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PRIESTS OF THE CHURCH, I

DECREE ON PRIESTLY MINISTRY  
AND PRIESTLY LIFE

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## Priests of the Church

**N***IHIL sine presbyteris*: Without the priests we shall do nothing, Archbishop Renard of Versailles said at the second Council session, when he called the fathers' attention to the Council's neglect of the priests. He appealed for due recognition of their status as priests of the Church. His appeal was seconded by several fathers, for instance by the bishop of Lourdes who said there were "ever more bishops, and fewer priests!" It resulted in the project for a message to the priests, planned to be sent out at the end of the second session. This, however, because of the considerable number of important amendments asked for by the fathers, did not materialize. When closing the session, the Pope exhorted the bishops to send a message to their priests, either individually or collectively — the bishops of France did so in fact.

The interventions of the bishops in favour of due recognition and promotion of the priests — and not only of the bishops and the laity — actually led to what should prove a great deal more important than the projected message, viz to the beautiful paragraph 28 on the priests, in the dogmatic constitution of the Church. Here their status and function as priests of the Church and as the presbyterium of the bishop is proposed in the setting of the hierarchical structure of the Church, the people of God. The doctrine laid down there is at the basis of the decree on priestly ministry and priestly life.

Meanwhile, a symbolic representation at the Council sessions of priests in the ministry was sanctioned before the end of the third session (there were already the actively participating priest-experts whose number rose to six hundred, and the priest-guests, admitted to one or other session, sometimes as many as two or three hundred). A limited number of parish priests from various countries were admitted officially to represent their confreres at the Council. One of them, don Marcos Fernandez, of Madrid, addressed the Council on November 17, voicing the expectations



of the priest in the ministry regarding the projected decree on priestly ministry and priestly life.

The schema for this decree was prepared after the first Council session of October-December 1962, by the conciliar commission on the discipline of the clergy and the faithful. It was entitled *De clericis* (cf. C.M. 1963, 310) and had been drawn up on the basis of three out of the seventeen schemas prepared before the Council (cf. C.M. 1962, 298), viz those on the holiness of clerics, on their offices and benefices, and their distribution. It dealt with the perfection of priestly life, studies and pastoral doctrine, the right to use Church goods, and a better distribution of the clergy.

Sent out to the fathers in March 1963, the schema was redrafted after some 464 remarks had come in from 237 fathers, and its title changed to *De sacerdotibus*. This schema, however, was not discussed at the second session. Later it became one of the seven schemas reduced to a few propositions (cf. C.M. 1964, 271) first ten, and after a new revision in keeping with more observations sent in before the session, to twelve. Its title was now: On the ministry and life of priests. This text came up for discussion at the third session, October 13-15. The debate resulted in a decision, by 1,199 votes against 930, to return the text to the commission for redrafting and developing into a full-blown schema (cf. C.M. 1965, 48). This request was carried out in the interval before the fourth session (cf. C.M. 1965, 345).

The new schema was discussed October 14-17, and, after amendment, submitted to the vote of the Council, November 11-15. At the vote on the whole schema, on December 2, it was approved by 2,243 Yes against 11 No (3 null votes). Before promulgation at the public session on December 7, the Decree was approved by 2,390 *placet* against 4 *non placet*.

The key to a proper understanding of the Decree lies in its very title and the problem it raises: why first priestly ministry and then priestly life? The answer is obvious: a priest's life is defined by his ministry. This appears from the first chapter on the presbyterate in the mission of the Church: this restates, from a slightly different angle, the teaching of *Lumen gentium* n. 28, on the priests in the hierarchical structure of the Church, but considers their function more dynamically in the mission, rather than in the structure of the Church. The priests, as helpers of the bishops, share in the priesthood and mission of Christ, as bishops do, but in a subordinate degree. Their function is to continue Christ's saving mission in the world. The very nature of the presbyterate determines all that is proper to a priest's ministry and life.

First of all, its orientation to Christ and to men. A priest's ministry and life is centred in Christ; he acts in the person of Christ in his ministry of the word and of the sacraments. He is, as the traditional phrase has it, an *alter Christus*. And he is sent to men; he is a priest, not for himself, but for the people — *in obsequium plebis Dei*. He is to go out to men, live among them, be in their midst as the minister of Christ's salvation — in and for the world, without being of the world.



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*info@thecmsindia.org*

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