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## **The relationship between the priesthood and the church from the perspective of unity**

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**Abstract.** The Church is the extension of the resurrected body of the Son of God in history and in the believers as totality, believers that through baptism and chrismation become her living and active members. The relationship between the sacramental priesthood and the Church can only take place in perfect unity, the Church being absolutely necessary for salvation. Without the historical Church of Christ, namely the laboratory where salvation is being accomplished, humanity would remain subjected to sin and death, unable to know the perfection for which it has been created. Only by getting closer to Christ through the visible hand of the sacramental priesthood in the Church through the Holy Sacraments, the relationship between the Divine and humans acquires a different meaning, and humanity receives a meaning that goes beyond the materiality of the world.

**Keywords.** God, Priesthood, Church, grace

### **1. Introduction**

The church is the vessel that leads to salvation. She is the body of Christ, and the totality of her members from all times and from all places represent the members of this body, the members that work as a whole for the wellbeing of the entire body, but also for the individual salvation that is obtained in the Church. The Holy Ghost is permanently working in the ecclesial environment through the grace of the Holy Sacraments that are administered by the sacramental priesthood. The latter offers in a visible form, through the use of matter, what the Holy Ghost offers to the believers in the invisible. The sacramental Priesthood, different from that belonging to all the believers from the point of view of the attributes, is brought to being by Christ the Savior in order to be at work in the Holy Church. As in the Old Testament, although there was a law that the head of the family should be a priest and offer prayers and sacrifices to God, yet God established through Aaron, whose staff bore fruit, a special priesthood to take care of the sacrifices of the people, a unique and different priesthood from the original ritual performed by the heads of families. In the same way in the New Testament, although there is a universal priesthood that is offered to all through baptism and chrismation, yet Christ establishes the sacramental priesthood, which has other attributes than the first. It is true that both priesthoods have their source in the Son of God, incarnated, crucified and risen from the dead, but what differentiates them from the beginning is the work of each.

The role of the sacramental priesthood is to preach the word of God, to sanctify the faithful, and to lead them to salvation (John XX, 21-23; Matthew XXVIII, 18-20; Mark XVI,

15-16) by having this empowerment, not taken on their own behalf, but from Christ through the Holy Spirit precisely through as He receives the candidate for the great mystery of ordination.

From the Holy Apostles to the end of the ages, Christ chooses those who will be those who take care of His Mysteries: “And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles;” (Luke VI, 13; Matthew VII, 1; Mark III, 14). To those Christ offers a special task, different from the work of the universal priesthood, a work which actualizes in the Church, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, His work of salvation for all who believe in Him. Christ sanctifies them: “As the Father has sent Me, so I send you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained” (John 20: 21-21).

## **II. The Relationship between the Church and the Universal Priesthood**

The Holy Apostles are the first to receive this great gift, and at the same time great responsibility, along with the commandment to preach and baptize to the ends of the earth. Faced with the physical impossibility of baptism in all places and times, the Holy Apostles shared the grace of the priesthood with people chosen from among those who were already baptized, so from the universal priesthood, and made them visible organs through which Christ Himself works in His Church (Acts II, 42; VII, 16-17). “If in the other Sacraments Christ is received as the One who gives himself through the priest, in the Sacrament of Ordination He binds Himself as a subject that is given to us invisibly by a human person, whom he consecrates as a priest or bishop, shows His devotion to us through the other Mysteries”<sup>1</sup>.

The necessity of the sacramental priesthood arises from the fact that Christ, the supreme Sacrifice, in order to be able to share Himself in a visible way to the whole people, needed to establish such a ministry, taken from among the people and ordained to work for their benefit. “For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins: Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity. And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins.” (Hebrews, V, 1-3). So the priesthood is part of the Church being one of her components. One cannot speak of the Church of Christ without if there is no priesthood, for the latter, the sacramental priesthood, as a visible element, transmits the invisible grace of the Spirit through the Holy Sacraments to the people of God. “Without a human subject to represent Christ in a visible way, Christ could not share His gifts with us as a person, or He could not give Himself in the other mysteries, considered as visible means. His giving of Himself could only be done invisibly. But this would keep us, without a way out, insecure whether Christ was truly given to us, or whether we are slaves to subjective illusions; we would not have the experience of Christ as a special subject for us in the person of the priest who greets us in his name”<sup>2</sup>. The lack of the mystery of ordination deprives the Church and the whole Christian world of the communion of Christ, without which there can be no salvation. So, the deprivation of priesthood of the Church brings harm to the latter, with real serious consequences, which endanger the most precious purpose of humanity, namely salvation.

This special priesthood does not contradict the universal one, for both have their source in the One High Priest who sacrificed Himself as a pure sacrifice once and for all to raise our humanity from the dead, to make us gods by grace. Christ is the Absolute High Priest: “holy,

<sup>1</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III, Basilica, 2020, p.97.

<sup>2</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, Basilica, 2020, vol. III, p.97.

harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Hebrews VII, 26-27). The High-priesthood of Christ is different from any other, for He does not sacrifice for Himself, but brings Himself to the Father for our sins. He is the Priest *par excellence* superior to the priesthood of the Old Testament; he is the Priest according to the order of Melchizedek - His prototype. Melchizedek himself was superior to the Old Testament priesthood, for even the great Abraham received a blessing from him. "Melchizedek surpassed Abraham, because if he had not surpassed him, he would not have blessed him and would not have taken tithes from him. Since all the priests of the Old Law were descends of Abraham, it is shown that Melchizedek also surpassed them, because by blessing their ancestor, Abraham, and taking tithes, at the same time by blessing they also took tithes from the priests who came from Abraham. And if the image of Christ, Melchizedek, was superior to the priests of the law, how much more did the Chris, as the first image of Melchizedek, and the true Melchizedek, surpass them."<sup>3</sup>.

Through the sacramental priesthood instituted by the Son of God, the supreme High Priest, the people of the universal priesthood receive the Holy Sacraments, receive the grace of the living and working Holy Spirit, and thus grow as fruitful branches in the vineyard of Christ.

The apostolicity confessed in the creed of the Orthodox Church refers to an attribute of the latter by which Christ, the Bishop, was present in the Holy Apostles, and is now present in their descendants, whom He adorns with the power of the Holy Spirit, thereby giving them the power and the authority to preach (Matthew XXVIII, 19; Mark XVI, 15; II Timothy II, 15) to sanctify through the Holy Sacraments (Matthew XXVIII, 19; Mark XVI, 16) and to lead the members of the Church to the fuller union with Christ (Matthew XXVIII, 20; Acts XX, 28; I Timothy IV, 16).

Through the work of the Holy Apostles and then of their canonical followers, Christ Himself works through the Spirit in His Church. "So that the visible unity of the Church may not find its ultimate center in the realm of the visible, but in Christ, He leaves not a single apostle and his followers as a center of the Church, but the community of apostles and bishops, so that they may become aware that their ultimate unity and that of the Church is in Christ, that He alone is the only High Priest, that He too is in the Trinity. All bishops must surpass themselves in a higher unity in Christ"<sup>4</sup>. The great Greek theologian Andrutso states: "The Lord chose the Apostles, the Twelve, and the Seventy, to whom He gave His power and authority and strengthened them by the Holy Spirit; and the Apostles, being aware that they were the Lord's messengers (...) granted priestly power to others, making deacons and priests in the Holy Spirit and leaving them as followers in their apostolic service"<sup>5</sup>.

The transmission of grace from the Apostles to their descendants is also mentioned from a historical point of view. Thus, Eusebius of Caesarea in "The Church History" confirms the apostolic succession of grace by saying: "After founding and building the Church, the blessed apostles entrusted the episcopal seat to Linus, who is mentioned by Paul in his epistles to Timothy (II Timothy IV, 21). Linus was followed by Anacletus; after him, in the third generation after the apostles, would follow Clement, who saw the apostles and spoke to them, hearing their sermon and seeing their true tradition with his own eyes."<sup>6</sup>.

The activity of the bishops has its origin in that of the Holy Apostles. They have a duty to keep the law of Christ unaltered and to lead the community in full harmony with Christ. Also, the bishop is the one who, as the overseer of the spiritual life of the people, is the basis of the

<sup>3</sup> Theophylact of Bulgaria, Explicarea Epistolei către Evrei, P.G., CXXV, col. 268, apud. Diac. Drd. Gheorghe Sava, Preoția lui Hristos - Izvorul și puterea preoției sacramentale, in Studii Teologice, XLI (1989), nr. 5-6, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. D. Stăniloae, Teologie Dogmatică Ortodoxă, vol. III, ... p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> Hristu Andrușoș, Dogmatica, translated to Romanian by Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Sibiu, 1930, p. 302.

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, Istoria Bisericii, Cartea III, III-IV, in P.S.B., Nr. 13, p.100-102.

visible work of the Church, being directly accountable to Christ for the flock entrusted to him. St. Ignatius Theophorous states: "That is why you must go with the will of the bishop, which you do. For your venerable priesthood, worthy of God, is as united with the bishop as the strings with the guitar (...) the more I rejoice in you that you are so united with the bishop, as the Church is united with Jesus Christ and as united Jesus Christ is united with the Father, so that all may agree in union"<sup>7</sup>.

The general priesthood, which even if it is the basis of the sacramental priesthood, because Christ chooses his servants within the first, is nevertheless the one who benefits from the fruits of the second, for the grace of the Holy Sacraments is transmitted to the members of the universal priesthood by Christ through the Holy Spirit in an invisible way, and in a visible way it is transmitted by the hand of the special priesthood. "Through the baptism administered by the bishop and the priest, he incorporates people into the mysterious Body of Christ, the Church, sanctifying his ministry as a public priesthood, therefore the priesthood which the priest and the bishop confer on the baptized is not a derivative of their hierarchical ministerial priesthood, but a participation in the priesthood of Christ in the Church"<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, the role of the special priesthood is totally different from that of the general priesthood, because the special priesthood has the special role of making Christ present in all the believers who believe in Him. This is accomplished within the Church as an extension in history of the body of the Lord and cannot be accomplished in any way by the universal priesthood, for no one can take this power of his own free will. The attributes of the universal priesthood are not related to the sharing of God's grace through the Holy Sacraments, nor to the possibility of performing the bloodless sacrifice, their nature being completely different.

### **III. The Fulfillment of the Church in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The work of the Sacramental Priesthood**

With the act of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost over the Holy Apostles, the Church of Christ is seen as a historical community including the Holy Apostles and their canonically ordained followers, as a ministerial priesthood and of course of the multitude of all who have received the universal priesthood through baptism and chrismation. Together, they represent the living members of the Lord's Mysterious Body, members who complement each other for the good of the whole body. This does not mean that there are two categories of people who compose the Church of Christ, for they are all the same, they have all received the same baptism, and they have been in communion in the same Holy Spirit. What is different here refers only to the missions of each member of the Mysterious Body of the Lord, missions related to the gifts that each one has received (I Cor. 12).

"The members of the sacramental church hierarchy are part of the general community of the Church, together with all the members of the Church, because they themselves are members of the Church in need of salvation, striving for this purpose for their own sanctification and perfection. Between the sacramental hierarchy and the general communion of the members of the Body of Christ, there is a relationship and an ontological communion in which the same Holy Spirit, or Christ in the Holy Spirit, pulsates and works through the Sacraments of the Church."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>St. Ignatius Theophorus, Epistola către magnezieni, VI,I, în P.S.B., Nr. 1, p.166.

<sup>8</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Radu, Taina Preoției, in rev. Ortodoxia, XXXI (1979), nr. 3-4, p. 550.

<sup>9</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Stoica Ion, Preoția, hirotonia și succesiunea apostolică in lumina Teologiei Ortodoxe, Macarie Publishing House, Târgoviște, 2005, p. 6.

The Church cannot exist without her members, nor can one speak of the Church without thinking of a branch of members that deals with the administration of her mysteries. When we say Church, we are saying Christ shared in people who believe in Him through the Holy Spirit, but not indefinitely, incomprehensibly, but in a real, intelligible way, through the visible work of ordained ministry. The church not only takes her being from Christ, but also finds her fulfillment in Him. By bringing the bloodless sacrifice by the ordained service even today, Christ Himself is truly shared with us in His body and blood by the hand of the ministering priesthood. Our union with Christ in the Eucharist through the hand of the ordained priesthood actually shows the real purpose of the historical Church. Christ accepts to give Himself whole to us through the Eucharistic act in a visible way in the Church through the priesthood obtained by ordination, not because He could not do it in an invisible way, but because of our materiality and our inclination towards it. That is why Christ, “must give Himself to the Church and her members through seen persons. He chooses and sanctifies these people through the mystery of ordination. Thus, if in the other mysteries Christ is received as the one who gives himself through the priest, in the mystery of the ordination He binds himself as a subject that is given to us invisibly by a human person, whom he consecrates as a priest or bishop and makes His giving of Himself to us visible through the other mysteries. If the other sacraments represent the visible means by which the priest mediates a power from those Christ gave us or His own body and blood, the ordination qualifies the seen person herself who fulfills these means, by whom Christ bestows His powers or His body and blood through those mysteries<sup>10</sup>.

If there were no human subject, with canonical ordination, to work visibly through the power given by Christ Himself, He would not share Himself to men as a person, we could not benefit from the gifts poured out by Christ through His Spirit, and there wouldn't be the possibility of experiencing Him as a person by the human race, hence the closeness between us and our High Priest, the One Who Sacrifices and the Victim that sacrifices Himself for our uplifting, would be realized only in a mysterious, unseen way. “But this would keep us in uncertainty as to whether Christ was truly given to us, or whether we are slaves to subjective illusions; we would not have the experience of Christ as a special subject for us in the person of the priest who greets us in His name. In any case, it would maintain an insurmountable individualism that would destroy any unity of faith and even the purpose and security of a real revelation, a real fact of salvation in Christ. That is why the Church and salvation in Christ depend on the priesthood”<sup>11</sup>.

There is no Church of Christ where the sacramental priesthood is absent. The priesthood of the Church is the one that makes Christ possible to experience by us by putting forward, through seen organs, in a visible way, the Holy Sacraments and especially the body and blood of the Son of God, from which we take communion and through which we live. The correct understanding of the priesthood in the Church depends on the way we look at it from a soteriological and anthropological point of view. Understood in terms of soteriology, and not ontology or functionality, the sacramental priesthood accomplishes here and now the very work of salvation of Jesus Christ. And since in Orthodoxy the saving work cannot be detached from the Person and from the very presence of the Savior, the identification of the church priesthood with the Priesthood of Christ can be thought of in its entirety in a realistic way, without the danger of ontological error, as Christ is understood and lived in continuation of His saving acts<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II ... p. 143-144.

<sup>11</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II ... p. 145.

<sup>12</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Stoica Ion, *Preoția, hirotonia și succesiunea apostolică în lumina teologiei Ortodoxe*, Macarie, Publishing House, Târgoviște, 2005, p. 7.

Being the Head of the Church, Christ is permanently present in her through the Holy Spirit, nourishes its members through His sacrifice, raises those who approach Him and even unites with them in grace through holy communion. He is the One who gives life to His Church, being life itself, and through His priesthood, which is connected with the priesthood of the Church, He wishes for the sanctification of human nature and its elevation to His state after the glorious resurrection. “In His capacity as the incarnated Word of God, Jesus Christ, the true God and the true Man, fulfills through His work in the Holy Spirit, in the Church and for the Church, a dialogue of immortal love between God and man and a permanent call to receive the divine truth that liberates and unites. The relationship between Christ and His Church thus becomes a dynamic one, full of the responsibility that derives from the progressive dialogue of the Church's progress towards his state of resurrection. This dialogue includes the Church in her capacity as a partner of eternal love, as well as each of her members, called to capitalize on their freedom, in communion with the risen Christ”<sup>13</sup>.

By assimilating our nature through the act of the incarnation, Christ fully raises it through the sacrifice made to the Father, to the state from which, if it had passed it, it would have ceased to be human. This voluntary assimilated nature is brought into the Person of Christ, a sacrifice that pleases the Father, which means that we, too, are mysteriously included in the act of sacrifice performed by the Savior. “Through His eternal High-priesthood, in the Church and for the Church, Christ brings Himself to the Father, as a sacrifice for us, secretly embraces us as voluntary, well-pleasing sacrifices in his sacrifice, making us fit to share in this way the power that radiates from His sacrificed body. The sublimity of His sacrifice is that He is constantly present in the continuity of His saving acts. His Sacrifice is constantly being brought to the life and salvation of the world as well as to the identity between the One Who sacrifices and the Sacrifice. He is in a continual offering of Himself to the fulfillment of the will of the One to whom He has given Himself.<sup>14</sup>; and there is no greater love than this, for He continually mediates our entry into God the Father, through His state of total devotion to Him. Christ is the eternal High Priest. He embraces us in His hierarchical ministry, in the relationship of eternal love with the Father, freeing us from the burden of loneliness and selfishness, making us partners of the Father, of infinite love, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit”<sup>15</sup>.

Therefore, in the Church of Christ there is no other priesthood than His, who is working every hour for our salvation and clearly manifests itself as the priesthood of the Church. Christ brings His sacrifice to the Father not for Himself, but for humanity. If the priesthood of the Church refers to the universal priesthood, it means that the priesthood of the Church would no longer be the priesthood of Christ, because each person in his capacity as a priest would perform the act of sacrifice for himself. This would mean that the bloodless sacrifice would no longer have a universal character, for the whole people, but a personal one in which each individual would bring the sacrifice only for himself. This spirit is foreign to the Church of Christ. In Orthodoxy, the ministering priest brings the bloodless sacrifice for the whole people following the example of the High Priest of Christ. This ministry is from God and no one, in any context, can take this dignity from himself because even Christ, the High Priest par excellence, did not take this ministry from Himself: “And no man takes this honor unto himself, but he that is called of God, as is Aaron; so also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, today have I begotten thee. As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek”. (Hebrews V, 4-6)

<sup>13</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II... p. 229-230.

<sup>14</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II ... p. 233.

<sup>15</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II ... p. 235.

The priesthood is a gift of God and at the same time an activation in the sensitive plan of the invisible Priesthood of Christ as Mediator towards God. Believers, always in need of Christ as Mediator, always need the priest who is especially visible to them.<sup>16</sup>

The reality of the presence of the special priesthood in the Church as a priesthood of Christ belongs to the continuous present of history and has its foundation in the eternity of the Priesthood of Christ. It transcends the boundaries of time, for it is not a presence of the past, something established at one time for a particular cause, but expresses the character of the eternity of the hierarchy of Christ, Who will be with us, through His real priesthood in the Church, until the end of ages. Speaking of the priesthood of Christ and of the Church, St. Cyril of Alexandria states: "The priesthood of the Church is understood as the priesthood of Christ in continuation of his saving acts, or as the permanence of the hierarchy of Christ."<sup>17</sup>, hence it follows that Christ continues the eternal plan of the Holy Trinity for the salvation of mankind by the Spirit, in His Church, until the end of ages.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

The priesthood of the Church whose Head is Christ is inextricably linked to the Person of the Logos, the Supreme High Priest, who brings Himself as a reconciliation sacrifice between the Uncreated and the created, thereby obtaining for humanity the forgiveness of the Heavenly Father. The historical reality of the sacrifice of the Son of God cannot be disputed, being prolonged in history, within the Church through the work of the sacramental priesthood, without which humanity would not have the visible, palpable element of Christ's work through the Holy Spirit in the Holy Sacraments. The absence of the sacramental priesthood would have dramatic consequences in the life of humanity, ending in a road that leads nowhere. Only through the work of the priesthood in the Church is the uncreated and unseen divine grace shared with the faithful by the visible hand of the priesthood, thus ensuring the relationship by which man knows God and experiences life in the love of the Holy Trinity.

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<sup>16</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II ... p.237.

<sup>17</sup> St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Închinare în Duh și Adevăr*, cartea X: PG, 68, col 673, apud. Pr. Prof. D. Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos Arhiereu în veac*, in *Ortodoxia*, anul XXXI, nr. 2, 1979, p. 221 ș.u.