

## The moral implications of celebrating Mass for the priest

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### I - Introduction

Your invitation to address “The moral implications of celebrating Mass for the priest” allows us to explore some truly illuminating perspectives centred on the two poles of the celebrant’s subjective holiness and the objective sacredness of the Holy Mass.

One cannot study the Eucharistic Mystery from a theological perspective whilst ignoring its impact on the person of the celebrant and failing to address the foundation and intensity of the priest’s moral life; is this a merely human or a supernatural moral life? And if it is to be considered supernatural, what degree must it attain? Is the morality of natural law according to the Decalogue sufficient, or must the priest practise the higher morality of the evangelical counsels and the Beatitudes according to the Sermon on the Mount? Or, if it is a matter of a higher morality, can we consider it to be specific to the priest as a minister, or to the priest as a member of the clergy, or finally as a celebrant?

These are the various questions that will be addressed in this paper.

### II - Religion, morality, spirituality

We must first consider the relationship between religion in general and morality. This question seems to me to be of interest in refuting certain philosophical or theological theories which hold that religion and morality should, in a sense, be set against one another.

Immanuel Kant, in the ‘General Remarks’ of his work *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, asserts that it is not necessary for people to know ‘what God does or does not do for their salvation’. In another work, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, he adds these words : "Even the love of God can pose a threat to morality because it could degenerate into superstition (*Pfaffentum*)."<sup>2</sup>

This fierce opposition between religion and morality was qualified by Rudolf von Otto; religion is an autonomous human phenomenon that springs from the mind as a category distinct from morality, for it is reduced to the irrational emotion of the ‘sacred’ (*das Heilige*), that is, the *numinous*, which produces two feelings in the soul: awe (*Fascinans*) and dread (*Tremendum*). Otto does not (like Kant) recognise any moral value in Christianity, which consequently requires not priests, but magicians, sorcerers not bound by any morality.<sup>3</sup> Even more surprising is the theological theory of Paul Tillich, who maintains that morality is by its very nature contrary to the sacredness of the Christian Mystery n.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lecture delivered at the 1st C.I.E.L. symposium, Versailles – Gap, 4–6 October 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel KANT: Critique of Practical Reason I, 1, 3

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf VON OTTO: *Das Heilige*, Italian trans. Bologna, 1926.

<sup>4</sup> Paul TILLICH: *The Dynamics of Faith*, New York, 1952.

If we turn to the pagan philosophy of the Ancients, we are surprised to find a desire and a concern that are closer to the demands of Christian morality; one need only mention Plato and Aristotle; the former regards morality as an assimilation to God (*homoiosis toi Theoi*, Prot. 360 6); the other thinks of morality as a kind of divine inspiration (*mantéia*, Eudemian Ethics, 1215 a 5) which produces a certain happiness bringing man, through imitation, closer to the bliss of the gods (Nicomachean Ethics, 1101 a 20–21).

The Christian conception of morality is quite different: it is an essential condition for obtaining salvation and obliges the baptised to observe the natural law of the commandments. The acquisition of virtues does not, however, fulfil the Christian ideal, as was the case for the *spoudaios anér*, Aristotle's seriously committed man (Ethics to Eudemus 1215a5): Jesus, in his encounter with the rich young man, naturally demands obedience to the natural law of the Decalogue, but this is the starting point of a higher "path" (in Greek, the word *hodos*) which rises to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fear of the Lord, piety, and fortitude.

As St Thomas Aquinas teaches us: "*dona perficiunt hominem ad altiores actus quam sint actus virtutum*" (I, II, 68, 1). He warns us that the natural virtues belong to the order of right reason; whereas the gifts are bestowed by God as external movements and as divine instincts. They are superior to nature and are necessary for eternal life (*ibid.* II, II, 89, 2) and, in a certain respect, they are superior in dignity and excellence to the natural virtues (I, 69, 8).

But that is not all: St Thomas adds that the Christian achieves moral perfection through the practice of the evangelical beatitudes, preached by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount; these are *habits* that sustain the gifts and enable us to participate (*inchoatio*) in eternal life even in this world (I, II, 69, 8).<sup>5</sup>

These are the foundations of Christian morality, which naturally apply to priests as Christians. But this conclusion seems too simplistic, since a priest cannot preach dignity without setting an example of a higher and more specific morality.

The priest's life is not merely a succession of virtuous acts but must rather be like a living liturgy, the foundation of which is set out by Saint Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. The Apostle exhorts Christians in general to "offer their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God" (Rom. 12:1), that is to say, the whole person is considered in their concrete and existential commitment, in a worship in accordance with reason, in Greek *logikè latreía* (Rom. 12: 1).<sup>6</sup>

But since each sacrament produces a specific perfection, it is important to take this into account for the priest's spirituality; the priest's moral life therefore consists of a spirituality

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<sup>5</sup> One can then understand the reactions of certain post-conciliar moralists who, scandalised by certain immanentist tendencies, have 'converted' to the true conception of evangelical morality. See Ph. DELHAYE: *Discerning Good from Evil in Moral and Social Life*, Cambrai-les-Tours, 1979; for an account of the opposition between "The Morality of Faith" and "Autonomous Morality", see A. GRAZIEUX, *Morality of Faith and Autonomous Morality*, Leuven, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> See Ugo VANNI S.J.: "La figura del sacerdote presbitero nel Nuovo Testamento", in AA.VV.: *Identità e missione del sacerdote*, Rome, 1994, p. 26

specific to Holy Orders ( ).<sup>7</sup> Whilst Baptism forms the basis of Christian spirituality, including that of the priest, Holy Orders form the basis of priestly spirituality.

### III - The priest's ministry

The subject we are addressing concerns the spirituality of the priest at the altar, in which we can distinguish the following three dimensions: the sacred ministry, the clerical *status*, and the nuptial identity (to use the expression of Father James Francis Staf<sup>ford</sup><sup>8</sup>), that is to say, his unity with Jesus Christ after ordination (*in persona Christi*).

The question thus posed involves a rather complex process; the priest-minister performs ceremonies at the altar governed by liturgical law: preaching, liturgical prayers, hymns, bows, signs of the cross, exhortations to prayer, etc. Can we discuss the spirituality of the priest as a minister, as one who carries out the liturgical prescriptions of the Mass?

In response to this question, St Thomas Aquinas offers us doctrinal guidance: he proposes a distinction between the priest's strictly ecclesial personality and his priestly personality.

The ecclesial personality is revealed when the priest follows the ritual instructions. The priestly personality comes to the fore at the moment of consecration. Here are the very words of St Thomas Aquinas: "*Sacerdos in missa, si orationibus quidem loquitur, in persona Ecclesiae agit, in cuius unitate consistit. But in the consecration of the sacrament he speaks in the person of Christ, in whose stead he exercises the power of the order*" (S. Theol. III, 82, 7) "The priest, in the prayers he recites at Mass, speaks indeed in the place of the Church, because he stands within its unity. But in the consecration of the sacrament, he speaks in the person of Christ, whose role he then plays by virtue of his power of ordination." *Summa Theologica*, translated by A.M. ROGUET, *The Eucharist*, Paris

- Tournai - Rome, Le Cerf, 1967, p. 188). The Latin expressions "*in persona Ecclesiae*", "*in persona Christi*" are obviously more technical; they contain a nuance that refers more to the function than to the person.<sup>9</sup>

Be that as it may, it must be noted, with St Thomas, that the two aspects can be clearly distinguished in the case where a heretical or schismatic priest celebrates Mass: on the one hand, he fulfils his priestly function by validly consecrating the Eucharist; on the other, he is separated from the Church, and therefore celebrates Mass outside the *communio Ecclesiae* (S. Theol. *Ibid.*), outside the service of the community of believers. A priesthood (*hieràteuma*, 1 Pet. 2:4–10) is truly

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<sup>7</sup> St Thomas Aquinas teaches us: "Gratia sacramentalis supermenti consequendum, sicut dona et virtutes super gratiam addere viactus perficiendos" (S. Theol. III, 62,2).

<sup>8</sup> Bishop James Francis STAFFORD: "*Il fondamento eucaristico del celibato sacerdotale*", in AA.VV.: *Identità e missione*, op. cit., p. 202; the author relates nuptiality to the covenant between the priest and Jesus Christ, the second Adam, who acts through the priest ("*in persona Christi*").

<sup>9</sup> Following the Second Vatican Council, some theologians have overemphasised the function at the expense of the condition. Thus, as Cardinal J. Ratzinger states: "the function" threatens "the being" of the priest (quoted by A. Feuillet: *Le Sacerdoce du Christ et ses ministres*, Paris, 1972, p. 85)

ministerial when the two aspects are united in the same reality of Jesus Christ, Head of the Church.

The priest's ministerial role is not merely external, but also symbolic, in that the priest, through the ceremonial trappings of vestments and gestures, introduces and reveals the reality of the Mystery, evoking feelings of charity, reverence, sorrow, adoration, etc .<sup>10</sup>

What happens if we place excessive emphasis on symbolism, or worse, if we attempt to stir up the religious *pathos* of the congregation? We then find ourselves in a theological position entirely opposite to that which we described earlier, that is to say, consecrating the triumph of the ecclesial personality. This is a theology of the Mass that appeals to mass psychology, aesthetics and drama: the congregation then takes the place of the Church, and the priest is no longer God's consecrated servant, but (as has been written) the chairperson of the popular gathering, or of the people of God. The fraternal gathering for the meal takes the place of the divine presence of Christ on the altar, and the ritual replaces the mystery of the Sacrifice.

This leads to the assertion that all religions contain natural sacraments whose form and ritual evoke an atmosphere of intense religiosity and profound emotion. Theodore W. Jennings asserts, for example, that the Mass stirs emotion to the point of tears .<sup>11</sup> One then understands why the word 'experience' has become the hermeneutical key to such sacramental theology: one enters into the *sacredness* of the Mass only if one perceives its sacramental dynamism ,<sup>12</sup> or if one 'experiences the emotional event' .<sup>13</sup>

According to John Boldovin, theological reflection must be grounded in anthropology, psychology and sociology rather than abandoning itself to metaphysics .<sup>14</sup>

This then raises the question: is there a moral life or a spirituality for the priest at the altar? If we are to believe recent attempts to explain the priest's role at the altar as a dramatist, as presider over the assembly, as director of the performance, or as an incomparable mime in the most solemn ceremonies, the issue of spirituality fades into the background. In this case, the performance at the altar belongs to the realm of aesthetics, not morality.

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<sup>10</sup> The complete codification of the liturgical law of the Tridentine Mass is available in the *Missale Romanum ex Decreto Sacrosancti Concilii Tridentini restitutum, S. Pii V Pontificis Maximi iussu aliorum Pontificum cura recognitum, a S. Pio X reformatum et Benedicti XV auctoritate vulgatum*, 16th ed., Turonibus, 10 March 1926. The strictly liturgical prescriptions are set out on pp. XXX–XL under the heading: "Ritus servandus in celebratione Missae" (pp. XLI–LXXIX). I note that the wealth of prayers for preparation and thanksgiving after Mass has been greatly reduced in the new *Missale Romanum*. One is led to believe that the intention of the liturgical reform to set aside a few minutes of silence after the priest and the faithful have received Communion has been significantly undermined and effectively removed.

<sup>11</sup> Theodore W. JENNINGS: *Encyclopedia of Religions*, 2nd ed., New York, 1963; ID.: "On Ritual Knowledge" in *Journal of Religions* 62, 1982, p. 115.

<sup>12</sup> Kena B. OSBORNE: *Sacramental Theology, A General Introduction*, New York, 1988, p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> This is the approach of John GALLEN ("American Liturgy, A Theological Locus" in "Theological Studies" 15, 1974, p. 303); see Walter BURGHARDT: A Theological Challenge to Liturgy in *Theological Studies*, 33, 1974, pp. 233–248; Léon DUFOUR: *Participation in the Eucharistic Bread, the Testimony of the New Testament*, Paris 1979, p. 194.

<sup>14</sup> John BOLDOVIN, "Celebration in Flesh and Blood Communities", in *Commonweal*, 29 January 1988, pp. 54–58. An important contribution to the value of true symbolism in the Eucharistic Mystery is provided by Bishop Antonio PIOLANTI: *Il Mistero Eucaristico*, Vatican City, 1985, pp. 367–371.

We must therefore conclude that the moral life of the priest as a minister is a spirituality founded on various virtues: on pastoral charity when preaching to the people; on obedience to liturgical norms; on the piety that inwardly animates every gesture, every movement, every glance, every greeting or liturgical exhortation. But it must be added that such a spirituality is not specific to the priest: all these virtues are common to Christians in general and are founded on baptism and confirmation. This statement is so true that certain liturgical actions of the priest-minister can even be performed by laypeople. It follows that the spirituality of the priest at the altar is characterised quite differently.

#### **IV - The clerical status of the priest**

We must therefore set aside the spirituality of the priest at the altar as a minister, in order to now explore its specific nature. Here, then, is the second dimension already mentioned: the clerical *status* of the priest at the altar. I do not think it necessary to elaborate at length on the nature of this *status*: theological and canonical doctrine is well-rooted in the history of the Church.<sup>15</sup> It suffices to mention a few general points on this subject by comparing the *status* to the “ministry”:

- 1°: clerical *status* or *clericatus* is a “condition” of being within the Church, referred to as “dignity” (*axioma*); ministry encompasses a complex variety of functions (*agere*), determined by canonical rules. Although *the esse* and *the agere* are not opposed, they are related in the same way that cause relates to effect;
- 2°: one may renounce ministry, but not *status*: consider the old age of a priest who is unable to celebrate Mass. This priest retains all his privileges, rights, and dignity;
- 3°: Canon law provides for the loss of the ministry but not of *the status*: consider, for example, the *suspensio a divinis*; it is nevertheless possible to lose the *status* through a sanction, but this sanction entails the cessation of the ministry;
- 4. Ecclesiastical tradition has always laid down rules governing the exercise of the priestly ministry; in the 4th century, the *regula ecclesiastica* was recognised throughout the Latin world; this concerned in particular the discipline of the clergy and their ministry.<sup>16</sup> This ‘code’ of priestly ministry was confirmed at the Second Lateran Council (1139) as *the regula fidei* and *the regula morum*. The dignity of the clergy’s *status*, for its part, rested more on exhortations than on canonical norms;
- 5°: the ministry is a function involving numerous duties; the *status* is a path to excellence within the Church. It is thus possible to determine the time devoted to the ministry during the day or the year. A priest devotes five or six hours a day to the ministry: confessions, catechesis,

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<sup>15</sup> I refer to my treatise on the theology of law, *\*La Chiesa visibile\**, Città del Vaticano 1985, pp. 211 ff. Dario Composta : “La consacrazione del sacerdote e il suo stato ecclesiale” in AA. VV.: *Il presbitero nel Nuovo Codice*, Brescia 1985, pp. 9–42.

<sup>16</sup> A. BONI: “The Concept of ‘Ecclesiastical Rule’ in Ancient Canon Law” in *Canonical Issues*, Milan, 1984, pp. 41–68.

charity towards the sick, Mass, preaching. When a priest has finished his duties, he has the rest of the time to eat, to rest, to study, and to relax.

However, nowadays, the priest is often viewed through a sociological lens. Indeed, due to the difficult context of contemporary society, certain episcopal conferences place greater emphasis on the priest's pastoral work. We do not then speak of 'moral life' but of 'morale', that is to say, the courage the priest must show on the eve of the year 2000.<sup>17</sup>

The perspective is entirely different if one approaches the subject from the angle of *status*, that is to say, the priest's transcendent dignity. Because of his dignity, the priest does not forget who he is before God and even before the Church. He is well aware that there is no separation between his personal and social life, his private and public life, between his humanity and his sacredness. His *clericatus* makes him a dignitary of the Church, an *alter Christus*, a "servant of God". There is no respite from his priesthood, not even in his own room. Yet, if we consider the *status* of the priest as a manifestation of his dignity at the altar, we discover a new dimension of his greatness; clerical *status* is conceptually built upon two values:

- a) a certain separation (more axiological than material) from the secular world;
- b) the representative character of Christ in the Church and in the world.

This separation makes the priest, as Saint Paul describes, a 'set-apart being' (in Greek *aphorizein*, Rom. 1:1), a 'bound being' (in Greek *désmios*, Phil. 1:9) and signifies, as we have already noted, a qualitative separation of the priest from the world.

The priest's representative character is manifested in his direct dependence on the Lord; it is St Paul himself who speaks of himself as an ambassador for Christ (in Greek, *presbéyo*; 2 Cor. 5:20), whose divine person he represents.

If we now raise the question of the priest's moral life at the altar, we may draw a partial yet interesting conclusion: the priest's clerical *status* is perfectly realised at the altar. His spirituality is clearly signified by his physical separation at the altar from the rest of the world, and by his representation *in persona Christi*, as we shall see later. I would also like to draw from the very experience of Saint Paul the inner nature of this greatness: the priest lives out his spirituality with a keen awareness of his dignity: Saint Paul requires Christians to recognise him as a 'minister of God' (1 Cor. 4:2); the Greek verb *logizomai* signifies not only the Corinthians' recognition of the Apostle's dignity, but also implies that the Apostle is already conscious of it and demands respect for it.

The clerical *status* thus reveals to us a principle that modern theology and spirituality emphasise with sometimes excessive insistence: priestly identity. Should we proclaim the primacy of priestly identity over clerical *status*? Let us note that the priest's own awareness is not sufficient. In fact, the *status* founded on the priestly 'sacred character' is a principle

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<sup>17</sup> I refer to the document of the National Conference of the Bishops of the United States (*National Conference of the Bishops of the USA*, Original NC Documentary Service, 12 January 1989, vol. 18, no. 31, pp. 489–505).

ontological rather than a psychological motivation. I would add that when Saint Paul asks to be recognised as an apostle, he appeals to Faith and not to human admiration.

The clerical *status* flourishes in the priest's nuptial love when he stands at the altar, united with Jesus Christ, *corde indiviso*.

But how are we to explain this union at the altar? Here we come to the third dimension of the priest: the celebrating priest and the particular spirituality associated with this action. We must therefore delve more deeply into the relationship between the *sacrum* and the *sanctum*, as we have already suggested.

## **V - The celebrant at the altar**

The encounter between the priest and Jesus Christ at the altar is truly the highest union between the *sanctum* and the *sacrum*; on the one hand, the priest attains the highest form of his spirituality, the most intimate friendship with the Lord; yet friendship is the love of spiritual assimilation. On the other hand, Jesus, who makes himself present on the altar, is the supreme *sacrum*. This is not a *status clericalis* in the sense we have seen previously, but rather a union that is realised in the event of consecration and communion.

This union has been compared with conjugal love, p. 18: in my view, the analogy is very inadequate because the priest's union is invisible and the encounter takes place within the purest Faith. It follows that the spirituality of the priest (*sanctus*) is truly distinctive, differing from the spirituality of religious, which is imitative, and differing from conjugal spirituality, which is shared. That a priest might celebrate Mass in a sacrilegious manner is a painful and terrible possibility. Saint Thomas Aquinas, drawing on ancient theological and canonical sources, echoes Pope Saint Gelasius: "*ita benedictio sacerdotis peccatoris in quantum ab ipso indigno fit, est maledictione digna, et quasi infamia sive blasphemia, et non oratio reputatur.*" (S. Theol. III, 82, 5 ad IIIum – "Likewise, the blessing of the sinful priest, insofar as it is unholy, coming from him, is worthy of a curse and deserves the name of infamy or blasphemy rather than prayer". *Summa of St Thomas Aquinas*, translated by A.M. ROGUET, *The Eucharist*, Paris – Tournai – Rome, Le Cerf, 1967). The love that dwells within the priest at the altar prompts us to explore the mysterious depth of the relationship between the ineffable objectivity of the Mass (*sacrum*) and the marvellous personal holiness of the celebrant (*sanctum*). The aim is to address the normality of things, not the failings or infidelities of the priest; deontology presupposes an ontology.

## **VI - The ontology of the *sacrum* as the foundation of the *sanctum***

Deontology concerns the inner attitudes, virtues, gifts and beatitudes of the celebrating priest. In the life of the priest, grace and charisms abound to such an extent that it is evident

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<sup>18</sup> Karl HILLIBRANS: "Ordensspiritualität und Leben des Diözesanpriesters" in J. SCHREINER-K WITTSTADT: *Communio Sanctorum Einheit der Christen Einheit der Kirche*, Festschrift für Bischof Paul Werner Scheele, Würzburg, 1988, pp. 364–522; ID.: "Sacerdozio celibato" in Various Authors: *Identità e missione del sacerdote*, op. cit., pp. 154 ff.

that, when a man decides to devote his whole life to Jesus Christ, we witness a divine irruption that fills him with joy as he perceives the beauty of his vocation.

But what happens when the encounter with Him takes place in consecration and communion? One might say that a new event occurs: it is a new irruption, not only of grace, but of the divine Person of Jesus Himself.

Theologians have found it very difficult to explain this presence. If we affirm that in consecration an event takes place that involves both eternity and time, we must conclude that the presence of Jesus on the altar is not comparable to the promise of His mysterious presence in the Church (Mt 28:20).

Saint Thomas Aquinas draws a comparison between the creation of the world and the Eucharistic presence. In creation, God brings the universe into being through the imperative: *'Fiat'*; in the consecration, God acts through the present indicative *in instanti*: *'Hoc Est'* (S. Theol. III, 78, 2). Bernard Ronze, in his recent work *\*Le Dernier Repas\**,<sup>19</sup> offers some very interesting observations; he tells us that consecration is not a mere episode, nor a hiccup along the way, but a deliberate rupture of time brought about by the immense Mystery of the Saviour. Here, he says, a double contradiction between time and eternity emerges: the world is opposed to the Kingdom of God; the Kingdom is opposed to the world. The rupture is permanent: Jesus Christ, he says, offers himself as a sacrifice to the Father, whilst Satan, through Judas, takes hold of the world.<sup>20</sup>

In this context of the sacred, certain theologians venture to introduce the “experience of faith” as an approach to the “sacred”. Is there an “experience” or a “mystery of faith”? The liturgy of consecration requires the priest to reaffirm his faith with the phrase *“mysterium fidei”*. This is the most sublime moment of the “sacred”. Of course, emotion sometimes touches the priest’s soul as he bends to recite the epiclesis, recalling in the *Memento* the joys and sorrows of times past. We say at the beginning of Mass: *“Confiteor Deo omnipotenti quia peccavi”*: it is a prayer to obtain protection, forgiveness, perseverance, and privileges. But this experience is human, and therefore does not enter directly into the faith of the Mystery, because faith is “conviction” or *elenchos* according to the definition in the *Letter to the Hebrews*.

The priest’s soul enters the “sacred” (in Greek, *to hagion*), Christ (Lk 1:36), with all the purity of his faith. This does not require any special illumination; Saint Paul, in telling the Corinthians that he has “the mind” of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16), uses the Greek word “noûs”, which, as we well know, is not a “feeling”, but a supernatural light given to him at the moment of his conversion and during his rapture to the third Heaven. Yet the priest has not yet entered into the reality of Paradise; mystical union is not required to consecrate; he must believe that he is in the ‘sacred time’ of Redemption, *lytron* (Matt. 20:24; 1 Tim. 2:6; Mk 10:45), of atonement, *hilasmos* (1 Jn 2:2). Everything is entrusted to him: “in saying he does” and “in doing he says”; the unity of the priest

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<sup>19</sup> Bernard RONZE: *The Last Supper*, Italian trans. Turin, 1995, pp. 34–35.

<sup>20</sup> Bernard PONZE: *The Last Supper*, Italian trans. Turin, 1995, pp. 34–35.

with Jesus Christ is thus mysteriously fulfilled, as St Thomas Aquinas teaches us : “*Et ita quodam modo idem est sacerdos et hostia*” (S. Theol. III, 83, 1 ad IIIum - - - “And thus, in a certain sense, it is the same who is both priest and host”. *Summa Theologica by St Thomas Aquinas*, translated by A.M. ROGUET, *The Eucharist*, Paris – Tournai – Rome, Le Cerf, 1962): the consecrated priest consecrates the *sacred* par excellence, the *to hagion* announced to Mary at the Annunciation. He says: “my body”, “my blood” in his own name.

Moreover, this is not a physical or numerical identity, as the theologian F. Stolz maintained ,<sup>21</sup> but a spiritual and mystical one, and yet a real one. If it is objected that such a priest confines himself to an impossible solitude, the reply is that in and through consecration he unites himself to Jesus Christ, who is the Head of the Body of the Church; a highly Christological conception of the priesthood, and also ecclesiological: the more he identifies spiritually with the Crucified One, the more he unites himself with the Church, the more he expands his field of pastoral activity within the Church.

## VII - From the ontology to the deontology of the celebrating priest

From such an ontology of *the sacred* flows the specificity of spirituality, or – if we wish to stick to the title of this paper – of moral life, provided that we acknowledge a relationship between consecration and communion; this essential correlation between the two moments of the Mass was articulated by St Thomas Aquinas with the following statement: “*quod sacramentum simul est sacrificium et sacramentum*” (S. Theol. III, 79, 5 – “This sacrament is at once sacrifice and sacrament”. *Summa Theologica*, translated by A.M. ROGUET, *The Eucharist*, Paris – Tournai – Rome, Le Cerf, 1962).

Sacrifice is part of the consecration; the sacrament is a characteristic of communion: one is for the other. We do not celebrate Mass merely to consecrate; Mass finds its fulfilment and meaning in the total self-giving of Jesus Christ to the world. We are familiar with the various views of modern theologians on the subject , vol. 22. Our claim is more modest: it suffices to reiterate with St Thomas Aquinas that, between sacrifice and communion, ‘*non est similis ratio*’ (S. Theol. III, 79, 7 – ‘the comparison does not hold’). *Summa Theologica*, translated by A.M. ROGUET, *The Eucharist*, Paris – Tournai – Rome, Le Cerf, 1962). In the sacrifice, Jesus offers himself in obedience to the Father; in the sacrament, He gives himself to the priest and the faithful as food for eternal life. The first to partake of this food is the priest, who is privileged to do so and indeed obliged to do so, for without his communion the Mass is not completed;

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<sup>21</sup> See the excellent exposition by Bishop Antonio Piolanti, op. cit., p. 455. Bishop Piolanti accuses Dr Stolz of excessive mysticism, which is dangerous even for the reality of the Sacrifice of the Mass.

<sup>22</sup> Eucharistic theology before and since the Second Vatican Council has been shaken by a strange desire for renewal. According to Bishop Antonio Piolanti, various schools have promoted solutions that reduce the essence of the Mass to Communion (Quarello, E. Louis Bouyer, Michel Schmaus, Alis Winklhofer) at the expense of Christ’s sacrifice to the Father; to anamnesis or ‘real representation’, not sacramental (Odo Casel and many of his admirers); to the “eternalised sacrifice manifested in the Church through the breaking of bread and wine” (F.X. Durwell); to the sacrament, with no significance attached to the immolation; the Mass would be “a sacrifice of communion” where the sacrificial symbolism is not found in the Passion of the Lord but in the breaking of the two elements: bread and wine (L. Ligier), etc. (*Il Mistero eucaristico*, op. cit., pp. 423–482.)

the faithful are not obliged to do so. Moreover, the sacrament remains after Mass, not only when it is administered as Viaticum, but especially when it is kept in the tabernacle.

Finally, we return to the initial question: what is the moral life, or indeed the spirituality, of the priest in the celebration of Mass, if we distinguish between sacrificial spirituality and the spirituality of communion? If we consider the sacrifice and the moment of the consecration of the Eucharist, I propose to describe the celebrant's spirituality as unitive; for from the Offertory to the Preface and from the Preface to the Canon, the liturgy expresses a *crescendo* of elevation (“*sursum corda*” – “Lift up your hearts”) towards union (“*communicantes*” – “United in the same communion”) and intimacy with Jesus Christ (“*Supplices rogamus Filii tui corpus et Sanguinem sumpserimus*” – “We beseech you ... when we receive ... the infinitely holy Body and Blood of your Son”). If we consider the Eucharistic communion of the celebrating priest, I propose to describe the spirituality that accompanies it as conforming, for, as we shall soon see, due to the celebrant's subjective attitude—by establishing a certain distance between the Victim on the altar and the minister—the liturgy strives to lead the priest not merely to imitation, but to assimilation. The imitation whose value the bishop extols in the ordination ceremony of the new priest (“*imitamini quod tractatis*”) goes far beyond outward *imitation*: what the priest takes into his hands, what he breaks or distributes, is not an object of imitation, but of identification.

But this outline warrants further clarification, particularly when one examines the liturgical texts of both parts.

- 1: Unitive spirituality is clearly emphasised before the consecration of the Blood, when the canon instructs the priest to profess his Faith with the words: “*Simili modo postquam coenatum est, accipiens et hunc praeclarum calicem*” – “In the same way, after the meal, He took this precious chalice ...” (Roman Vespers Missal, by Dom Gaspar Lefévre, Bruges, 1951).

It is here that the eternal bursts into time: this cup is the very cup of Jesus, that is to say, there is no temporal distance between the original event and the present; the unity of time implies the identity of the consecrator with the consecrated; identity of persons, but also of attitudes, of spirituality. All this is already foreshadowed in the exhortation: “*Orate fratres ut meum ac vestrum sacrificium acceptabile fiat apud Deum Patrem omnipotentem*” (“Pray, my brothers, that my sacrifice, which is also yours, may be pleasing to God, the almighty Father”).

We can therefore fully understand those modern authors closest to the Catholic tradition who proclaim such spirituality to be superhuman. Why? Because every Mass is perfect in itself, and the first Mass may be celebrated as the last, just as the last must also be celebrated as the first. St Thomas Aquinas fully grasped this sublime value when he proclaimed the holiness of the celebrating priest to be *excellent*: “*ad idoneam executionem ordinum non sufficit bonitas qualiscumque sed requiritur bonitas excellens*” (S. Th. III, 35, 1 ad V um – “To exercise the ministry of the order properly, it is not merely any virtue that is

required, but rather an eminent virtue". *Summa Theologica* by St Thomas Aquinas, translated by M.J. GERLAND, *L'Ordre*, Paris – Tournai – Rome, Le Cerf).

To achieve unity between the consecrator and the consecrated, the priest is required to possess excellent faith, excellent hope and excellent charity, but also to live by the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the beatitudes, as we have already noted. Now, the gifts and the beatitudes belong more to *the disposition* than to specific acts.

This marvellous spiritual richness of the celebrant at the moment of consecration is therefore not spontaneous; it shines forth through the charism of chastity, through the infusion of the virtues and the beatitudes; his life has been compared to a living liturgy; but St Thomas, enraptured by such splendour, finds in the vocabulary of his time a word that denotes the highest human condition. Let us listen to his words: "*Qui divinis mysteriis applicantur regiam dignitatem assequuntur et perfecti in virtute esse debent*" (In IV Sent. dist. 24, q. 2). It is ontology that governs deontology; it is dignity that commands the most perfect virtue, the holiness of union.

The priest can never rely on Kant's concept of *Pflicht* to promote his spirituality: his superhuman, sublime and regal spirituality is a masterpiece of God's grace, and not the result of his meagre human efforts. This idea seems to me to be well expressed by Saint Paul who, addressing the disciples Titus and Timothy, calls them "men of God" (1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 3:17), *anthropai Theou*. They no longer belong to themselves: they belong to Jesus Christ. They are in Him. But such a unitive spirituality is not an immutable state to which one might apply Seneca's legal principle: "*Semel iussit, semper pareat*", or the other: "*Quod factum est infectum fieri nequit*". Its virtues are not immovable paradigms, nor deified forms of the spirit, as were the virtues of the ancient Romans who honoured *Pietas, Pudicitia, Prudentia*, etc. as goddesses.<sup>23</sup>

- 2°: the priest's moral weakness is not forgotten at the most solemn moment of the Mass; it is particularly evident in the texts of the post-consecration liturgy. We are thus in the realm of conforming spirituality, which concerns the priest receiving Communion. It should first be noted that after the consecration, the celebrant relinquishes his identity with Christ and takes his place alongside the Church.

A duality begins, in fact, with the adoration of the Holy Chalice and ends after the supplicatory prayer of *the Agnus Dei*. This part of the Mass is distinctive for the systematic use of the plural.

I think it is worth repeating these words of St Thomas: "*Sacerdos in missa, si orationibus quidem loquitur, in persona Ecclesiae agit, in cuius unitate consistit. Sed in consecratione sacramenti loquitur in persona Christi, cuius vicem in hoc gerit ordinis potestatem*" (S. Theol III, 82, 7 - - "The priest, in the prayers he recites at Mass, speaks indeed in the

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<sup>23</sup> Karl KERENYI: "Il mito dell'areté in Demitizzazione e Morale", Proceedings of the Conference organised by the International Centre for Humanities Studies of the Institute of Philosophical Studies, Rome, 7–12 January 1965, pp. 23 ff.

place of the Church, because he stands in her unity. But in the consecration of the sacrament, he speaks in the place of Christ, whose role he then plays through his power of order." *Summa Theologica* by St Thomas Aquinas, translated by A.M. ROGUET, *The Eucharist*, Paris – Tournai – Rome, Le Cerf, 1967,

p. 188.). His priestly personality is set aside to make way for his ecclesial personality: he is a minister, he humbles himself with humanity; he identifies with it: "*Unde et memores, Domine, nos servi tui sed et plebs tua sancta*" ("therefore, Lord, we your servants, and with us your holy people, in remembrance"); and again: "*Supplices te rogamus ut () omni benedictione caelesti et gratia repleamur*" ("we beseech you () that we may all be filled with heavenly graces and blessings"). Even in *the commemoration* of the departed, the celebrating priest prays on behalf of the community and invokes the Lord's mercy.

The *Lord's Prayer* and *the Agnus Dei* are formulated in the plural and highlight the priest's role as the Church's representative.

A remark brings us back to St Thomas: is it true that when the priest recites the prayers of the Mass, he speaks on behalf of the Church? One might say that the statement is generally true; but when the priest confesses his unworthiness, asks forgiveness for his sins, acknowledges his weakness and his need for the Lord's help for himself, he no longer identifies with Christ and returns to himself. We are then in the realm of his personal holiness.

Thus a sudden change appears in the three prayers of preparation for the priest's Holy Communion. The use of the plural is interrupted and the singular pronoun prevails: "*ne respicias peccata mea*" ("look not upon my sins"); "*libera me ab omnibus peccatis meis et universis malis et fac me tuis semper inhaerere mandatis*" ("Deliver me from all my sins and all evil, and grant that I may always remain attached to your commandments"), "*Percepto Corporis tui, Domine Jesu Christe, quod ego indignus sumere praesumo, non mihi proveniat in iudicium et condemnationem: sed pro tua pietate prosit mihi ad tutamentum mentis et corporis*" – "May the reception of your Body, Lord Jesus Christ, which I intend to receive, unworthy as I am, not turn to my judgement and condemnation; but may it, through your goodness, serve as a defence for my soul and body".

The following invocations are more urgent: "*Domine non sum dignus*" ("Lord, I am not worthy"), "*Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam meam*" ("May the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ preserve my soul for eternal life"), etc. The faithful present are not included in the priest's prayers. The liturgy follows the logic of participation in the Body and Blood of the Lord right up to the final moment of personal Communion, when the priest expresses his sorrow, then bursts into joy through his union with the Redeemer: "*Quid retribuam Domino pro omnibus quae retribuit mihi?*" ("What shall I render unto the Lord for all the good things He has bestowed upon me?").

Bitterness and hope, sorrow and joy: these are the sentiments of the priest celebrating Holy Communion. This is a spirituality quite different from the spirituality of union.

The nature of this conforming spirituality can be further understood by referring to the prayers of certain “post-communion” prayers, through which the priest, in concluding Mass, asks for the grace of perseverance and the disposition to prepare for a new Mass the following day. In the prayers of preparation for Mass found in *the old Missale Romanum*, the priest seeks a higher disposition. In Latin, the most frequent expressions are: “*Ut dignus efficiar*”; “*Ut digne ministrare valeam*”, etc. This desire for holiness and purification does not pertain to his ministry in the Church, but to his priestly state. What state? That of a deeper assimilation to the model, and thus pertaining to conforming spirituality.

### VIII - Conclusion

The two forms of spirituality or moral life are not independent of one another: whilst unitive spirituality configures the priest to Jesus Christ, this configuration prepares and intensifies unitive spirituality. We thus discover a convergence of the two spiritualities to ultimately build the celebrant’s single spirituality: Eucharistic charity, which is realised in the dynamism of the *sacrum* and the *sanctum*.

But since the *sacred element* in the Mass is not what all pantheists call the ‘*divinum*’ of nature, but the person of Jesus Christ (the ‘*to hagion*’, Luke 1:35), it follows that without consecration there is no true priestly spirituality. Without transubstantiation, there is no consecration; without consecration, no Eucharistic sacrament; without communion, no Eucharistic holiness and charity.

With Saint Paul, we must therefore ‘exhort’ and ‘console’ the celebrating priest by reminding him that union and conformity with the Saviour will always be imperfect. Union is found in Faith; conformity is a progressive path; Eucharistic charity can thus be defined as a joy in exile. Joy, because the priest at the altar possesses, all by himself, the royal power to renew the living Presence of Jesus in the world. In exile, because this joy is troubled by the clamour of the world. Exile, then, calls for *paraklesis* (to use St Paul’s technical term)<sup>24</sup>: to ‘comfort’ for the priest in his sorrows in the world, and to ‘exhort’ him to persevere in hope.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Hans SCHLIER: *The Essence of Apostolic Exhortation According to the Epistle to the Romans* in *Der Zeit der Kirche*, French trans., Paris, 1969, pp. 85–99. Figures on the crisis in the clergy were recently provided by the Holy See: between 1970 and 1994, 50,000 priests abandoned their vocation and status. This is, of course, a crisis of the Faith; but it can also be said that this multitude of defrocked priests had already lost either the ‘consolation’ of their fellow priests and superiors, or the ‘exhortation’, that is to say, the courage to struggle to preserve their fervour and Eucharistic charity.