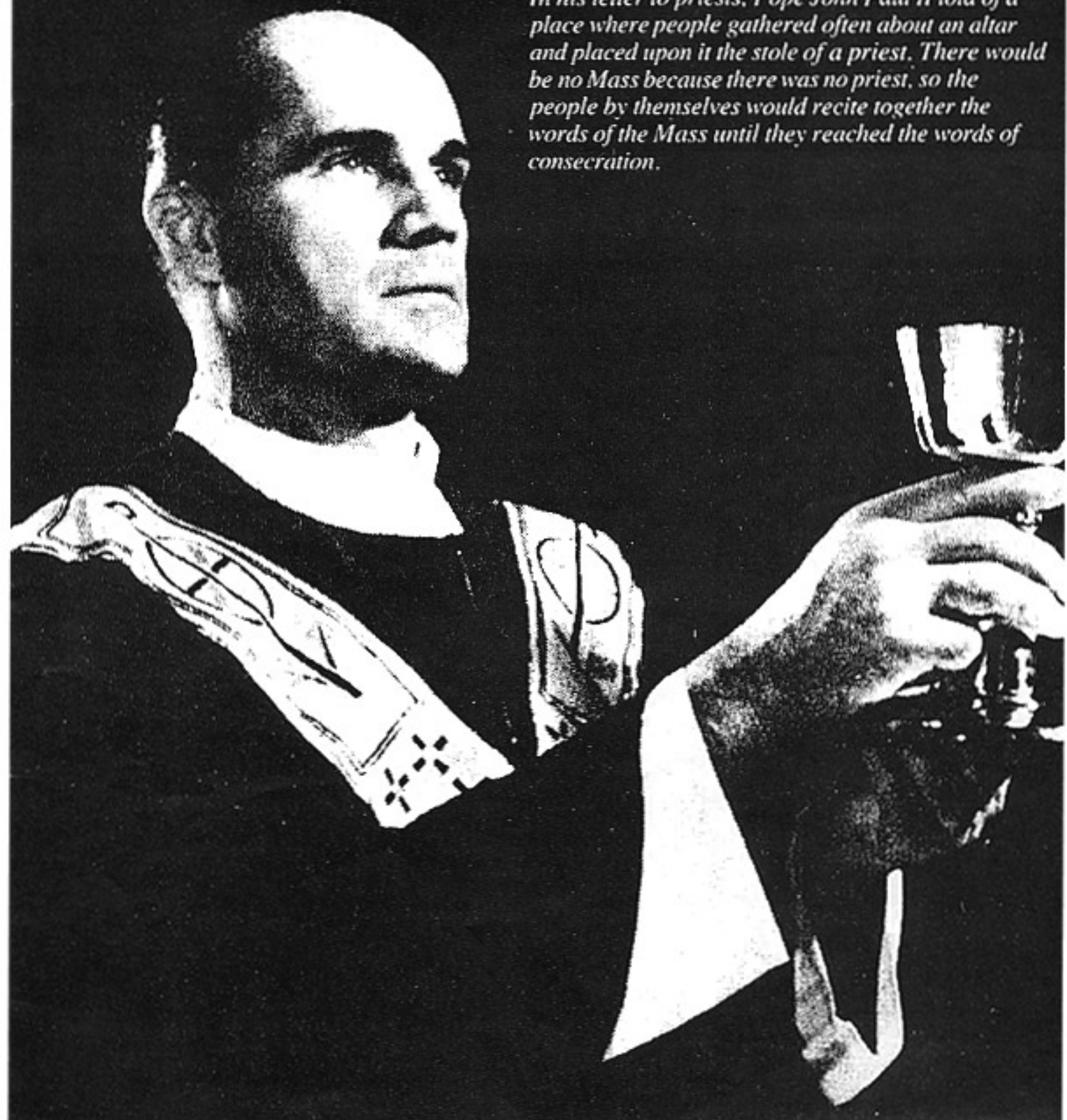


THE CATHOLIC PRIEST: A MAN SET APART

By Fr. Franklyn McAfee

In his letter to priests, Pope John Paul II told of a place where people gathered often about an altar and placed upon it the stole of a priest. There would be no Mass because there was no priest, so the people by themselves would recite together the words of the Mass until they reached the words of consecration.



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Then they paused in a long silence broken only by sobbing from the priestless congregation. What they would give to have a priest with them! They would not care if he were young or old, liberal or conservative, a brilliant or boring speaker, and they would not be concerned if he were able to keep down the parish debt or worked effectively with a parish council. They wanted the hands, the heart, the mind of a priest of Jesus Christ. These laypeople knew what too many (including priests) have forgotten: that at Mass "the ineffable greatness of the human priest stands out in all its splendor" (Pius XI).

Attempts to Diminish the Role of the Priest

Yet, in recent years, the priest has been seen by the reformers as a combination of a Protestant minister and social worker. A religious order of priests ran an ad recently in some national newspapers listing the work that could be done by

someone aspiring to priesthood in their congregation. One function was that you could help someone learn to type! All the examples that were given could have been done by a layman. Not once were the sacraments mentioned, nor prayer.

A priest is supposed to be a mediator between God and man. "Once the sacrificial, penitential and mortified side of the vocation is lost, then the priesthood reduces itself exclusively to social welfare," observed Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. And our Holy Father agrees as he urges priests to involve themselves with their people—"but always as a priest."

And then there are those who stress that the priest's role at Mass is merely as presider, there at the altar by the whim of the congregation. Although they might also say that he presides as the representative of Christ, it would be a representation not radically different from those assembled in the pews. This view is born from the wedding of

two false ideas, that the Mass is not a sacrifice, and that priestly ordination is merely an official delegation by the bishop and the community to do in the name of all what could be done by all. It coincides with the trend to blur or eradicate the essential distinction between the priesthood of the laity and

the ordained priesthood. Some theologians even go so far as to deny that Jesus Christ directly instituted the priesthood at the Last Supper.

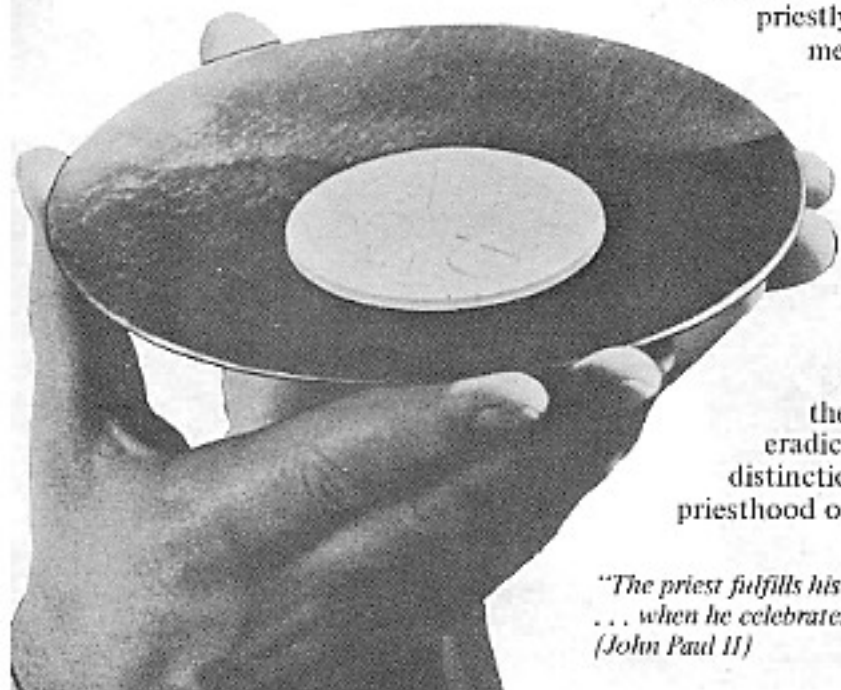
By Whose Authority?

"The Eucharist is the principal and central *raison d'être* of the sacrament of the priesthood which effectively came into being at the moment of the institution of the Eucharist. . . ." With these words, Pope John Paul II reaffirmed the dogmatic definition of the Council of Trent (and refers his readers to it) which leaves no doubt as to the Church's official teaching on the matter. And it was at the precise moment that the Eucharist came into being—"Do this in memory of Me"—that the priest received his authority.

The authority the priest exercises in the community comes from his authority over the Eucharistic Body of Christ upon the altar. When he exercises any priestly role, but especially when he celebrates the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, he is acting, not on the authority of the congregation but as a delegate of God. It is only from Christ that the priest draws his authority.

"In Persona Christi"

Although attempts to eradicate the distinction between the priesthood of the laity and the ordained priesthood are done in the name of the Council, the Council reaffirmed the fundamental difference between the priest and the laity. The Holy Father also states, ". . . the priest celebrant who, by confecting the Holy Sacrifice and by acting *in persona Christi* is sacramentally (and ineffably) brought into that most profound sacredness and made part of it. . . . This means more than of-



"The priest fulfills his principal mission . . . when he celebrates the Eucharist."
(John Paul II)

fering 'in the name of' or 'in the place of Christ'. *In persona* means specific sacramental identification with the 'Eternal High Priest'."

His Principal Mission

The priest revolutionary? The priest lobbyist? The priest facilitator? The priest typing teacher? The Pope says, "The priest fulfills his principal mission and is manifested in all his fullness when he celebrates the Eucharist." The Pope was echoing the teaching of Vatican II: "Priests fulfill their chief duty in the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice."

Thus it is the Mass that is the locus of priestly identity. It is the Mass that is the heart of the priesthood. What priest could be confused as to his role who would ponder the traditional doctrine proclaimed refreshingly new by this great Pontiff? He repeats again to a cynical and secularized world what St. Augustine said centuries before, "O truly we must venerate the dignity of priests in whose hands the Son of God is incarnated as in the womb of the Virgin."

"Maximum miraculum Christi"

The author of the *Imitation of Christ* wrote: "When the priest celebrates he honors God, he rejoices the angels, he edifies the Church, he helps the living, he obtains repose for the dead." What a mission to have in life, what an adventure to undertake! And it belongs entirely to the priests of Jesus Christ. So tremendous is the offering of Mass, that if a priest should die after celebrating one Mass his life would be complete for there would remain nothing in this world he could further do which would surpass the one precious Calvary hour. His parents could rejoice that their selfless love and many years of

growth and prayer had produced such great fruit; their own flesh and blood standing at the altar in the very person of Christ and bringing upon that altar the sacred flesh and blood of Christ the Son of Mary. One can certainly see why St. Thomas Aquinas referred to the Holy Mass as "*maximum miraculum Christi*"—"the greatest of all Christ's miracles."

It was the vision of celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass that drew many young boys in the past to seek the priesthood. I know that it was the primary reason that I became interested in being a priest. Some may dream of finding a cure for cancer, or being elected President, or becoming an astronaut, or the president of a large corporation, and these aspirations are good and exciting. But nothing can compare to the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, an event whose worth is so singular and incomprehensible that St. John Eudes was moved to say, "To celebrate Holy Mass properly, three eternities would be necessary: one to prepare, one to celebrate, one to give thanks." The *Imitation of Christ* says: "Oh, how great and honorable is the office of priests, to whom it is given to consecrate with sacred words the Lord of majesty: to bless Him with their lips, to hold Him with their hands, to receive Him with their mouths, and to administer Him to others."

Edify or Scandalize

In speaking of the manner in which the Holy Eucharist is celebrated, the Holy Father said, "... this manifestation is more complete when he [the priest] himself allows the depth of that mystery to become visible, so that it alone shines forth in people's hearts."

When the priest celebrates Holy Mass he can by his conduct either edify the people and deepen the depth of the love of the Eucharistic mystery within them or he can disturb their faith, play havoc with their spiritual sensitivities and diminish the love of the Eucharist. The Pope urges his priests to pray the words of the Consecration with "humility and simplicity, in a worthy and fitting way in keeping with their holiness." And these words which are "the essential act of the Eucharistic liturgy" are to be performed "unhurriedly" so as to manifest "the greatness of this mystery." St. John Vianney said: "How much to be pitied is the priest who says Mass with no greater care than he shows in performing any ordinary action." How tragic it is to see a priest celebrate the Mass with distraction or in a rush, or even worse, to break a rubric or even to refuse to genuflect before the body and blood of his Lord!

If the priest has forgotten the Mass or forgets what the Mass truly is, he will soon forget who he is. I remember a few years back attending a Mass celebrated by a very holy priest who it was said could actually see Christ at the consecration. When the priest reached the words of consecration, and elevated the host his face actually lit up and a joyous smile came over his countenance as he stood motionless gazing at the Victim he held in his unworthy hands. "There is no greater act than the consecration of the body and blood of Jesus Christ," St. Thomas Aquinas said.

As the priest raises up the sacred Host and precious chalice of blood for the adoration of the people he becomes greater than Hercules lifting up far more than a universe with his mortal arms. □

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