

Inspired by New Testament Priesthood

Martin Harun

New Testament, STF Driyarkara, Jakarta, Indonesia

marharun@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper gives a detailed exegetical study of priesthood in the New Testament as gleaned from the Letter to the Hebrews, Paul's authentic letters, the Letters of later Pauline Communities, and the pastoral letters of Peter and Titus, with reference to the Gospels of Mathew and John as well as Revelation. Clearly for the New Testament writers, priesthood is not a cultic affair, but rather the living out of Christ's one and only self-sacrifice for others. The author then contrasts the way in which ministries administered by a variety of people in the New Testament came to be accumulated in the ordained priesthood of the contemporary Catholic Church. Priests can actualise the priesthood as co-workers in a communion, realising their ministry in collaboration, both among themselves (ministerial priesthood), and with the laity (common priesthood), all contributing their specific gifts to the Body of Christ. And so Christ can be fully present and active in church and society. He concludes by noting that this vision is not far from the transforming vision of a community church as has been propagated by the Lumko Pastoral Institute.

Keywords: New Testament; ministerial priesthood; common priesthood; elders; service; sacrifice; Vatican II



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Introduction

With many uncertainties around the notion of priesthood in the New Testament, one thing is absolutely certain: the New Testament does not mention any ordained priest as we know them in the church today. I am not sure whether the Curia of the Archdiocese of Jakarta was aware of this total absence when some eight years ago at the opening of the *Year for Priests* (2009–2010) they asked me for a conference for their clergy on the priest in the New Testament. The term priest (ἱερεὺς, *hiereus*, *sacerdos*) in the New Testament almost always refers to Jewish priests who are strongly opposed to Jesus and the apostles, and only occasionally still needed for certain Jewish rites. (Ac 21:26; cf. Lk 5:14, 17:14). Jesus himself is never called a priest, except in one later writing, the *Letter to the Hebrews*. And the terms priest and priesthood are used a few times for the entire Christian community (1P 2:5,9; Rv 1:6, 5:10, 20:6). Seen from a New Testament perspective, the ordained clergy does not have firstborn rights in the church.

We first note the predicate ἱερεὺς (*hiereus*) for a bishop at the end of the second century, in the *Fragments of Polycrates*.¹ This sacerdotal term became prevalent for all presbyters only in the following centuries, probably under the influence of Origen who frequently used the Old Testament term *hiereus* for the bishop and presbyters (Osborne 2003, 112–114).² The notion of *sacerdotes*, ordained for sacramental service, will become ever stronger in the medieval church and was endorsed by the Council of Trent in opposition to the Reformation which rejected the concept of *sacerdos* for ministers in the church. It is only at Vatican II that this dominant concept of cultic priesthood was balanced by linking priestly ministry to the three tasks of Christ as Prophet, Shepherd-King, and Priest (PO 1 and 4–6).

The New Testament is not a sufficient source at all for seeking clarification about ministerial priesthood and its role in the present church, since it has been developed to a large extent in the course of the earlier, and even later history of the Early Church Era. The priesthood we inherit from this long history seems to have become problematic to many in modern society.

1 “I speak of John, moreover, who reclined on the Lord’s bosom, and who became a priest (ἱερεὺς) wearing the mitre, and a witness and a teacher. He rests at Ephesus.” *Fragments of Polycrates*, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/polycrates.html>.

2 Osborne refers to the letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians 40, 5 where the *episkopoi* and *presbuteroi* are suggested to be sacerdotal figures. In the context of their still limited liturgical ministry, Clement refers to the functions assigned to the Jewish highpriest (ἀρχιερεὶς *archierei*), priests (ἱερεῖς *hiereusin*), and Levites, however without creating an overt analogy or parallelism to the Christian overseers, presbyters, and deacons (Osborne 2003, 95–96).

In the world of modern media, it has increasingly lost its prestige and aureole, and so its influence. Young people become less attracted to opt for the priesthood, so much so that Pope Benedict felt the need to call for a year for priests, directly after the jubilee year to the apostle Paul. In the Bible we will find no specific solutions to present problems of priesthood, but—more importantly—we do come across basic inspirational patterns that are essential to any pursuit for renewal of ministerial priesthood in church and society ahead.

Inspired Although Absent

In the *Letter to the Hebrews* the Greek terms ἱερεὺς (*hiereus*, Vulg.: *sacerdos*) and ἀρχιερεὺς (*archiereus*; Vulg.: *pontifex*) are used 31 times, but never for an ordained Christian minister. The term always appears in texts comparing the Levitical High Priest (ἀρχιερεὺς, *archiereus*) with Jesus, the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5:6,10, 6:20, 7:11,17), who like Melchizedek, was not from a priestly family. Even though our ordained priest is absent from *Hebrews*, theological reflection about priesthood usually starts from this Letter.

Hebrews' comparison, or better contrast, of the Levitical High Priest to Jesus as a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek is no easy reading for us. We are unfamiliar with Israel's worship, especially one of its most important rituals, the sacrifices offered annually by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) when he enters twice the Holy of Holies to offer the blood of animals, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people.

Hebrews contrasts the annual offering of animal blood by the Jewish High Priest in the inner room of the temple with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Christ's sacrifice is presented as more perfect in every respect. He did not just enter the most holy place of the temple made by human hands but entered into heaven, into the presence of God on our behalf, taking his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty. He did not enter with the blood of goats and calves but in obedience presented his own blood. He did not enter twice but only once since he himself is without blemish and sin. His offering is once and forever, without any need to be repeated from year to year. He gained direct access to God not only for himself, while the people remained outside like in Israel's temple worship, but gained access to God for the people as well. As mediator between the people and God he succeeded in attaining fully the goal that could never be completed in the annual temple offerings.

What insight and inspiration can ordained ministers, who are absent from the whole scene in *Hebrews*, gain from this representation of Christ as the kingly High Priest offering himself once and forever while leading the people to God?

Christ's Priesthood is not a Cultic One

It is important to note that *Hebrews* does not compare two rituals, but contrasts a Jewish cultic ritual with Jesus' existential offering of himself, his self-giving that was already manifest throughout his ministry and culminates in giving up his life on the cross. Christ's sacrifice is not a rite. He provides his own life as a perfect offering: "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (Heb 5:7–8). What gives Jesus access to God on our behalf, is the real gift of himself. Even though its uniqueness is explained in comparison to the temple cult, it is not a cultic ritual but acted out in his real life and death.

Priesthood of the People

Albert Vanhoye, a foremost interpreter of *Hebrews*, notices that in this letter the members of the congregation are said to be "participants of Christ" (μέτοχοι τοῦ Χριστοῦ *metochoi tou Christou*, 3:14), i.e. of Christ who in the close context has been presented as a priest (Heb 3:1; see also 2:17; Vanhoye 1977, 158–9). This participation in Christ's priesthood is confirmed in 10:14, "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." The Greek verb τελειόω, (*teleioō*) which can be translated with "(make) perfect", has been repeatedly used for the transformation of Christ into becoming a priest through his suffering (Heb 2:10, 5:8–10, 7:28). Such a transformation occurs also in the people, as can be seen from its expected result: they all "have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus" (Heb 10:19), an access that until then had been reserved for priests only. This privilege of the people to come to God is revealed by referring to them as "those who come to God" (Heb 7:25), like the priests of Israel, but now it is for *all* through the intercession of the living Christ (Scholer 1991, 119–24). Without using the term "priest", but by using various expressions pertaining to priesthood, the congregation is presented as having been given a share in Christ's priesthood.

This is also evident from their offerings. Having reminded the reader that Christ came to do the will of God (Heb 10:7–9) by presenting his own body (Heb 10:10), the letter invites people to do God’s will as well (Heb 10:36, 13:21). Christ’s obedience in accepting death is an act of solidarity with humanity. Therefore the offerings of Christians should also be acts of solidarity: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (Heb 13:16). This invitation is reminiscent of some cultic metaphors in Paul’s invitation to the Romans (Rm 12:1): “... to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” The use of priestly language in Hebrews and Romans shows an awareness of the common priesthood. This priesthood of the community is clearly not a cultic but real-life priesthood. From this point of view Vanhoye values the common priesthood as more “real” than the sacramental mediation of ordained priesthood, merely being a sign and instrument of Christ’s mediation between God and human beings (Vanhoye 1977, 160–1).

The concept of common priesthood is found explicitly in the book of *Revelation* and *1 Peter*. In Rv. 1:6, 5:10, and 20:6, the perception of the priesthood of all Christians is rooted in Ex 19:6: “And you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The common priesthood in *Revelation* is related directly to the blood of Christ who has redeemed or purified the saints; and in the broader context to the blood shed by the saints themselves (Rev 6:10, 16:6, 17:6, 18:24). In 1P 2:5,9, which is also derived from the Ex 19:6 (but the Septuagint version, “You shall be to me a royal priesthood and a holy nation”), the spiritual offering of the members of the community is related to their willingness to be used as living stones for the construction of a spiritual house. Their readiness is directly linked to the sacrifice of Jesus who has been rejected by human beings but chosen by God (Ex 2:4). So here the actual priesthood of Christ is reflected in an actual priesthood of all Christians who are expected to come to God while offering their lives.

This common priesthood of the people of God is overtly present in the New Testament, and should inspire the church, and especially its ordained priests who come centuries later, to give more attention, appreciation and place to the common priesthood, after having been neglected for such a long time. Vatican II has lifted the common priesthood to the surface again (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 2); but has it become a real concern of the local churches since the Council? As a people, we take part in Christ’s priesthood. The present moment of missionary

reorientation of a church “going forth” as has been provoked by Pope Francis’s Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* which is about the entire people of God proclaiming the Gospel (111–134) and about the social dimensions of evangelisation (176–258), should become the occasion for ordained priests to learn from the common priesthood, and to be taught by the faithful about the real meaning of Christ’s priesthood, which priests make present in sacraments. All hierarchical feelings of superiority should make place for putting first what came first: being at the service of the common priesthood.

Ministerial Priesthood

Our High Priest’s entering into the Holy Place, offering his own blood on behalf of the people, is rooted in older New Testament traditions (Soares-Prabu 1992, 71–72; Pathrapankal 2010, 278–279), in the words of the new covenant associated with the bread and the cup at the Last Supper and in Jesus’ interpretation of his atoning mission as ransom for many and his death for the forgiveness of sin (Mt 20:28, 26:28). No wonder the High Priest’s offer of his own life in *Hebrews* has been associated more and more with the rite of the Lord’s Supper, and that as a result ministers presiding over the Lord’s Supper during the subsequent centuries began to be called *priests*, *sacerdotes*, first bishops, and since the late fourth century also all the clergy (Mattam 2009, 208–209). But in what sense? The implications of *Hebrews* are that Christ’s perfect offer had achieved its goal once and for all, and therefore no other offerings or priests were needed anymore. So the “priest” conducting the Eucharistic sacrifice, cannot be a priest in his own right, in the sense of an intermediary between humans and God. That role has been thoroughly fulfilled by Christ. These ministers can be called priests only in the derivative sense of a ministry that makes Christ’s priesthood present and functioning among his people.

If that is the priest’s role, then the ministerial priest should not be put on such a high pedestal, as still happens among the faithful in non-secular societies. What aureole still surrounds a new priest on the day of his ordination and the endless cycle of first masses! Is he not put on the wrong foot from the very beginning? Even though communities continually complain over the ill-prepared sermons and authoritarian leadership of many priests, they are still held in very high esteem for no other reason than that they are cultic performers with the unique power of administering the sacraments. But do they really make Christ’s work present if it is not also observable from the manner they carry out their pastoral and preaching ministry?

The Eucharist as the Climax of Christian Life?

The contrast between the Jewish ritual sacrifices in the temple and the existential gift of Christ in *Hebrews* implies that “only cult” has no place in Christian life, even if it concerns the Eucharist. In the Eucharist the priest actualises Christ’s self-offering in real life and death in order to restore the covenant relationship between God and his people. This relationship (new covenant) is only made manifest to the people, if through the Eucharist, they are led to a real offering of themselves as well. In *Hebrews*, the congregation has been involved in the real act of the High Priest’s offering of his own blood. They are reminded “to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (Heb 13:16). If the Eucharist leads the faithful to real self-giving in family, society, and community life, we can speak of Christian life reaching its culmination, because the restoration of God’s relationship with humanity is being manifest. On the contrary, a Eucharist which is celebrated beautifully, solemnly, and full of peace with the Lord, but does not lead to real change in community life, should not be called the culmination of church life. It is simply part and parcel of the ritual and cult rejected in *Hebrews* because it does not actualise Christ’s real life sacrifice.

This has been stated by Paul in 1Co 11. When the Corinthians came together for the Lord’s Supper, they were divided: “... each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk” (1Co 11:21). Paul bluntly tells them: “When you come together, it is *not* the Lord’s Supper you eat.” To explain his point, he passed on to them the tradition of the Lord’s Supper. The tradition depicts the act of Jesus who took and broke bread and distributed the cup on the night He was handed over, and he presents the words that Jesus spoke over the bread and the cup. Both words refer to his surrender on the day ahead for the sake of the disciples; for the sake of restoring their relationship with God. Both words end with “Do this in remembrance of me” (1Co 11:24–25). “Do this ...” is sometimes understood as a command to *celebrate* the Eucharist. A former Indonesian edition of the Eucharistic prayers “hoc facite in meam commemorationem” was translated as: “Remember Me by *celebrating* this event.”³ “Do this” was misunderstood as “celebrate this.” If that had been its purpose, Paul should not have been angry with the Corinthians because celebrating they were! But they did not *do* it, did not practise it, and thus did not have the Lord’s Supper (1Co 11:17–22).

3 “Kenangkan Aku dengan merayakan peristiwa ini.” *Tata Perayaan Ekaristi*, ed. PWI-Liturgi, Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1979, 137.

That standard applies to the community, above all to the priest who serves the Lord's Supper. Of course, the church has secured the validity of the sacraments for the people even when "just celebrated" by priests who do not practise them. If the priest celebrates the Eucharist in disparity to its purpose (instead of giving himself, just enjoying his honourable position or gaining his stipendium, etc.), that Eucharist is still the Lord's sacrifice and supper for the people. But also for the priest?

To answer this critical question, we should also remember what Francis Moloney expressed in the title of his book *A Body Broken for a Broken People* (cf. Moloney 1989, 151–74; Moloney 2004, 14). In the Gospels, the Lord held his supper with disciples who were not yet prepared to lay down their lives with Him. One of them betrayed him, the others left him, and one again three times denied he ever knew him. By sharing his broken body and the blood of the covenant with them, Jesus went on to empower his disciples so that they might become able to offer their lives just as he did. Except for the one who betrayed Jesus and became hopeless, the other disciples were finally empowered by the Lord's Supper.

Inspired by Elders (πρεσβύτεροι)

In the Bible the term *priest* translates the Hebrew קֹהֵן (*kohen*). Greek ἱερεὺς (*hiereus*), Latin *sacerdos*. But etymologically our term *priest*, *priester*, *prêtre* comes from another biblical term: πρεσβύτερος (*presbuteros*, Lat. *presbyter*), translating the Hebrew term זָקֵן (*zaqen*), "elder". This origin of the term tells us that the function of a priest has absorbed more than just the sacerdotal aspect; and invites us to trace the elders in the New Testament (Häring 1996, 63–65). They appear on many pages of the New Testament, first of all as Jewish elders opposed to Jesus and the apostles, especially in Jerusalem; but in *Acts*, and in some later letters, as groups of Christians functioning as "ministers" in Christian congregations. More attention should be given to them since Vatican II freed the priesthood from its hieratic one-sidedness and related it also to Christ's role as Shepherd-King. Shepherding duties of the present priesthood are partly inherited from these Christian elders in the New Testament.

A Council of Elders

When the new Antioch community was able to send aid to the poor in Jerusalem through the hands of Barnabas and Paul, they did not put it at the apostles' feet (cf. Ac 4:35,37) nor hand it over to deacons appointed to wait on tables (cf. Ac 6:2–6), but to *elders* (Ac 11:30). In

addition to the group of apostles and deacons in the Jerusalem community, another group appears there, the πρεσβύτεροι (*presbuteroi*).

When disagreement arose in Antioch on the necessity of circumcision and the Torah for the salvation of Gentile Christians, Paul and Barnabas were sent to discuss the matter with the apostles *and elders* in Jerusalem (Ac 15:2,4). In the story of the Jerusalem meeting, elders are involved at all stages of the discussion and decision making (Ac 15:6, 22–23, 16:4). The elder James, the brother of Jesus, appears to have acted as chairperson of the meeting (Ac 15:13–29, Ga 2:9). The same is apparent when Paul visits Jerusalem the final time. “Paul went with us to visit James; and all the elders were present” (Ac 21:18). The Jerusalem congregation at an early stage developed some kind of a council of elders headed by James, who at an even earlier stage appears to be the leader of the local congregation (Ac 12:17).

Regarding our hope for collegiality in church stewardship, it is interesting to note that the presbyters in the Christian congregation emerge as a group, always plural. At a certain stage, New Testament congregations continued a leadership form known in Jewish societies of the time. In Palestine and possibly also abroad, Jewish societies had leadership councils consisting of elders (passim in the Old Testament, also in late Deutero-canonical books). The term elders, זקנים (*z^aqenim*), πρεσβύτεροι (*presbuteroi*), refers to a group of citizens who have a certain standing in local Jewish society, either as head of an extended family, or because of seniority, or because of their experience. The *Vulgate* translates πρεσβύτεροι with *presbyteri* but often also with *seniores* (1Es 6:5; Ezr 6:7; Jdt 6:16; 1Ma 12:35; 2Ma 13:13, a.o.) and sometimes *maiores natu* (1Ch 15:25, 21:16; 2Ch 5:2; Act 20:17, 22:5). Whether such a council of elders was responsible also for overseeing a Jewish synagogue congregation, is now a matter of dispute, because of lack of evidence.⁴ At national level, the elders were part of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish “National” Council in Jerusalem (Mt 26:47,57).

Where first century Christian missionaries attracted a sufficient number of believers to form a local community, they certainly could not continue their journey while leaving the new congregation without any members responsible. Although Paul’s original letters never mention elders, his lists of charismas, and the many names at the conclusion of his letters, show that

4 See Judith M. Lieu’s review of Alistair C. Stewart, *The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014). *RBL* 08/2015.

some members took on certain responsibilities. In later letters from the Pauline churches the elders play an important role (1Tm 4:14, 5:17; Tt 1:5), as is clear also from Luke's later story about Paul and Barnabas on their way back from their first Asian mission, appointing elders in each church: "And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe" (Ac 14:23). This presentation by Luke may reflect later development in the Pauline churches.

Presbyters, Overseers, Shepherds

Returning from his third mission journey in Asia and Greece, in Miletus Paul "sent a message to Ephesus, asking the *elders* of the church to meet him" (Ac 20:17). From the story of this meeting it is obvious that at that time (and several decades later when Luke wrote the story) there was not a clear definition as yet, nor a hierarchical arrangement of functions in the congregation. In Paul's discourse to the Ephesian *elders*, Luke has Paul saying: "... the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*, to *shepherd* the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son" (Ac 20:28). Here the designations of elders (πρεσβύτεροι *presbuteroi*, from which our term *priest*), overseers (ἐπισκόποι *episkopoi*, from which our term *bishop*), and shepherds (ποιμένες *poimenes*, *pastores*) are still synonymous terms for a group of members responsible in the church. It is worth noting that this church is called the congregation of God that he has acquired with the blood of his own Son. It does not belong to any elder, overseer, or shepherd.

Some of these synonymous terms are found also in the renowned advice in *1Peter* (which is probably contemporaneous with the *Acts of the Apostles*): "Now as an *elder* myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the *elders* among you to *tend the flock* of God that is in your charge, exercising the *oversight*, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock" (1P 5:1–3). We wonder what kind of felt pressure, greediness, and dictatorial power had already emerged in the administration of the churches towards the end of the first century, so that the letter of Peter had to advise them with such forceful words? The letter does not only remind them that the feature of their task is to be pastoral and exemplary, showing readiness and willingness to fulfil it, but also feels the need of picturing the apostle Peter as an exemplary

elder and shepherd, and remind them of the suffering and the glory of Christ, who in the next verse will be introduced as their Chief Shepherd (1P 5:4).

In that same period towards the end of the first century, John 10 presents Jesus also as a shepherd, the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. After the initial period of missionary growth of the early communities, the church has turned to a new period requiring a pastoral approach to the churches that had been growing in numbers. In this later period Jesus was more and more pictured as a shepherd, a model for those responsible for shepherding the churches. New times with new requirements ask for new models. In the *Gospel of John*, the profile of the apostle Peter has also been remodelled into a shepherd: “Feed my lambs” (Jn 21:15–17).

The Pastoral Letters

Tracking down the group of πρεσβύτεροι (*presbuteroi*) and ἐπισκόποι (*epikopoi*), we are eventually led to the *Letters of Timothy* and *Titus*. These pastoral letters give us a more complete profile of them (Tt 1:5–9; 1Tm 3:2–7), and in addition to the διάκονοι (*diakonoι*, 1Tm 3:12–13; Tt 8:13). In drawing their profile, the letters direct attention first to their life style, especially the family life of those serving the Lord’s family. A person who wants to administer a church, must first be able to manage his own household; being a husband of one wife; able to educate his children so that he will be respected and obeyed by them. If we find that these details are obsolete for today’s celibate priests, we can only hope that the following has also become obsolete: “... not a drunkard, not quarrelsome, not mercenary ...” (Tt 1:7). Could not these profiles be fascinating stuff for meditation and sharing among priests who live in the “family” of a parish, of a community, in the larger “family” of a diocese or congregation, where they are still susceptible to various temptations experienced by early presbyters? These texts could be very substantial stuff for faith sharing in a rectory or religious community.

For ministers who tend to get lost in the hustle and bustle of management and administration, there is another important feature in the profile of the overseers in *1Timothy* “to teach people” (1Tm 3:2). The final point of the elders’ profile in Tt 1:9 is again teaching; suggesting that more attention should be given to sound doctrine to confront those who oppose it. Special appreciation of the activities of the teaching and preaching of presbyters is underlined at the end of *1Timothy*: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour,

especially those who labour in preaching and teaching” (1Tm 5:17). We will return to preaching and teaching in the third part of this article.

All Members Participate in Building up the Body

Considering the attention given to the elders, overseers, and deacons in *Acts* and the pastoral letters, we wonder why some 20 years earlier Paul’s genuine letters did not much talk about them. Only overseers and deacons are once mentioned (Phm 1:1). The house churches of Paul’s mission were clearly not left without some people responsible, as is clear from Philemon 1–2, and from greetings for many co-workers at the end of each letter. But Paul’s vision of the church is its being Christ’s body in which all members help to build up the congregation, each according to his or her gifts (1Co 12; Rm 12; cf. Ep 4). Charismas in Paul’s churches were many and diverse.

However, gifts are not automatically dedicated to the community’s interest. That was one of Paul’s main struggles. Today various charismas come back to the surface with great abundance. If they are ignored by the ministers of the congregation, they may again divide church communities, as once in Corinth. If welcomed and supported, as was done by Paul, service to the community by gifted priests and lay people together will become more vibrant, creative, and fertile, as a number of congregations are experiencing.

The overall impression we get from the New Testament is that the development of flourishing churches in the first century was not the work of impressive single fighters but occurred thanks to the involvement and cooperation of many members, all with their specific gifts and contributions. This is also our pastoral objective today, although not always functioning smoothly everywhere. More attention to the way of administering the churches in the New Testament letters and in *Acts* could consolidate our ministry in a more collaborative direction.

Inspired by Prophetic Missionaries

Pope Francis’s apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* highlighted another aspect of ministry, the missionary and prophetic one. This is an aspect of the priesthood too, related to Jesus as the prophet or messenger of God, which was emphasised by Vatican II as a main feature of Jesus as a model for priests (PO 1). Thus a reflection on priesthood in the light of the

New Testament ought to start from the prophetic mission of Jesus, a mission that can be seen in the oldest traditions of the New Testament (Comblin 1997, 19–25).

Jesus, Model of Missionary Prophetic Preaching

In John's Gospel, Jesus is usually introduced as sent by the Father, doing the work of the Father and speaking the Word of the Father. Thus the prophetic part of Jesus' mission remains visible in this later Gospel, although Jesus in John is much more conceived of as the Son who reveals the Father. The purpose of Jesus' mission has been expressed in the first Johannine letter in this way: "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him" (1Jn 4:9). Jesus was sent to express the Father's love in order to give his disciples faith and true life (Jn 3:16; 20:31).

An earlier portrayal of Jesus' prophetic mission is preserved in the synoptic tradition. Jesus came to proclaim the good news, that the kingdom of God had come near (Mk 1:14–15,38). The coming of the kingdom of God was proclaimed by Jesus with authority, opposing the rule of Satan; and was also shown by acts expressing God's mercy, especially for those who suffered and were marginalised (Osborne 2003, 15–24, 28–29). Jesus' good news in words and deeds were not peaceful actions of a wise man, but often done in prophetic ways that shocked the established society and religion (e.g. Mk 2:1–3:6; Mt 23:13–33; Lk 16:8f, 19–31; Jn 4:7ff, 21–24). Jesus is portrayed as an explosive prophet calling his people to look at God and humanity in a new way (Senior and Stuhlmüller 1983, 144–51).

All New Testament books show that Jesus' prophetic mission has been continued by his disciples. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus once sent his apostles on a mission very similar to his own: "... go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (Mt 10:6–8). However, after this first mission they continue to be disciples of Jesus. Thus the prophetic mission is closely linked with discipleship. Jesus remains the model for the prophetic mission of his apostles, the messengers (Power 1998, 68–71; Pathil 2010, 260–263). A messenger must profoundly know who Jesus is and be acquainted with his mission. Sequentially the first disciples or apostles became models for ministers today (Brown 1999, 26). So, of what does this prophetic mission of the apostles in fact consist?

Jesus' Gospel or a Gospel about Jesus?

At the end of the Gospel stories, the disciples are sent by the risen Lord, but with a somehow different objective: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19); "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Lk 24:47). We directly see the difference between this mission command by the risen Lord and Jesus' earlier mission command to his disciples in Galilee. Now they are no longer sent to preach and bring about the Kingdom of God in Israel. Their mission is focused on proclamation of forgiveness in Jesus' name, and in teaching Jesus' commands. Everyone should be made *his* disciples. Besides that, the mission command of the risen Lord is universal, for all nations.

To understand this shift, we need to remember that the definitive formulation of the mission commands by the risen Lord at the conclusion of the Gospel stories was written decades afterwards, after the apostles, especially Paul, had already proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus, crucified and raised, to the nations. Paul's preaching in particular is often dubbed Christocentric. The essential content is Christ's death and resurrection as a saving event, the culmination of God's saving work. In the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus, those accepting it with faith receive God's salvation.

This shift from Jesus' proclamation of God's Kingdom to the disciples' message about Christ's teaching, ministry, death and resurrection is striking, but the two should not be overly contrasted. Many of the prophetic features of Jesus' bringing about God's Kingdom remain visible in the Christ-oriented mission of the apostles and subsequent generations, such as the sovereignty of God (though almost without the phrase Kingdom of God; but still theocentric), God's mercy and care for the excluded, and signs of divine power. On the other hand, the universality of the apostolic mission had already surfaced in Jesus' Galilean ministry, in his mission to Israel in the midst of "Galilee of the Gentiles." The prophetic mission of Jesus and its continuation in the early church by the apostles, both preserved in the New Testament with their different emphases, together become the model for a prophetic mission of the ongoing church and its prophetic priesthood.

A complication, especially for Asian churches, is that their missionary preaching takes place in a very multi-religious society. Since Vatican II taught us to appreciate the values in other

religions, missionary preaching has become increasingly focused on the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus. This aspect is easier to communicate in a non-Christian society, because it does not directly concern the identity of Jesus as Son of God, but focuses on God as a shared belief and experience; on the God who through messengers transforms the world in line with his initial and final purpose. This focus on God's Kingdom also addresses the fate of a huge number of oppressed and marginalised people yearning for liberation and justice.

The question is whether this one-sided understanding of mission, fully centred on the Kingdom of God, is enough to be called New Testament mission? It is questionable because no New Testament writing restricts missionary preaching to the aspect of the Kingdom alone, however important and indispensable. Typically, missionary preaching in the entire New Testament is about the work of God's salvation through Jesus Christ, not only through the work of Jesus' liberating ministry in Galilee but also through his consequential death and resurrection. Will the New Testament not lose its meaning if the proclamation about the Lord Jesus Christ is absent from the mission of the church? Obscuring the testimony about the cross and resurrection of Christ in favour of the proclamation of God's Kingdom as proclaimed by Jesus, is not the direction of New Testament mission. The content of present prophetic preaching, also in dialogue with other religions, can only be the combined content of the mission of both Jesus and the apostles, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God coming through the ministry, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as the central events in the setting up of God's rule (cf. also *Evangelii Gaudium* 110).

The Congregation, Object or Subject of Mission?

What is the very purpose of mission in the New Testament? Is it the establishment of churches or something more? Who is the subject of the prophetic mission? Special messengers or the newly established congregations themselves? In the course of his mission journeys, Paul established communities of faithful in urban centres. Is the formation of these churches the final purpose of Paul's mission? Or are they a means set up to share the Gospel of God's salvation through Christ in the surrounding society (Bosch 1991, 177–8)? Paul, the great missionary, shows repeatedly his appreciation for the mission carried out by his churches: "For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known" (1Th 1:8; Rm 1:8), "... the Gospel that has come to you ... is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world" (Col 1:5–6; cf. 2Th 1:4). This

is what has been forcefully elaborated by Michael Gorman (2015) in his recent book *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission*. The central claim of this title “is that already in the first century the apostle Paul wanted the communities he addressed not merely to *believe* the Gospel but to *become* the Gospel and thereby to *advance* the Gospel. That is, they were to participate in the very life and mission of God, through proclamation, praxis, and even persecution” (Gorman 2015, 279).

The impression that the formation and establishment of the church was the main purpose of Paul’s mission, arises not from Paul’s own letters but rather could emerge from Deutero-Pauline letters, such as *Ephesians* with its focus on the church (singular), and from the *Acts of the Apostles*. The gentiles are seen by Luke as those who are called to be God’s people (Ac 11:1,18, 13:42–52; 15:3,12,16–17, etc.). A similar conclusion is often drawn from Matthew’s Gospel, called the “Church Gospel.” The risen Jesus instructed the eleven disciples to make all the nations his disciples, by baptising them and teaching them to keep his commandments.

However, the real purpose of the apostles’ mission is to guarantee the continuation of God’s universal mission through Jesus Christ. In that perspective the formation of churches is not an end in itself, but a crucial means for the continuation of God’s work. Congregations are media of missionary witness within society. This is not only obvious from the letters of Paul but also from some of the books often quoted to tell us as if the church were the goal. The everyday life of the early Church (Ac 1:47, 6:7) and of the churches in Asia Minor who are addressed in 1P1:1 and are portrayed as having a strong missionary appeal (Ac 2:12–17, 4:4). In the Sermon on the Mount, the addressed group of disciples are called “the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:14–16).

In multi-religious or secular societies we should not consider preachers of the word as the most effective subject of mission, but local congregations who dare to live the Gospel in their neighbourhood. The missionary task of ministerial priests will be coaching the congregation to become more capable of a witnessing life (Senior and Stuhlmüller 1983, 335–8). The power of the congregation’s testimony has nothing to do with their numbers, but with the courage to live a prophetic life in the midst of a society that may reject them. Prophetic testimony is more likely to come from smaller alternative faith communities like the early Christian communities,

whereas massive well-adapted churches with considerable facilities easily become established, controlling, consumptive, passive, and thus contra-productive for mission.

Nevertheless, we should also notice that the New Testament missionary congregations would never have emerged if there had not been particular prophetic messengers like Jesus who sat to eat with sinners, or apostles going around, especially Paul who had the guts to open the door for the impure nations, or John who could see a new Jerusalem replacing corrupted Babylon. In the same way it will be difficult now to hope for the emergence of prophetic basic communities if not inspired by singular prophets, either from among the faithful or from among ministers, inspired by the prophetic mission of Jesus and the early preachers.

The prophetic call of ministers in the church has its origin in the New Testament and always should be reflected on in light of the New Testament, the most missionary book in the world. This prophetic and missionary call is now facing many challenges. For example, the challenge of inculturation which cannot be answered from the Bible alone but can learn much from ongoing inculturation as happened in Israel and the first century church, still discernable in the ongoing development of different legal, prophetic and Jesus traditions in various context and periods; traditions that finally became the building blocks of the Torah, prophetic books and gospels. Also challenges of new evangelisation and catechetics which are really unprecedented and unique, but must still draw inspiration from preaching and teaching in the writings of the New Testament (Phan 2002, 165–186). Even for a new phenomenon like interfaith dialogue, which at first sight looks very different from New Testament approaches toward preaching the Gospel, inspiring cases of inclusive attitudes toward other faiths can be uncovered throughout the Bible (e.g. Am 9:7; Is 19:19–25; Jonah 4; Mk9:38–40; Mt 8:5–13, 15:22–28; Lk 10:30–37, 17:11–19; Jn 4, Ac 10–11, 17:22–31; Ro 2:1–15; cf. Harun 2017).

Conclusion

Ministerial priesthood in churches today has absorbed a variety of tasks that were existent and carried out by a number of people in the New Testament. Contained in this priesthood is the model of Jesus as a prophetic preacher and teacher, as well as the Shepherd King, and the sole High Priest, carried on in the missionary passion of the apostles and Christian prophets, in the service and dedication of elders and overseers, and in the service at the table of the Lord's Supper by often unspecified servants. The wealth and complexity of this priesthood have been

called “both the grandeur and the weakness of the priesthood” (Brown 1999, 44). Can a Catholic priest today be expected to perform all those functions that were carried out by different agents during the foundational era of the New Testament?

The answer to this question can be found in the New Testament itself: Christ never expected everything from everyone, but in the course of the first century called various people to carry out certain aspects of a multisided ministry. In the same way priests now can actualise the priesthood as co-workers in a communion, realising their ministry in collaboration, both among themselves (ministerial priesthood), and with the laity (common priesthood), all contributing their specific gifts to the Body of Christ. So Christ can be fully present and active in church and society. This vision is not far from the transforming vision of a community church as has been propagated by the Lumko Pastoral Institute, the place where I first got to know Br. Anselm Prior OFM some 20 years ago. For that reason I have chosen to contribute this piece of writing to this Festschrift. Fraternal congratulations!

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