

chapter seven

PRIESTS, PROPHETS, AND KINGS

Opening Prayer

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful
and kindle in them the fire of your love.
Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created.
And You shall renew the face of the earth.

O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit,
did instruct the hearts of the faithful,
grant that by the same Holy Spirit
we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations.
Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.

I. A COMMON VOCATION

In this perspective of “service”—which, when it is carried out with freedom, reciprocity and love, expresses the truly “royal” nature of mankind—one can also appreciate that the presence of a certain diversity of roles is in no way prejudicial to women, provided that this diversity is not the result of an arbitrary imposition, but is rather an expression of what is specific to being male and female.

— Saint John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” 11.1

Key Points

A vocation requires mutual discernment.

Every human being has a vocation to holiness. Every human being also has a vocation to give themselves in love to another, whether that “other” is a human person (marriage), the Church (the priesthood), or Christ Himself (consecrated life).⁶³ Lastly, every human being has a vocation to serve God in a particular way—through a profession, through parenthood, through suffering, through apostolic work, and more (see CCC, 898).

Entering into almost any one of these vocations requires some level of discernment. But some vocations require more: they require mutual discernment. They require that someone else concur with what we’ve discerned.

In other words, we can discern that we have a vocation to marriage, but until another person comes along who wants to marry us (and whom we want to marry), we can’t enter that vocation. Likewise, someone can discern that they’re called to the priesthood, religious life, or consecrated virginity, but unless a bishop or religious superior agrees, they can’t begin formation. Similarly, one of us might want to become a catechist, but unless a pastor concurs that we have what it takes to serve in such a capacity, we can’t pursue that vocation.

This process of mutual discernment reminds us that nobody has a right to a particular vocation. A vocation isn’t simply a job or lifestyle. A vocation is a gift from God, initiated by Him, and freely received by us.

⁶³ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, November 22, 1981, 11.

A diversity of roles does not imply a hierarchy of roles.

We live in a culture heavily influenced by utilitarianism—by the belief that a person's value depends on their usefulness. So, according to that line of thinking, the more useful a person is in the ways the culture values, the more important they are. Unfortunately, many people apply a similar equation to the Church. We look at the diversity of roles and vocations within the Body of Christ, and think some roles and people matter more than others.

This is particularly true of the priesthood. Because a bishop or priest has authority over his diocese or parish, many see him as more important in the Church than a religious sister or lay man or woman. They think he matters more, that he has greater dignity and value, because of his priestly role.

This line of thinking is mistaken for two reasons. First, in the Church, God grants authority for the sake of service, not for personal gain or professional advancement. Sacred authority doesn't have the same purpose as worldly authority (see CCC, 876).

Second, and more important, in the Church, every part of the Body is essential. Saint Paul hammered this home for the Corinthians nearly two thousand years ago: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord" (1 Cor. 12:4–6). Two millennia later, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council echoed Paul, writing:

If therefore in the Church everyone does not proceed by the same path, nevertheless all are called to sanctity and have received an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God. And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ.⁶⁴

Every baptized Christian shares in Christ's ministry as priest, prophet, and king.

When God became Man in Jesus Christ, He took on the three-fold office of Priest, Prophet, and King (see CCC, 783). As Priest, Jesus offers

His life as an atoning sacrifice for all. As Prophet, He proclaims the Good News of salvation. And as King, He rules over the Kingdom of God.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, all those who have been configured to Christ through baptism (or as Saint Paul says in Romans 13:14, who have “put on Christ”), share in those three roles. The laity, the Second Vatican Council explained, “are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.”⁶⁵

So, just as Christ the High Priest offers Himself for the sins of the world, each of us is called to offer ourselves—our sufferings, good works, and lives—back to God. Just as Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that as members of the common priesthood, “the priests are appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.”⁶⁶ In other words, when we sacrifice something for another person, we are fulfilling our priestly role. This is what John Paul II referred to as “the gift of self.”

Likewise, just as Christ the Prophet came as a messenger from God to call people to conversion, each of us is called to be a witness and evangelist. We are to proclaim the Gospel through words and deeds. That can mean sharing the story of our faith with friends, inviting neighbors to Bible studies (or Endow studies!) at our parish, and asking fallen away family members to come to Mass or Confession with us. It can also mean praying before every meal (including in restaurants), giving to the poor, saying a prayer with the homeless man on the corner, and doing a thousand other things that demonstrate our belief in Jesus Christ.

Finally, as Christ the King reigns over all, we are to reign as His stewards. Like Him and His mother, our reign is to be a reign of service. We should care for all God has entrusted to us—our homes, our children, our yards, our tasks at work, our neighborhood, and more—in order to bring all in our charge to perfection and give glory to God.

⁶⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, 32.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 30.

⁶⁶ CCC, 1539.

Bringing It Home

The Church needs priests. The Church needs religious sisters. But she also needs doctors and lawyers, accountants and public school teachers, journalists and software engineers, all living their faith in the world.

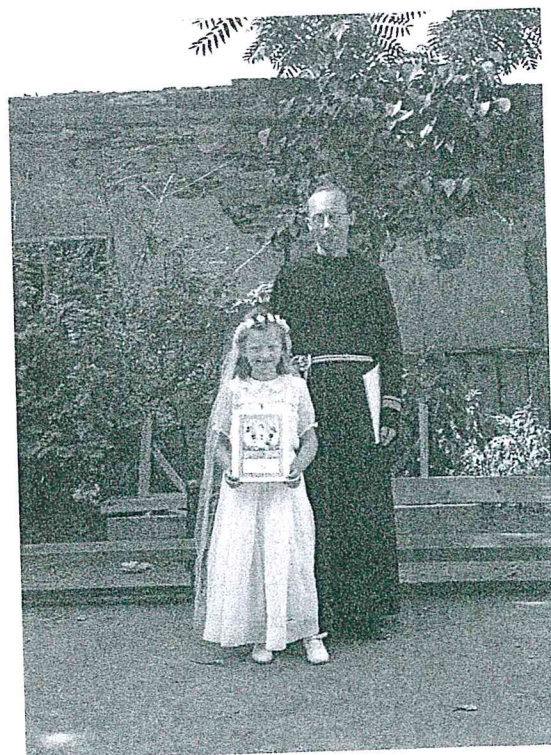
Oftentimes, as Catholics, we fall into the same trap as the world, thinking we're only important in the Church if we have some kind of official role or title before our name: Bishop, Father, Sister, etc. We confuse authority with value. But that's not how it works in the Body of Christ. Our value to the Church has nothing to do with the title before our name and everything to do with how open we are to the grace God offers us.

Likewise, working for the Church isn't the only way to serve the Church. We can also serve the Church by living as priests, prophets, and kings in our homes and offices. The marketplace, the public school, the neighborhood—that's the layperson's mission field. So many people in our culture are lost. So many are lonely. So many are searching for truth and meaning. But they're not darkening church doors. They aren't seeking out the wisdom of priests or the help of sisters. But, as laypeople, we can seek those people out where they are, and offer them the help they need. We can be faithful, passionate, intelligent priests, prophets, and kings in the darkest and most isolated corners of our culture.

Discussion Questions

1. How, in your life today, are you living as a priest? Give one or two examples of the "priestly offerings" you make.
2. What are some of the attitudes or fears that can hold us back from being the prophets the world needs us to be? Do you struggle with any of these?
3. How can those who have no worldly authority still rule as kings? What could their rule look like?

*Do you not know that a priesthood was given to
you too, that is, to the whole Church of God, the
whole nation of believers? It binds you to offer God
a sacrifice of praise, a sacrifice of prayer, compassion,
modest chastity, justice, sanctity...*
—Cardinal Henri de Lubac, S.J.



II. THE MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD

This issue also has a particular application within the Church. If Christ—by his free and sovereign choice, clearly attested to by the Gospel and by the Church's constant Tradition—entrusted only to men the task of being an “icon” of his countenance as “shepherd” and “bridegroom” of the Church through the exercise of the ministerial priesthood, this in no way detracts from the role of women, or for that matter from the role of the other members of the Church who are not ordained to the sacred ministry, since all share equally in the dignity proper to the “common priesthood” based on Baptism. These role distinctions should not be viewed in accordance with the criteria of functionality typical in human societies. Rather they must be understood according to the particular criteria of the sacramental economy, i.e., the economy of “signs” which God freely chooses in order to become present in the midst of humanity.

— Saint John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” 11.2–11.5

Key Points

The Church understands salvation history through an economy of signs.

Usually, when we hear the word “economy,” we think of money or finance. The Church, however, uses the term differently. *Economy* is also a theological term, which refers to the way God communicates His life to us.

Here’s how this sacramental economy works. Through His Passion, Death, and Resurrection, Christ merited all the graces necessary for our salvation. Those graces, however, still need to be distributed to us. So, just as a secular economy provides for the material needs of its citizens—distributing money, clothing, food, and more, through the exchange of goods and services—God’s sacramental economy provides for the spiritual needs of the faithful (see CCC, 1076). It “distributes the goods,” so to speak.

That distributing depends on what the Church describes as an “economy of signs.” In our everyday life, signs communicate particular truths to us. Some of the most basic signs we encounter are red lights, which communicate, “Stop,” or flags at half-mast, which communicate that someone important has died. Body language, facial expressions, and language itself are other forms of signs. They are all physical (or embodied) signs and symbols that communicate spiritual realities (see CCC, 1146).

Something similar applies to the Church, where this economy of signs helps us grasp essential truths about God, man, and salvation. Christ, for example, is depicted as a Bridegroom and the Church as His Bride. The use of these symbols or signs points to a deep truth about the loving, lasting, fruitful relationship between the two.

On an even deeper level, the bread that becomes Christ's Body in the Eucharist speaks to the spiritual nourishment Communion gives, while the water of Baptism points to the spiritual cleansing taking place. These sacramental signs are efficacious, in that they make possible what they symbolize: the Eucharist really does nourish us; the waters of Baptism really do cleanse us. And they also are illustrative: they teach us how to understand God's actions in our lives (see CCC, 1131, 1152, 1412).

Christ instituted an all male priesthood.

All Christians participate in Christ's priesthood through making a gift of our lives to God and others. This "common" priesthood, however, is different from the ministerial priesthood.

Through the ministerial priesthood, the Church teaches, "Christ unceasingly builds up and leads His Church" (CCC, 1547). The first priests were the Apostles, who were entrusted with this sacred vocation at the Last Supper by Jesus Himself (Jn 13:12-15). Even though Jesus had many female disciples and entrusted them with great responsibility, including carrying the news of His Resurrection to the Apostles, He only called men to serve in the ministerial priesthood (see John 20:1-18).

The Church sees the reason for this rooted in the sacramental economy. In this economy, the priest is a sign of Christ, the Bridegroom, and his "fatherhood" represents the Fatherhood of God. Through the sacrament of holy orders, his life becomes "a mystery totally grafted onto the mystery of Christ."⁶⁷

⁶⁷ John Paul II, "Address to the Bishops from the State of Michigan and Ohio (USA) on the Ad Limina Visit," May 21, 1998, 2.

From the point of his ordination forward, John Paul II explained, the priest's overarching task is to let "his whole life be transformed, so that he can be Christ for others: a convincing and efficacious sign of God's loving, saving presence."⁶⁸ The priest's maleness isn't incidental to how he lives as that sign. It is part of its efficaciousness—for only men can be bridegrooms; only men can be fathers.

The Church cannot change what Christ instituted.

Jesus Christ, not the present pope or a past pope, made the decision to entrust the ministerial priesthood to men. This decision is recorded in Scripture, was the practice of the Apostles, and has been the constant Tradition of the Church everywhere in every time.

Therefore, despite more recent attempts on the part of some lay Catholics and dissident theologians to argue for the end of the all-male priesthood, the Church cannot and will not ordain women.

As John Paul II himself explained, in fidelity to the example of Jesus Christ, the Church "does not consider herself authorized to admit women to the ministerial priesthood."⁶⁹ This is not an obstinate claim. The Church is simply acknowledging her limits. She considers the Lord's example binding on her, and does not have the authority to change the sacramental economy.

John Paul II goes on to say:

In fact the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles attest that this call was made in accordance with God's eternal plan; Christ chose those whom he willed (cf. Mk 3:13-14; Jn 6:70), and he did so in union with the Father, "through the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:2), after having spent the night in prayer (cf. Lk 6:12). Therefore, in granting admission to the ministerial priesthood, the Church has always acknowledged as a perennial norm her Lord's way of acting in choosing the twelve men whom he made the foundation of his Church (cf. Rv 21:14).

⁶⁸ Ibid, 2.

⁶⁹ John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, May 22, 1994, 2.

These men did not in fact receive only a function which could thereafter be exercised by any member of the Church; rather they were specifically and intimately associated in the mission of the Incarnate Word himself (cf. Mt 10:1, 7-8; 28:16-20; Mk 3:13-16; 16:14-15). The Apostles did the same when they chose fellow workers who would succeed them in their ministry. Also included in this choice were those who, throughout the time of the Church, would carry on the Apostles' mission of representing Christ the Lord and Redeemer.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Ibid., 2.

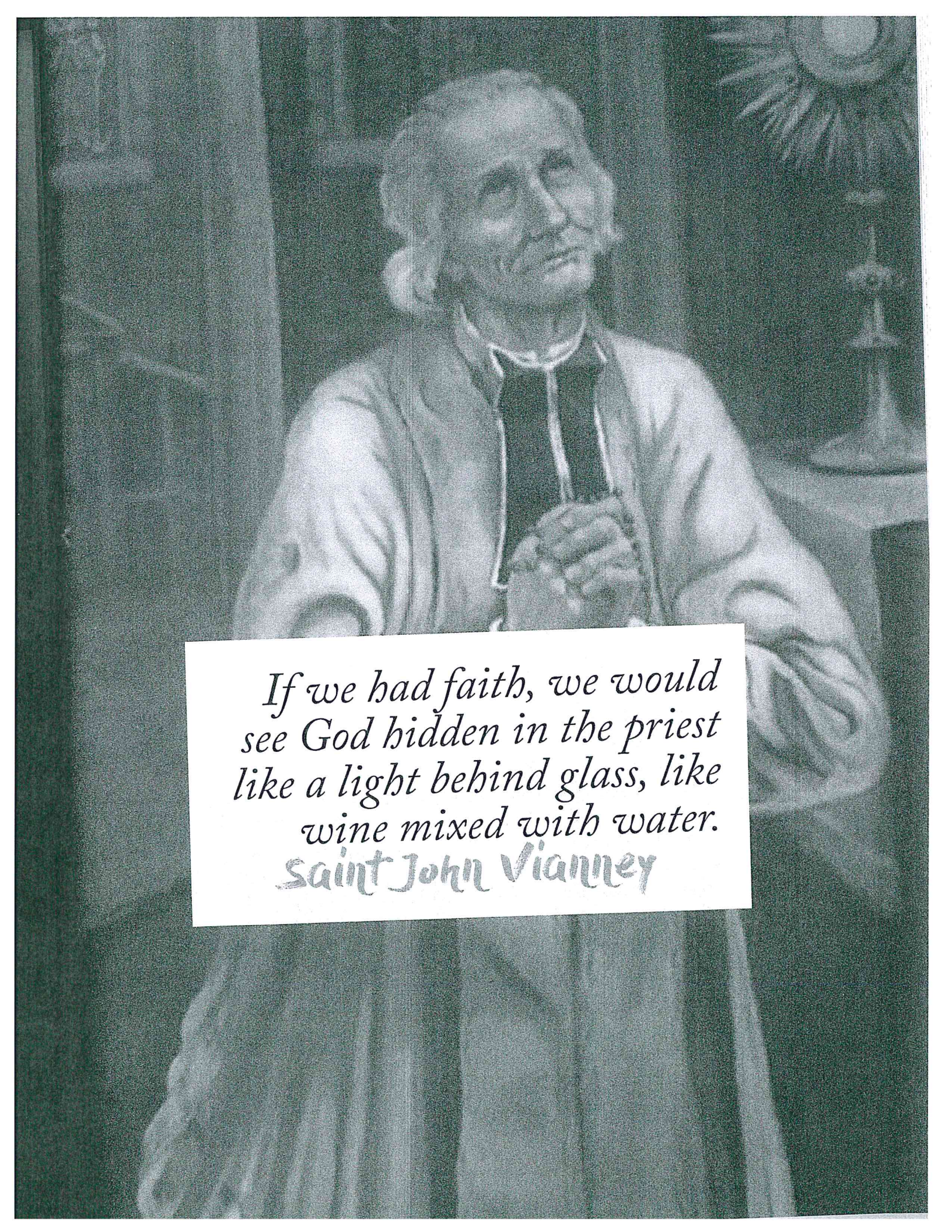
Bringing It Home

As our culture understands it, there are no differences between men and women: women can do anything men can do, and sometimes do it even better. For this reason, the Church's insistence that only men can become priests, strikes many as backwards and misogynistic. They see the Church holding women back and keeping "power" concentrated in male hands.

If we think with the world, understanding this teaching can pose difficulties for us too. But, when we remember the teachings about the feminine genius (that women are gifted to be spiritual mothers), male-female complementarity (that men and women have different gifts and tasks in the Church and the world), and the nature of authority in the Church (that authority is for service, not power), those difficulties can begin to be resolved. In essence, the Church is like a family. In human families, men and women have different roles and tasks. Only men can be fathers. Only women can be mothers. Only men can generate life outside their body. Only women can nurture new life within their bodies. But, because of (not in spite of) these differences, both men and women are absolutely essential in a family. At minimum, you need both to create life and help it grow. The same holds true for the Church. Only men can be spiritual fathers. Only women can be spiritual mothers. The Church needs both to make Christ known and manifest God's love to the world.

Discussion Questions

1. Spiritually speaking, what could happen to us if we feel like we have a "right" to a vocation?
2. Have you ever struggled with accepting the Church's teachings about the all-male priesthood? If so, what has helped you work through those struggles?
3. How are priests fathers? How has a priest been a father to you?



*If we had faith, we would
see God hidden in the priest
like a light behind glass, like
wine mixed with water.
Saint John Vianney*

III. THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

*Furthermore, precisely in line with this economy of signs, even if apart from the sacramental sphere, there is great significance to that "womanhood" which was lived in such a sublime way by Mary. In fact, there is present in the "womanhood" of a woman who believes, and especially in a woman who is "consecrated," a kind of inherent "prophecy" (cf. Mulieris Dignitatem, 29), a powerfully evocative symbolism, a highly significant "iconic character," which finds its full realization in Mary and which also aptly expresses the very essence of the Church as a community consecrated with the integrity of a "virgin" heart to become the "bride" of Christ and "mother" of believers. When we consider the "iconic" complementarity of male and female roles, two of the Church's essential dimensions are seen in a clearer light: the "Marian" principle and the Apostolic-Petrine principle (cf. *ibid.*, 27).*

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 11.6–11.8

Key Points

Just as Christ is the Bridegroom, the Church is the Bride.

In the sacramental economy, Christ stands as the Bridegroom, who loves His Bride, desires union with her, pursues her, and sacrifices for her. In turn, the Church signifies the Bride. She is set apart for her Beloved. She is desired, pursued, and won through His sacrifices (see CCC, 796). These images, of Bridegroom and Bride, originated not with theologians or writers, but rather with Scripture itself.

In the Old Testament, God speaks of Israel as His Bride, comparing her to a harlot whose dignity is restored by her husband's faithful, sacrificial love (see the Old Testament book of Hosea). Then, in the New Testament, Saint Paul compares the relationship between Christ and His Church to that between husband and wife, noting that Christ sacrificed Himself for the Church, as husbands are called to sacrifice themselves for their wives (Eph. 5:32). Paul also speaks of the Church as a "pure bride" of her "one husband" (2 Cor. 11:2). Later, Saint John describes the Church as a bride "adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2).

Drawing upon that scriptural imagery, the Church teaches that the "consummation" of the relationship between the Heavenly Bridegroom and His Bride is the Eucharist. It is "the sacrament of the Bridegroom and of the Bride" and "the Marriage Supper of the Lamb," where Christ's sacrificial offering for His Bride is represented on the altar, and the Bride receives her Husband's

offering of Himself under the form of bread and wine.⁷¹ Through His sacrifice and her receptivity, the Church—like Israel in Hosea—becomes the “pure bride” of the New Testament, eager to bear fruit for her Husband.

Mary is a special icon of the Church.

All women of faith, in a sense, are an icon of the Church as Bride. Through our femininity, we bear witness to a Church that is both Bride and Mother, that is beloved, receptive, and fruitful. “Wherever woman is most profoundly herself,” wrote Gertrude von le Fort, “there she is also bride and mother.”⁷² John Paul II was getting at this very idea when he spoke of a special “prophecy” women can give. Our prophecy is our feminine witness.

Consecrated women, who give themselves completely to Christ in this life, have an even greater share in this “prophecy.” Their entire life is meant to serve as a witness to the single-minded devotion of the Bride. They are, the Church teaches, “a transcendent sign of the Church's love for Christ, and an eschatological image of this heavenly Bride of Christ and of the life to come.”⁷³

Mary, however, is the ultimate icon of the bridal Church (CCC 972). As bride, mother, and virgin, devoted to God, fruitful, and pure, she is, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, “the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come.”⁷⁴ Mary's fidelity is total. Her love unsurpassed. She perfectly receives all God gives her, and she perfectly gives back all that she has received. No one has served the Bridegroom more, and no one has born more fruit for Him, both on earth and in eternity.

The Church, at its deepest level, is Marian.

Theologians often use different biblical figures as metaphors for the Church in order to help us better understand the Church's nature and mission. They have pointed to Saint Paul—the great evangelist—as an image of the missionary Church; Saint John—the Beloved Disciple—as an image of the contemplative Church;

⁷¹ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, February 22, 2007, 27.

⁷² Gertrude von le Fort, *The Eternal Woman*, 6.

⁷³ *From the Rite of Consecrations of Virgins, Praenotanda*, 1. Available online at: <http://consecratedvirgins.org/usacv/sites/default/files/documents/VocRes-Decree.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 68.

the Blessed Virgin as an image of the maternal, virginal, bridal Church; and Saint Peter—the first pope—as an image of the institutional Church.

For centuries, despite an abundance of images, the primary image most people associated with the Church was Saint Peter, holding the keys to the Kingdom. They thought of the Church largely in terms of authority, governance, and structures.

During his pontificate, however, John Paul II repeatedly emphasized the importance of the “Marian principle.” That is, he stressed the value of seeing Mary as the ultimate icon of the Church: of what it is, of how believers are called to live, and of the destiny God has for His children in eternity.

In his book, *The Truth of Catholicism*, John Paul II’s biographer, George Weigel, shed light on the pope’s preference for the Marian principle, noting that, “Mary was the first disciple, because Mary’s ‘yes’ to the angel’s message had made possible the incarnation of the Son of God,” and that “Mary’s assumption into heaven was a preview of what awaits all whom Christ will save.”⁷⁵

“In the Catholic view of things,” Weigel continued, “that means that everyone in the Church is formed in the image of a woman: Mary, the Mother of Jesus.”⁷⁶

In stressing the importance of a Marian Church, John Paul II wasn’t denigrating the Petrine Church or saying we shouldn’t see the Church as an institution with authority in the world.

Rather, he saw the two as “complementary,” much as men and women are. The Marian Church, he explained, “precedes, makes possible, and indeed makes sense of the Petrine Church.” That is, it creates the need for it and supplies it with priests and bishops. In turn, he said, the Petrine Church, exists for the Marian Church—it exists to serve it, having no other purpose “except to form the Church in line with the ideal of sanctity already programmed and prefigured in Mary.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ George Weigel, *The Truth of Catholicism* (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 2002), 46.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 45.

⁷⁷ John Paul II, Christmas greetings to members of the Roman Curia and Prelature, December 22, 1987. Available in Italian online at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1987/december/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19871222_curia-romana.html.

Bringing It Home

The images and metaphors theologians use to describe the Church don't just apply to the Church in general. They also apply to us as individuals. For example, each believer, in a sense, is Christ's bride. We're all pursued by Him and loved by Him. He sacrificed His life for each one of us. And He wants each of us to bear fruit for Him in the world.

For some of us, it can be a struggle to see ourselves that way. We know we're much more like the harlot of Hosea than the "pure" bride of Revelation. We sin. We screw up. We complain. We don't trust, and we don't love nearly enough.

But our heavenly Bridegroom is a patient, loving Bridegroom. No matter what we've done in the past, no matter what weaknesses we struggle with now, He loves us unreservedly. He also has promised to go on loving us unreservedly, giving us every grace we need to become the pure bride He made us to be. His fidelity is stronger than our infidelity. Earthly spouses may disappoint, but Jesus never will.

Discussion Questions

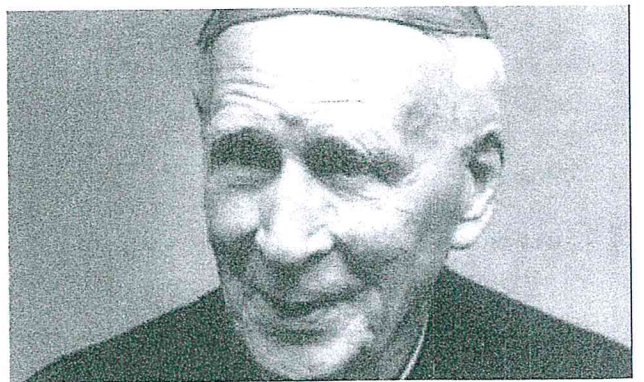
Do you think of the Church more in Marian terms, as a body of the faithful, or in Petrine terms, as a governing institution? How do you think that perception of the Church affects your faith?

Is it easy or difficult for you to think of Christ as the Bridegroom and yourself as the Bride? Why do you think that is?

How has Jesus pursued you? How has He been faithful to you?

*The priest is not, in virtue of his priestly ordination
more of a Christian than the ordinary believer; the
Order he has received is for the sake of the Eucharist,
but the Eucharist is for the sake of everyone.*

— Cardinal Henri de Lubac



Closing Prayer

THE MEMORARE

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary,
that never was it known
that anyone who fled to thy protection,
implored thy help, or sought thine intercession
was left unaided.

Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee,
O Virgin of virgins, my mother; to thee do I come,
before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful.
O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my
petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me.

Amen.

Saint John Paul II, pray for us.