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Reflections on the Priesthood as Priest, Prophet, and King

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In his book, *The Priestly Office*, Avery Cardinal Dulles offers his timely reflections on what it means to be a priest, and what our current interpretation of the question lacks. Dulles situates these reflections on each of the three *munera* of the priesthood—priest, prophet, and king—and suggests that each of these must be maintained and lived in proper balance for the priest to live out his office in the right way. Dulles adds that, on top of those more practical applications of his office, if a priest is not devoted to holiness of life in his own life, he cannot possibly serve well as a priest. In my experience, I have seen both good and poor examples of priests living and expressing the *munera* of the priesthood. This paper will discuss those examples in light of Dulles’ text, the pastoral vision set forth in *Gaudium et Spes*, and Sacred Scripture.

The first of the priestly *munera* that Dulles discusses is that of the prophet, that is to teach the people of God. Dulles cites several theologians in expressing this *munus*. Hans Urs Von Balthazar sums it up in the passage from John 14:24, “the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it.” He builds on that in John 20:21, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”¹ The prophetic *munus* is well summarized in these two verses quoted by Cardinal Dulles. Dulles goes on to speak of other theologians culminating in Blessed John Paul II. Here, he reflects on the pope of happy memory’s call for a priest to “[let] the word of God penetrate his thoughts and feelings, so that he becomes first of all a believer in the message he is to transmit to others.”² This phrasing calls to mind the Rite of Ordination for Deacons which calls the man being ordained to “Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach.”³ In my own experience, I can best relate this particular *munus*, albeit negatively, to a priest I knew in Florida. The problem here was not his willingness to preach. Indeed, he

¹ Avery Dulles, *The Priestly Office: a Theological Reflection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 20.

² Dulles, 25.

³ Liturgical Press, *Rites of the Catholic Church (rites of the Catholic Church*, 2 ed. (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo Pub Co, 1990), 2):36.

preached constantly and included several homilies in any Mass he celebrated. Instead, the problem here is in that first part of the threefold formula in the diaconate ordination. Rather than teach and expound on the vast, deep, and rich treasury of the Church, he frequently extended his material to either beyond what could fit within the scope of the Church or limit the activity of God to that which could be explained by mundane and simple explanations. The priest in question did not serve to express a “sensitivity, love, and docility to the living tradition of the church and to the magisterium as the authoritative interpreter of the word of God,”⁴ but instead chose to expound his own theories. It seems that one thing that is imperative for an authentic expression of the prophetic or teaching *munus* of the priest is for him to always function “under the guidance of the bishops and the supreme pontiff.”⁵ For any priest to legitimately exercise his teaching and preaching ministry, that is, his *munus* of prophet, he must remain guided by the Church, bishops, and magisterium.

Dulles then moves on to the priestly *munus* of priest: the cultic role of worship. This was the classical understanding of the principle role of the priest throughout most of the history of the Church. To properly understand this role, a priest must realize that each time he exercises his role as the cultic leader of the people of God, he acts *in persona Christi capitis*, in the person of Christ the head. Dulles describes this relationship by saying that, “in every sacrament Christ is the principal agent. The priest or celebrant can be no more than an instrumental cause. As Augustine put it, when Peter or Judas baptizes, Christ baptizes.”⁶ One example I have recently encountered of the priestly *munus* in play is in Father Maestri, who we have been encouraged to work with in our pastoral formation program. This may seem a superficial example, but it is, I believe, an essential one. Even though his ministry is, at least superficially, focused on temporal

⁴ Dulles, 25.

⁵ Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1, *The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents* (Cincinnati, OH: Costello Pub Co, 1975), 945.

⁶ Dulles, 36.

needs of the people of the French Quarter, he has opted to include daily Mass as a part of his schedule at the Bishop Perry Center. This is rare since frequently such endeavors seem to be overwhelmed with “social justice” concerns, and the cultic and worship ideals of the Church are left behind in favor of these temporal needs of the people. Instead, in his example, the Mass was not a perfunctory function of the day, but a central point of the mission of the center that both offered the actions of the day and gave life to them.

Next, Cardinal Dulles goes on to discuss the pastoral or kingly *munus*, that of ruling and governing the people of God. It is important to distinguish this idea of ruling from the common notion of the word. Indeed, even Peter exhorts the elders of the apostolic age, “not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock.”⁷ It was apparently already a cause for concern even in these first years of the Church that the idea of governing the people of God could be mistaken for a power rather than an authority in service. Christ himself had foreseen this challenge when he himself exhorted the apostles, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them.²⁶ It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.”⁸ At the same time, it is important that a priest does not abdicate his authority since, as Dulles is careful to note, this authority does not stem from a mere mandate from the community, but rather, “from God, through Jesus Christ, by way of apostolic succession.”⁹ Dulles is quick to temper that statement, lest it lead to an overly authoritative priest, that “the power of priesthood is **entirely** for the sake of service.” (emphasis

⁷ Catholic Biblical Association (Great Britain), *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994), 1 Peter 5:3. Future Scriptural references will be from the same unless otherwise noted.

⁸ Matthew 20:25–27.

⁹ Dulles, 51.

mine)¹⁰ Again, in this circumstance, I am forced to offer a negative example. In this case, the pastor of a certain parish was forced to challenge his pastoral council for some errors they proposed. He was right in his desire to challenge them, but, as was often the case in this priest's ministry, his method of doing so served to create bad blood instead of correct an erring pastoral council. As a result of the insult he leveled on them, they turned on him, and he was cowed by their attack. In fact, he was humiliated to the point that several of the ministries in the parish were forced to attempt to heal his wounded ego. In this case, it seems the worst possible sort of misapplication of the governing *munus* was applied. It is most accurately described by Father Aschenbrenner as quoted in Father David Toups in *Reclaiming our Priestly Character*. In that, he describes this priest lucidly, for he had become, instead of a husband to the Church and a father to his parish, a mere bachelor. He observes, "Bachelors...radiate a superior, critical attitude and condescendingly carp at people who are seriously involved in the challenges of life."¹¹ The bachelor syndrome that Toups and Aschenbrenner describe seems to most often manifest themselves in misguided applications of this office of governance.

These three short discussions show some of the needs of the priestly office flowing from the three *munera* that are received by each of the baptized, but are received, in a unique way, at priestly ordination. If any one of these are overly emphasized or ignored, the results can range from slight annoyances to the people of God to true spiritual devastation. In order to fully live his priestly ministry, a man must keep all these in balance with one another under the balance of a deep spiritual life. Dulles' final chapter reminds priests that, even if each of these tasks is undertaken, his ministry will not necessarily bear the best fruit that God has in store for it. This has been aptly observed by Archbishop Alfred Hughes when he notes that the efficacy of the

¹⁰ Dulles, 51.

¹¹ Fr. David L. Toups and STD, *Reclaiming Our Priestly Character - Revised Edition* (Omaha, Nebraska: Institute for Priestly Formation, 2010), 150-151.

sacraments comes from the sacraments themselves, but the fruits of a priest's ministry flows from his holiness of life which provides fertile ground in himself and an example to his people.¹² No amount of practical application of a priest's activities of priest, prophet, and king will substitute for holiness of life and a personal relationship with Christ if his ministry is to bear the full fruit intended by God.

¹²Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes. Personal correspondence.

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