

**A book review by Fr. Michael Johns**  
Associate Pastor, St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church

*From the Depths of Our Hearts: Priesthood, Celibacy, and the Crisis of the Catholic Church* (Ignatius, 2020), is a book composed by Pope Benedict and Cardinal Sarah. As its title suggests, the book is devoted to clarifying and defending the integral connection between celibacy and the Catholic priesthood.

For the purposes of time and space, this review will focus on Benedict's essay.

**What is a priest?** This is the central question Pope Benedict addresses in his essay entitled, "The Catholic Priesthood." In the course of his reflections, the Pope Emeritus offers two beautiful and intimately connected answers to this question. He writes that the priest is first and foremost a "craftsman of worship" [*un artisan du culte*]. Also,

the priest is a watchman, the one who "must keep the world awake for God." The essay as a whole should be approached as providing the theological implications of these answers.

In Benedict's eyes, the basic flaw that undergirds the modern understanding of priesthood is a failure to see that the Old Testament speaks of Christ. Once "the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament" is denied, theology can no longer see Christ as the one who has come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. Once sacrificial worship is expunged from the work of Christ as something *passé* and belonging to an archaic age, then the very core of priesthood becomes uncertain and tenuous. If there is a current crisis affecting the priesthood, as indeed Benedict thinks there is, the many dimensions of this crisis share a common *theological* root in the unwillingness of many to see the pages of the Old Testament illuminated by the light of Christ.

The principal and overarching aim of Benedict's project, therefore, is to contemplate the priesthood of Christ as that which most clearly manifests the inner unity and harmony of the Testaments of Scripture. He structures the essay into two parts. The first is devoted to bringing to light the "fundamental exegetical structure," namely, the light of Christ, that allows for a correct theology of worship and the priesthood. The second part then examines three Scriptural texts which speak to the worship of God by the priesthood in the new and eternal covenant of Christ.

In the first part, Benedict turns to two events in Christ's life, the cleansing of the Temple and the Last Supper, in order to elucidate the definitive character of Christ's worship and sacrifice.

**First, the Temple cleansing.** When Christ cleanses the Temple, he is not merely attempting to rectify abuse. He is also replacing the Temple with himself. That is, the Lord lays claim to an authority greater than the Temple, an authority by which he now identifies his own body as the locus of divine worship and the presence of God.

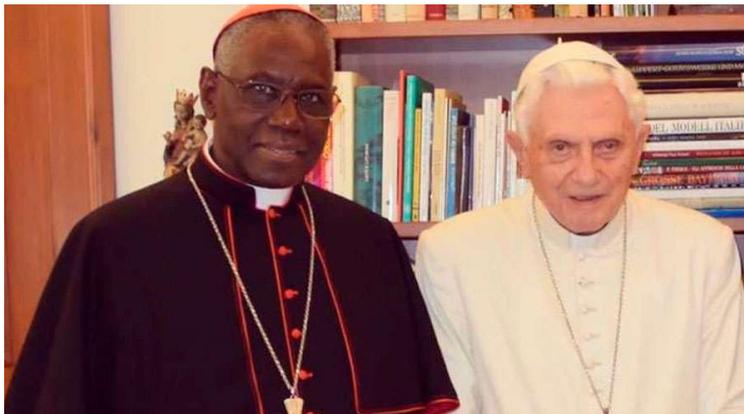
Both the new worship that Christ offers and his priesthood are manifested at the Last Supper. At the Supper, Christ appears as the New Moses, the one with authority even over the sacrifice prescribed long ago on Mount Sinai. Christ's authority over Sinai comes from his charity, by which he will forever transcend the old sacrifices in the complete offering of himself in love to his Father. In so doing, Christ also fulfills at once all the various critiques of the Sinai tradition by the Prophets (e.g., Hos 6:6), and inaugurates the new and eternal Covenant promised in Jeremiah.

What is important here for Benedict is that the worship of God has been entirely transformed. All the OT prescriptions for worship have been fulfilled by Christ's supreme act of worship, such that there is now only one way to worship, only one sacrifice that can be offered. As such, the old priesthood of Aaron has been "outmoded" and surpassed, and Christ himself appears as the High Priest in whom "love and sacrifice are one."

Very early in the Church's history, as seen already in Acts of the Apostles, for example, the daily celebration of the Eucharist became normative for the Church. And it is here that celibacy emerges as the gift at the very center of the Eucharistic sacrifice. The daily celebration of the Eucharist means the daily offering up in love of the entirety of the priest's being, ordained to speak the very words of Christ "This is my body."

*From now on, their entire life is in contact with the divine mystery. This requires on their part exclusivity with regard to God. Consequently, this excludes other ties that, like marriage, involve one's whole life. From the daily celebration of the Eucharist, which implies a permanent state of service to God, was born spontaneously the impossibility of a matrimonial bond. We can say that the sexual abstinence that was functional [in the priesthood of the OT] was transformed automatically into an ontological abstinence.*

**The Three Scriptural Texts.** The second part of the essay examines three scriptural texts in order to show the inner harmony of the pages of scripture but also the fulfillment of the OT priesthood by the priesthood of Christ. The first text is Ps 16:5-6. "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; yes, I have a goodly heritage." These words originally referred to the tribe of Levi, the only tribe without a share of the promised land because they lived "only by God and for God." These words, prior to Vatican II, were used during the rite of ordination of priests in the Church, signifying that priests must live especially by God and for God.



The words of the Psalm thus take on a more profound meaning in the priests of the Church. As OT priests were to renounce land, "in the New Testament this privation is transformed and renewed: priests, because they are radically consecrated to God, renounce marriage and family. The Church interpreted the word 'clergy' in this sense. To enter the clergy means to renounce a self-centered life and to accept God alone as the support and guarantee of one's own life." Celibacy is the sign of this freedom, and "without such forsaking on our part there is no priesthood."

If a priest is one whose entire life is in contact with the divine mystery he offers at the altar, this is because the priest is the one who most truly "stands in the presence of the Lord and serves him." This is the second text highlighted by Benedict, taken from Dt 10:8 and 18:5-9 and which is repeated after the words of consecration in Eucharistic Prayer II, itself an ancient text of the Church. Dt 18 provides an essential point of unity between the OT and NT. Just as the priests of the OT were centered on God and gazed on God, so now the priests of the NT must be entirely centered on the Eucharist, the Word of God made flesh. But, notes the Pope, our vigil is more intense than that of the priests of the OT. The priest of Christ is a watchman:

*He must keep the world awake for God. He must be the one who remains standing: upright before the trends of time. Upright in truth. Upright in the commitment for good. Standing before the Lord must always also include, at its depths, responsibility for humanity to the Lord, who in his turn takes on the burden of all of us to the Father. And it must be a taking on of him, of Christ, of his word, his truth, his love.*

That priests can take on Christ in this way comes from Christ's prayer to the Father in John 17, where the Lord asks the Father to "sanctify them in the truth" (Jn 17:17), the third text adduced by Benedict. He notes that to be sanctified' is to be set apart, to enter God's sphere and take part in God's service. "Sanctify them in the truth," then, is a prayer that the Father immerse the Twelve completely in the truth of Christ himself. In other words, "The Lord is asking the Father to include the Twelve in his mission, to ordain them priests."

Pope Benedict offers both a theologically illuminating but also a deeply moving and beautiful account of the nature of priesthood and the gift of celibacy. The essay is not overly cumbersome or complex for the general reader, although it does presuppose a familiarity with Scripture. Numerous times the Pope refers to a fuller discussion found in several of his other books, most prominently his Jesus of Nazareth series, and, although not necessary for grasping Benedict's argument, do contribute a fuller understanding of the Pope's approach to Scripture. Several times the Pope movingly recounts his own interior experiences the night before his ordination, how he experienced both the call of Christ to leave everything behind and how he has tried to live out that call. Such recollections are beautiful, and themselves provide a testimony to a life of priestly fidelity to Christ.

Fr. Mike Johns  
Associate Pastor, St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church

<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "The Catholic Priesthood," in Benedict XVI and Robert Cardinal Sarah, *From the Depths of Our Hearts: Priesthood, Celibacy, and the Crisis of the Catholic Church*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2020), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict, "The Catholic Priesthood," 52.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict, "The Catholic Priesthood," 25.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict, "The Catholic Priesthood," 33.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict, "The Catholic Priesthood," 41.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict, "The Catholic Priesthood," 45.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict, "The Catholic Priesthood," 46.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict, "The Catholic Priesthood," 52-53.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict, "The Catholic Priesthood," 58.