

*"All priests must have the mind
and heart of missionaries."*

Pope John Paul II



ORDAINED FOR THE
UNIVERSAL CHURCH

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The Society for
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FOREWORD



*"All priests must have
the mind and heart of missionaries."*

This observation of Pope John Paul II is repeated four times in the text of this booklet by Father Eugene LaVerdiere, S.S.S.

Indeed, just as the Church is missionary by her very nature, so is the priesthood.

Priests and bishops are ordained for the universal mission of Christ and his Church. They are called and sent to proclaim the death of the Lord, announcing it in word and, ultimately, through the celebration of the Eucharist.

When the priestly ministry, the relationship to those served, is seen in this "missionary" light, it is easier to cope with the disappointments and apathy inevitably encountered in day-to-day efforts; easier, too, to celebrate the joys and to be signs of hope in a world too often marked by despair.

In the following text, Father LaVerdiere calls attention to the need today to focus on the missionary dimension of the priesthood as presented by Pope John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. Father seeks to show that both mission and ministry are complementary, each needed for a healthy priestly identity.

INTRODUCTION



Pastores Dabo Vobis, Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation on the formation of priests, contains his most extensive teaching to date on the nature of the priesthood and its challenges.

The exhortation, dated March 25, 1992, follows the October 1990 Synod of Bishops on "The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day." It refers frequently to the synod documents and integrates these in the Pope's growing body of teaching for the Church universal.

John Paul II's treatment of priestly formation is quite comprehensive. Four of the chapters in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* examine the topic of formation directly, considering the challenges facing it as we approach the close of the second millennium (Ch. I), vocational ministry as integral to the Church's pastoral work (Ch. IV), the formation of candidates for the priesthood (Ch. V), and the ongoing formation of priests (Ch. VI).

The concerns presented in these four chapters are very important and call for every priest's careful consideration. But *Pastores Dabo Vobis* is much more than a seminary document. Two of its chapters deal with "The Nature and Mission of the Ministerial Priesthood" (Ch. II) and "The Spiritual Life of the Priest" (Ch. III). These

two chapters present the basis for the entire exhortation and are absolutely central to its message. Without a clear notion of the nature of the priesthood and priestly living, there is little point to talking about vocational ministry and formation.

Mission and Ministry

The two central chapters address some of the most vexing issues facing priests today, the search for a priestly identity, the meaning of the priesthood, its necessity for the life of the Church, and the components of a well-grounded and sustaining priestly spirituality. Questions regarding these matters come up repeatedly at priestly gatherings, formal and informal, in dioceses throughout our country and many other parts of the world.

Two notions hold the key to each of these issues, that of *mission* and that of *ministry*, and both are at the heart of the Pope's teaching.

It is very important to hold those two notions in balance. The notion of mission associates the priest with the person of Christ and the universal mission of the Church. The notion of ministry associates the priest with the people he serves and the particular Church. Both mission and ministry are essential to the priesthood and critical for its effective exercise.

Without a particular ministry, a priest's sense of mission has no outlet and is bound

to leave him frustrated. Unless it flows from a sense of mission, a priest's ministry remains purely functional and incapable of supporting a strong priestly identity.

A few decades ago, we thought of the priesthood primarily in terms of mission, and we spoke of the priest's work as apostolic. A deep priestly spirituality was needed to support the priest in his apostolate, his part in the great mission of Christ and his Church. For this, the spirituality emphasized the priest's relationship to the person of Christ.

Today we have come to think of the priesthood primarily in terms of ministry, and we speak of the priest's work as ministerial. As before, a deep priestly spirituality is needed, but now it is to support the priest in his ministry, his part in the ministry of Christ and his Church. For this the spirituality emphasizes a priest's relationship to those to whom and with whom he ministers.

To bring about a much-needed balance, we need once again to address the priesthood's missionary dimension. The Pope helps us do this in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, referring generously to *Redemptoris Missio*, his encyclical letter "On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate," and a number of documents from Vatican II, notably *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the council's "Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests," and *Optatam Totius*, the council's "Decree on Priestly Formation."

The following reflections were inspired by the teaching of the council and Pope John Paul II's teaching on the priesthood, as well as my own experience teaching the New Testament with priests in continuing education and seminarians. Their purpose is to contribute to the development of a strong priestly identity and spirituality in the post-Vatican II era.

After situating the priesthood in its missionary nature, I shall explore the image of shepherd, which the Holy Father emphasizes to describe the priest in his exhortation. I will then reflect on the priest's ministry to a particular Church and on his mission in a world Church. ♦

I. THE PRIEST IS A MISSIONARY

♦

A priest is a missionary. Every priest is ordained for the mission of Christ and his Church.

Some priests leave their country as missionaries to other peoples and cultures. In their mission, those who bring the Gospel "to the nations" (*ad gentes*) are a clear sign in the Church of the missionary nature of Christ's priesthood. We need them to remind all of us that being a priest is being a missionary.

Every priest is ordained for the Church's apostolic mission "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Such is the message of Pope John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, which refers over and over again to the missionary nature of the priesthood. The Pope is very clear in this matter. He develops it while discussing the priest's relationship to the person of Christ. He takes it up again while presenting the priest's relationship to the Church and the world.

Through their relationship to Christ, priests are "servants of the proclamation of the Gospel to every people and to fullness of Christian life of all the baptized" (#15). In their relationship to the Church, their priesthood "is ordered not only to the particular church but to the universal church (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 10), in communion with the bishop, with Peter and under Peter" (#16).

The Pope's teaching on the missionary nature of the priesthood takes up an important concern of *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Vatican II's Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests:

The spiritual gift that priests received in ordination prepares them, not for any limited and narrow mission, but for the widest scope of the universal mission of salvation "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8; #10).

After quoting this same passage from *Presbyterorum Ordinis* in his encyclical on the Church's world mission, *Redemptoris Missio* (#67), Pope John Paul II draws out some of

its implications for priestly spirituality:

All priests must have the mind and heart of missionaries — open to the needs of the Church and the world, with concern for those farthest away, and especially for the non-Christian groups in their area. They should have in their heart, in their prayers and particularly at the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the concern of the whole Church for all of humanity (#67).

The Church Needs Priests

The Church needs priests to fulfill her most fundamental mission: to announce the Gospel and renew Christ's self-offering for the life of the world (see *Pastores Dabo Vobis* #1).

This teaching of Vatican II and Pope John Paul II has its roots in the New Testament. Without priests, the Church would not be able to obey the command of Christ to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19) and to "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24).

In the mission of the Church, these two commands are inseparable. The Gospel is not just a matter of words. It is a matter of deeds, of doing what Jesus did in remembrance of him. Proclaiming the Gospel is a matter of Eucharist.

Announcing the Gospel reaches its climax in the Eucharistic sacrifice. As St. Paul told the Church of the Corinthians, "For as often as you eat this bread and

drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26).

The Eucharist is a proclamation of the Gospel. Just as Jesus, our Lord and Savior, is the Word-made-flesh (see Jn 1:14), the Eucharist is the Gospel-made-sacrament.

Priests Have a World Mission

Christ's Gospel, like Christ's offering of his life and the pouring out of his blood, is for the salvation of the whole world. The Eucharist, in which Christ's Gospel is made sacrament, is also for the whole world. The priesthood, whose primary purpose is to proclaim the Gospel of the Eucharist in word and deed, is also for the whole world.

In *Redemptoris Missio*, the Pope took up an important teaching of Vatican II when he emphasized the Church's missionary nature (#1). In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, he did the same by calling attention to the missionary nature of every priest (#16).

In *Redemptoris Missio*, the Holy Father focused on the Church's world mission as a key to renewing Christian identity. He stressed the importance of missionary activity for renewing the Church, revitalizing faith, strengthening Christian identity, offering fresh enthusiasm and giving new incentive. "Faith," he said, "is strengthened when it is given to others!" It is in commitment to the Church's universal mission that the new evangelization of Christian peoples will find inspiration and support" (#2).

In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the Pope again focuses on the Church's world mission, but this time as a key to renewing priestly identity:

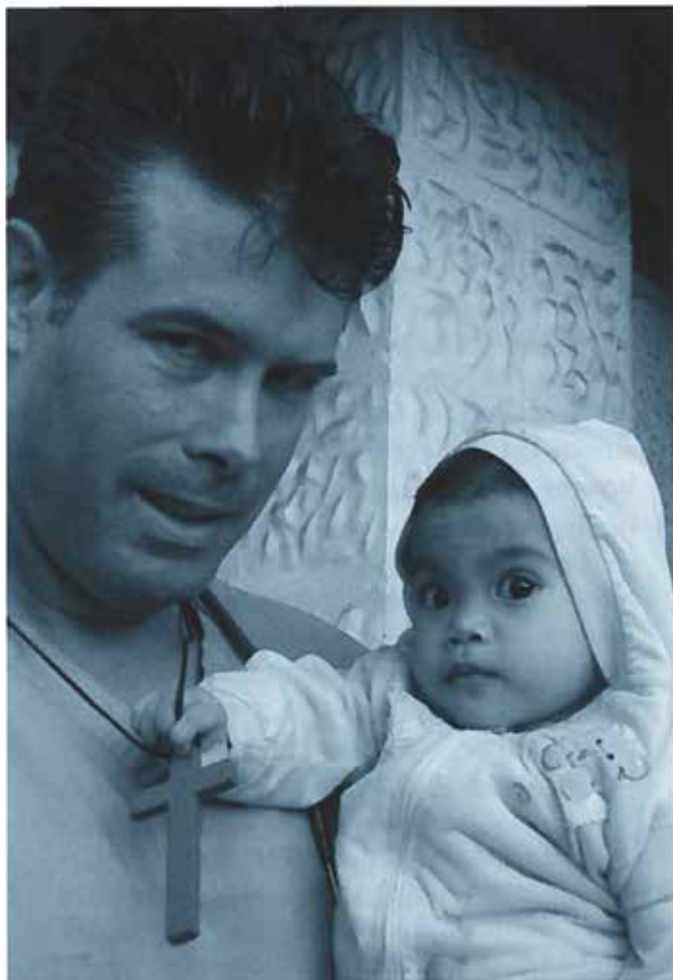
A correct and in-depth awareness of the nature and mission of the ministerial priesthood is the path which must be taken — and in fact the synod did take it — in order to emerge from the crisis of priestly identity (#11).

Priests, diocesan and religious, all priests, exercise their ministry in a particular Church and usually for a small part of that Church. This is true of those priests who minister at home in their own country as well as of those sent to other nations, peoples and cultures. To fulfill their ministry to the particular Church, priests must respond to actual situations and needs, which vary from place to place and time to time. Because of this, priests often need special qualifications and preparation.

Those same ministerial situations and local needs, however, are not the most basic factors in shaping priestly identity. While fulfilling local and particular needs, a priest is merely doing his part in fulfilling the Church's mission "to the ends of the earth."

Mission is fulfilled in ministry, and ministry is undertaken in fulfillment of mission. The two are very closely related, but they are not identical, and mission is more basic.

In shaping a priest's identity, ministry is secondary; mission is primary. ♦



American missionary and doctor, Camillian Father Scott Binet, during his service in Southeast Asia

II. SHEPHERDS OF THE FLOCK



Images play a major role in forming and developing a priestly identity. Indeed, images are important in all religious matters. They undergird much of our theological reflection, especially when it deals with mystery.

We need images when we speak of the Church, the Spouse or Bride of Christ, the Body of Christ, a Temple built of living stones, the flock of God. We also need images when we speak of the priesthood.

In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope John Paul II refers to priests as shepherds, in Latin *pastores*. The Pope uses this image from the very beginning in the exhortation's introductory paragraphs and he returns to it repeatedly throughout the exhortation. Priests are shepherds of the flock of God.

The Church has always turned to images to express the mystery of the priesthood. In times of rapid change in the world — change that profoundly influences the life of the Church — the tendency is to look for new images. Today, it is common to think of the priest as a president. The priest, who presides at Eucharist and parish council meetings, is the president of the parish. Some think of the priest as an orchestra leader or the director of a theater.

Like all images, those for the priesthood are very powerful. Besides shaping a priest's identity, they channel people's thinking and expectations regarding the priest. Indirectly, they also influence the way all people in the Church think about themselves.

Those who think of the priest as a presider do not view themselves in the same way as those who see the priest as a mediator. Because of their power and influence, images for the priesthood must not be taken for granted. They must be selected very carefully and reflected upon.

Not every image for the priesthood is adequate. A bad image can do a lot of harm. Poor images might well be contributing to the identity crisis and loss of morale that is so often mentioned among priests today.

It often happens that the best image is a very traditional one which needs to be examined afresh. Referring to priests, as well as bishops, as shepherds, Pope John Paul II used a very old image with an extremely rich background in the Old and New Testaments.

The opening line of *Pastores Dabo Vobis* comes from Jeremiah 3:15, "I will give you shepherds after my own heart," hence a title, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, "I Will Give You Shepherds."

The Holy Father then provides a brief biblical theology concerning the priest as shepherd of the flock. In the words of Jeremiah, we have God's promise: "I will set shepherds over them (my sheep) who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed" (Jer 23:4). The people of God would never be "without shepherds to gather them together and guide them."

The definitive fulfillment of God's promise is Jesus Christ: "I am the good shepherd" (Jn 10:11). As "the great shepherd of the sheep" (Heb 13:20), Jesus "entrusted to the apostles and their successors the ministry of shepherding God's flock" (see Jn 21:15ff; 1 Pt 5:2).

The priesthood has always been closely tied to the biblical images of shepherd and flock. The Latin word, *pastor*, which means "shepherd," long ago gave us the English word "pastor," a term applied to priests in relation to the parish or congregation which they serve, to bishops in relation to their diocese, and to the Pope himself, the shepherd of the universal Church.

The word "pastor" is closely related to the term "congregation," which is derived from two Latin words, *grex*, meaning "flock," and *cum*, meaning "with" or "together." A congregation is consequently a flock gathered together, and its leader is a pastor or shepherd.

The Shepherd Image

The image of shepherd evokes a pastoral setting. Even today, in the Holy Land, one often comes upon a shepherd leading his flock to pasture or standing watchfully among sheep grazing on a quiet hillside. It is also possible to come upon a sheepfold, a rough, rock enclosure, usually in a barren wilderness, and a shepherd standing guard by the entrance.

The image of such a shepherd is a very powerful one. It fills the imagination, and it evokes many biblical passages. For most, these passages include Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd," and John's Gospel with its image of Jesus as the good shepherd, who knows his sheep by name and calls out to them, who is the gate for the sheep and lays down his life for them (see Jn 10:1-18).

Our images of shepherd and flock, whether taken from the Scriptures or directly from life experience, call to mind a particular flock grazing in a particular place, and a shepherd whose concern is for that particular flock, and no other.

Each flock has its own shepherd, whose role depends on the needs of the flock for which he is responsible and the circumstances in which it lives. Those needs vary according to the time of year and geographical location. In spring, following the winter rains, grass is quite plentiful in the mountain country of Judea, and shepherds

can keep their flock together pretty much in one place. But around Easter time at the end of spring, when the dry hot winds known as *khamisin* rise from the eastern desert, the mountains of Judea become extremely dry, and shepherds must lead their flock from place to place in search of a bit of green.

Shepherds as a Christian Image

As an image for Christian shepherds, for the Church's bishops and priests, a shepherd keeping watch over his flock focuses attention on the role and responsibility of the bishop or priest regarding a particular diocese or parish. We think of the bishop, the shepherd, keeping watch and leading the diocesan flock. And we think of the priest as the shepherd of a parish, gathering the flock, nourishing it with the Word of God and the manna of the Eucharist. The image of shepherd is wonderful for describing the priest in terms of his ministry to a particular parish.

The Christian shepherd, however, is a shepherd like no other. And the Christian flock is a flock like no other. In their Christian usage, the images of shepherd and flock are used analogously.

From the very beginning, the Church has used these images very broadly. In the New Testament, Jesus is shepherd, not just for those who already recognize his voice but for the whole human race. As we read in Jesus' famous Good-Shepherd discourse,

"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd" (Jn 10:16). John's Gospel later explains, "Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God" (Jn 11:51-52).

In the New Testament, the image of the flock is used both for the particular flock and for the universal flock of the Church and the people of God. Correspondingly, the image of the shepherd describes his relationship to the universal flock of God as well as to the particular flock to which he ministers. What is true of Christ as shepherd is also true of all those who share in the mission of Christ the Shepherd, including priests, bishops and, of course, the Holy Father.

In this respect, Pope John Paul II has given extraordinary witness to the Pope's universal shepherding role by personally going as a missionary to every part of the world.

With regard to priests, if not to bishops, our image of shepherd may have become too small. In our understanding, it may need to be adjusted and enlarged. The priest is indeed shepherd to a particular flock which defines his ministry. But the priest is also shepherd by reason of his mission to the whole flock of God. ♦

III. MINISTER IN A PARTICULAR CHURCH



Since the Second Vatican Council, there has been a great deal of emphasis on cultural diversity, particular situations and local needs and the importance of taking these into consideration in the Church's ministry. The past few decades have seen the emergence of the particular Church and the realization that the Church is a communion of particular Churches.

In *Redemptoris Missio*, the Holy Father teaches that the objective of the Church's mission *ad gentes* is "to found Christian communities and develop Churches to their full maturity." Such is the goal of missionary activity, "so much so that the mission is not completed until it succeeds in building a new particular Church which functions normally in its local setting" (#48).

For the Church, this has meant a major effort at inculturation. As the Pope wrote in *Redemptoris Missio*: *Through inculturation the Church makes the*

Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community (#52).

Inculturation is very important for the mission of the Church. "Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission" (*Redemptoris Missio* #52).

The Gospel must address vastly different peoples, cultures and situations. For Jesus' message to reach everybody, it must be translated into the many languages of the world and applied to each culture and social setting.



Celebration of the Eucharist, Papua New Guinea

The new emphasis on the particular Church and the need for inculturation has had a major impact on the work of priests in all parts of the world, including the Church in the United States, which includes Catholics of very diverse backgrounds.

It is in this context with emphasis on the particular Church, cultural diversity, and local situations that we have come to think and speak of the priesthood in terms of pastoral ministry.

Other factors, including the involvement of laity in the ministry and ecumenical contacts, have also been influential. In all these developments, as in so many other areas, the New Testament has been an extremely helpful resource.

Ministerial Priesthood as *Diakonia*

The English word ministry corresponds to an important Greek word in the New Testament, *diakonia*, meaning "service" or "ministry." *Diakonia* includes many forms of service, beginning with service at table, including the Eucharistic table, and extending to a wide range of personal and community service in the Christian household. The verb associated with *diakonia* is *diakonein*, meaning "to serve" or "to minister."

The word *diakonia* was used both in the singular and in the plural. In the singular, it referred to ministry in general. In the plural (*diakoniai*) it referred to the various forms of ministries, as when St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "there are different forms of service (*diakonion*) but the same Lord" (1 Cor 12:5). The many forms of service or ministries correspond to the many gifts (*charismata*) of the Spirit and the many workings or works (*energēmata*) of God in the community (see 1 Cor 12:4-6).

The person who provides *diakonia* is called a *diakonos*, the Greek word from which we derive the English word "deacon." Three stages can be distinguished in this term's usage in the New Testament.

In the first few decades of Christianity, *diakonos* referred to anyone, male or female, who exercised *diakonia* or ministry. So it is that Paul referred to Phoebe, "our sister, who is a minister (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae" (Rom 16:1). We recall too that Simon Peter's mother-in-law "ministered" (*diakonein*) to Jesus and the first disciples after Jesus raised her to health (Mk 1:29-31).

Later in the New Testament era, *diakonos* was used in a more limited way to designate someone who held a special position in the Church. At this point, the *diakonos* (minister) was a *presbyteros* (elder or presbyter) who was chosen to be the community's *episkopos* (overseer). This level of development is found in the Acts of the Apostles, where we read of the laying on of hands on seven men selected to serve the community (6:1-7) and where Paul addresses the presbyters (*presbuteroi*) of the church of Ephesus as overseers (*episkopoi*) of the whole flock (20:17, 28).

Still later, with the emergence of distinct orders in the Church, *diakonos* referred to the person we now call a "deacon." A very clear example of this usage can be found in 1 Timothy 3:8-12, where Paul speaks of the qualifications for serving as a deacon.

The terms ministry (*diakonia*), minister (*diakonos*) and to minister (*diakonein*) are always related to a particular local congregation. Ministry has to respond to the needs of a particular congregation. This

realization has done much to revitalize the Church throughout the modern world.

Many Ministries, One Lord

Like all the baptized, the priest shares in the ministerial life of the Church. Pope John Paul II insisted on this aspect of the priesthood in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. God calls priests from "specific human ecclesial contexts which inevitably influence them." This is part of the "human character" of the priest. And it is "to these same contexts the priest is sent for the service of Christ's Gospel" (#5).

Priests have become very much aware of their responsibility to bring the Gospel and do the work of Christ in the diocese to which they belong and in the particular parish where they serve. Some of them minister in downtown urban parishes, others in the suburbs, still others in the inner city. Some minister in small towns, others in a rural environment. Every setting is unique, and each makes special demands on the priest.

It often happens that a parish takes up a priest's entire attention, leaving little time and energy for broader concerns, or even for his own spiritual development. When a local situation takes up a priest's entire life, it cannot help but affect his self-understanding as a priest.

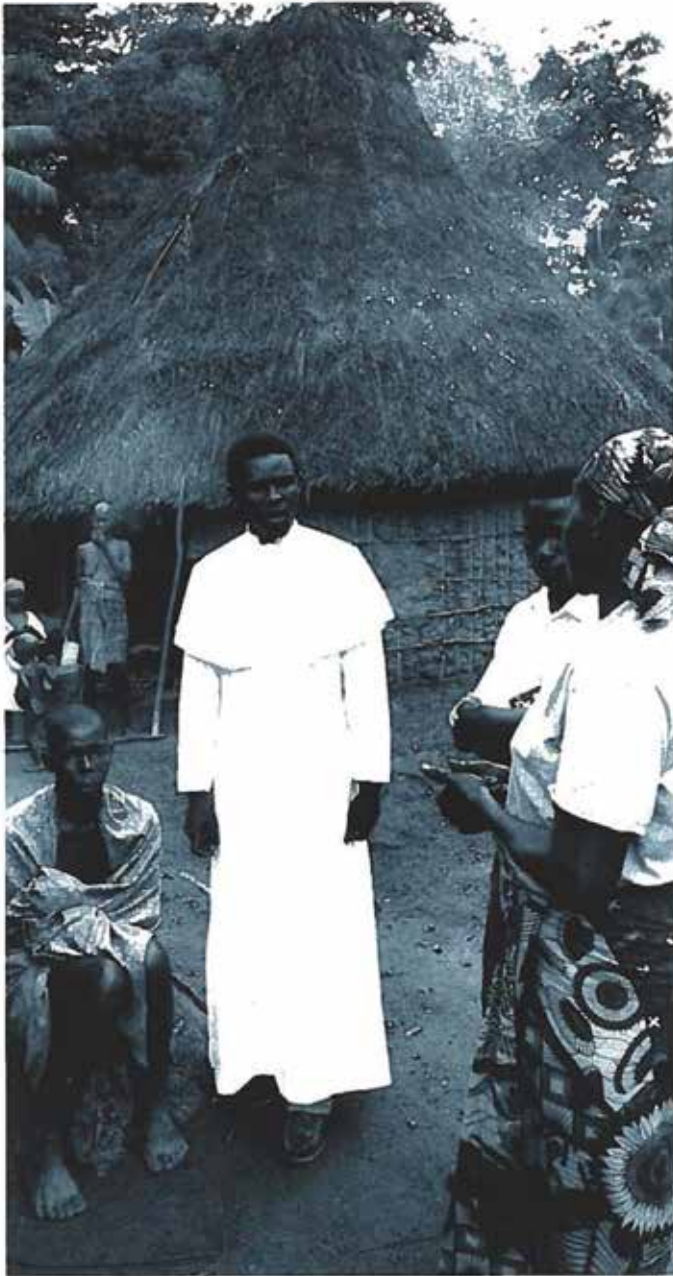
As pastoral ministers, priests must respond to the needs of a particular congre-

gation, and the situation in which they minister necessarily influences how they view themselves. Ministry is a factor in shaping a priest's identity, but it does not provide someone with a priestly identity.

Priests who turn to their ministry for their identity are easily absorbed into the local situation, which can change very rapidly. Local needs are constantly in flux, as emergency after emergency vies for total attention. Someone who views his priesthood primarily in term of ministry easily becomes the hostage of local needs and a victim of constant change.

A priest in that situation easily loses touch with the core of his priestly identity. When this happens, a priest's identity is at the mercy of external circumstances and easily destabilized. Its first symptoms surface in loss of morale, a condition all the more distressing because the reason for it is so difficult to identify.

The reason, however, may not be far to seek. It may be, quite simply, that while focusing on the "many ministries," we have lost sight of their source. All those ministries come from the one Lord. ♦



Local priest in Sierra Leone

IV. MISSIONARY IN A UNIVERSAL CHURCH

It is easy to understand how a pastorally sensitive priest can be absorbed by the needs of the congregation to which he ministers. While responding to people's needs, he may forget that he is sent by Christ for the work of the gospel.

The priest is indeed a minister, but he is also a missionary.

As a minister, the priest responds to the needs of a congregation or parish which is part of a particular Church or diocese. The nature of his ministry is largely determined by those needs, some of which change very quickly.

As a missionary, the priest is sent with the Gospel of salvation "to the ends of the earth." The nature of his mission is determined by Christ the missionary and the Gospel of his life, death and resurrection.

Being a missionary and being a minister are both very important for the priest. But they are not the same. As a minister, the priest sees himself in relation to the people he serves. As a missionary he sees himself in relation to the person of Christ in whose name he serves. Ministry situates a priest vis-a-vis the local Church. Mission situates him vis-a-vis the universal Church.

Mission and ministry complement one another in the life of a priest. Priestly mission needs to be expressed in ministry, and priestly ministry has to flow from mission.

Vatican II kept these two aspects of the priesthood in balance. But that balance has not always been well maintained in popular thinking. It was new to think in terms of ministry. It allowed priests to see themselves as serving in a ministerial Church alongside of those engaged in ministry as lay people. It also allowed priests to situate themselves in ecumenical settings, where the term ministry plays a vital role. Turning toward the new, the tendency has been to turn away from the old. As part of the old, the notion of priestly mission and apostolate was little by little set aside in favor of priestly ministry and service.

The shift from mission to ministry in the life and thinking of priests was very subtle, with many not particularly aware of the change. But the effects of the shift are quite dramatic. Many have come to view the priesthood in merely functional terms instead of personal terms. Priesthood is seen from the point of view of what a priest does, instead of who is a priest. Jesus remains important for understanding priestly ministry but only as a model to be imitated, no longer as the source of a priest's personal identity. It is one thing to have Christ as an exemplar, another thing to be his personal representative.

In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, John Paul II tries to redress this situation and restore the balance between mission and ministry, which the council presented as two complementary aspects of priestly life:

Membership in and dedication to a particular Church does not limit the activity and life of the presbyterate to that Church: A restriction of this sort is not possible, given the very nature of the particular church (see Lumen Gentium #23) and of the priestly ministry (#32).

The Pope then goes on to quote *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the council's Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests:

In this regard the council teaches that "the spiritual gift which priests received at their ordination prepares them not for any limited or narrow mission but for the widest scope of the universal mission of salvation 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). For every priestly ministry shares in the universality of the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles" (#32; see Presbyterorum Ordinis #10).

In solidarity with the bishop, who is ordained not for a particular diocese but for the whole Church, the priest thus shares in the bishop's mission to the whole world and responsibility for the universal Church, together with the Holy Father, the bishop of Rome.

Through the priesthood of the bishop, the priesthood of the second order is incorporated in the apostolic structure of the Church. In this way priests, like the apostles, act as am-

bassadors of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:20). This is the basis of the missionary character of every priest (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, #16).

"It thus follows," says John Paul II, "that the spiritual life of the priest should be profoundly marked by a missionary zeal and dynamism" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis* #32). Such missionary zeal will have a profound impact on the priest's local ministry: "In the exercise of their ministry and the witness of their lives, priests have the duty to form the community entrusted to them as a truly missionary community" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis* #32).

The Pope had already addressed the missionary nature of priesthood in *Redemptoris Missio*, his encyclical on world mission: *All priests must have the mind and heart of missionaries — open to the needs of the church and the world, with concern for those farthest away and especially for the non-Christian groups in their own area. They should have at heart, in their prayers and particularly at the eucharistic sacrifice, the concern of the whole church for all of humanity* (*Pastores Dabo Vobis* #32).

This vision of the priest as a missionary has important implications for the formation of those called to the priesthood. The Pope called attention to these in *Redemptoris Missio* (#67), recalling Vatican II's Decree on Priestly Formation: "For this reason, the formation of candidates to the priesthood

must aim at giving them 'the true catholic spirit, whereby they will learn to transcend the bounds of their own diocese, country or rite, and come to the aid of the whole Church, in readiness to preach the Gospel anywhere' (see *Optatam Totius*, 20)."

Priests with a strong sense of mission rarely experience crises of priestly identity, and their morale remains high in the midst of all kinds of difficulties and even under persecution. Their sense of worth does not depend on popular recognition. Priests who are aware of their call to extend the universal mission of Christ wherever and with whomever they serve know that their life is eminently worthwhile.

Priestly identity does not depend on a priest's pastoral functions and the various human and spiritual needs to which he responds. Priestly identity is inscribed in a priest's very being. The priest bears the person of Christ in his person, speaks the Gospel of Christ with his lips, and proclaims the sacrifice of Christ sacramentally reconciling all peoples to God the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such is the mission of the priest in a universal Church, whose mission is "to the ends of the earth." ♦

CONCLUSION



A priest is ordained for the mission of Christ and his Church. All priests are missionaries. As Pope John Paul II indicated, "All priests must have the mind and heart of missionaries."

The purpose of these reflections was to call attention to the missionary aspect of the priesthood in the hope of contributing to a stronger sense of priestly identity.

In recent years, especially since Vatican II, we have emphasized the ministerial aspect of the priesthood, and this has been an extraordinary blessing for the Church in a great many ways. It can become an even greater blessing with a strengthening of the missionary aspect of the priesthood.

The Church needs priests who see themselves as sharing in the great priestly mission of Christ, priests whose ministry flows from a strong sense of mission.

Pope John Paul II called our attention to this in his apostolic exhortation "On the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day," *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. In the exhortation, he recalled what he said about the priest as a missionary in his encyclical "On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate," *Redemptoris Missio*.

These reflections have drawn on the Pope's teaching, convinced that we need to emphasize the missionary aspect of the priesthood for a more fruitful exercise of priestly ministry. Priests have a vital role in the Church's mission "to the ends of the

earth." It is in view of that mission, that they exercise their ministry in a particular Church.

As a missionary, the priest continues the mission of Christ the

Shepherd, tending and feeding the flock and working as he did that all may one day belong to one fold.

A priest's commitment to the universal mission of Christ and his Church both strengthens and enriches his ministry to a particular Church. It also strengthens and enriches his own identity as a priest. ❖



Local priest in Africa hears confession