

The Doctrine of Josemaría Escrivá on the Priesthood. Some Theological Themes Concerning the Ministerial Priesthood in the Thought of Blessed Josemaría

Lucas F. Mateo-Seco

When I wrote *Priests in Opus Dei* (Pamplona 1994), I dedicated a long chapter to the testimonies of diocesan priests who had asked to be admitted to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross in the early years¹. When I wrote this book, some of them were bishops; many others held positions of government in Dicasteries, Episcopal Conferences or in dioceses; others were professors of various

¹ Art. 1 of the Apost. Const. *Ut sit* with which Pope John Paul II erected the Prelature of Opus Dei establishes that after having declared the Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei to be erected, the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross is also erected “as an association of clergy intrinsically united to the Prelature”. The Statutes of the Prelature or the *Codex iuris particularis Operis Dei* define the Priestly Society as “a clerical association proper and intrinsic to the Prelature, in such a way that it forms a unity with it — *aliquid unum* — and cannot be separated from it” (n. 36, 2). The Priestly Society of the Holy Cross offers diocesan clergy the help and encouragement of the spiritual message from which Opus Dei was born and lives. The Statutes describe its end as the promotion of “priestly sanctification, in conformity with the spirit and ascetical praxis of Opus Dei, also among clergy who do not belong to the Prelature” (n. 57).

The diocesan clergy who belong to the Society seek and receive spiritual help in order to become holy in the exercise of their ministry, according to the ascetical praxis of Opus Dei. Their affiliation with the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross does not imply incorporation into the Prelature: each priest continues to be incardinated within his own Diocese and depends only on his own Bishop, including in what refers to his pastoral work, and he only gives account of this work to his Bishop. See further A. DE FUENMAYOR - V. GÓMEZ-IGLESIAS - J.L. ILLANES, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei. The History and Defense of a Charism*, Princeton 1994, pp. 463-467.

ecclesiastical sciences; the majority spent their lives in parish work. At that time, they were asked to respond to two simple questions: Why did you ask to be admitted to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross? Why have you continued to belong to it for so many years?

I must admit that I was moved by the unanimity of the responses. It was a simple unanimity which spontaneously sprang from the very truth of their lives. They unanimously responded that they had decided to form part of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, and had persevered in their vocations, out of love for their dioceses. And in the background, guaranteeing their fidelity to this love, was the figure of a priest: Blessed Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer.

I can attest to the fact that what moved all of us to request admission to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross was the absolute certainty that Blessed Josemaría was a secular priest who deeply loved the priesthood, and who deeply understood and loved the diocesan clergy with all his soul... and that we could trust him and his spiritual and theological gifts. We knew that he would never disappoint us in our desires to give ourselves to our dioceses. And with the experience of the years — some have already celebrated the Golden Anniversary of their vocation to Opus Dei — we have received confirmation that neither our confidence nor our hopes were misplaced. There are many reasons for this. Some are to be found in our absolute trust in the spiritual path marked out by Blessed Josemaría and his foundational charism; others relate to his personal authority and — why not say it? — on the firmness and clarity of his theological convictions.

My considerations centre on this last aspect. Although it is not the most important facet of Blessed Josemaría, it is nevertheless of great importance. I am referring to the firmness and clarity of his theology. In turbulent times of change which led so many people to question the very significance of the priesthood, Blessed Josemaría was always a clear point of reference, of understanding and of serenity. As I have just said, there were many reasons for this: some of them relate to the personal sanctity of Blessed Josemaría, to his fidelity to the Church and to the foundational charism of Opus Dei, while others were based on his profound knowledge of the theology of the priestly ministry. When it came to reminding Christians that they had to be professionally competent², Blessed Josemaría liked to say that while it is true that the medieval cathedrals were built with faith, it is also true that they were built with geometry. Something similar could be said about his knowledge of theology and canon law: without them, Blessed Josemaría would not have been able to carry out his mission in the beautiful way in which

² Cfr. *Christ is Passing By*, 50; *Conversations*, 10, 47; *The Forge*, 705, etc.

he did. In other words, it is also thanks to this knowledge that he did not disappoint the priests who placed their priestly hopes in him.

1. THE THEOLOGICAL 'TENDENCY' OF BLESSED JOSEMARÍA

Blessed Josemaría was far from being either a dry academic or an 'ivory tower' theologian. For the Founder of Opus Dei, the experience of life always needed to precede reflection about life; he was a man who was fundamentally interested in living. The 'theological' as such, took second place for him. This is certainly not to say that theology was irrelevant to him. Faith, by its inherently dynamic nature, tends to form both culture and thought. In short, faith tends to become theological. The Founder of Opus Dei was both a man of great faith and a man who truly loved the academic world.

The theology of Blessed Josemaría could be described as a sober theology which is beautifully expressed in his written and oral teachings, a theology which is very attentive to the intellectual currents of his time, and to the clarity of its formulations. His is the theology of a well-educated person who possesses an enviable store of knowledge about the life of the world and the Church of his times. His is the theology of a shepherd of souls, who reflects on both faith and life. And he does all of this without ever trying to 'play the theologian', so to speak.

Furthermore, the intellectual dispositions of Blessed Josemaría are characterized by a humble and passionate desire for the truth, great respect for the opinions of those who did not think as he did, and great clarity when it came to explaining his own views. If the courtesy of the teacher is manifested in clarity of expression, Blessed Josemaría undoubtedly deserves the epithet of 'courteous'.

Blessed Josemaría, who transcends his historical epoch in his role as the Founder of Opus Dei, was at the same time a priest who was immersed in his times and in his circumstances. He was a man who passionately loved his own times and who knew how to interpret events with attentive and loving eyes, discovering in them the signs of the times. Regarding the priesthood, his theological thought is closely bound to that of II Vatican Council. This is not only due to his contemporaneity with and warm welcome to the teachings of the Magisterium, but also because of the harmony of his thought and spirit with that of the Council. It is not necessary to point out that many of the theological affirmations of this Council had been preached by Blessed Josemaría since 1928. This was what occurred, for example, with the message of the universal call to sanctity and the recognition of the positive theological value of secularity as the common ambit of both secular priests and lay people. This was also the case with the importance given to the common priesthood of the faithful, his love for the Church, and his passion for unity.

2. II VATICAN COUNCIL AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE PRIESTHOOD

As is well-known, with Vatican Council II, the theology of the priesthood came to be seen in a much broader context than in the previous epoch. I am referring here, above all, to the approach and affirmations contained in the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*: the character of People of God possessed by the Church; its priestly dimension; the affirmation of the universal call to sanctity; the consideration of the priesthood as an organic participation in the mission of the Apostles; and the view that the priest's mission is inseparable from the new sacramental identification with Christ which emanates from his priestly consecration. This provides a fitting framework for the thought of Blessed Josemaría on the priesthood.

3. CONSECRATION AND MISSION

This is especially evident in an interview given to the magazine 'Palabra'³, which took place in the first turbulent post-conciliar years, years of confusion in ideas and attitudes, and of multiple crises in relation to the priesthood. It was in this context that the Director of 'Palabra' asked the Founder of Opus Dei which feature of the priest he would highlight, out of those described in the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. The answer is direct and to the point:

“I would underline a characteristic of priestly existence which is not part of these changing and transitory elements. I refer to the perfect union which should exist, as the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* reminds us on several occasions, between a priest's consecration and his mission. Or, in other words, between his personal life of piety and the exercise of his priestly ministry; between his filial relationship with God, and his pastoral and brotherly relations with men. I do not believe a priest can carry out an effective ministry unless he is a man of prayer”⁴.

³ Between 1966 and 1968, Blessed Josemaría granted a series of interviews to different magazines and periodicals. These were wide-ranging and thorough interviews, wherein the Founder of Opus Dei maintained an open dialogue with his interviewers. The texts of these interviews are not merely summaries of informal conversations with the interviewer, but rather the questions and answers were carefully reviewed by Blessed Josemaría himself. These answers, therefore, constitute a reliable testament of the thought of Blessed Josemaría. At the same time, the Founder of Opus Dei allowed himself to be led by the questions of the interviewer. This is especially apparent in the interview granted to the Director of the magazine "Palabra", Pedro Rodríguez, who was already then a well-known ecclesiologist.

⁴ *Conversations*, 3.

Blessed Josemaría's answer underscored one of the 'imperishable' features of the priestly theology which forms part of the backbone of the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. This feature is the 'perfect union' which should exist between consecration and mission in the life of the priest. It must be pointed out that the affirmation of Blessed Josemaría does not lean towards either one of the two dimensions of which we have been speaking, but rather speaks of them as being inseparably united.

This response manifested a deep understanding of *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. The Decree says that Christ chose certain disciples from the beginning, so that they would have the sacred power of Holy Orders, in order to offer sacrifice and forgive sins, thereby making them participants in His consecration and mission⁵. Blessed Josemaría, who placed such importance on sanctification through one's work and who was so conscious of the theological dimensions of secularity, emphasizes here the union between consecration and mission as the enduring theological foundation for the priestly life. The application is immediately apparent: this implies union (not juxtaposition) between the priest's life of piety and the exercise of his ministry, between his relation with God and his relations with others. His emphasis on this union also reflects the importance he gave to a concept which is key in the spirit of *Opus Dei*: the concept of unity of life.

The order in which he places these two words — consecration and mission — is also not accidental. This is because the mission emanates from the consecration. This is what the Decree says: *Ideo mittuntur quia consecrantur*. At the same time, the consecration tends towards the mission, in a way which is so essential that to renounce the mission would be to violate the very nature of the consecration. It could be said that this would radically impede its christological and ecclesial dynamism.

4. THE PRIEST, 'ALTER CHRISTUS'

This consideration of sacramental consecration leads one to view the priesthood in its christocentric dimension and to highlight the well-known assertion that the priest is another Christ, '*alter Christus*'.

As J.L. Illanes and A. Aranda have already pointed out, the view that the priest is *alter Christus* has a long tradition in Christian thought about the ministerial priesthood. However, with Blessed Josemaría, this consideration acquires new dimensions, and becomes a sort of catalyst for his thought about Christian

⁵ Cfr. II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.

spirituality. It is an expression which is closely bound to the priestly dimension of the Christian vocation and one which permitted Blessed Josemaría to deepen his understanding of the baptismal priesthood, which in turn had so many theological and ascetical consequences. In this light, the ministerial priesthood appears to naturally emerge from a People, who are themselves an entirely priestly people⁶.

Blessed Josemaría first used the simple formula '*alter Christus*', and then continued emphasizing its content by adding the expression '*ipse Christus*'. Both expressions are used to express the same meaning and content. He used the first expression to refer to the priestly ministry in accordance with the tradition of this phrase. Later on, he widened its application to the baptismal priesthood in a continuing *crescendo*, to the point where, in his writings, he applied the expression *alter Christus* many more times to the baptismal priesthood than to the ministerial priesthood⁷.

This is the first feature of the priestly ministry which emerges from the considerations of Blessed Josemaría. It is found in some texts written in the 1930s. This is also the feature which underlies the points dedicated to the ministerial priesthood in *The Way*, many of which were added by Blessed Josemaría in order to teach the young people who surrounded him the veneration and respect that is due to the priesthood:

“A Priest — whoever he may be — is always another Christ”⁸.

5. THE IDENTITY OF THE PRIEST

The ‘identity crisis of the priest’ was already in full swing when Blessed Josemaría highlighted the priest’s consecration and mission in the interview in ‘Palabra’. Later on, as the priestly crisis continued to intensify, he commented:

“Some people keep searching for what they call the identity of the priest. How clearly Saint Catherine expresses it! What is the identity of the priest? That of Christ. All of us Christians can and should be not just

⁶ Cfr. J.L. ILLANES, *El cristiano “alter Christus-ipse Christus”. Sacerdocio común y sacerdocio ministerial en la enseñanza del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, in G. ARANDA - C. BASEVI - J. CHAPA (eds.), *Biblia exégesis y cultura. Estudios en honor del Prof. D. José María Casciaro*, Pamplona 1994, pp. 604-622; A. ARANDA, *El cristiano “alter Christus, ipse Christus” en el pensamiento del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, in M. BELDA - J. ESCUDERO (eds.), *Santidad y mundo. Estudios en torno a las enseñanzas del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Pamplona 1996, pp. 129-189.

⁷ This is what is affirmed by A. Aranda in the paper cited above.

⁸ *The Way*, 66.

other Christs, *alter Christus*, but Christ himself: *ipse Christus!* But in the priest this happens in a direct way, by virtue of the sacrament”⁹.

The priest encounters his own identity by identifying himself with Christ. In terms of ascetical practice, Blessed Josemaría emphasized the need for a genuine *kénosis*, which he himself practised joyfully: one must disappear to such an extent that only Christ appears.

6. SACRAMENTAL IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST

This is how Blessed Josemaría describes this identification:

“In the sacrament of holy orders our Father God has made it possible for some members of the faithful, by virtue of a further and ineffable communication of the Holy Spirit, to receive an indelible character on their soul which configures them to Christ the priest so that they can act in the name of Jesus Christ, Head of His Mystical Body. By virtue of this ministerial priesthood — which differs essentially and not only in degree from the common priesthood of the faithful — the sacred ministers can consecrate the Body and Blood of Christ, offering God the holy sacrifice. They can pardon sins in sacramental confession and carry out the ministry of teaching the peoples ‘about everything that refers to God’¹⁰ — and nothing more”¹¹.

This text sets out Blessed Josemaría’s principal considerations of the theology of the priesthood, using sections of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* and *Lumen Gentium* as his points of reference. One must read this passage in light of these documents in order to understand what he is saying here in such a synthetic way¹². The priestly ministry is a sacrament, which, by power of the Holy Spirit, imprints an indelible character in the soul, a character by which the priest is configured to Christ the Priest, in order to act in the name of Christ. Once again, I insist that it

⁹ *A Priest Forever*, 16.

¹⁰ *Heb* 5:1: “in iis quae sunt ad Deum”.

¹¹ *Christ is Passing By*, 79.

¹² The passage of *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2, reads as follows: “...peculiari tamen illo Sacramento confertur, quo Presbyteri, unctioe Spiritus Sancti, speciali characterе signatur et sic Christo Sacerdoti configurantur, ita ut in persona Christi Capitis agere valeant.” In its consideration of the priesthood of the faithful, *Lumen Gentium*, 10, views the ministerial priesthood as it is ordered to the common priesthood.

is the consecration that generates the mission, which is here signalled by its essential elements: the ministry of the sacraments and the ministry of the Word.

7. ACTING ‘IN PERSONA CHRISTI’

The expression *in persona Christi* was used frequently by Vatican Council II¹³. This is an expression with a venerable tradition and which, amidst the crises in the priesthood in those years, was a firm defence against the secularization of the priesthood.

It is widely known that the expression *in persona Christi* was not developed to *exalt* the dignity of the ministerial priesthood. The fact that the priest acts in this capacity is rather an unavoidable consequence of the unique nature of the Mediation of Christ. Indeed, it is precisely because the Mediation, the Priesthood, and the Sacrifice of Christ are unique, that the actions of the priest neither succeed nor add anything to the Sacrifice or the Mediation of the Unique Mediator. The sacramental actions of the priests are not actions which are added onto or juxtaposed to the action with which Christ unites and sanctifies His Church, but rather they are *instrumental* actions through which Christ Himself continues to exercise His Priesthood.

We have already considered how Blessed Josemaría insisted that the priestly identity is rooted in identification with Christ the Priest, both in its sacramental dimension and in the demands of the spiritual life that come with it¹⁴. Explaining the Holy Mass, he writes: “The Mass is, I insist, an action of God, of the Trinity. It is not a merely human event. The priest who celebrates fulfils the desire of our Lord, lending his body and his voice to the divine action. He acts, not in his own name, but *in persona et in nomine Christi*: in the Person of Christ and in his name”¹⁵. This consideration occupies a privileged place in his homily *A Priest Forever*:

“To accomplish so great a work — the work of redemption — Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the Sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the per-

¹³ The Council uses this expression or equivalent expressions a number of times. See for example *Lumen Gentium*, 10, 21, 25, 27, 28; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 33; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2, 12, 13; Cfr. B.D. MARLIANGES, *Clés pour une théologie di ministère. In persona Christi. In persona Ecclesiae*, Paris 1975, pp. 231-235. See also M. EVANS, *In persona Christi - The Key to Priestly Identity*, in «The Clergy Review» 71 (1986), 158-164.

¹⁴ Cfr. *A Priest Forever*, 10.

¹⁵ *Christ is Passing By*, 86.

son of his minister, ‘the same now offering through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the Cross’, but especially under the eucharistic species. The sacrament of Orders, in effect, equips the priest to lend Our Lord his voice, his hands, his whole being”¹⁶.

8. A PRIEST FOREVER

In view of these theological considerations, one understands why one of Blessed Josemaría’s last homilies was entitled *A Priest Forever*. This should be considered not only as a reference to Psalm 110, or as a simple expression, the theological consequences of which have not been carefully considered. Rather, it is a position which is coherent with his emphasis in the theology of the priesthood on the sacramental identification with Christ. The priesthood can be considered to be eternal precisely because the configuration with Christ granted by the sacrament of Holy Orders is analogous to that granted in the baptismal consecration, and because it imprints a character which is intimately related with the baptismal character. It can be considered to be permanent in an analogous way to the permanence of the baptismal character, even though the pastoral ministry will obviously not be exercised as such in heaven.

Blessed Josemaría knew very well that the permanence of the priestly character, once it had passed beyond the veils of time and space of this world, was not strictly speaking a doctrine of the Faith. He also knew that the permanence of the sacramental character was the view most commonly held by theologians¹⁷. This is the context which frames his considerations of the eternal character of the priesthood. I refer, for example, to the title of the homily, *A Priest Forever*, or to paragraphs such as the following:

“A priest who says the Mass in this way — adoring, atoning, pleading, giving thanks, identifying himself with Christ, and who teaches others to make the Sacrifice of the altar the centre and root of Chris-

¹⁶ *A Priest Forever*, 39, with reference to II VATICAN COUNCIL, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7, COUNCIL OF TRENT, *Doctrine Concerning the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, 2.

¹⁷ In the 23rd session of the Council of Trent, it was said that the characters imprinted by the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Orders are indelible in this life (cfr. DS 1767, 1771). Thomas Aquinas argued that (*S.Th.* III. q. 63, a.5, in c and ad 3), since the sacramental character is a participation in the priesthood of Christ, and this priesthood is eternal, the sanctification that is received by the participation in it remains forever. This view came to be common among theologians, without becoming a matter of argument. In this regard, see for example M. SCHMAUS, *Teología Dogmática*, vol. VI. *Los sacramentos*, Madrid 1963, pp. 58-63.

tian life really will show the incomparable value of his vocation, the value of that character with which he has been stamped and which he will never lose”¹⁸.

9. CONCLUSION

In ending these considerations, I am conscious that I have barely begun to scratch the surface of Blessed Josemaría’s profound theology of the ministerial priesthood. This topic can and should also be considered from other perspectives. I am thinking of the ecclesiological dimension of the ministerial priesthood, of the theological and ascetical dimensions of the priestly ministry, of the relation between the ministerial and the lay priesthood, of the priestly dimension of the entire people of God, and of so many other perspectives that are just waiting to be studied.

As I have already said, at the time when Blessed Josemaría made many of these considerations, priests were finding themselves caught up in a swell — which was also theological — that shook the very foundations of the priestly identity. To sincerely and loyally express one’s views about the ministerial priesthood, as Blessed Josemaría did at the time, required faith, lucidity, intellectual firmness and great fortitude.

Indeed, to say that the priest should seek his identity in his ordination, that the priestly ministry emanates from the sacramental consecration and is marked by it, that the priest should give himself completely to his ministry, that his ministry is sacred, or that the priesthood is forever, were not assertions which were easy to make, nor were they well received in many places. His statements often scandalized people and they provoked visceral reactions in many places. Knowledge of this ecclesial context, to which we will need to give witness with the passing of time, helps us to appreciate the greatness and fruitfulness of the theological views of Blessed Josemaría, in the field of the theology of the ministerial priesthood.

The passing of time does nothing more than confirm the words spoken by the Cardinal Primate of Spain when Blessed Josemaría was called to the House of the Father: “When a detailed history is written of these years of the life of the Church — in Spain and in other countries — the influence of the spirit of Opus Dei among diocesan priests will be one of the most decisive elements in making an evaluation of the mark left by Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer on the life of the Church”¹⁹.

¹⁸ *A Priest Forever*, 45.

¹⁹ CARD. M. GONZÁLEZ MARTÍN, *La huella de un hombre de Dios*, in AA.VV., *Mons. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y el Opus Dei*, Pamplona 1985, p. 390.