

# FRIENDS OF THE BRIDEGROOM: REFLECTIONS ON PRIESTLY FATHERHOOD IN LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

ANTONIO LÓPEZ

“If the Marian Church were not the Bride of Christ, the ordained priest would be deprived of both the possibility of an authentic gift of self and of his very fatherhood.”



The priesthood is a great gift and a profound mystery. Christ's gratuitous calling of certain men to be with him and participate in his salvific mission is a grace of singular beauty. In the sacrament of holy orders, God makes these men his own and continues, through them, to give himself efficaciously to everyone. The ever-patient Father, rich in mercy (Eph 2:4), extends through priests configured to the Son his redemption of our bodily human existence. When, in the name of Christ, the priest repeats the words of thanksgiving over bread and wine, the Holy Spirit, “who blows where [he] wills” (Jn 3:8), obeys his epiclesis and transforms the eucharistic species into the body and blood

of Christ. In Christ's name, the priest may pronounce the words that absolve us from our sins and allow us to enjoy anew the Father's love. Because he has been sacramentally allowed to do what no human being can do out of his own resources, to give God, the priest is also responsible for the whole human person: as a father, the priest helps the believer open up to the triune God and completely entrust his whole self to God's ever-greater light and love. God remains close to us and our daily joys and troubles in a particular way through the ordained priesthood.

It is precisely this beauty that makes the abuse of minors by priests, religious, and bishops so grievous and unsettling. By their iniquitous actions, they bring about the opposite of what they were and are entrusted to do. Taking advantage of people—children and mostly male teenagers—they give themselves up to “dishonorable passions” and, instead of communicating God's glory, incarnate its denial (Rom 1:26–27).<sup>1</sup> They thus inflict wounds that their victims will carry for their entire lives. It would be presumptuous to claim to be able to fathom why men

---

1. D. Paul Sullins notes in a November 2018 study that, as is known, “the influential report of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice on the causes and context of Catholic clergy sex abuse . . . concluded that widespread American abuse was not related to the share of homosexual priests because the reported increase in ‘homosexual’ men in the seminaries in the 1980s . . . does not correspond to an increase in the number of boys who were abused.” He also indicates that “since 2002 abuse has been rising . . . , and today is comparable to the early 1970s” and that “four out of five victims over age 7 were boys; only one in five were girls. Ease of access to boys relative to girls accounts for about one fifth of this disparity. The number of homosexual priests accounts for the remaining four fifths” (D. Paul Sullins, “Is Catholic Clergy Sex Abuse Related to Homosexual Priests?,” <http://www.ruthinstitute.org/clergy-sex-abuse-statistical-analysis>, 2–3). He claims that his “findings showed that the increase or decrease in the percent of male victims correlated almost perfectly (.98) with the increase or decrease of homosexual men in the priesthood. Among victims under age 8, the correlation was lower but still strong (.77). This indicates that 1) the abuse of boys is very strongly related to the share of homosexual men in the priesthood, but that 2) easier access to males among older victims (ages 8–17) was also an enabling factor. The increase or decrease of overall abuse also correlated highly (.93) with the increase/decrease of homosexual priests; not surprisingly since such a high proportion of victims were male” (*ibid.*, 3). See also John Jay College, “The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950–2010,” commissioned by the U.S. Catholic Bishops, May 2011; John Jay College, “The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the US,” commissioned by the U.S. Catholic Bishops, February 27, 2004.

who were given such proximity to God, who themselves enjoyed the words of forgiveness, and who received Christ's eucharistic body and blood have lied so deeply. The depths of the human soul, its history, sufferings, fears, and hopes are fully known only by God. Although this evil is not completely graspable, it is certainly possible to say that just as these men did not nourish their lived relation with Christ, so they did not pay authentic attention to human conscience, where the truth of man's being and God's word on our good can be heard.

The human inability to bear evil and desire for true justice spur us to pursue solutions that will drastically reduce the resurgence of this evil and fully deal with it if, sadly, it re-emerges. Without forgetting that, however marred, the beauty of God's presence continues to dwell in the Church and in many called to the priesthood, one has to do what is humanly possible to expiate, make amends for, and prevent future occurrences of abuse. Yet, rather than limiting oneself to treating symptoms and thus only briefly alleviating the grief this evil has caused, it is more fruitful to recognize that the scandal also represents a call to rediscover what priestly existence is about and to redecide with greater awareness, freedom, and totality in its favor. To this end, it is imperative to engage the question at its root. What has emerged in the Church over the last two decades bespeaks a culture that has been proliferating within her for more than a century. The problem is not simply ethical or political in nature; it cuts more deeply, beyond questions of sexual morality or Church governance, to anthropological and theological levels. In other terms, it regards what it means to be a human being and our very relation with God and other people, that is, the nature of love. At stake therefore, and in an unprecedented way, is the very heart of Christianity: the revelation in Jesus Christ of God as triune love. Only starting from this depth can any moral, political, or social account and response be adequate.

This article does not seek to offer a fully articulated theological anthropology, nor does it take our historical circumstances as an excuse to offer an abstract reflection on who the priest is. Rather, it attempts to present and to offer an initial response to two questions that the culture sourcing those evil deeds posits anew: what is priestly fatherhood? what does human sexuality have to do with it? The sexual abuse of minors is a problem

afflicting modern society to a particularly high degree, and the fact that the Church also suffers from it is a consequence of an unpurified worldliness within her members. Given this connection, the *metanoia* of the clergy and the Christian people (Rom 12:2) cannot but bring a greater good to our modern world.

With regard to the ordained priesthood, I would like to suggest that the anthropological and theological crisis bears on three fronts: the nature of power; the meaning of love as gift of self to others; and the bodily extension of God's redemptive love in history. Given that Christ is both man's archetype (Rom 5:14) and the eternal high priest (Heb 7:23–27), we can elucidate these three dimensions of priestly existence only by retrieving their meaning in Christ. In him, we discover that they express three dimensions of love: power is a participation in the filial dimension of Christ's love (section 1); gift of self regards the nuptiality of the priest as friend of the Bridegroom; and a vocation, as given and received in history, expresses his participation in God's fruitful and patient fatherhood (section 2). Exploring these three aspects will help us better understand the life and spirit of the priesthood, and this understanding will in turn help us see why the Church cannot admit men with deep-seated same-sex attraction to the seminary or holy orders (section 3).

#### 1. THE CALL AND AUTHORITY OF THE ORDAINED PRIESTHOOD

Christ called the apostles to be with him (Συγκαλεσάμενος, Lk 9:1) and to participate in his own authority (ἐξουσίαν, Mt 10:1). Between the vocation to the priesthood and the power (δύναμιν, Lk 9:1) it confers, there exists an intrinsic relation that surpasses a legal entrustment of the capacity to perform certain rhetorical, administrative, and charitable tasks. This crucial bond between power and vocation will pass unnoticed if, as is common today, “vocation”—from the Latin *vocare*, to call—is taken simply to mean either “the strong feeling of suitability for a particular occupation” or the “specific trade or profession” for which one has an aptitude or training. Such a subjectivistic perception of vocation results in the belief that one's authority in a certain field depends either on the fact that one's skills surpass those of others

or that one's position grants the contractual or political capacity to have others at one's disposal. Power, on this reading, would be nothing but a neutral capacity to order people and things, and its goodness would depend on the integrity of its wielder and the nobility of his purpose. This, of course, presupposes that power is the exercise of a human freedom that is not intrinsically attracted to the good, and that this power designs man's countenance and forges his destiny by enacting available possibilities.<sup>2</sup> Within such a subjective anthropology, both vocation and power begin and end with oneself and concern mostly what one can do.<sup>3</sup> Were we to grant this account, we would understand the priest as someone who felt called to and relatively gifted for the tasks to which holy orders gave him access after he passed muster with those in charge of his priestly formation. The nature of his actions and his gender would have little to do with the calling and authority with which ordination invests him. Christ's calling of the apostles, instead, is a radically different event. It begins not with man and his self-perception but with God's gracious call, which always takes into account the priest's humanity. Rather than a mere starting point, vocation is the permanent source of the form of priestly life and authority. Let us then look at the mystery of this calling and, in its light, discover the true meaning of power.

Christ calls the men he wants (Mk 3:13), and this vocation remains for those chosen a life-long, dramatic relation of love with Christ that encompasses all of their existence. As every priest knows, the reason for Christ's selection is not the capacities

---

2. See Romano Guardini, *Power and Responsibility: A Course of Action for the New Age*, in *End of the Modern World*, trans. Frederick D. Wilhelmsen (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 1998), 117–20; Joseph Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today*, trans. Martha M. Matesich (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 45–69; George Grant, “The Triumph of the Will,” in *Collected Works of George Grant*, vol. 4, 1970–1988, ed. Arthur Davis and Henry Roper (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 726–35; D. C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 264–69.

3. Vocation is thus identified with a choice that has to be made at a certain point and that, once embraced, needs only to be carried out—unless, of course, a change of circumstances or feelings suggest moving in a different direction. See Benedict XVI, *Called to Holiness: On Love, Vocation, and Formation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017).

the chosen ones may have; nor is it an utterly random divine will. Instead, the calling to the priesthood—as with every other divine vocation—is a participation in the eternal vocation and election of Jesus Christ himself: “he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph 1:4). Christ’s own calling is not only to be the one in whom, through whom, and for whom everything is created (Col 1:16). He is also the sent one (Jn 5:36–38) for whom a body was prepared (Hb 10:5) so that through his life and sacrificial love he could witness to the Father’s love for mankind: “The Father himself loves (φιλεῖ) you, because you have loved (πεφιλήκατε) me and have believed that I came from the Father” (Jn 16:27).<sup>4</sup> For the human being whose original sin was a profound rejection of God’s fatherhood and goodness, nothing is more important or delightful than to learn that the Father, whose countenance no one except Christ has seen, loves him.<sup>5</sup> Through Christ’s transfiguring revelation of the Father’s love, men’s destiny “to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will” (Eph 1:4–5) is accomplished.

If we grasp that the priestly vocation is a participation in Christ’s eternal calling and specific mission in history, then it also becomes possible to see Christ’s election as the revelation of God’s omnipotence. Rather than the exercise of a random and absolute will, divine power is the communication of God’s own being to another person.<sup>6</sup> In fact, because “person is what is most

---

4. This, of course, does not mean that creation and redemption are part of God’s eternal being—as if God needed to create and be involved in history to make or to perfect himself. The creation and redemption of the world is an expression of God’s gratuitous, free, and kenotic love that is completely harmonious with his own triune being. See Michael Sharkey (ed.), *International Theological Commission: Texts and Documents 1969–1985* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 211–12.

5. For an account of original sin as a rejection of God’s fatherhood, see my *Gift and the Unity of Being* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 135–47.

6. Aquinas rightly defines God’s power as “the communication of his own likeness to other things” (*De potentia Dei*, q. 1, a. 1, co.). He also writes that “We speak of power (*potentia*) in relation to act. . . . Now God is act both pure and primary, wherefore it is most befitting to him to act and communicate (*diffundere*) his likeness (*similitudinem*) to other things: and consequently, active power is most becoming to him: since power is called active forasmuch as it is a principle of action” (*De potentia Dei*, q. 2, a. 1, co.). God’s power is to extend

perfect in nature,” to fully communicate one’s being—inside and outside God—is to posit another person and to share with him all that one is.<sup>7</sup> The Father is God as always having given himself to the Son and the Spirit without either remainder or loss of self. Albeit with infinite difference, there exists a similarity between the Father’s eternal begetting of the Son with whom he breathes the Spirit and the creation and redemption of man. God calls man out of nothing; he lets him be and affirms his goodness. He communicates his simple and perfect being to what he is not so that the human person, apex of creation, can participate in his tripersonal life, that is, live in it and respond to God with filial love.<sup>8</sup>

Along with the dimension of divine power just mentioned—the communication of being that posits another person and thus affirms his goodness—there is another important characteristic revealed by Christ’s incarnation and obedience to the Father unto death.<sup>9</sup> Divine power is gratuitous. Gratuity here does not mean that God contemplated the possibility of being

---

his being, what is most proper to him, both in himself and to what he is not. This communication of his being regards therefore both his generative power and his creative power.

7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 29, a. 3, co. (hereafter cited as *ST*). As Richard of St. Victor put it, in God’s supreme simplicity “being is identical to loving,” and therefore “their persons will be identical to their love” (*De Trinitate* 5.20).

8. Thus, this definition of omnipotence is not the simple application of the classic axiom *bonum est diffusivum sui* to God. The self-diffusiveness of the good (*bonum*) does not suffice to account for the goodness of otherness because this axiom not only requires that what comes from the source be less than it in order to preserve the source’s perfection; it also understands union with the origin as the elimination of the many in the one. See, for example, Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.3.14–15 and 5.4.1–2. If the communication of being were just self-diffusiveness, then it would only be good for the divine being to be. Nevertheless, the perception of divine power as the communication of self in another—the Father in the Son and both in the Spirit; and God in what he is not, the created human being—is also the wonderful fulfillment and sublation of the goodness of God perceived by the Greek philosophers, since it confirms the goodness of otherness by securing the incommunicability of the source through its total sharing.

9. St. Paul hinted at this mystery when he described the spirit of Christ to be such that he “did not count equality with God (ἴσα θεῷ) a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself (ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν), taking the form of a servant (μορφὴν δούλου λαβὼν)” (Phil 2:6–7).

simply for himself but decided against it. To affirm this would be to project into God the creaturely distinctions between being and nothing, nature and freedom, as well as fallen man's experience of genuine love that teaches him to convert from self-enclosure to fruitful union with the beloved. Gratitude, instead, is the power in which, by nature, one person wants the other two to be, wants to be himself in the other two, and wants the other two to be themselves in him.<sup>10</sup> Gratitude regards utter joy in the divine other's being both other and equal to oneself, in one's own being in and with the other, and in sharing with another one's eternally being loved by the beloved.<sup>11</sup> This gratitude, which makes creation and redemption possible, exists eternally only as paternal, filial, and spiritual love. In brief, gratitude is divine love as tripersonal unity that lets the other be and does not grasp. In light of the Trinity, we can understand power as the self-communication that posits another person with whom one shares life and from whom one desires, awaits, and welcomes a gratuitous response.<sup>12</sup>

Precisely because divine power is the affirmation of another to whom one has given all of oneself and who responds with equal love, the Son's revelation of the Father's love within man's sinful history cannot but take the form of obedience unto

---

10. Augustine wrote about the trinitarian persons: "Both are in each, and all in each, and each in all, and all in all, and all are one" (*De Trinitate* 6.10.12). See *ST I*, q. 37, a. 1 ad 3.

11. For a more detailed account of gratitude, see my *Gift and the Unity of Being*, 241–58.

12. To affirm this is not to presume that God's unity is moral. Ratzinger clarifies, "The Father and the Son do not become one in such a way that they dissolve into each other. They remain distinct from each other, since love has its basis in a 'vis-à-vis' that is not abolished. If each remains his own self, and they do not abrogate each other's existence, then . . . their unity must be in the fruitfulness in which each one gives himself and in which each one is himself. They are one in virtue of the fact that their love is fruitful, that it goes beyond them. In the third Person in whom they give themselves to each other, in the Gift, they are themselves, and they are one." Joseph Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 35. Unity in God is the eternal and perichoretic communion of persons. Thus, it is not the case that the Father first possesses the divine being and then begets the Son—as Arius thought. God is his eternal begetting. Nor is it that the eternal existence of the other two persons makes the two processions spurious—as Sabellius contended. The Father is always already with the other two persons.



death (Phil 2:8). It is not that he simply obeys because he is powerful. More radically, Christ reveals power to be obedience.<sup>13</sup> Rather than to violently bend oneself to an extrinsic will or positive law, to obey is to depend lovingly on the Father. This dependence confronts man's rejection of both himself and God with the affirmation of the Father's goodness, which alone fulfills man's existence and is capable of redeeming him. Thus, Christ's power, in the form of obedience and service, is simultaneously the gratuitous, life-giving, and wonder-filled affirmation of the good of the Father, of man, and of creation. Every genuine form of human power is a participation in and expression of this filial affirmation.

In order to redeem fallen mankind, Christ had to receive and respond to the Father's love as a human being. In doing so, he rejected every false form of power: at the beginning of his public life, he contested Satan's claim to be the ultimate possessor of the kingdoms and glory and rejected his offer to share them with Christ if he would simply adore him (Mt 4:8–10). He rejected Peter's all-too-human proposal that he fulfill the Father's plan not through the folly of the Cross but by another more efficacious and less embarrassing strategy (Mt 16:21–22). He tirelessly contested the lie in man so that he may embrace the truth (Jn 6:67; Jn 8:21–59). He offered himself as the sacrificial lamb that meekly endured man's punishment, his disciples' betrayals (Lk 22:48), and, more deeply, the Father's silence (Mt 27:46; Lk 23:46). Having shown himself to be the true servant (Phil 2:7; Is 52:13–53:12), after the Resurrection he receives "all authority (πᾶσα ἐξουσία) in heaven and on earth" (Mt 28:18) and makes his disciples participants in his mission to redeem mankind.<sup>14</sup> In so

---

13. Undoubtedly, this does not suggest that the trinitarian relations are to be thought in terms of obedience, since this would require that there be several wills in God. Rather, we mean that the relation of love among the divine persons is one in which a "dialogue" takes place: the Father speaks the Word and breathes it in the Spirit; the Word says God, himself, and all of creation in it; and the Spirit witnesses to its depth and searches it. See Michael Waldstein, "The Analogy of Mission and Obedience: A Central Point in the Relation Between *Theologia* and *Oikonomia* in St. Thomas Aquinas' *Commentary on John*," in *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology*, ed. Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 92–112.

14. It is after the Resurrection and the reception of the Holy Spirit that it becomes clear that Christ "is the splendor of (the Father's) glory and the ex-

doing, he draws them into the power of his very being (ἐξ-ουσία): power to judge and thus to bind or set free (Mt 18:18); to consecrate the eucharistic species (Lk 22:19); to preach the word (Mt 28:19); and to govern people, that is, to guide them to the Father.

Lest we think the calling to the priesthood is a mechanical passing on of power, we should recall that Christ entrusted Peter with the responsibility of governing the Church (Mt 16:18; Jn 1:42) only after Peter confessed three times his love for Christ (Jn 21:15–19). By requesting this confession of love and entrusting to Peter the great task of tending his sheep, Christ taught him that to exercise his power is to communicate to them the grace he received, that is, the grace of believing in Christ's love for him. Power is not about what one can do or give but is, as we saw, the communication of God's life-giving love (Acts 3:6). Only the one who truly believes in the love that Christ is—that is, only the one who entrusts himself to Christ and recognizes him as the very heart of the Father—can be the “good and faithful servant” (Mt 25:23) dwelling in this love and thus living for Christ. Having been confirmed, Peter followed Christ to a death similar to his and thus witnessed to Christ's love to the end.<sup>15</sup>

In light of his dialogue with Peter, we see that Christ's bestowal of his own authority—the power to communicate divine life—requires the priest to enter into Christ's unconditional obedience to the Father and into his love for the Church. The priest is therefore the sacramental representation of Christ—he acts *in persona Christi capitis*—and is called to live this mission within a twofold relation: to Christ, to whom he is ontologically configured and in whom, for whom, and with whom he is; and to the Marian Church, who ordained him and whom he serves. This double referentiality is a permanent reminder to him and to the Church that he is not Christ. His unconditional service to Christ in this twofold relation is what makes priestly existence so beautiful and utterly demanding.

---

pression of his being” and that he “bears everything (τὰ πάντα) by the power of his word” (Heb 1:3). Christ's power is divine: he commands and what he says exists (Ps 33:9; Gn 1:3, 6, 9ff). Albert Vanhoye, *A Different Priest: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. Leo Arnold (Miami: Convivium Press, 2011), 59–69.

15. For the martyriological dimension of the Petrine ministry, see Joseph Ratzinger, “The Primacy of the Pope and the Unity of the People of God,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 112–28.

Human sinfulness makes the challenge to live the sacramental representation of Christ very difficult because it obfuscates the fundamental truth that God is a genuine giver and, with the gift of his own being, he invites man to participate in the gift he is by allowing him to give further. God lets man participate in his own power precisely because he wants a free, gratuitous, and creative response from him. This is why man's power is not for him to go about his own little things but to express God's greatness by informing the world in his light and reciprocating his love. Original sin can make one think that being a finite but real origin also means being the ultimate origin of what one gives. From this point of view, power is the most alluring human temptation: its possession and exercise make one believe that one is God, the beginning without beginning, and hence immortal. The greater one's power, the greater the temptation to think oneself its ultimate source, and the uglier its corruption. The power to give God and its consequent power over souls, which belong to the ordained ministry, are by far the greatest powers man knows. The priest's sinful forgetfulness that his power is being *given* to him, that it is filial, makes him believe that he is the ultimate origin and destiny of people's lives. Clericalism is in this light the most radical distortion of power, because it is the use of God and his people to affirm oneself. Concerning the way a priest relates to everything, the instantiations of this corruption of priestly power are manifold: restless activism; verbosity in the confessional; the aestheticism of pompous liturgies; self-referential spiritual direction; soulless and mechanical prayers; self-centered preaching; uncertain guidance of people; self-aggrandizing administration; the avoidance and management of human relations through bureaucratic procedures; the use of human weakness and suffering to impose oneself and one's ideas on the faithful; and, most hideously, the abuse of the innocent and the young to exercise through them a denial of God. Men called to the priesthood should retrieve the beauty of a life of dependence on and obedience to Christ, finding solace in the fact that Christ, who learned obedience through suffering (Heb 5:8), will enable them to enter into the real nature of his own power. They will then communicate in an ever-truer way the goodness of the Father and of all that he has created, thus helping to lead everything back to him.

One should be mindful that when dealing with the priesthood the very nature of the Church is also at stake since she is apostolic in nature and it is the mystery of the Eucharist that makes the Church. Following the Protestant Reformation, however, a very different view of the relation between the faithful and apostolic office became current. As Balthasar remarks, for the Christian Churches “the relation between the priest and the faithful is no longer based on apostolic succession and thus on the structure of the apostolic Church, but rather the common priesthood of all believers.”<sup>16</sup> In this view, both the Church’s sacramentality and the priest’s capacity to sacramentally represent Christ vanish; the common priesthood of the faithful absorbs the sacramental priesthood.<sup>17</sup> Just as the Church is no longer seen as the Bride of Christ but as a congregation of worshipers who freely determine how they wish to live their faith, so the priest becomes a male or female member elected by the congregation with the twofold task of skillfully administering the congregation’s affairs and of preaching so as to occasion God’s eventful occurrence. Not surprisingly, this ecclesiology is of a piece with the subjective reduction of vocation and power discussed earlier. As such, it places the emphasis on personal competencies and activity and thus cannot but foster clericalism. This is why, regardless of how poorly it may be lived, it is imperative not to lose sight of the sacramental nature of priesthood. Rather than accept an ecclesiology and sacramentality that subjectivize the priestly office—by, for example, disseminating priestly responsibilities through the empowerment of some lay faithful—we must retrieve the nature of the ordained priesthood and educate the men God calls to it to genuine priestly fatherhood.

## 2. FRIENDS OF THE BRIDEGROOM

If we wish to ponder priestly fatherhood, we need to grasp who Christ is for the priest and what kind of bond he wants to estab-

---

16. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “How Weighty Is the Argument From ‘Uninterrupted Tradition’ to Justify the Male Priesthood?,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 185–98, at 188.

17. Cf. *Lumen gentium*, 1; Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 84–160.

lish with the ones he calls. To answer these questions, we do well to recall the word Christ himself adopted in his farewell speeches: “I have called you friends (φίλους)” (Jn 15:15). The priest is Christ’s friend. Turning again to the end of John’s gospel, we see that the love of friendship is at the heart of the conversation between Peter and Jesus. The first two times Jesus asked about Peter’s love, he spoke of gratuitous love (ἀγαπάω), as if to say that Peter’s response must be like his own and that it could rest in the love Jesus had for him. The third time, he adopted the same verb that Peter used in all his answers—and that Christ himself used to describe the Father’s love for the disciples (Jn 16:27)—to ask Peter whether he found delight in loving him, that is, whether he had befriended him (φιλέω) (Jn 21:15–17). Christ not only desires that his disciples respond to his love but also wants there to be between them the bond of friendship. Friendship, in fact, is reciprocated love.

### *2.1. Friendship with Christ*

Christ did not resort to the term “friendship” because he found the apostles equal to him, capable of understanding what he said, or faithful to either his desires or the promises they made to him. He called them friends because he preferred them to others: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide” (Jn 15:16). He took delight in them, set them apart from the rest of his people, and consecrated them.<sup>18</sup> Christ chose them to be his friends in order to make known to them all that he heard from his Father (Jn 15:15). The content of this friendship, therefore, is the total sharing of the revelation of the Father’s name, being, and plan for man—in other words, Christ himself, who wants nothing but the Father’s glory in itself and for man. In light of

---

18. Just as Christ chose the Virgin Mary, betrothed to Joseph, as the one in whom he would become flesh and not the wife of Caiaphas the high priest, so he chose twelve simple men and not others who were better qualified than them to be his friends (2 Cor 4:7). It is true that God creates everyone for himself and that each person is everything to him. Yet, God creates us as members of a communion, and thereby the choice of each one takes place within an order of love and for the sake of the whole, that is, for everyone to enjoy and radiate the Father’s glory.

Christ's relation with his disciples, it is possible to see that friendship is the bond between people (and between God and man) that genuine power generates.

As the disciples became more and more familiar with Christ, they could not help perceiving his friendship as the incarnation of mercy. They came to know his claim to divinity and the infinite value that every human life had for him (Lk 21:18).<sup>19</sup> They grew to appreciate how much truer, penetrating, and freeing his judgments on everything were, and how beautiful and comprehensive his vision of human destiny was (Jn 17:20–26; 14:1–3). They witnessed how indefatigable and patient he was in teaching them to refer to God as Father and to live and rest only in him (Mt 6:24–34). They finally saw how marvelous and unmerited it was when, after the Resurrection, he came back to be with them who had betrayed him, thus confirming the truth of all that he had told them and of God's love for them. The disciples knew that Christ had forgiven them numerous times before those three dreadful days and his solitary death (Lk 5:8–11; Mt 26:49–50). Yet, it was only after he came back from the dead, forgave them, and brought them even more deeply into himself—into his filial existence and mission—that they learned the bottomless depth of his mercy. Mercy, in this light, is Christ's purifying reception of man into his own being as eternal Son of the Father; it is also, therefore, the gratuitous offering of the sonship for which man has been predestined. Friendship with Christ, who is true God and true man, is possible only if he makes man his equal, that is, if he forgives man and thus allows him to be part of his very identity and life. It is only when the apostles perceive the unity between mercy and friendship that their friendship with Christ loses every political and romantic connotation and takes on a universal horizon.

Through his merciful friendship, Christ gradually educated the disciples and opened them up to God, the Father rich in mercies. They thus began to think like Christ, to love like him, and to desire to live like him, that is, to obey the Father and experience in that friendship with Christ the only real joy man's heart desires. To use the words of St. Paul, "I count everything

---

19. Luigi Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, trans. Viviane Hewitt (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 80–98.

as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:8). The disciples discovered that to reciprocate Christ’s friendship is to obey him, that is, to receive his love and truth and to let them take root and flourish in one’s own life. “You are my friends if you do what I command you” (Jn 15:14). They learned that obedience is the dynamic nature of friendship: “This I command you, to love one another” (Jn 15:17). Because Christ was merciful with them and welcomed them into himself, they could also let him enter their lives, reciprocating his love and living for him. Friendship with Christ is reciprocated, merciful love, in which one is given to be oneself in another.<sup>20</sup>

Christ’s preference for his disciples and their reciprocation of his love was not an end in itself, a closed circle of sorts. Christ’s love opened them up to his own mission: “As [the Father] sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (Jn 17:18). They were sent, however, not as simple emissaries whose message did not deeply regard their persons. The priest is the friend of Christ and hence, being one with him, is endowed with a specific mission.<sup>21</sup> This singular identification with Christ’s mission is what makes the priest’s friendship with Christ different from others’. Friendship with Christ, of course, is not a priestly prerogative. Yet the priest is the friend of Christ particularly as he is the Bridegroom of the Church, the one who gave himself for his Bride in the eucharistic sacrifice of himself on the Cross (Eph 5:25). In this sense, what John the Baptist said about himself is, *mutatis mutandis*, also true of the priesthood: “He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full” (Jn 3:29). We must now consider what this nuptial analogy means, since, arguably, much of the weakness

---

20. See Massimo Camisasca, *Father: Will There Still Be Priests in the Church’s Future?*, trans. Joseph T. Papa (Human Adventure Books, 2012), 91–96 and 125–33.

21. Friendship with Christ, therefore, has an ontological root, expressed in the priestly character—that is, the flourishing of the priest’s belonging to Christ, which began at his baptism. It also has an existential one: it is a lived relation with Christ that is called to grow in time.

of priestly formation, life, and culture—a weakness that makes it less and less attractive to young men—is located in either the dismissal of the nuptial nature of friendship with Christ or in its moralization.<sup>22</sup> I would like to suggest that for the priest, identification with Christ the Bridegroom entails two related dimensions. First is the priest's reflection of God's fatherhood. Christ is the Bridegroom because his sacrifice for the Church witnesses to the Father's faithfulness to his own fatherhood and thereby the restoration of man's sonship. The priest's fatherhood continues this testament of God's saving fidelity. Second, the priest is called, in conformity to Christ, to love the Church as he does. The Bridegroom wants to present the Church to himself in all her beauty, as "holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:27); he therefore calls his friends to share in the suffering and joy of his nuptial love for the Bride.

## 2.2. *Priestly fatherhood*

To realize what priestly fatherhood is, we must recall the wonderful mystery of the Father's omnipotence, by which he offers to man the possibility of being united with him (2 Pt 1:3–4). When at the beginning of creation, God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gn 1:26), he expressed his desire for man to be one with him: "image" and "likeness" are ways of being in relation with God.<sup>23</sup> Christ again expressed this desire of God when he commanded his followers to be "perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48) and "merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36). To be like God, holy and merciful, is to be one with him. Yet, since the one God subsists only as Father, Son, and

---

22. This nuptial analogy, while preserving the difference between God's and man's being, needs to be taken in its strongest sense. The priest is sacramentally brought into Christ's being, and the ontological conformation to him is deeper than the priest's actual lived obedience—this conformation to Christ is, in fact, the source that makes obedience possible in the first place. The scriptural use of the nuptial analogy is not a metaphor whose goal is to encourage feeble spirits to imitate Christ. Rather, it indicates a real participation of the priest in Christ's being and mission.

23. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 14.12.15.



Holy Spirit, to say that God wants us to be one with him cannot but mean that he wants us to be part of the tripersonal communion of love that God is. The Father never communicates an indeterminate divine substance or force: he eternally begets the Son and with him breathes the Spirit. Thus, when the Father ardently pursues this union with fallen man—a union that is also man’s deepest desire—he cannot but send his consubstantial Son (Rom 8:32), that is, allow him to be born from man and in man. For the Father to give his Son is to allow him to be born from the Virgin Mary by the Spirit. Christ wants to be born from man so that every man may participate in his own glorified body and thus, through the Spirit, enjoy the Father’s love.<sup>24</sup> Christ wants man to receive him in faith, to entrust himself to him, to grow in love (Col 2:6–7), and to await from him the fulfillment of his life: “Every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (ἄγνός)” (1 Jn 3:2–3). Christ, who took flesh from Mary, will not extend his birth in man if not through her. At the Cross, Christ extended Mary’s virginal motherhood in a spiritual way, and she became the mother of all believers. Through her, everyone will be able to enjoy Christ’s love, and, in a way different from but participating in hers, all will be able to let Christ be in them. Everyone who, like her, welcomes the incarnate Son in himself will, in a certain sense, experience this fruitful

---

24. St. Hilary expressed this mystery beautifully when he wrote: “But the Incarnation is summed up in this, that the whole Son, that is, His manhood as well as His divinity, was permitted by the Father’s gracious favor to continue in the unity of the Father’s nature, and retained not only the powers of the divine nature, but also that nature’s self. For the object to be gained was that man might become God. But the assumed manhood could not in any wise abide in the unity of God, unless, through unity with God, it attained to unity with the nature of God. Then, since God the Word was in the nature of God, the Word made flesh would in its turn also be in the nature of God. Thus, if the flesh were united to the glory of the Word, the man Jesus Christ could abide in the glory of God the Father, and the Word made flesh could be restored to the unity of the Father’s nature, even as regards His manhood, since the assumed flesh had obtained the glory of the Word. Therefore, the Father must reinstate the Word in His unity, that the offspring of His nature might again return to be glorified in Himself: for the unity had been infringed by the new dispensation, and could only be restored perfect as before if the Father glorified with Himself the flesh assumed by the Son” (*De Trinitate* 9.38. English translation taken from Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate: On the Trinity*, ed. Paul A. Böer Sr. [Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012], 383–84).

motherhood: "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mt 12:50).<sup>25</sup>

Priestly fatherhood thus takes place within Mary's virginal motherhood, which is extended to the Church, and it is at the Church's service.<sup>26</sup> The priest readies the incarnation of Christ in men and women and contributes to their reaching "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13). As St. Paul said: "For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (1 Cor 4:15; cf. Phlm 1:10). Within the Church's motherhood, the priest's spiritual fatherhood represents God's own fatherhood. Ordination confers the power of the Spirit so that the priest can invoke his presence and the Spirit may bring the Son to men, leading them in the Son to the Father. Priestly fatherhood, then, runs deeper than a spiritual influence on a few people. It is the sacramental collaboration with the Spirit of the Father in the Son's birth in the believer.

The fatherhood of the priest, helping bring Christ to birth in the human person, is conveyed through word and sacrament. The priest proclaims the Word so that men and women may hear the Logos and discover his truth and love (Rom 10:14). Similarly to when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary so that the Word could take flesh from her, the priest invokes the Paraclete so that men may be reborn in baptism and thus incorporated into Christ. In his Body, the Church, they receive his strength and become his witnesses at confirmation. The priest, repeating Christ's very words, also calls forth the Spirit so that the eucharistic species can become Christ's body and blood. He thus enables those who receive Christ to grow in him as children of the Father and to grow in unity with one another. Through the

---

25. St. Paul expressed well this maternal dimension of his mission: "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!" (Gal 4:19). To see how the Fathers of the Church account for Christian existence in this way, see, among others, Hugo Rahner, *Our Lady and the Church*, trans. Sebastian Bullough (Bethesda, MD: Zaccheus Press, 2010), 75–86.

26. Because priestly fatherhood is a participation in the Church's fruitfulness, and ultimately in Mary's virginal motherhood, it is fitting that the priest be a virgin. Just as the one in whom the eternal Son of the Father was conceived was a virgin, so it is proper that one who is called to consecrate the eucharistic species be virginal.

words of forgiveness, the believer is reinserted more deeply into Christ's love. It is also the Spirit of the Father of Christ who comes to bestow holy orders on those called and to strengthen the sick when the priest anoints them.

Along with letting the Word resonate through his own voice and sacramental actions, the priest also witnesses to the Father's faithfulness. One of the main features of divine fatherhood, in fact, is God's faithfulness to his own paternity, to his being for man.<sup>27</sup> God is true; he does not lie, because he keeps his promises: the Father patiently awaits (2 Pt 3:15) the return of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–32). This paternal care involves not only the Father's being present to everyone and knowing what is in every heart, but also his bearing everything. The Father, who is the fount of all beauty, truth, goodness, and unity, does not grow weary when confronted by sin's ugliness and man's lies, greed, and betrayals.<sup>28</sup> The fact that the Father keeps calling men to be priests, and that the priest's most important actions—to consecrate and to forgive sins—do not depend on his holiness, discreetly but undeniably signifies the Father's faithful presence to man. When the priest pronounces the words of forgiveness and consecration in the name of Christ, Christ's gift of self bears within it the memory of the Father's presence. In this way and as he has always done, the Father continues to show his transcendence through the presence of his love in history.<sup>29</sup> The priest is called to enter into the Father's patience, that is, his capacity to bear evil so that men may encounter in history his patient mercy revealed in Christ.

A final aspect essential to understanding priestly fatherhood is the humbling responsibility of being asked to act *in persona Christi capitis*. Priestly headship, as a participation in Christ's, is the responsibility to lead God's people to God. Thus, it is first of all a radical call to prayer, since it is only God who can instill the gifts of faith, hope, and charity and elicit the person's gratuitous surrender to God. The term "radical" is to be taken

---

27. See John Paul II, *Dives in misericordia*, 7.

28. Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 384–87.

29. Divo Barsotti, *La rivelazione dell'amore* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1996), 443–73.

in all its connotations: prayer is to be comprehensive (catholic), incessant (to the end), tireless, and confident (Lk 11:1–13). The priest is the man who constantly intercedes for his people. And this indispensable priestly service cannot be done unless prayer is a permanent and organizing dimension of priestly life. Along with prayer, a second dimension of headship is the proclamation of the Word, which in its dynamic form is the education of the faithful. The priest educates by calling out to people in the region of dissimilarity they inhabit—as Augustine calls our sinful condition—in order to lead them to the Father by letting them see how the circumstances they go through are not against them, or, stated positively, are for their good, their being with the one for whom they are made (Rom 8:31–39).<sup>30</sup> Thirdly, the fact that the Father mediates his presence through the Son and the Spirit teaches us that to exercise authority is not to issue a unilateral, kataphatic decision but to live communion and, within it, the further gift of friendship. The Father makes divine communion possible by eternally sharing all of his life with the Son and the Spirit. Similarly, the priest as father is called to guard, strengthen, and protect communion. For this communion not to be a conglomerate of individuals but a real union of love, it must reflect the communion the priest himself lives with other priests and his bishop.<sup>31</sup> The father is such only when, within the communion he is called to guard and generate, he affirms the goodness of the son (and of all that is) with delight—that is, when he rejoices in the fact that the son is and in his response to him.<sup>32</sup> In other terms, the father is him in whom the son finds himself loved as a constitutive part of him and thus he is one who is at the service

---

30. Administration, which consumes so much time in a priest's quotidian life, needs to be perceived (even in its most menial tasks) within this comprehensive call to educate the person to the truth of himself and help him to respond to it. It is an implicit rather than explicit proclamation of the centrality of Christ, but as such it is also an efficacious way to be present to people and help them fulfill their destiny.

31. The exercise of authority therefore, without losing the dimension of headship, should not, out of fear of solitude, embrace an ecclesiology patterned after contemporary liberal democracy or imitate the world's way of conducting its business. Cf. *Lumen gentium*, 18–29.

32. A beautiful example can be found in John Paul II, *Rise, Let Us Be on Our Way*, trans. Walter Ziemba (New York: Time Warner Books, 2004), 113–47.

of the other, that is, fights for the truth of man's happiness (2 Cor 1:24). It is thus that the priest sacramentally and spiritually leads men and women in Christ to the Father and collaborates in the incarnation of the Son in the believer.

### 2.3. *Nuptiality and the priesthood*

This last remark leads us back to the second aspect of priestly vocation: the priest, as friend of the Bridegroom, is to have the same nuptial relation to the Church as Christ has. As John Paul II lucidly indicated, the nuptial analogy stems from the paternal and redemptive dimensions of love and reveals a further aspect of God's love. Christ can be the spouse of the Church because he is her redeemer (Eph 5:25–27).<sup>33</sup> “The analogy of the love of spouses,” says John Paul II, “seems to emphasize above all the aspect of God's gift of himself to man who is chosen ‘from ages’ in Christ (literally, his gift of self to ‘Israel,’ to the ‘Church’); a gift that is in its essential character, or as gift, total (or rather ‘radical’) and irrevocable.”<sup>34</sup> God's redeeming love is *nuptial* because Christ's love is the total, free gift of himself for the Church, who is made beautiful and immaculate through it.<sup>35</sup> If the paternal

---

33. Christ's redemption, as a gift of self that effects nuptial union with his Bride, superabundantly fulfills the nuptials between God and man promised through Isaiah but prevented by man's sinfulness: “Fear not, . . . for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer” (Is 54:4–5). See also John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, “Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year,” August 15, 1988, 23; John Paul II's Catechesis on Human Love, published as *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 501–02.

34. *Ibid.*, 95b:4.

35. This radical gift to man, first of all, originates in the Trinity. In a sense, it is an expression of God's triune love. This, of course, does not mean that “nuptiality” is construed as one of the relations constituting the divine persons. Rather, the nuptial character of God's gift expresses the total, irrevocable, and eternal exchange of love that the trinitarian communion of persons is and that Christ's gift on the Cross reveals. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 221 (hereafter cited as CCC). For the sense in which nuptiality may be considered a fitting analogy for the triune God, see Paolo Prospero, “This Mystery Is Great: Reflections on the Fittingness of the Nuptial Analogy in

and redemptive dimensions of love indicate that God, desiring unity with mankind, makes man similar to himself, gives him life, and predestines him in Christ to be his adopted son, then the nuptial dimension emphasizes that the unity he seeks is a fruitful union of free and equally loving reciprocation. Nuptiality, after all, regards the reciprocal self-gift in whose union both lover and beloved generate a third.<sup>36</sup> The reciprocity of the gift is not a commercial transaction—as if the priest were to teach and govern and the faithful were simply to obey and contribute to the weekly collection. Instead, each desires to be received and reciprocated by the other and to find in that reception and reciprocation utter delight. Nuptial love, in this regard, is as much agapic as it is erotic. Because of the joyous unity of the agapic and erotic, there is no actual gift of self without the receptive response of the other.<sup>37</sup> To sever the agapic gift of self from the joy of being received and reciprocated in love is to lose oneself in lovelessness and fruitlessness.

The priest, of course, always remains a member of the Church, “but in virtue of his configuration to Christ, the head

---

Trinitarian Theology,” in *Enlightening the Mystery of Man: Gaudium et spes Fifty Years Later*, ed. Antonio López (Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2018), 148–77.

36. John Paul II is careful to remark that the nuptial union of Christ with the Church is not a denial of the body. The Eucharist and the promises given in Christ’s Ascension to the Father with his glorified, risen body reject this gnostic reading of nuptiality. Yet, while it affirms the bodily dimension, Christ’s nuptial union with the Church does not require sexual intimacy because it is all of God who in Christ brings all of mankind to fruitful union with him. Christ is the only spouse of the Church, represented by Mary. Not stemming from a sexual encounter, the fruitfulness of this union is the communication of divine life through the sacraments and the theological virtues, both of which the Father’s beloved Son gives mankind in the Spirit through Mary. Balthasar writes, “Christ does not need sexual experience in order to know his bride, the Church, in the total way that the biblical use of ‘know’ suggests. He knows the force that goes out from him. He knows it both as strength and as powerlessness. He, therefore, knows everything in the bride (and in all her members, which we are) which not only corresponds to his strength, but also—as contradiction and refusal—limits this power” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theological Anthropology* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010], 312).

37. The priority of Christ’s gift is such that it includes the loving response of Mary, immaculate virgin and mother, from the Annunciation to the Crucifixion. John Paul II, *Redemptoris mater*; Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Mass, a Sacrifice of the Church?,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3, *Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 185–245.

and shepherd, the priest stands in this spousal relationship with regard to the community.”<sup>38</sup> This does not mean that he replaces Christ’s priestly and virginal oblation that sanctifies the Church. Christ alone is the Bridegroom of the Church. More simply, it indicates that he is entrusted with communicating to the Church Christ’s faithful, total, and redeeming love for her.<sup>39</sup> The priest expresses this nuptial love of Christ through his obligation of virginity. It is well known that celibacy is a juridical bond that is freely assumed by the priest, being mandatory in the Latin Church and in the Eastern Church only for bishops. Yet, this bond of virginity “has theological and moral characteristics which are prior to the juridical characteristics, and is a sign of that spousal reality present in sacramental ordination.”<sup>40</sup> The priest, as friend of the Bridegroom, represents Christ first and foremost by living a virginal life like his—that is, by living an exclusive, totalizing, permanent, and unconditional love for Christ. This totality includes the priest’s soul, his reason and will, and his body. Far from denying the body, his virginal love places it at the service of affirming Christ’s most delightful person. Of course, virginity is also the total absence of sexual pleasure, but this sacrifice, rather than denying human bodiliness, reveals that human sexuality is most properly the gift of self. John Paul II said that “in virginity or celibacy, the human being is awaiting, also in a bodily way, the eschatological marriage of Christ with the Church, giving himself or herself completely to the Church in the hope that Christ may give Himself to the Church in the full truth of eternal life. The celibate person thus anticipates in his or her flesh the new world of the future resurrection (Mt 22:30).”<sup>41</sup>

---

38. John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day,” March 25, 1992, 22.

39. At an episcopal ordination, the consecrator says these words as he places the ring on the bishop’s finger: “Take this ring, the sign of your fidelity, and in the integrity of faith and purity of life, guard the Holy Church, Bride of Christ” (*The Rites of the Catholic Church*, vol. 2 [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991], 75 [translation modified]).

40. Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, January 31, 1994, no. 58, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccclergy\\_doc\\_31011994\\_directory\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_doc_31011994_directory_en.html).

41. John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 16.

To be totally for Christ, who “came not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:28), is also to be for others. One does not love another person truly until he loves what the other holds most dear; hence the priest is called in loving Christ to love others virginally as Christ did. The manner in which Christ dealt with people—how he looked, spoke, touched, listened, and felt—revealed him to be always everything to everyone (1 Cor 15:28).<sup>42</sup> As a total belonging to Christ, therefore, virginal love affirms with the whole of oneself that the human person (and in him the whole cosmos) has such an infinite value that he deserves all of oneself. Priestly virginal love is nuptial—it is the gift of self for others—in a specifically priestly form, that is, as the priest’s sacrificial offering of himself so that through him God may save some (1 Cor 9:22). His virginity is informed by his priesthood and vice versa: his gift of self is at the service of Christ’s sacramental birth in the believer and of the faithful’s hearing the Word of love through the priest’s life and action.<sup>43</sup>

### 3. SAME-SEX ATTRACTION AND THE ORDAINED PRIESTHOOD: AN IRRATIONAL POSITION?

Having pondered the paternal and nuptial dimensions of the priesthood that stem from the priest’s participation in Christ’s mission to reveal the Father’s love as the Bridegroom of the Church, we will now consider how these two dimensions relate to the embodied sexuality of the priest, friend of the Bridegroom. More specifically, we will attempt to show why this vocation requires the sexually differentiated body. Asking first why the priest must be male in or-

---

42. See the beautiful account of Christ’s total and concrete love in John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, homily 76, no. 5.

43. As we know, human love participates in Christ’s love in two different ways: virginal love and married love. Whereas the latter is total, permanent, and exclusive, the former is total, permanent, and universal. Since the priest’s bodiliness belongs to the Bridegroom, his body is not to be given to those he loves, as is the case for married spouses. It is only Christ, as we see in the Eucharist, who can give all of himself to each one both bodily and spiritually. The priest’s touch, look, hearing, and words therefore should reflect those of the Bridegroom, who being also the perfect man ensures that the priest’s expressiveness be fully human. It is thus that the priest’s gift of self will be fruitful, that is, will contribute to generating Christ in the life of the believer.



der to be apt for ordination, we will then consider why the Church cannot ordain men with same-sex attraction (SSA).

### 3.1

From the perspective of the current cultural push to ennoble “homosexuality,” the Church’s irreformable doctrine reserving priestly ordination to men appears irrational.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, the instruction that the Church “cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so called ‘gay culture’” seems unfair and anachronistic.<sup>45</sup> Yet, in light of what we

---

44. By “homosexuality” I mean, with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, those “relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity (cf. Gn 19:1–29; Rom 1:24–27; 1 Cor 6:10; 1 Tm 1:10), tradition has always declared that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered’” (CCC, no. 2357). See also CCC, nos. 2358–59. Cf. *Persona humana*, “Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics,” December 29, 1975, no. 8; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” October 1, 1986; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care,” November 14, 2006. My concern in the following is with the ontological, anthropological order implied by homosexuality. In light of this order, I wish to show the reasonableness of the Church’s position with regard to the priestly ordination of men with deep-seated SSA. Thus, this section neither addresses the issue of ordained men who have SSA nor expresses a negative judgment of persons who experience it.

45. Congregation for Catholic Education, “Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of Their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders,” November 4, 2005, no. 2 (AAS 97 [2005], 1007–13, at 1007–10); Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter insigniores*, “Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood,” October 15, 1976 (AAS 69 [1977], 98–116, at 109); John Paul II, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, “Apostolic Letter on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone,” May 22, 1994; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “*Responsum ad dubium circa doctrinam in Epist. Ap. Ordinatio sacerdotalis traditam*,” October 28, 1995 (AAS 87 [1995], 1114); Joseph Ratzinger, “Commento alla risposta,” *L’osservatore romano*, November 19, 1995; Congregation for the Clergy, “The Gift of the Priestly Vocation: *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*,” December 8, 2016, <http://www.clerus.va>.

have seen so far concerning the nature of power and of priestly fatherhood, it may now be possible to deepen the reasons the Church has already given for her position, which stems from the very nature of revealed, divine mysteries. In this way, we will attempt to see more clearly why the reservation of the ordained ministry to men, as well as the Church's consequent inability to ordain men with SSA, is neither groundless nor discriminatory.<sup>46</sup>

Both Paul VI and John Paul II recalled the normativity of Christ's decision to call only men to the priesthood. Because of this decision and its consistent maintenance throughout the Church's history, both popes also indicated that the Church "has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women."<sup>47</sup> Paul VI's declaration *Inter insigniores* offers several reasons showing that this confession, rather than exercising a masculine power that fears to share its authority, follows what God has revealed of himself, man, and the nature of love. Two of these reasons are important for our purpose. The first regards the principle that "sacramental signs represent what they signify by a natural resemblance."<sup>48</sup> For the Church, sacraments are not conventional signs whose meaning is arbitrarily imposed upon them—just as finite beings are not simply lifeless, opaque matter awaiting our manipulative enhancement and ordering.

---

46. It is important to keep in mind that the nature of theology is also at stake in this discussion. The Church seeks to offer reasons for her faith and hope and to give an always deeper account of the inexhaustible mystery of God, of which she is also a part. Theological work is not the offering of arguments that may be comprehensible and acceptable by anyone, regardless of their having faith or not. It is also not the proposal of fideistic tenets that eschew all reasonableness. Sadly, reflections on Church teaching with regard to homosexuality tend to be political, that is, driven by the goal of overturning the *status quo* in the Church so that it may be in keeping with the world's common mentality. Such reflections also tend to be rhetorical, as if one only needed to find a vocabulary or strategy that would make faith more readily acceptable. Theology, however, is neither a political nor a rhetorical discipline. It instead seeks to offer reasons for the faith and to show the sense in which beliefs about homosexuality and holy orders are rooted not in the exercise of a random divine will enforced in history by a patriarchal clergy but rather in the nature of the human being, of divine and human love, and the very identity of the Church.

47. John Paul II, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, no. 4.

48. Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sent.*, dist. 25, q. 2, a. 2, qc. 1, ad 4; *ST III*, q. 83, a. 1, ad 3; *ST, Supplementum tertiae partis*, q. 39, a. 1.

Sacraments do not act as neutral channels, changeable at will, through which divine grace is conveyed to men. They are efficacious signs that link us to the bodily, redemptive life of Christ and disclose further the purpose of the created world.<sup>49</sup> In the case of holy orders, the “natural resemblance” involves sexual differentiation in both its physical and symbolic connotations. Given that Christ was and *is* male, *Inter insigniores* states that for the priest to represent him sacramentally, that is, to act *in persona Christi*, he needs to be male.<sup>50</sup> The priest represents Christ, “to the point of being his very image, when he pronounces the words of consecration.”<sup>51</sup> The declaration indicates further that Christ’s being male “is a question of fact,” and that this fact does not imply “an alleged natural superiority of man over woman” because it is “in harmony with the entirety of God’s plan as God himself has revealed it.”<sup>52</sup>

The second reason we need to mention seeks to explain the nature of this harmony. Following Scripture’s use of the nuptial analogy to describe the kind of union God wants to establish with his people, the declaration states that the priest has to be male not only because Christ was male but also because, precisely as male, he is the bridegroom of the Church. The maleness of both the incarnate Word and of his priests presupposes, of course, an understanding of the sexual difference according to which it belongs to the nature of the male to be for the female and vice versa. Our modern culture instead promotes an understanding of sexuality that aims to eliminate this difference and that, for this reason, makes it difficult to understand the cogency of the declaration’s argument. Yet, as we shall soon see in greater detail, only

---

49. See CCC, nos. 774, 1084, 1131.

50. See Manfred Huake, *Women in the Priesthood? A Systematic Analysis in the Light of the Order of Creation and Redemption*, trans. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 452–54; Sara Butler, “The Priest as Sacrament of Christ the Bridegroom,” *Worship* 66, no. 6 (1992): 498–517; Sara Butler, “Forum: Second Thoughts on Ordaining Women,” *Worship* 63, no. 2 (1989): 157–65; Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Women Priests? A Marian Church in a Fatherless and Motherless Culture,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 164–70.

51. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter insigniores*, no. 5 (AAS 69 [1977], 98–116, at 109).

52. *Ibid.* (AAS 69 [1977], 110).

an appreciation of the sexual difference as part of a given order that analogically reflects divine, tripersonal life allows us to make sense of the exclusively male priesthood in proper relation to the feminine. John Paul II, who was keenly aware of the need to elaborate a theological anthropology that could give solid reasons to elucidate the meaning of our sexed condition, took pains to explain that, as we saw in the previous section, the nuptial union constituted by this mutual being-for is best elucidated in terms of the genuine gift of oneself to the other.<sup>53</sup>

Modern culture—accustomed to understanding what is higher in light of what is lower and the norm in light of the exception—reduces man’s existence as male or female to the genital condition and interprets its meaning as merely functional: sexuality is simply the means to obtain pleasure and to perpetuate the species. The contemporary separation of sexuality from love and of both from procreation—made possible by man’s ever-increasing technological capacity to master his somatic condition—is the logical heir of modernity’s conceptual severing of the body from the soul. As the Western world increasingly exhibits, this separation frees one from the need to affirm sexual dimorphism and to interpret the male and female’s affective relation in terms of sexual difference. On this view, therefore, the claims of persons whose “biological” sex does not correspond with a self-ascribed “gender” are just as legitimate as those in whom they do, and the consequent appearance of different ways of relating among people should not be surprising. In order to account for the whole array of affective relations informed by this new anthropology, our culture has settled on the language of “orientation.” Rather than the “rigid” sexual difference that limits sexual relation to that between a man and a woman, the paradigm of “sexual orientation” grants that each person’s affective desire moves itself toward *any* other for whom a passion—understood not as a passive undergoing but as an active reaching out—is experienced. It should not go unnoticed that, as David Crawford lucidly argues, the language of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” imposes

---

53. See Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis coelibatus*, “Encyclical on the Celibacy of the Priest,” June 24, 1967 (AAS 59 [1967], 657–97); John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, 26; John Paul II, *Christifidelis laici*, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World,” December 30, 1988, no. 51; and CCC, no. 1577.

this conception of “sexual orientation” on everyone. The human person is culturally interpreted by means of a neutral sexuality that is equally free to turn toward what is similar (homosexuality) or what is irreducible to oneself (heterosexuality).<sup>54</sup>

Naturally, this understanding of human sexuality deems it unserious to account for the male priesthood by a nuptial analogy based on an atrophied, essentialist model of sexual differentiation. Instead, assuming the conceptual separation of body and soul and the loss of reality’s sacramental nature, it understands the nuptial analogy in terms of “gender fluidity”: maleness is associated with giving and femaleness with receiving, but these appropriations are simply characteristics on a single continuum.<sup>55</sup> So the priest, being both a member of the feminine Bride-Church and endowed with a male body, is both masculine and feminine. As feminine he receives divine grace with the entire Church. As masculine he acts in the person of Christ: he is the one in charge of communicating grace to the Church and stands before her as the bridegroom. Something similar is attributed to Christ himself: he is feminine inasmuch as he receives from the Father his being and the Father’s will. However, he is also masculine inasmuch as he re-presents and communicates the Father’s love. He gives his very essence, and from his pierced side the Church is born. The gender fluidity model likewise affects the “God-world” distinction, where God’s masculine, giving activity is met by creation’s feminine, receptive passivity. It reaches further to the conception of the triune God himself: each of the trinitarian persons is active and receptive in different ways, and thus each should be thought to be supra-masculine (when giving) and supra-feminine (when receiving). From the perspective of modern anthropology, gender fluidity is the only way to avoid

---

54. David S. Crawford, “Public Reason and the Anthropology of Orientation: How the Debate over ‘Gay Marriage’ Has Been Shaped by Some Ubiquitous but Unexamined Presuppositions,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 247–73; David S. Crawford, “Liberal Androgyny: ‘Gay Marriage’ and the Meaning of Sexuality in Our Time,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 239–65.

55. See, among others, Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On The Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 33–65; Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 129–62.

eliminating the feminine. If God is pure act and this power, or self-communication, is identified with the masculine, then the woman is reduced to a sheer receptacle incapable of participation in divine giving. The refusal to ordain women then appears as a wholesale denial of the woman, who cannot initiate giving. To save the feminine, then, this anthropology requires that the nuptial analogy be read from a hermeneutical horizon on which there is no sexual difference, only "orientation." Consequently, one should accept persons of either sex to the ordained ministry.

To view nuptiality in terms of gender fluidity, however, is to misunderstand how the giving and receiving proper to love at the metaphysical and anthropological levels are an analogical reflection of their trinitarian source. The archetype of gift is not the conjugal embrace but the triune, personal exchange revealed through Christ's gift of self for the Church. This exchange both confirms and overfulfills the nature of finite beings and of the human person, created in the image of God as male or female. When we lose sight of the fact that sexual differentiation, as the finite condition for self-gift, is analogically grounded in divine, triune gift, and that precisely this difference allows the embodied soul to participate in God's eternal, fruitful exchange of love, we also lose sight of the goodness and reasonableness of the difference itself. As our means of participation in God's being-gift, man's being created as male or female belongs essentially to the communion of God and man attained by Christ's redemption. By allowing him to experience the goodness of fruitful receptivity through his relation to the opposite sex, the sexual difference also allows man to experience the goodness of being a creature, that is, one who receives himself entirely from God. In contrast, the suppression of sexual difference required by the anthropology of orientation eliminates the means of the human person's receptive participation in God. It therefore entails that only God is, and the world is not; or that only the world is, that there is only finite history.

Just as the gender fluidity model implies an entire ecclesiology and theology, so a properly analogical understanding of gift bears with it an understanding of Christ and of the Church and her priests in relation to the triune God. If God's creative and redemptive plan involves the human person's fruitful participation in divine love, then the priest in his configuration to Christ

serves to mediate this union in difference between God and man. He must, therefore, represent God as a transcendent principle with regard to the Church while simultaneously being united with her. As we have seen, this communion takes a nuptial form. It is thus necessary to preserve the sexual difference in ecclesiology as an icon of the infinite difference between man and God as well as the condition for their union. In this structure, the priest as male images divine, creative transcendence that seeks and establishes graced union with the Church, whereas the anthropology and theology of sexual orientation—able to affirm only God or finite being, but not both—dispenses with this transcendence in favor of never-ending finite history.

The preservation of sexual difference is not something insisted upon simply in service of a traditional ideology but is, rather, rooted in the concrete reality of the human person. Notwithstanding claims to the contrary, every instantiation of the connection between “biological” sex and culturally self-assigned “gender” remains parasitic to sexual dimorphism. The purported self-originating movement (“orientation”) of one person toward another can never obviate the fact that the body remains always and only male or female and that this concrete bodiliness conveys an intrinsic meaning and order. When this given order is denied or misused, it destroys itself. Man’s bodily dimorphism is grounded in the unity of the human spirit with its body, a unity that reveals a reciprocal relation between the body and the soul. To see why this is the case, we do well to recall that the human “form” is both spirit and soul. As spirit, the form of the human person is first and foremost relation with God. As soul, the form makes the human being this particular human being, that is, this concrete, singular individual with this particular body. As the *form* of the body, the human soul expresses itself through it as either male or female—hence, masculinity and femininity are not reducible to the body. At the same time, being the form of the *body*, the soul receives from the body its concrete spatial temporality that also determines how the human being dwells in the world and relates to the other.<sup>56</sup> Sexuality, therefore, is the

---

56. Edith Stein notes that “the insistence that the sexual differences are ‘stipulated by the body alone’ is questionable from various points of view. 1) If *anima* = *forma corporis*, then bodily differentiation constitutes an index

irreducibly dual way in which an embodied human spirit relates to himself, other human beings, the world, and God.

In keeping with the analogical understanding of love just presented, and inverting the modern tendency, we wish to interpret reality on the basis of its higher orders. Love is the noblest form of relation binding men and women; thus, it is through the lens of love that we should understand abiding sexual difference. Love is a uniting force according to which one desires a response from the other and hence does not seek to absorb the other into oneself. Thinking in light of the trinitarian archetype revealed in Christ, we know that love exists only as gift of self to another, and this giving of oneself requires that there be an origin that gives, something that is given (love), someone who receives, and the reciprocal relation between giver and receiver. Love, then, does entail both giving and receiving. It is also true that because man and woman are created equally in the image of God, when the male and female reveal themselves to each other, each one of them both gives and receives in their mutual relation. The

---

of differentiation in the spirit. 2) Matter serves form, not the reverse. That strongly suggests that the difference in the psyche is the primary one” (Stein to Callista Kopf, August 8, 1931, in *Self Portrait in Letters, 1916–1942*, trans. Josephine Koeppel [Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1994], 98–99). It is important to keep in mind that there is a unity and a distinctness between soul and body. Whereas the soul contributes to the meaning of the male and female body—grounding its fruitful relationality—so the body contributes to the meaning of the soul as soul in its giving to the soul existence in time and space. The soul, as form of the body, does not exist without the body yet has an absolute priority over it. The body nonetheless preserves, in the sense indicated, a relative priority over the soul. In this regard, it is inadequate to say that there is such a thing as a “spiritual identity” that would be exactly the same for male and female persons and that the difference between them is to be located exclusively at the somatic level. While reason and will are common faculties of the human spirit, thinking and willing are differentiated according to male and female bodiliness—though this is a difference that exists only within the commonality of human nature. See David L. Schindler, *Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 242–74; Walter J. Ong, *Fighting for Life: Context, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 97–104; Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999); Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference* (Basic Books, 2003). For an account of the meaning of sex as understood by the Church Fathers, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, vol. 2, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 365–82.



gender fluidity theory is thus correct in wanting to preserve both giving and receiving on both sides of the relation. Yet, in contrast to the anthropology of sexual orientation undergirding this theory, a nondualistic conception of the body-soul relation prevents the elimination of the sexual difference, which is safeguarded by the body. Because of the intrinsic unity of soul and body, one sex incorporates properties of the other into itself without thereby losing its determining male or female sexed condition. The female makes hers in a feminine way the masculine properties and the male likewise appropriates in a masculine way the feminine properties. Each one thus remains irreducible to the other.

That distinct properties belong to each of the sexes stems from the fact that their relation takes place within a given order in which the difference itself is rooted. This order is first that between God and creation, including the human person, and second—as a further unfolding of the creative gift—that between male and female persons. God gives man to himself and allows him to participate in the fecundity of divine being-love by creating him male and female and thus calling him to form a communion of persons. We can consider this creative gift in five elements: 1) the divine origin that creates the human person as gift; 2) the person's reception of himself or herself as gift from God; 3) each person's being-for the sexually differentiated other; 4) the fecundity that this being-for makes possible; and 5) the capacity to dwell in love, that is, to remain faithful. Taking these elements together, we see that the ordered sexual relation is given to man so that he can participate, in creaturely fashion, in the tripersonal gift that God is. It is therefore crucial not to understand "order" in light of the negative sense of power described in the first section. If instead the ordering between male and female is perceived as an expression of love, that is, as the revelation and communication of being, then it will keep its true logos and remain iconic of divine gift. As such, the ordered relation will not be one of domination and strife, but one of letting the other be that analogically reflects the original giver: the triune God who is a communion of persons in which receiving and giving are equally good.

To indicate how the ordered relation of love in human persons analogically reflects God's ordered love, let us briefly consider the latter. We recall that the Father is the divine being-

love in his having always given all of himself to the Son without remainder or loss. The Son is the divine being-love in that he eternally receives the Father's substance and love; he receives himself from the Father "not 'passively' . . . but . . . actively as a Lover, returning love, as one who responds to the totality of the Father's love and is ready to do everything in love."<sup>57</sup> This divine being-love of the Father and Son is sheer gratuity, and as such it is always excessive, that is, fruitful in a third. The overabundant "more," excess, or fruitfulness belongs to the very nature of love. God is the miracle of gratuitous, overabundant love whose incomprehensible and ever the same "always more" is hypostatized in the Holy Spirit. The mutual love of the Father and the Son is the permanent origin of the eternal Holy Spirit. The Father, therefore, is origin not in the Plotinian manner—according to which the spirit and the soul proceed from the solitary One—but as the one who has always already given himself to the Son with whom his love is eternally fruitful in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is thus both the reciprocal love of the Father and the Son (their bond or nexus) and the fruit that proceeds from it and attests to its ever-new and immutable truth. The eternal Father, therefore, is origin neither as a "monarch" to whom the Son and the Spirit are subordinated nor as one whose initiating personal property is undone by the eternal response of the Son and the Spirit.

Created in the image of God, man, as male and female, proceeds from the triune God and is in relation with him. This iconic dimension of the human being, albeit damaged by original sin, is not lost; rather, it is called by grace to come into likeness with God, that is, into life with him—which requires that one know him, love him, and be for others as he is. The natural order of the sexes analogically reflects this ordered and fruitful communion in its threefold dimension of paternal origin, filial response, and fruitful nuptial embrace.<sup>58</sup> What is most wonder-

---

57. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Spirit of Truth*, vol. 3, *Theo-Logic*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 158.

58. It is worth recalling that, as Balthasar says, "If, in imagination, we were to exclude from the act of love between man and woman the nine months' pregnancy, that is, the temporal dimension, the child would be immediately present in their generative-receptive embrace; this would be simultaneously the expression of their reciprocal love *and*, going beyond it, its transcendent result. It would be wrong, here, to object that the diastasis we have described

ful is that man and woman participate in and reflect God's triune glory, that is, the beauty of his eternal being-love, precisely through what appears most distant from him: their existence as incarnate spirits. In and through their sexually differentiated bodily structures, they reveal and give themselves to each other, and in so doing they simultaneously are themselves and re-present their ultimate origin. If we thus look at the male—both in the conjugal embrace and in the unfolding of his sexed condition, that is, in the revelation of himself—we can recognize that it belongs to his spiritual bodiliness to be and symbolize origin, transcendence, distance, initiative, and fruitful presence (in the sense of being's coming to be). As such, the male bears within himself the memory of the divine origin that he is not. He is the one who takes the initiative, remaining other and outside in his being-for the woman without whom he would not be what he is. If we consider the woman both in the unfolding of her sexed bodily condition and the conjugal embrace, we can see that it belongs to her spiritual bodiliness to be and symbolize immanence, nearness, receptivity, response, and fruitful presence (in the sense of the gratuitous abiding of being). As such, the female bears within herself the memory of created participation in the active reciprocity of divine love. She therefore is the one who remains and fruitfully responds in her being-for the male without whom she would not be what she is. Their being themselves only through their intrinsic relativity is the sign that they are ultimately given to themselves and to each other by God. Hence, transcendence, presence, and fruitfulness are all iconic of God's love; that is, they come from him and are called to lead to him, that is, give him glory.<sup>59</sup> Rather than "gender fluidity," human

---

is purely dependent on the nature of the human species and that in a higher form of love the element of propagation would disappear. . . because it must be said that this form of 'excess' and 'fruit' (which can be spiritual-intellectual) belongs to every love, including the higher forms. To that extent, perfect creaturely love is a genuine *imago trinitatis*" (Balthasar, *Spirit of Truth*, 160).

59. To express the reciprocal relation of male and female that reflects the order and hierarchy of God's triune love, St. Paul said that the man "is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man" (1 Cor 11:7). And yet, this, of course, is true only because man's glory is reflected glory—he is not the ultimate origin of being and beauty. Eve is from Adam, but just "as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God" (1 Cor 11:12). See Margaret McCarthy, "Something Not to Be

sexuality in the image of God presents both a giving in a receiving way—which characterizes the female—and a receiving in a giving way—which characterizes the male. And this is why only man begets, only woman conceives, and only together do they both communicate life.<sup>60</sup>

In light of this we can now see more clearly why Christ's sexuality is iconic of the Father's transcendent love and renders him apt to be Bridegroom of the Church. It is his male bodiliness that allows him to be the one 1) who always initiates the dialogue with man; 2) who speaks the word that reveals what is in every man (Jn 2:25) and who therefore must remain at a distance so that everyone may hear and be guided by it; and 3) who communicates his eternal life gratuitously through the gift of himself, which entails letting be those whom he affirms so that they may reciprocate his desire to be loved (Jn 17:24; Lk 22:15). Christ,

---

Grasped': Notes on Equality on the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*," *Ave Maria Law Review* 8, no. 1 (2009): 121–52.

60. Sexual difference, then, is a matter of both irreducible and common properties, where the latter are differentiated by and within the former. The male begets and the woman conceives; analogically, in God, the Father eternally begets and the Son is eternally begotten. The fact that the common properties—e.g., wisdom or good will—reside within the irreducible properties is not at all contradicted by an emphasis on reciprocity: the male and the female both give and receive, or, more technically, there is a “communication of idioms.” Between Father and Son as trinitarian persons, there is also a communication that requires the enduring, irreversible distinction of order, because (i) to come from the Father is just as good as to originate, and (ii) what each person has to share with the others in any such *communicatio* is precisely himself, his personal property that irreducibly hypostatizes the one being of God. At the same time, the structure of the sharing is to let the others participate in it without losing themselves in the process. The relation of the Father to the Son, in this regard, is not formally speaking a “reception,” since this would mean that the Father receives his being from the Son, which would eliminate the difference. In another sense, as St. Hilary mentions, the Son “perfects” the Father, not because he brings to him “something he lacks”—for neither person is lacking—but because without the Son there is no Father (and vice versa), and they are not without the Spirit (and vice versa). Just as the giving and receiving of man and woman takes place within their bodily sexual differentiation, so, analogically speaking, the divine persons are the one God in the eternal communication of themselves required by their irreducible personal properties (to beget, to be begotten, to proceed). This divine essence exists only as being eternally determined by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, vol. 2, *Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 136–37; Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, 7.31.

in a filial way, reveals the mystery of the Father by speaking the truth in love. This liberating truth, which affirms the human person and lets him or her be while bringing all of creation back to the Father, is most fittingly expressed through male bodiliness. That the priest, as friend of the Bridegroom, is male allows him to represent Christ both as Bridegroom of the Church and icon of the Father's love. In Christ, these roles do not entail two kinds of love that exist without intrinsic relation. Instead, Christ's nuptial gift of self for the Church is the expression of the Father's redemptive love that includes man's answer within it. Redemptive love, as we saw, has a relative priority over the nuptial: it is the divine, paternal initiative that allows man to be in relation with God as the child he has been predestined to be. Love's unity requires both its giving and receiving dimensions, which are preserved thanks to the irreducible sexual difference of the persons united in gift. For this reason, in light of the nuptial analogy, it is only in being male and thus representing the Petrine dimension of the Church within its Marian dimension that the priest can adequately convey Christ's paternal and nuptial love.

### 3.2

Once we appreciate the sexual difference as belonging to an ordered communion that is iconic of the triune God, we also grasp how this difference structures the relations of paternity and nuptiality essential to the priesthood. The logic inherent in the sexual difference will also help us, in this final section, to clarify a bit more the Church's inability to admit men with deep-seated same-sex attraction to the seminary or holy orders.<sup>61</sup>

---

61. It is important to realize that if one embraces the contemporary account of power and sexuality, the decision not to accept men with SSA to holy orders will always be perceived as an intolerable injustice—no matter how many sincere confessions of respect and understanding for people with SSA the Church may offer. Neither the endeavor within the Church to enable dialogue by softening a language perceived by the world as disrespectful and discriminatory nor the attempts to foster the Church's approval of homosexuality under the guise of chastely lived spiritual friendships between two people with SSA will be perceived as sufficient. These two efforts will be welcomed only if they lead to their logical conclusion: the *de facto* abandonment of the Church's anthropology with its undergirding metaphysics of creation and trinitarian theology. Fundamental decisions like the one at stake here should follow not

We saw above that because of the reciprocal relation between the body and its form (as spirit and soul), sexuality encompasses both of these components of the human person and therefore is the way the person relates to everything. In fact, as the way the human being relates, sexual difference “determines the proper identity of the person,” because to be a person is the way one relates to another.<sup>62</sup> For this reason, departures from the order given in man and woman’s sexual dimorphism cannot but distort the relations that constitute the human person as such, including the fatherhood and sponsality characteristic of the priest. Following the Catholic Church’s teaching that homosexual acts are “intrinsically disordered” and deep-seated homosexual inclinations “objectively disordered,” the Congregation for Catholic Education—which has authority on matters concerning seminary formation—indicated that persons engaged in such acts or experiencing such tendencies are “in a situation that gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and women.” It also added that “one must in no way overlook the negative consequences that can derive from the ordination of persons with deep-seated homosexual tendencies.”<sup>63</sup> When the SSA a man may experience is not “the expression of a transitory

---

the current mentality but what the human being knows from experience to be the meaning of his own bodily existence: that he is given to be in order to become himself in the sincere gift of self, as John Paul II elucidated. See James Martin, *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity* (New York: HarperOne, 2018); Eve Tushnet, *Gay and Catholic: Accepting My Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2014). For a view contrary to these, see Daniel Mattson’s well-argued *Why I Don’t Call Myself Gay: How I Reclaimed My Sexual Reality and Found Peace* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017).

62. “Haec tamen verba [Mt 22:30] non significant viri ac mulieris distinctionem in aeterna gloria aboleri, cum identitatem personae propriam determinent” (*Inter insigniores*, AAS 69 [1977], 112). See also John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 207–08 *et passim*. The term “person” is to be understood analogically. For the human being, the constitutive relationality that characterizes him as a person is expressed in and through the male or female body, whereas in God who is absolute spirit, the divine person is the eternal and complete communication of being-love that posits and maintains difference: the Father eternally begets, the Son is the eternally begotten, and the Spirit proceeds from both.

63. Congregation for Catholic Education, “Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations,” no. 2 (AAS 97 [2005], 1010).

problem” that can be overcome, the person cannot reach the “affective maturity” needed in order to be ordained a priest.<sup>64</sup>

It is important to understand correctly what the Church intends by using the term “objective disorder.” Our modern, subjectivistic anthropology—which we mentioned in discussing the meaning of vocation and power—predisposes us to understand “disorder” as expressing a moral judgment on the person and his intentions. Additionally, if one mistakenly identifies desires with actual judgments or actions, then it would seem that “tendencies” are actual grave sins. Nevertheless, when the Church speaks of “disorder” or “tendency” she is neither passing judgment nor accusing everyone with SSA of perversion. Instead, she is speaking at the objective level; that is, she refers to the very structure of the human person, created in the image of God as male and female. To speak of “disorder” relative to the God-given order described above—namely, that according to which one receives oneself from God as gift and thus lives a fruitful relation of being-for the sexually-differentiated other—does not, therefore, mean that people with SSA are considered irreligious, ungrateful, egotistic, and deprived of creativity. Rather, for many reasons that are difficult to account for, it means that the acceptance of oneself as a sexually-differentiated, embodied soul given to oneself to experience fruitful unity with another person of the opposite sex is radically troubled. Same-sex attractions are objectively disordered insofar as they push the person away from that for which he was created. Thus, SSA do not indicate simply another sexual “orientation” but a reconception of the human person’s sexed condition and of his or her relation to himself, others, the world, and God.

This objective disorder affects the priesthood in what is most proper to it: priestly fatherhood and the priest’s loving the Church as friend of the Bridegroom. Nuptial love is displaced by the deep-seated attraction of one man for another, because men

---

64. Congregation for Catholic Education, “Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations,” no. 1–2 (AAS 97 [2005], 1008–10). For a definition of “affective maturity,” see John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 44. For an adequate scientific assessment of the transiency of sexual self-perception with regard to transgenderism, see Lawrence S. Mayer and Paul R. McHugh, “Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences,” *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology and Society* 50 (Fall 2016).

experiencing this desire are unattracted to women and hence incapable of marrying. Ultimately, this disordered attraction represents a denial of the woman. This, of course, does not mean that such men do not appreciate women or that they disregard, for instance, their mothers. Rather, it indicates an objective disorder: one turns to another man and not to a woman to find fulfillment and discover himself. Thus, the man who could not and does not want to marry a woman cannot represent Christ as Bridegroom of the Church. He cannot be for the one he does not love; he cannot be for what he does not want for himself. The incapacity to affirm the woman's goodness is related to the inability to represent God's fatherhood. When a man cannot see the intrinsic goodness of woman as other and as given by God, the goodness of the giver himself is also thrown into question. The rejection of the woman and the nuptial relation with her therefore indicates a conflicted relation with God the Father, who is the ultimate giver of all that is and the source of its goodness. Without affirming woman, the priest cannot represent the fatherhood of God as Christ revealed it. More deeply, and just as the nuptial analogy depends on the redemptive and paternal dimension of love, the man's rejection of nuptiality is not merely symptomatic of a troubled relation with God's fatherhood but derives from it, that is, from the radical questioning of one's own sonship.<sup>65</sup> Since the Father is both origin and destiny, the priest's incapacity to re-

---

65. One may wonder why a man with deep-seated SSA who seems to live perfect continence could not be ordained. This reservation—already corrected by the Congregation for Catholic Education's 2005 instruction "Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations"—fails to see two of the points we have been elucidating. First, as an "objective disorder" SSA prevents men from properly relating to women, that is, affirming them in the goodness of their otherness. Even if a man with SSA remains chaste, his relationship with women is *per se* troubled. This is also the case for the relation with adolescent boys. The priest with SSA cannot represent a father to them, and, being attracted to them because they are similar to him, he cannot educate them to true fatherhood—that is, he cannot teach them to relate to what is other than themselves (the woman, and creation as other) and to respond to God. Ordained priests who have SSA know from their own experience both the fear of hurting women or children and how difficult it is to avoid doing so. To ordain men with SSA is to put them on a path of very profound suffering. This brings us to the second point. The disorder proper to SSA also regards the way one lives chastity. Given that SSA instills the tendency toward a disordered relation, the sacrifice of avoiding such a relation is much harder to endure, because the lack of fulfillment one experiences in same-sex relation exacerbates its practice.



present the origin also entails his inability to lead people to their own destiny. Without the filial affirmation of the Father's goodness, which passes through the joyous affirmation of the woman in her goodness and otherness from him, a man cannot convey God's paternal love to others.

With this in mind, it is possible to see that the conflict affecting the paternal and spousal dimensions of the ordained priesthood centers on one point: the rejection of the fruitful receptivity proper to love. In rejecting union with a woman, a man says "no" to what is most specific to her, namely, fruitful receptivity. He thus also rejects that of which this fruitful receptivity is a reminder: the original reception of his being called to respond to God, or his own sonship. In the created person, however, sonship always precedes fatherhood. This filial receptivity underlying the paternal relation comes first through relation to God, the original giver, and then through relation to one's own parents—every man is always the son of a father and a mother. Since, as we indicated, the man lives his created receptivity as transcending origin, he also receives his very receptivity from the woman, to whom fruitful receptivity belongs most properly. By accepting a child from the woman, the man makes his own her fruitful receptivity and hence learns through her his own fatherhood. Likewise, the woman makes her own his originating transcendence, and both become givers of life through each other. Similarly, as we saw, every priestly fatherhood is derived from divine fatherhood and the motherhood of the Church and thus it is inseparable from either one. If the Marian Church were not the Bride of Christ, the ordained priest would be deprived of both the possibility of an authentic gift of self and of his very fatherhood. The priest would just be a caretaker of spiritual matters.

The dismissal of woman and her fruitful receptivity entails a change in the very nature of desire. If one is not attracted to the other as other, then every desire for a human being, in whatever form it takes, is a desire to find oneself and to put the other at the service of this self-affirmation. Once again, this does not mean that persons with SSA cannot be generous to others. Rather, when he or she is not desired precisely as other, the other cannot but function as a mirror of sorts, since what one wants is not otherness but sameness. Here we can also perceive why it is not rare that the clerical abuse of power and homosexuality oc-

cur together in the same person. Both depend upon a similarly disordered desire to affirm oneself.

The Church cannot ordain men with deep-seated SSA because this tendency, as an objective disorder, is a wound in the person's way of relating to everything. In particular, it radically afflicts the relations of paternity and nuptiality that belong essentially to the priesthood. In order to protect men who experience SSA from falling into the abuse of priestly power, as well as any persons who could suffer under this power, it is crucial—as the Church does in doctrine and practice—to safeguard fruitful receptivity and the sexual otherness that makes it possible.

### CONCLUSION

The preceding reflections sought to delve into the mystery of priestly fatherhood. They suggested that this fatherhood, if approached christologically, appears as the permanence in history of God's merciful and nuptial love for his people. God wishes to transfigure creation by affirming its goodness, and he extends this affirmation—his omnipotent power—through those men he calls to be friends of Christ the Bridegroom. Ordination is a call to live one's loving dependence on Christ and service of the Church with the awareness of one's own sinfulness and of the ever-greater divine mercy that Christ constantly bestows on his friends, who receive with this mercy also his being and authority. Priests' awareness of their own sinfulness and of Christ's mercy for everyone should yield a life lived as entreaty that the vocation they received and accepted may be fulfilled. This vocation, understood as God's love given ever anew, is the light with which God illumines the darkness of man's sin. If genuine, priests' ongoing entreaty will deepen a threefold wound in their souls that will spur them to live their mission until the very end, as Peter did. They will know and suffer ever more deeply the wound of faith, because people live and die without knowing Christ (Lk 18:8); the wound of hope, because they do not realize the Father's faithful and patient presence; and the wound of charity, because they do not live for him "who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor 5:15). Certain of Christ's love for them and of the Father's goodness, they will experience no anxiety to resolve this dramatic condition. They will ask to be able to offer their very existence so that, through them, God

may continue to bring more men and women to the fulfillment of the eternal promise for which he has predestined us: to be his sons through Jesus Christ to the praise of his glorious grace. □

*ANTONIO LÓPEZ, F.S.C.B., is provost/dean and associate professor of theology at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America.*