

## IN PERSONA CHRISTI: REPRESENTATION OF CHRIST OR SERVANT OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE?

If in the past the illusory notion that the priest "represents" Christ was the relatively harmless expression of a still undifferentiated horizon of understanding, to continue to press it today is to revert to the rigid hierarchicalism of the Counter-Reformation against the grain of the evangelical vision of the Church inculcated at Vatican II,<sup>1</sup> to reconstitute an ecclesiology of power in place of an ecclesiology of ministry and service. The contrast between these two visions of the priesthood and the Church underlay the apophatic interpretation of *in persona Christi* in St. Thomas which triggered the present exchange,<sup>2</sup> and today I would like to pursue it further and more thematically. First, however, I want to revisit briefly the epistemological problem involved in speaking of the priest as representing Christ and to insist, once again, that only by a technical and disciplined mode of analysis can we hope to move beyond overextended metaphor and theological fragments and arrive, within the analogy of faith, at a coherent understanding of what St. Thomas would call the *veritas rei*, the truth of the matter.

That representationalism is wrong epistemologically is evident even empirically. According to Sara Butler, "it is clear to any onlooker that . . . the priest is ritually enacting Christ's part in relation to the other worshippers," reciting his

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<sup>1</sup>A retrograde phenomenon of this kind is not without historical precedent. Faced suddenly with the symbolic interpretation of the Eucharist by Berengarius of Tours, Rome's initial reaction, in the synod of 1059, was to express the Catholic faith in Christ's Real Presence in crudely physical, almost cannibalistic terms. Branded as heretical was the view that in the Eucharist "the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . are not sensibly but only sacramentally handled and broken by the hands of the priests and torn by the teeth of the faithful" (*manibus sacerdotum tractari et frangi et dentibus fidelium atteri* [DS 690]). This inappropriate and reactionary naturalism, which endangered the very truth it intended to safeguard, proved short-lived, however. A process of theological refinement, led chiefly by Lanfranc, ensued, enabling a second Roman synod, convened just twenty years later (1079), to present Berengarius, who meanwhile had recanted his recantation, with a theologically purified confession of faith. Gone completely is the physicalism of 1059; in its place we read that "the bread and wine . . . are substantially converted (*substantialiter converti*) into the true, proper, and lifegiving flesh and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord" (DS 700). With these words, the doctrine of transubstantiation (though not the term) appears officially for the first time, some 150 years, be it noted, before the advent of Aristotelian scholasticism.

<sup>2</sup>Dennis Michael Ferrara, "Representation or Self-Effacement? The *In Persona Christi* Axiom in St. Thomas and the Magisterium," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994) 195-224.

words, repeating his gestures, serving as host at the sacrificial meal.<sup>3</sup> A little reflection leaves us, I would say, with quite the opposite impression. For the priest, as leader of the congregation's worship of God, imparts to them "the grace and peace of God our Father and of Our Lord Jesus *Christ*," prays to the Father *through Christ*, proclaims and expounds the words of *Christ*, recounts the *magnalia Dei* of which *Christ's* paschal mystery is the climax, offers the consecrated elements to the Father *through, with, and in Christ*, leads the congregation in the "words *our Savior* taught us," and distributes to the faithful "the *body of Christ*." Everything here reveals not an alleged sacramental similarity of the priest to Christ, but his *visible* otherness from and subordination to Christ, his pure ministeriality of Christ within the community of the Church.

And the same is evident from the formal theology of the sacramental sign. For in no sacrament, marriage alone excepted, is the celebrant part of the sacramental sign, the *sacramentum tantum* (e.g., pouring the water and invoking the Trinity in baptism), as distinct from being the one who places the sign (e.g., performing the baptism). To be part of the sacramental sign, to be part of what is placed, the celebrant would have to enter into what is signified by the form of the sacrament, namely, the words. These words would have to signify the celebrant, in the case of the Eucharist, the consecrating priest. But this is exactly what is excluded by Catholic doctrine. For if the priest were signified by the form of the Eucharist he would speak the words of consecration not *in persona Christi* but *in propria persona*, and the "My" of "This is my body" would refer to himself and not to Christ. Such a reversal of priorities between Christ and the priest is in fact the explicit conclusion reached by Sara Butler in her mistaken appeal to Thomas's *significative*,<sup>4</sup> when she writes that the priest "pronounces the words of consecration both materially (as the words of another) and formally (as

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<sup>3</sup>Sara Butler, "Quaestio Disputata: 'In Persona Christi.' A Response to Dennis M. Ferrara," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995) 61-80, at 72.

<sup>4</sup>*Summa theologiae* 3, q. 78, a. 5. For Thomas, that the priest utters the words of consecration *significative* and not merely *recitative* has to do not with any priestly representation of Christ (a notion which never arises in the text in question), but with the priest's referring of the historical words of Christ to the matter here and now present. More specifically, it has to do with a typically medieval conundrum: what precisely does the "this" in "This is my body" refer to? A mental construct? The matter, whether as understood or as sensed? The bread? The body of Christ? None of the above, responds Thomas in detail, concluding that the "this" of the words of consecration can only refer to "substance in common, without . . . a determinate form." That the entire analysis is far removed from concerns about a representation of Christ on the part of the priestly consecrator is made finally and conclusively clear by the fact that the question of the *significative* arises primordially for Thomas not in the Mass, but in "the first uttering of these words by Christ; since it is evident that then [the words] were employed not materially, but *significatively*."

his own) at one and the same time." In such an interpretation, the priest does not make way for Christ; Christ makes way for the priest.<sup>5</sup>

As to our main theme, the theory of representation is, to put it bluntly, theologically wrong and therefore doctrinally and spiritually dangerous. For the priest is said to represent Christ as "Bridegroom and Head of the Church"<sup>6</sup> and hence as symbolically reenacting the principiating relation of Christ to the Church.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Butler, "Response," 72. The whole matter under discussion hinges on this question. The formal agent of any action is the one to whom that action is properly attributed. And for Thomas, as I pointed out at length in my original article, the sole formal agent in the Eucharist is Christ, whose word is the sole form of the Eucharist: *verbum Christi hoc conficit sacramentum* (*Summa theologiae* 3, q. 78, a. 1; see Ferrara, "Representation or Self-Effacement?," 204-206). That this rules out the priest as formal agent is further evident from the cause-effect relationship that obtains in Eucharist. For the effect of the consecratory words, as form, is the *mirabilis conversio* of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, a conversion which is attributable to that strictly divine power (see Paul VI, *Mysterium fidei* 46) which is not transferable to a creature, even to the human soul of Christ (see *Summa theologiae* 3, q. 13, a. 2). This leaves only two possibilities for interpreting the priest's utterance of the words of Christ. The first is by way of merely material repetition such as occurs in dramatic representation. The second is by way of instrumental causality. The first results in a merely symbolic Eucharist, the second in the Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence. There are, as far as I can see, no other intelligible alternatives.

<sup>6</sup>"On the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood" (*Inter Insigniores*), Declaration of Oct. 15, 1976 of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, U.S. Catholic Conference Edition with Commentary (Washington, D.C. 1977) section 5. See also "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*), Apostolic Letter of Aug. 15, 1988 of Pope John Paul II, section 26 (*Origins* 18 [6 Oct 1988] no. 17).

<sup>7</sup>Despite the stress laid by *Inter Insigniores* on the affective and unitive aspects of the nuptial relationship (e.g., "the Church is [Christ's] Bride, whom he loves . . . and henceforth he is inseparable from her" [section 5])—there can be doubt that what is formally signified by nuptiality for the Declaration is not the *union* of love between God and Israel/Church, but the *priority and agency of God* within the divine-human covenant: for "in actions which require the character of ordination" it is "Christ the author of the Covenant, the Bridegroom and Head of the Church, exercising his ministry of salvation" who is said to be "represented" by the priest (*ibid.*). Here, "Bridegroom" loses any specific reference to "love" and becomes simply a variant of "authority," "head," and "savior," as is further made clear when the same point is made a few paragraphs later without any reference to the nuptial image: "It is true that the priest represents the Church, which is the Body of Christ. But if he does so, it is precisely because he first represents Christ himself, who is the Head and Shepherd of the Church." Even when love becomes the express horizon of the nuptial image, as in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the note of priority and authority remain predominant, thereby enabling nuptiality to serve as an image of divine action: "Christ's divine love is the love of a bridegroom" (section 25); "The bridegroom is the one who loves. The bride is loved. It is she who receives love,

Such symbolism, and, what is more, the theology which it embodies, besides having no empirical basis in the liturgical rite, takes the analogical argument of the medievals a momentous step further. That medieval analogical argument rests on a clear distinction between the natural and graced communities. The representational view, however, interprets the priest as *the visible embodiment of Christ's redemptive grace, as a direct icon of his lordship of the Church*. By such immediacy, it removes the priesthood from that graced receptivity which characterizes the Church as a whole as Christ's Body and Bride and establishes a symbolic and operational *univocity* between the power of the hierarchy and that of Christ. This radically obscures the fact that the priestly power is not something outside and above the Church's graced nature, but is rather an expression of that nature. It is itself a grace and therefore something received and subordinate. The representational view, however, symbolizes the priestly power as agent and cause over against the receptive Church, thereby sacramentalizing grace not as grace but as power.

Further attention to the a posteriori drives the point home. For priestly power is not a "direct" affair between the priest and Christ, exercised from outside the Church and over against it from some point of mystical coincidence between the priest and Christ. It is rather a mediated act exercised from within the Church's communal structure "in the Holy Spirit," who is the animating principle of the Church as a whole and the living source of all ministries,<sup>8</sup> and who just for this reason is specially invoked at the ordination rite in that "anthem of the Catholic priesthood," the *Veni, Creator Spiritus*. For it is, after all, not the historical Christ who is present to the Church, but the risen and heavenly Christ, raised to the Father's right hand by the power of the Spirit, who sends this same Spirit upon the Church as the principle which, while binding the members to each other, first and foremost binds the Church to himself as his Body and Bride.<sup>9</sup>

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in order to love in return" (section 29). In short, the nuptial image, here as in Scripture, is an image of the priority of divine grace. It is not surprising, therefore, that the New Testament never invokes the bridegroom image to describe the apostle, preferring the purely ministerial image of marriage broker (2 Cor 11:2). This scriptural nonusage stands in sharp contrast to the technical (and not merely popular and metaphorical) use of nuptial imagery by my interlocutors in the present debate.

<sup>8</sup>*Lumen Gentium* 7-8.

<sup>9</sup>The ecclesial mediation of the mystery of Christ in the Spirit is decisive in precluding a fatal misunderstanding of the nature of the sacraments. Only in light of this mediation can an acceptable meaning be given to the statement of *Inter Insigniores* that "the sacramental signs . . . are principally meant to link the person of every period to the supreme Event of the history of salvation," and that they thus contain a "sacramental reference to constitutive events of Christianity, and to Christ himself" (Section 4). For no *direct* correlation exists between the sacraments and the mysteries of Christ's life, as is made clear by St. Thomas, who patterns the number of the sacraments on the stages of human existence (*Summa theologiae* 3, q. 65, a. 1; see Ferrara, "Quaestio Disputata: 'In

In the end, the representational view of the priesthood, encapsulated in the nuptial image, despite its laudable intention of reasserting traditional Catholic belief in the transcendental dignity of the priesthood, falls victim to the traditional Catholic weakness of overly immanentizing grace and in so doing becomes subject to Christ's peremptory rebuke to those who would be leaders in his Church (Matt 20:25-28).

To bring to light the operational meaning of the priesthood's ministerial nature, we can, I believe, do no better than reflect on the priority accorded the priestly preaching of the Gospel by both the Council of Trent and Vatican II<sup>10</sup> and even, to no small degree, by *Inter Insigniores* itself.<sup>11</sup> The priest's "leadership" role, the *eminentia gradus* of which the medievals spoke, is in the last analysis rooted in the priest's function as the one who, within the Church, is charged and deputed by office to recall, proclaim, and make present, here and now, the saving Gospel of Christ as that word by which the Church lives and realizes its deepest nature as the sign and sacrament of Christ. Such precisely is the commission of the apostle, as witness of Christ, in the New Testament (e.g. Luke 9:2; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8). I would quickly add, however, that if the "ministry of the word" is to retain the density and depth required for a Catholic understanding of the priesthood, it requires a Catholic and metaphysical theology of the word such as, for example, was sketched out by Karl Rahner in some of

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Persona Christi'. A Reply to Sara Butler," *Theological Studies* 56 [1995] 81-91, at 86-87) and thus without reference to the quite distinct mysteries of the life of Christ himself (conception, birth, circumcision, baptism, mode of life, preaching, miracles, passion, death, resurrection, ascension, enthronement; see *Summa theologiae* 3, qq. 31-59).

The case of the Eucharist, which contains a specific sacramental reference to Christ's actions at the Last Supper and to his death on the cross, is obviously more difficult, but even here there can be no question of abandoning the principle of mediation or the general principles governing sacramental theology. Ruled out in particular is any representing of the historical Last Supper or the historical death of Christ, such as seems intended by the theories of Vonier and Casel, for whom "the historical immolation on Calvary is rendered present through the eucharistic body and blood," so that "the sacrament is the representation of the natural sacrifice" (Edward J. Kilmartin, S.J. "The Catholic Tradition of Eucharistic Theology: Towards the Third Millennium," *Theological Studies* 55 [1994] 405-57, at 408), though Kilmartin's own attempt to refute "Mystery Presence" theology is marred by his acceptance of the uncritical view that the sacraments signify historical events in the life of Christ (*ibid.*, 411). What is made *really* present in the Eucharist can only be what is real and actual at the present: the risen and ever-living Christ whose presence to his Church is mediated by the Spirit.

<sup>10</sup>Council of Trent, sess. 5, decr. 2, no. 9, *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, ed. Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, Bologna (1973) 669; Vatican Council II, *Presbyterorum ordinis* 4, *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Abbott.

<sup>11</sup>For the texts and their significance, see Ferrara, "Representation or Self-Effacement?" 216.

his earlier essays. This would be a theology which views the priestly word as one that makes the saving reality of God present, and that is uttered in diverse ways and degrees of intensity, culminating in the sacramental and above all in the eucharistic word.<sup>12</sup>

To sum up: Of his relation to the Father, Christ said to Philip, "He who sees me, sees the Father" (John 14:26), thereby announcing himself as the one mediator between God and the human race. But of the relation of the apostles to him, he said: "He who hears you, hears me" (Luke 10:16). For the priest is not a mediator between Christ and the Church, but the minister of their union, which is effected by Christ's grace alone. He exists, therefore, despite his own brokenness and human frailty, to make Christ present, to let Christ be in, to, and for the Church and the world. To do this, he must be transparent of Christ. Precisely for this reason and in this sense is his office ministerial, self-effacing, and apophatic.<sup>13</sup> As I put it in a conference to a group of deacons more than

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<sup>12</sup>Rahner bases his analysis not on a philosophy of the word and still less on a juridical understanding of its role in the sacraments, but on the biblical notion of the efficacious Word of God: "the word of God . . . is not *didache* (teaching) but proclamation, in which the real arrival of the thing proclaimed itself takes place. . . . the mighty, creative *dabar* (word) of God to man." Rahner goes on to apply this biblical notion to the sacraments in general, seeing in the sacramental word "the supreme and most intensive realization of the essence of the word," "the supreme form of the efficacious word of God"; and finally and in particular to the Eucharist, "the absolute case of the word anywhere." ("The Word and the Eucharist," *Theological Investigations IV* [Baltimore: Helicon, 1966] 253-86, at 261ff.) In an earlier essay, Rahner had drawn out, as it were in advance, the implication of such a view of the word for the meaning of priesthood: "The word which is entrusted to the priest as gift and mission is the *efficacious* word of God himself. It is the word of God. The priest is not speaking of himself. His way does not lead man, his world and the experience of this world in which man encounters himself, into the light of man's consciousness of himself (*Beisichsein*). His word does not redeem . . . the things of the *world* from their gloomy and blind darkness by orienting them towards man. The word of the priest is the word of God. It is spoken by God in the infinite *katabasis* of his self-revelation, and brings the inner and most intimate light of God into the darkness of man. It enlightens the man who comes into the world and admits God himself into man through the faith which it awakens. The word of God is the eternal Logos of God who was made flesh, and therefore could also and in fact did become the word of man." ("Priest and Poet," *Theological Investigations III* [Baltimore: Helicon, 1967] 294-317, at 303.)

<sup>13</sup>My insistence on the primordially ministerial nature of the priesthood is not intended either to reduce the priestly power to some pale and eviscerated notion of service or, much less, to confuse it with the "priesthood of the baptized" in such wise as to call into question the legitimate, indeed necessary, sense in which the priest acts *in loco Christi* "over against" the Church (the formulation is Congar's; see Edward J. Kilmartin, S.J., "Apostolic Office: Sacrament of Christ," *Theological Studies* 36 [1975] 243-64, at 256n.61). Rather, it is intended as a bringing to the center of reflexive awareness the fact

twenty years ago, the priest is a man who continually disappears behind the Word of God. That is his blessed and irrevocable vocation. And this ministry would be reversed at its core if, at the moment of consecration, that defining apogee of priestly activity and priestly being, the priest suddenly abandoned his self-effacing ministeriality and became a direct icon of Christ, thereby visibly assuming center stage and directing attention not to Christ but to himself.

Let me put all this in a series of questions. Which interpretation of *in persona Christi*—the representational or the ministerial-apophatic—more clearly and unequivocally asserts the primacy of the living Christ? Which is more concerned with the power and prerogatives of the hierarchy? Which is more consonant with an intellectually and historically refined doctrine of analogy and, yet more, with the doctrine of grace? Which accords better with the Gospels and the prophetic spirit of Vatican II? Which provides a clearer and more workable basis for healing the divisions that have rent the Church in the West since the Reformation? Which, finally, is more in keeping with our Catholic experience of the priestly ministry and with the priest's own experience of his role in the Church?

Only after the primary question of the nature of the priesthood itself has been clearly answered can and should we go on to address the corollary question whether a woman can serve as the official instrument of Christ's word and presence and hence act *in persona Christi*. And then, in my judgment, a good and sound theology will answer "yes." But since not all theology is good and sound, we will have to beware, as we probe the weighty issues involved, of what T. S. Eliot called the "greatest treason" of doing "the right deed for the wrong reason."<sup>14</sup> We will have to beware, I would say, of three things in particular.

First, we must beware of superficial anthropologies which neglect the rich and complex philosophical and theological tradition of the West, with all its technical refinement and metaphysical and psychological depth, on the natural

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that the priestly word, while it is indeed, according to its form and level, the saving and authoritative word and grace of Christ, is this word not in some naked, historically and ecclesially unmediated sense, but as always already received, heard, and accepted by the Church as constitutive of her existence and as normative for her being. It is, then, Christ's word as accepted in its saving authority by the bridal faith of the Church as such that the priest recalls and proclaims, to the point of being himself an addressee of his own proclamation, which thus is, as effective preachers make clear, salvation and judgment on himself as well as on his hearers. In this quite potent sense, the priest can genuinely be said to "represent Christ, the Bridegroom and Head of the Church," i.e., be the one through whom Christ's voice is heard in the Church and Christ's grace is given to the Church. But only in this sense, only indirectly. Anything more, any view of priestly power as *directly* representing Christ's vis-à-vis the Church would turn "representation" into a univocal and idolatrous countersign of Christ.

<sup>14</sup>T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, part 1.

difference between the sexes and the theological significance thereof, in the name of a poorly thought-out and pragmatically oriented egalitarianism. Similarly, we must beware of counterpositional anthropologies that seem unable to praise the distinctive importance and contributions of the female unless they debunk the male via a theoretically and historically undifferentiated notion of patriarchy.

Second, we must beware of theologies of vocation that neglect the will of God, who remains the sole Lord of history and the Church. If women are to be ordained priests in the Catholic Church, as I believe they one day will be, it will come at a time set not neither by women nor by men, but by God. To paraphrase Scripture: "One does not take this honor on her own initiative, but only when called by God, as Aaron was. Even Christ did not glorify himself with the office of high priest; he received it from the One who said to him: 'You are my son; today I have begotten you'" (Heb 5:4-5). And for a Catholic, there can be no such election by God—that is, no call to public office in the Church—without acceptance by the authority of the Church.

Above all, since the priest is the minister of the Word and that Word is, finally, Christ, we must beware of Christologies—and who here has not encountered them?—which obscure or in any way compromise the personal divinity of Christ, God from God, Light from light, true God of true God, as authoritatively taught at Nicea, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Constantinople II. For only to such a Lord does the priest commit himself, his body, his soul, his life, in this world and the next. On this we may learn a lesson from the woman who provides the strongest scriptural evidence for the ordainability of women, Mary Magdalene. For before being commissioned by the risen Savior to bring the glad tidings of his resurrection to the dispirited group of the Twelve huddling in fear behind closed doors, this lioness of an Apostle to the Apostles gave witness to her spiritual credentials for this high office. "Jesus said to her: 'Mary!' She turned to him and said: 'Rabbouni!'" (John 20:16). From this rapturous cry of love, adoration, and disponsibility that bolted from Mary's heart we learn the deepest meaning of that equality that opens to all the baptized the full range of the Spirit-endowed ministries of the Church—that we are all, women and men alike, the unprofitable servants of Christ our Lord, and, yet more, his beloved friends.

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