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The Fundamental Munus of the Ministerial Priesthood in
John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper

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The Fundamental Munus of the Ministerial Priesthood in John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper

von

Chinemerem Valentine Uwandu-Uzoma



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Index of Abbreviations

- AAS – Acta Apostolicae Sedis
CIC – Codex Iuris Canonici
CCEO – Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium
CCSL – Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
DH – Denzinger-Hünemann Enchiridion Symbolorum
FC – Fontes Christiani
GuL – Geist und Leben. Zeitschrift für christliche Spiritualität
HDG – Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte
HKSW – Hans Küng, Sämtliche Werke
IKaZ – Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift Communio
MGH – Monumenta Germaniae Historica
MThS.K – Münchner Theologische Studien. 3. Kanonistische Abteilung
JPW – Josef Pieper Werke
JRGS – Joseph Ratzinger – Gesammelte Schriften
QD – Quaestiones Disputatae
Rev. Sc. ph. th. – Revue des Sciences philosophique et théologique
SC – Sources Chrétiennes
SW – Karl Rahner Sämtliche Werke
ThPh – (Zeitschrift für) Theologie und Philosophie
WKGS – Walter Kasper Gesammelte Schriften
ZAC – Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum (Journal of Ancient Christianity)

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Introduction

Any inquiry into the essence and duty of the bearers of the Sacred Orders needs a starting point, a foundation which sustains and permeates all other explanations. It is an axiom of the Catholic theology that this foundation is ultimately God, as revealed in and by Jesus Christ. However, the quest for truth by man can suscite the need for a clarification. The human person often comprehends the simple reality proceeding from God by making distinctions and judgements. This is the case in the attempts to explain the life and ministry of a priest. It is common in theology to describe his office and function in three dimensions: to teach, to lead, and to sanctify. This is usually termed the threefold office or ministry (*triplex munus*).

During and after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), one of the questions which has gained importance in theological debates is the following: If we are to understand the essence and duty of the ordained priesthood by appealing to the threefold scheme, which of the three should be the starting point? In technical terms: among the three *munera*, is there a fundamental *munus*, on which the other two hinge? Can a certain priority be assigned to one of the three dimensions of the priestly office such that it provides the most essential definition of the priesthood while integrating and conditioning the other two?

As a slight detour, one may draw an analogy from another branch of dogmatic theology in the 1940s and 1950s, namely, the quest for the “fundamental principle” of Mariology, i.e., the question of which truth about Mary is the primary one, the point of anchorage for every other truth about the mother of Christ – her divine motherhood, her exemplary function, her cooperation with Christ as the new Eve, etc.?

The quest for the fundamental office of the priesthood was triggered mainly by the crisis of the priestly identity in the Western world since the second half of the twentieth century. The crisis struck not only the priesthood, but also the Church in general. The cultural upheavals in the Western society jarred the existence of the parish priest and the Church as an instance of influence and authority at the centre of the community. Consequently, it evoked the question: What is actually the

function of the priest? For what is he actually ordained? In other words, it is not just a purely academic problem, it also has an existential meaning. Thus, in a bid to answer or solve the question of the fundamental dimension of the threefold office of the priesthood, different theologians developed their individual perspectives.

The first three chapters of this research are preparatory sections dealing respectively with state of research, explication of technical notions, and a brief sketch of the historical development of the question. The fourth to sixth chapters are systematic presentations of the respective *arguments* of the three authors – John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper. There are no special reasons or criteria for choosing the three authors other than the fact that each is a representative of one *munus*. The seventh chapter is an exposition of selected criticisms from the theological literature on their respective positions. The eighth chapter presents the author's own evaluation of the arguments of the three writers while stating his own position. The ninth chapter reviews a topical context of the question, namely, how the problem of the fundamental *munus* of the ministerial priesthood plays out in the German Synodal Path. Finally, the findings of the research are stated once more in a terse conclusion.

Chapter 1: Status Quaestionis

1.0 Preamble

Amongst a variety of published theological works, there already exists a consensus on the positions of the three authors: John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger, and Walter Kasper. John Paul II gives priority to the ministry of sanctification, Joseph Ratzinger argues for the ministry of the word, while Walter Kasper takes the ministry of leadership to be central.

1.1 State of Research

There are three categories of such published works which are significant precursors for my research question, and on whose shoulders my work stands. The common denominator of all of them is that they are not specifically about the fundamental *munus* of the ministerial priesthood, but they address it with different intensities within the context of the issues they deal with.

1.1.1 Single-Author Studies

These are works which focus on one author and his theology of the Catholic priesthood, and within the context, briefly state the author's model of the Catholic priesthood with regard to the threefold office.

Nilson Leal de Sa provides an interpretation of John Paul II's teachings on the Catholic Priesthood. He does not, though, state it expressly under the aspect of the threefold office, rather, the picture emerges clearly from the whole work.¹

Ladislav Kučkovský describes among other things Ratzinger's discontentment and distaste for the neo-scholastic Theology, especially

¹ Cf. LEAL DE SÁ Nilson, *The Priesthood, Mystery of Faith. Priestly Ministry in the Magisterium of John Paul II*, Washington, D.C. 2022, 43, 60–63. For his subtle criticism, see chapter seven of this work.

its conception of priesthood based on cult and sacrifice. In Ratzinger's view, this neo-scholastic conception could not stand up to the challenge posed by modern biblical exegesis on the office of the priesthood.² This experience lies at the root of Ratzinger's paradigm shift to the priority of proclamation. In grappling with the criticisms of the liberal exegesis, he realizes that even the replacement of the sacramental with a functionalistic conception of the priesthood neither corresponds with the ancient Christianity nor is it rooted in the Scriptures. It is, rather, as a result of a protestant and philosophical predecision. In the protestant tradition, the functionalistic approach to priesthood proves itself unsustainable.³ Kučkovský also shows the inner and peculiar line of development of Ratzinger's thoughts on the priesthood as regards the issue of discontinuity or continuity between the old and new priesthood. The earlier Ratzinger champions a radical discontinuity, while the later Ratzinger introduces differentiations in which he sees a certain form of continuity. Notwithstanding that the priesthood of the new covenant is something completely new in the general history of religion, it does not mean that it has nothing more to do with cult and sacrifice (sanctification). The deeper basis is actually the relationship between the Old and New Testaments: not that of a total breakup, rather of fulfilment, of inner and organic unity. This is to say, the new priesthood is founded on a Christological unity of the proclamation of the word and of sacrifice.⁴ It is only in this sense that the priority of the word in the writings of the earlier Ratzinger can be correctly understood. It has at the same time a sacramental-witnessing dimension.⁵

A similar analysis as the above is found likewise in Jongsu Sang's dissertation.⁶ In contrast to Kučkovský, Sang does not indicate the priority of proclamation in Ratzinger's theology of the priesthood.

2 Cf. Kučkovský Ladislav, *Auf dem Weg zur theologischen und existentiellen Erneuerung. Krise und vertiefte Grundlegung des Priesterbildes bei Joseph Ratzinger*, Regensburg 2022, 200–236.

3 Cf. *Ibid.*, 236–240.

4 Cf. *Ibid.*, 241–250.

5 Cf. *Ibid.*, 331–337.

6 Cf. SANG Jongsu, *Das Verständnis des Priestertums als Selbsthingabe bei Joseph Ratzinger im Licht seiner Christologie*, Hamburg 2025, 172–183.