

CELIBACY: A LIGHT THAT ILLUMINES THE NUPTIAL DIMENSION OF THE ORDAINED PRIESTHOOD AND OF THE EUCHARIST

KEVIN E. O'REILLY, OP

Pontificia Università San Tommaso d'Aquino, Roma

ABSTRACT: This article deals in a Thomistic vein with the practice of celibacy in the Catholic priesthood in the Roman rite. Central to the discussion is the notion of participation. The article argues that celibacy furnishes the means of being configured to the mode of Christ's priestly existence in a way that is more perfect than that of the married state, albeit other factors can undermine the realization of this possibility in practice. The article ends with appeal to the nuptial imagery employed at Eph. 5:25-27 in depicting the relationship between Christ and His Church, since the priest, in confecting the Eucharist, is in some way identified with Christ.

KEYWORDS: celibacy; participation; charity; sacramental character; Eucharist; sacrifice.

RIASSUNTO: Questo articolo tratta in chiave tomista la pratica del celibato nel sacerdozio cattolico di rito romano. Al centro della discussione c'è il concetto di partecipazione. L'articolo sostiene che il celibato fornisce i mezzi per configurarsi al modo dell'esistenza sacerdotale di Cristo in modo più perfetto di quello dello stato coniugale, anche se altri fattori possono minare la realizzazione pratica di questa possibilità. L'articolo termina con un appello alle immagini nuziali impiegate in Ef 5,25-27 nel raffigurare il rapporto tra Cristo e la sua Chiesa, poiché il sacerdote, nel confezionare l'Eucaristia, è in qualche modo identificato con Cristo.

PAROLE CHIAVE: celibato, partecipazione, carità, carattere sacramentale, Eucaristia, sacrificio.

SUMMARY: I. *Participation in Christ's Priesthood*. II. *Participation in the form of Christ's charity and sacrifice*. III. *Priestly celibacy and the nuptial significance of the Eucharist*. IV. *Conclusion*.

This article – inspired by the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas but also necessarily drawing upon other resources – engages the position of those who seek an end to the discipline of mandatory celibacy for priests in the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church.¹ This questioning received a certain impetus in recent times on the basis of one of the suggestions of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Amazon Synod. The authors request that “for the most remote areas of the region, the possibility of priestly ordination be studied for older people, preferably indigenous, respected and accepted by their community, even if they have an existing and stable family, in order to ensure availability of the Sacraments and accompany and sustain the Christian life.”² While Thomas does not offer any

¹ The focus of this article, namely the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood, does not allow for a discussion of the common priesthood of the faithful. The teaching of *Lumen Gentium* (hereafter *LG*) 10 ought however to be noted: “Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree (*licet essentia et non gradu tantum different*), the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ” (AAS 57 [1965], 14). For a study of this relationship, cfr. T.G. GUARINO, “*Essentia et non gradu tantum different*”: *A Note on the Priesthood and Analogical Predication*, «The Thomist» 77 (2013) 559-76.

² *L'Instrumentum Laboris per il Sinodo sull'Amazzonia*, 129, a) 2: “Affermando che il celibato è un dono per la Chiesa, si chiede che, per le zone più remote della regione, si studi la possibilità di ordinazione sacerdotale di anziani, preferibilmente indigeni, rispettati e accettati dalla loro comunità, sebbene possano avere già una famiglia costituita e stabile, al fine di assicurare i Sacramenti che accompagnano e sostengono la vita cristiana” (accessed 04/02/2022 at <http://www.sinodoamazonico.va/content/sinodoamazonico/it/documenti/l-instrumentum-laboris-per-il-sinodo-sull-amazzonia1.html>). The unofficial translation of this document that I have employed is to be found at <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=12176>. The Church's discipline concerning priestly celibacy has of course been called into question over the last few decades. In more recent times, a survey in 2012 by the Association of Catholic Priests in Ireland, for example, found that nine out of every ten Catholics there were in favour of allowing priests to marry. (Cfr. *Almost nine in ten Catholics in Ireland want priests to be allowed to marry* [accessed 04/02/2022 at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/12/catholics-ireland-priests-allowed-married>]). In Germany there has been pressure from various quarters to end this discipline. According to *La Croix*, there are now “plans to openly debate the issue of celibacy at the German bishops’

sustained discussion of the issue of perpetual continence or celibacy in relation to the priesthood,³ his doctrine of participation in particular can be used to illuminate this venerable tradition and to show forth its fittingness, a task that to the best of my knowledge has to date not been undertaken.⁴

Discussion of this doctrine in the present context demands that one distinguish between the notion of participation with respect to the sacramental character proper to the ordained priesthood, on the one hand, and the notion of participation with respect to the existential form of priestly existence (obedient, poor, chaste, humble, and so on),⁵ on the

permanent council meeting in the European spring” (Cfr. *Celibacy debate gains momentum in Germany*, [accessed 04/02/2022 at <https://international.la-croix.com/news/celibacy-debate-gains-momentum-in-germany/9163>]). In an article in the *National Catholic Reporter*, Fr. Peter Daly concludes that “Mandatory celibacy for the diocesan clergy of the Roman rite should be abandoned immediately. It is a necessary first step in the reforming of Catholic priesthood” (P. DALY, *Celibacy advances the priesthood’s culture of compromised truths*, 22 July 2019 [accessed 04/02/2022 at <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/priestly-diary/celibacy-advances-priesthoods-culture-compromised-truths>]). These examples are but a taste of the questioning of and the call for an end to the discipline of priestly celibacy that has developed among clergy and laity alike over several decades.

³ In the *Supplementum* to the *Summa*, redacted by Reginald of Piperno, we read that continence is enjoined on those who handle holy things, namely priests and deacons, so that they may be “holy and clean” (*Suppl.* 37.3).

⁴ It ought to be noted in passing that the doctrine of participation was one of the various ideas that fell by the wayside in Western thought in the generations following the death of St. Thomas. The rejection of these ideas arguably constituted a critical departure from the preceding Christian tradition. A non-participatory construal of reality is one of the factors that led ultimately to modern atheism. For a consideration of various metaphysical assumptions that contributed to this development, cfr. B.S. GREGORY, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge - London 2012, 25-73. For a more extended treatment of the range of intellectual factors that have led to modern nihilism, cfr. M.A. GILLESPIE, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1995. In light of the argument put forward in this present article, I would venture that a non-participatory construal of reality has also contributed to an increasingly functional view of the Catholic priesthood, a view that lies at the basis of calls for married priests. The constraints of this article do not allow me to elaborate this point.

⁵ Cfr. K.G. GROVE, C.S.C., *Desires, Counsels, and Christ: The Christology of Aquinas’ Treatment of the Evangelical Counsels*, «Jaarboek» (2016), Thomas Institute, Utrecht, 49-73.

other hand. By virtue of sacramental character, on the one hand, which pertains to the ontological constitution of the ordained priesthood, the ordained priest participates in Christ's Priesthood, which is predicated on the hypostatic union and which for that reason possesses the fullness of the intelligible content of priesthood. Concerning this content, Thomas writes:

The office proper to a priest is to be a mediator between God and the people: to wit, inasmuch as He bestows Divine things on the people, wherefore *sacerdos* (priest) means a giver of sacred things (*sacra dans*), according to Malachi 2:7: *They shall seek the law at his*, i.e., the priest's, *mouth*; and again, forasmuch as he offers up the people's prayers to God, and, in a manner, makes satisfaction to God for their sins; wherefore the Apostle says (Heb 5:1): *Every high-priest taken from among men is ordained for men in the things that appertain to God, that he may offer up gifts and sacrifices for sins*.⁶

Christ's ultimate priestly act was of course His Passion, which operated by way of sacrifice.⁷ The hypostatic union was the necessary condition for Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, whereby He wrought our redemption, offering up our prayers to God and making satisfaction for our sins.⁸ In imitating Christ's earthly example, on the other hand, the

⁶ *STh* III, q. 22, a. 1. Cfr. also III q. 22, a. 1, ad 1, which sheds further light on the significance of the hypostatic union for the fullness of intelligible content that characterizes Christ's Priesthood. In this response, Thomas answers the objection that a priest is less than an angel whereas Christ is greater than the angels and that it is therefore not fitting for Christ to be a priest: "Hierarchical power appertains to the angels, inasmuch as they also are between God and man, as Dionysius explains (*Coel. Hier.* ix), so that the priest himself, as being between God and man, is called an angel, according to Mal. ii. 7: *He is the angel of the Lord of hosts*. Now Christ was greater than the angels, not only in His Godhead, but also in His humanity, as having the fullness of grace and glory. Wherefore also He had the hierarchical or priestly power in a higher degree than the angels, so that even the angels were ministers of His priesthood, according to Matt. iv. 11: *Angels came and ministered unto Him*. But, in regard to His passibility, He *was made a little lower than the angels*, as the Apostle says (Heb. ii. 9): and thus He was conformed to those wayfarers who are ordained to the priesthood."

⁷ Cfr. *STh* III q. 48, a. 3.

⁸ Cfr. *STh* III q. 22, a. 1. Notwithstanding this assertion, Thomas holds that all the mysteries of Christ's life have a salvific import. Thus, in an article on the causality of Christ's resurrection, he asserts that "all other things which Christ did and endured in His humanity are profitable to our salvation through the power of the Godhead" (*STh* III q. 56, a. 1, ad 3).

ordained priest participates in the form of Christ's priestly existence, which existence [Christ's] was modelled in a manner that was characterized by obedience, poverty, celibacy, humility, and so on, as already intimated. While the participation afforded by the character imparted by any of the three degrees of the sacrament of Holy Orders admits of neither greater nor lesser perfection,⁹ participation in the mode of Christ's priestly existence, however, does allow for different degrees thereof. Hence the significance of priestly celibacy: in brief, the celibate state, while not necessary for the priestly existence per se, nevertheless, affords a priest a participation in one particular aspect of the form of Christ's priestly existence. Participation by way of a celibate lifestyle in the form of Christ's priestly existence is obviously precluded by the married state.¹⁰ In this respect, therefore, since the celibate priest is configured to the form of Christ's priestly existence in a way the married priest is not, the form of his priestly life is more perfect than that of a married priest. While this objective form of life furnishes the matrix in which the self-sacrificing love which is charity, to which all are called, can flourish optimally, such flourishing is not necessarily realized in practice.¹¹ Men and women in other states of life can and do live lives of more intense charity than many priests. One might object that what is argued concerning priestly celibacy as a participation in Christ's

⁹ Thus, in this sense, one deacon cannot be more or less a deacon than another deacon, a priest cannot be more or less a priest than any other priest, and a bishop cannot be more or less a bishop than any other bishop. On this point, cfr. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1554, which quotes *LG* 28: "The divinely instituted ecclesiastical ministry is exercised in different degrees by those who even from ancient times have been called bishops, priests, and deacons" (AAS 57 [1965], 33-34). Catholic doctrine, expressed in the liturgy, the Magisterium, and the constant practice of the Church, recognizes that there are two degrees of ministerial participation in the priesthood of Christ: the episcopacy and the presbyterate. The diaconate is intended to help and serve them. For this reason the term *sacerdos* in current usage denotes bishops and priests but not deacons. Yet Catholic doctrine teaches that the degrees of priestly participation (episcopate and presbyterate) and the degree of service (diaconate) are all three conferred by a sacramental act called "ordination," that is, by the sacrament of Holy Orders.

¹⁰ This assertion does not deny that a married priest may well by grace enjoy a greater participation in the mode of Christ's existence in other respects. He might, for example, excel in the virtues of humility and obedience.

¹¹ On the degrees of charity, cfr. *STh* II-II, q. 24, a. 9.

celibate existence could just as well be said about the religious vow of “chastity in celibacy.”¹² The response to this objection is in brief predicated on the fact that, in celebrating the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the priest acts *in persona Christi* [*capitis*].¹³ The response to this objection in effect brings together both the notion of ontological participation in Christ’s priesthood by virtue of the sacramental character and that of the existential participation in the celibate mode of Christ’s priesthood. Central to this response is the nuptial imagery employed at Eph. 5:25-27 in order to depict the relationship between Christ and His Church: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle

¹² Cfr. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 915: “The perfection of charity, to which all the faithful are called, entails for those who freely follow the call to consecrated life the obligation of practicing chastity in celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, poverty and obedience. It is the profession of these counsels, within a permanent state of life recognized by the Church, that characterizes the life consecrated to God”.

¹³ Cfr. *STh* III q. 82, a. 1: “[S]uch is the dignity of this sacrament [the Eucharist] that it is performed only as in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*). Now whoever performs any act in another’s stead, must do so by the power bestowed by such a one. But as the power of receiving this sacrament is conceded by Christ to the baptized person, so likewise the power of consecrating this sacrament on Christ’s behalf (*in persona Christi*) is bestowed upon the priest at his ordination: for thereby he is put upon a level with them to whom the Lord said (Luke xxii.19): *Do this for a commemoration of Me*. Therefore, it must be said that it belongs to priests to accomplish this sacrament.” In the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, as Vatican II’s Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests notes, priests in fact “fulfil their greatest *munus*.” Cfr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (hereafter *PO*) 13 (AAS 58 [1966], 1011-1013). I have deliberately left the term *munus* untranslated. “Task,” the translation offered on the Vatican website, is arguably inadequate. As Janet E. Smith writes in pointing out the shortcomings of “duty” as a translation: “One who knows classical Latin would as readily translate *munus* as “gift,” “wealth and riches,” “honor,” or “responsibility” as “duty.” Other English translations commonly used are “role,” “task,” “mission,” “office,” and “function”; indeed all of these are on occasion legitimate translations, and on a few occasions the word embraces all of these connotations” (J.E. SMITH, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1991, 137-38). For a fuller discussion of the concept of *munus*, cfr. *ibidem*, 136-40. For a book-length study of the theology of *munus*, cfr. M. PINET, *La notion de munus au Concile Vatican II et après*, Lateran University Press, Rome 2021.

or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”¹⁴ This same nuptial symbolism enters into the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. Thus, I argue, while priestly celibacy is not strictly necessary in order to confect the Eucharist since participation in Christ’s Priesthood by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders constitutes the necessary and sufficient condition in this regard, a form of life characterized by celibacy nonetheless serves to shed an existential light on the nuptial significance of priesthood inasmuch as in confecting the Eucharist, a priest is in some way (*quodammodo*) identified with Christ.¹⁵ A certain fittingness attends priestly celibacy in this context.

I. PARTICIPATION IN CHRIST PRIESTHOOD

In his commentary on Boethius’s *De hebdomadibus*, Thomas prefaces his remarks about participation with what Rudi A. te Velde describes as “a kind of etymological explanation.”¹⁶ Thomas writes that “to participate is as it were to receive part [of something] (*quasi partem capere*).”¹⁷ He elaborates by explaining that when something receives in a particular way what belongs to something else universally, the former is said to participate in the latter.¹⁸ According to this understanding of participation the participating subject possesses a characteristic or perfection only in a partial or particular manner. As te Velde puts it, “The subject is not identical with the perfection it possesses, which leaves the possibility open for other subjects to share in that same perfection.”¹⁹

Thomas identifies three modes of participation although, as Daniel D. De Haan notes, he “does not present any criteria to showcase the principled characteristics for each of these three modes of participa-

¹⁴ Biblical quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2004.

¹⁵ Cfr. *STh* III, q. 83, a. 1, ad 3.

¹⁶ R.A. TE VELDE, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas*, Brill, Leiden-New York-Köln 1995, 11.

¹⁷ *In de heb.*, l. 2 (accessed 02/02/2022 at <http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/cbh.html#84829>). My translation.

¹⁸ Cfr. *ibidem*.

¹⁹ TE VELDE, *Participation and Substantiality*, 11.

tion.”²⁰ The first mode is evidenced in the case of the relations obtaining between genus, species, and individual. This mode has generally been interpreted as a logical or conceptual participation rather than as a real one.²¹ Thus man is said to participate in animal since, as te Velde paraphrases Thomas’s formulation, “man does not possess the intelligible content of animal in all its amplitude and extension.”²² In a similar way Socrates participates in man since no individual man exhausts the common nature of the species. Indeed, in addition to the common nature of the species, each individual possesses something else that differentiates him from other members of the species.²³ The second mode of participation, ontological or real, is instanced in the case of a subject participating in an accident and of matter participating in form. Once again what is universal in terms of its intellectual content receives

²⁰ D.D. DE HAAN, *Aquinas on Actus Essendi and the Second Mode of Participation*, «The Thomist» 82 (2018) 575. De Haan endorses the view that the three modes of participation identified by Thomas in his commentary on Boethius’s *De hebdomadibus* “are in some sense [...] canonical” (*ibidem*). In other words, “All other orders or cases of participation identified by Aquinas can be analyzed in terms of these three modes of participation” (*ibidem*).

²¹ On this point cfr. J.A. MITCHELL, *Aquinas on Esse Commune and the First Mode of Participation*, «The Thomist» 82 (2018) 561-64; TE VELDE, *Participation and Substantiality*, 76-82; and J.F. WIPPELL, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2000, 96-97.

²² TE VELDE, *Participation and Substantiality*, 12. Thomas writes: “[H]omo dicitur participare animal, quia non habet rationem animalis secundum totam communitatem” (*In de hebd.*, l. 2).

²³ Jason A. Mitchell writes that “Participated humanity, for example, is formally identical in all men, but really multiplied in each individual human being” (MITCHELL, *Aquinas on Esse Commune and the First Mode of Participation*, 561-62). Cfr. *In I Metaph.*, l. 10 [154]: “For the Form or Idea [of man] is the specific nature itself by which there exists *man* essentially. But an individual is man by participation inasmuch as the specific nature [man] is participated in by this designated matter. For that which is something in its entirety does not participate in it but is essentially identical with it, whereas that which is not something in its entirety but has this other thing joined to it, is said properly to participate in that thing. Thus, if heat were a self-subsistent heat, it would not be said to participate in heat, because it would contain nothing but heat. But since fire is something other than heat, it is said to participate in heat.” The translation employed here is taken from the *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, trans. J.P. ROWAN, Dumb Ox Books, Notre Dame 1995.

a particular determination: substantial or accidental form is determined to this or that subject.²⁴ As te Velde explains, “The reason for speaking of participation is that the form, which – simply viewed in itself – can be shared in by any number of different subjects, is restricted by this particular subject or instance of matter in which it is received.”²⁵ The third mode of participation, which again is real rather than a merely conceptual one, is that of an effect in its cause, especially when the effect does not match the power of its cause (*non adaequat virtutem suae causae*).²⁶ Thomas offers the Dionysian example of the sunlight as participated by the air, which does not receive this light according to the brightness (*claritas*) that it exhibits in the sun. It receives in a diminished way what exists in its fullness in the sun.

The first and third modes of participation are of particular interest when considering Thomas’s understanding of the ordained priesthood as a participation in the Priesthood of Christ, an understanding that is in evidence at *STh* III, q. 22, a. 4. With regard to the first mode it is clear that, on account of the hypostatic union, Christ’s priesthood can be said to possess the intelligible content of priesthood in its fullness. This point is borne out by the first article in the question devoted to Christ’s Priesthood. There we read that “The office proper to a priest is to be a mediator between God and the people.”²⁷ On the one hand, he bestows divine things (*divina*) on the people.²⁸ This order of descending mediation is clearly operative in the case of Christ for “through Him are gifts bestowed on men, according to 2 Pet. i. 4: *By Whom* (i.e. Christ) *He hath given us most great and precious promises, that by these you may be made partakers of the Divine Nature* (*divinae consortes naturae*).”²⁹ On the other hand,

²⁴ Cfr. *In de hebd.*, l. 2.

²⁵ TE VELDE, *Participation and Substantiality*, 14.

²⁶ *In de hebd.*, l. 2.

²⁷ *STh* III, q. 22, a. 1.

²⁸ The word *sacerdos* is derived from *sacra dans*, which signifies “bestowing sacred things” (*ibidem*). Thus the meaning of ‘priest’ (*sacerdos*) is “a giver of sacred things” (*ibidem*).

²⁹ *Ibidem*. The reference to 2 Pet. 1:4 alerts the reader who is familiar with Thomas that he is talking about grace, for grace “is nothing short of a partaking of the Divine Nature” (*STh* I-II, q. 112, a. 1). 2 Pet. 1:4 is, as Daniel A. Keating puts it, “the biblical medium, as it were,” of Thomas’s teaching on grace (D.A. KEATING, *Justification, Sanctification*

appeal to Heb. 5:1 – “*Every high-priest taken from among men is ordained for men in the things that appertain to God, that he may offer up gifts and sacrifices for sins*”³⁰ – establishes that the priest is one who “offers up the people’s prayers to God, and, in a manner, makes satisfaction to God for their sins.”³¹ This order of ascending mediation is perfectly fulfilled in Christ in reconciling the human race to God, as indicated in Col. 1:19 and 20: “*In Him (i.e. Christ) it hath well pleased (the Father) that all fullness should dwell, and through Him to reconcile all things unto Himself.*”³² It is precisely with regard to this ascending mediation – the redemptive aspect, as it were – that celibacy is befitting.

In explaining how Christ communicates His Priesthood to men, Thomas has recourse to the analogy of the sun that “gives but does not receive light”³³ and of fire that “gives but does not receive heat.”³⁴ Implicit in this assertion is that both the priest of the Old Law who was a figure of Christ and the priest of the New Law who “works in

and Divinization in Thomas Aquinas in T. WEINANDY, D.A. KEATING, J. YOCUM (eds.), *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction*, T&T Clark, London-New York 2004, 154). For a treatment of grace as a participation that brings out the rootedness of Thomas’s teaching in the biblical text, cfr. K.E. O’REILLY, *The Hermeneutics of Knowing and Willing in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Peeters, Leuven 2013, 135-42. Grace pertains to the New Law, which Thomas describes as “chiefly the grace itself of the Holy Ghost, which is given to those who believe in Christ” (*STh I-II*, q. 106, a. 1). As such the New Law is principally a law that is inscribed on the hearts of believers and only secondarily is it a written law. It is surely of no small importance that the sacraments, instituted by Christ as means “whereby we obtain grace” (*STh I-II*, q. 108, a. 2), also pertain to the New Law: the *sacra* that descend from God to the people through the mediation of the priest include both Word and Sacrament. As deriving from the one divine source they are intimately related to each other. The following words, penned by Avery Dulles, with reference to Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s theology of priesthood, could equally well be applied to Thomas: “Word and sacrament are inseparable. The eucharist itself, as a powerful form of the word, fulfils the gospel by rendering the paschal mystery present” (A. DULLES, *The Priestly Office: A Theological Reflection*, Paulist Press, New York-Mahwah 1997, 22).

³⁰ *STh III*, q. 22, a. 1.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *STh III*, q. 22, a. 4.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

His person³⁵ participate in Christ's Priesthood according to the third mode, namely that of an effect in its cause.³⁶ Reflection on the third mode of participation as illustrated by the air's illumination by the sunlight affords some insight into the reality of the ordained priesthood as a participation in Christ's Priesthood.

Just as the illuminated air is dependent in the order of efficient causality on some principle, namely the sun, to receive a *participatio* (light), so too the ordained priesthood is dependent by means of sacramental character on Christ as "the fountain-head of the entire priesthood (*fons totius sacerdoti*)."³⁷ Participation in Christ's Priesthood, as cause, is the fruit of the sacramental character, as effect, conferred by the Sacrament of Holy Orders. As in the case of sacramental character in general, the character imparted by Holy Orders "is specially the character of Christ, in whose character the faithful are likened by reason of the sacramental characters, which are nothing else than certain participations of Christ's Priesthood (*quaedam participationes sacerdoti Christi*), flowing from Christ Himself."³⁸ Thomas defines character as "a certain (*quaedam*) spiritual

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ Gregory T. Doolan highlights a number of elements regarding the third mode of participation on the basis of the example of the air's illumination by the sunlight, the illustration employed by Thomas in his commentary on Boethius's *De hebdomadibus*. Cfr. G.T. DOOLAN, *Aquinas on Esse Subsistens and the Third Mode of Participation*, «The Thomist» 82 (2018) 634-636.

³⁷ *STh* III, q. 22, a. 4.

³⁸ *STh* III, q. 63, a. 3. Concerning character in general, Thomas writes: "[T]he sacraments of the New Law produce a character, in so far as by them we are deputed to the worship of God according to the rite of the Christian religion. Wherefore Dionysius (*Eccl. Hier.* ii), after saying that God *by a kind of sign grants a share (participatio) of Himself to those that approach Him*, adds *by making them Godlike and communicators of Divine gifts* (*perficiens eum divinum et communicatorem divinorum*). Now the worship of God consists either in receiving Divine gifts, or in bestowing them on others. And for both these purposes some power is needed: for to bestow something on others, active power is necessary; and in order to receive, we need a passive power. Consequently, a character signifies a certain spiritual power ordained unto things pertaining to this Divine worship." For a discussion of sacramental character as ordained to worship, cfr. P. SYSSOEV, *Le caractère sacramental comme ordination au culte chez saint Thomas d'Aquin*, «Revue Thomiste» 155 (2015) 383-422.

power ordained unto things pertaining to the Divine worship.”³⁹ This spiritual power assimilates the ordained minister to Christ the Priest, just as Christ is “*the figure* or *χαρακτήρ* of the substance of the Father (Heb. i.3).”⁴⁰ To be more precise, just as the illuminated air participates in a likeness of the sun by means of the light that illuminates it, so too in an analogous manner sacramental character participates in a likeness of its cause, namely Christ the Priest. It does not participate in its nature since Christ’s Priesthood is predicated upon the hypostatic union.⁴¹

This section has briefly outlined Thomas’s doctrine of participation as encountered in his commentary on Boethius’s *De hebdomadibus* and employed this doctrine to elucidate the relationship between Christ’s Priesthood, on the one hand, and the priesthood of the ordained minister, on the other hand. In brief, Christ possesses the intelligible content of the priesthood in its fullness while ordained ministers participate in His Priesthood as effects participate in the reality of their causes. The analogy of the illumination of the air by the light that emanates from the sun helps to elucidate the nature of this participatory relationship which is effected by the sacramental character proper to Holy Orders.

As already stated, the participation in Christ’s Priesthood by way of sacramental character does not admit of degrees. Indeed, the character remains even in a soul that lacks grace. Thus, for example, wicked

³⁹ *STh* III, q. 63, a. 2.

⁴⁰ *STh* III, q. 63, a. 1, ad 2.

⁴¹ The line of argumentation presented here is based on DOOLAN, *Aquinas on Esse Subsistens and the Third Mode of Participation*, 635. Here Doolan argues that the example of the illumination of the air by the sun affords a certain understanding of what Thomas deems to be entailed by the third mode of participation. Doolan explains: “The effect by means of an inherent *participation*, participates in a likeness of its cause, not in the nature of that cause. That nature in itself remains unparticipated. Why, then, does Thomas present this third mode in his *De hebdomadibus* commentary, with the unqualified wording that “an effect is said to participate [in] its cause” rather than in a *likeness* of the cause? Here, I think an important distinction needs to be made regarding the causality at work in this third mode of participation, which entails both formal and efficient causality. According to the order of formal causality, the participated cause is the exemplar of its effect and, as such, is extrinsic to its effect, just as the sun is extrinsic to the air it illuminates. The nature of the cause thus remains in itself unparticipated; instead, the effect participates that nature according to a likeness, just as air participates in a likeness of the sun through the light that it receives.”

ministers are still able to confer the Sacraments instrumentally.⁴² With regard to the issue under discussion in this article, whether a priest is celibate or not makes no difference when it comes to conferring the Sacraments. At the same time however, as Paul VI emphasizes in his encyclical devoted to this issue, namely *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*,⁴³ “Christ remained throughout His whole life in the state of celibacy, which signified His total dedication to the service of God and men,”⁴⁴ an idea to which the next section turns. Christ’s celibacy as the form of His charity and sacrifice as it were – which charity and sacrifice pertain to the ascending aspect of His priestly mediation exercised for our redemption – furnishes moreover an existential exemplar to be imitated by the ordained priest. By this imitation the priest participates in the dignity and mission of Christ “the Mediator and eternal Priest”⁴⁵ in a way that is not possible for one who is not free from the bonds of flesh and blood.⁴⁶ In this respect the celibate priest participates more perfectly in the existential mode of Christ’s priesthood. This greater perfection can be illuminated by pertinent comments made by Thomas in his commentary on the Letter to the Colossians, where he offers a division of participation which differs from that found in his commentary on Boethius’s *De hebdomadibus*.

II. PARTICIPATION IN THE FORM OF CHRIST’S CHARITY AND SACRIFICE

In his commentary on the Letter to the Colossians, Thomas offers a division of participation which differs from that found in his commentary on Boethius’s *De hebdomadibus* but which nevertheless overlaps with

⁴² Cfr. *STh* III, q. 66, a. 5; a. 5, ad 3; and a. 6. For a discussion of the Sacraments in general as instrumental causes, cfr. R.M. LYNCH, *The Cleansing of the Heart: The Sacraments as Instrumental Causes in the Thomistic Tradition*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington 2017. For a discussion of this doctrine as it appears in the *Summa Theologiae* in particular, cfr. *ibidem*, 120-28.

⁴³ Hereafter referred to as *SC* (AAS 59 [1969], 657-697).

⁴⁴ *SC* 21 (AAS 59 [1967], 665).

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ The latter might participate more perfectly in other ways in the reality of Christ’s priesthood than the former: he might, for example, be more obedient or more humble, and so on.

it inasmuch as, in the words of Jason A. Mitchell, these three ways “can be seen as belonging primarily to the second mode of participation, which relates a subject to a form.”⁴⁷ In his commentary on the Letter to the Colossians Thomas writes that a thing (*aliquid*) can participate in by another (*ab alio participare*) in three ways, “one way, receiving the property of its nature; another way, insofar as it can receive it by way of cognitive intention; and another way insofar as it can somehow serve the power (*virtus*) of a thing. The first is greater than the second, and the second [greater than] the third.”⁴⁸ Thomas illustrates the foregoing modes of participation with the example of a *medicus* who either receives the art of medicine in himself or who receives knowledge of it or who serves it. The three ways of participating are intimately related inasmuch as they involve the reception of one and the same *aliquid* by another, albeit in different modes.

Jason A. Mitchell offers a concrete illustration of how these three ways can be understood to belong primarily to the second mode of participation: “[A] doctor of medicine (M.D.) or Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (D.O.) properly possesses the habit *in se*, a pharmacist has knowledge of the medical art, and a nurse (L.P.N.) serves the medical art.”⁴⁹ It can nevertheless be said, however, that the doctor of medicine, as well as possessing the habit *in se*, also has knowledge of the medical art and, in addition, serves this art. In his own person he participates the art of medicine in these three intimately related modes.⁵⁰ Such also I argue to be the case, *mutatis mutandis*, with regard to the ordained minister’s participation in the form of Christ’s priestly existence.

⁴⁷ MITCHELL, *Aquinas on Esse Commune and the First Mode of Participation* 546, n. 16.

⁴⁸ *Super Col.*, c. 1, lect. 4 (Aquinas, *Super Epistolam B. Pauli ad Colossenses lectura* [accessed 23/08/2019 at <http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ccl.html#87849>): “Triplíciter enim aliquid potest ab alio participare: uno modo, accipiéndo proprietatem naturae eius; alio modo, ut recipiat ipsum per modum intentionis cognitivae; alio modo, ut deserviat aliquiditer eius virtutis.” Translation by MITCHELL, *Aquinas on Esse Commune and the First Mode of Participation*, 546.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ Indeed, the same point can be made with regard to the pharmacist and the nurse, each in their own way according to the emphases that Mitchell discerns and both ordered to the art of the medical doctor.

By virtue of his ontological assimilation to Christ's Priesthood by his priestly ordination, the minister is *ipso facto* placed in a role of sacrificial service to the Church, the Spouse of Christ, regardless of whether the minister is celibate or married. Obviously, this ontological assimilation cannot admit of more or less. The perfection of the mode of priestly existence however depends in the first instance on the extent to which the mode of Christ's priestly existence is received by way of cognitive intention. This intention participates in a cognitive mode in the form of Christ's priestly existence.⁵¹ Insofar as what is received by cognitive intention then informs the existence of the ordained minister,⁵² it serves the *virtus* of his priesthood which manifests itself in pastoral charity. Sacrifice, a special act that belongs to the virtue of religion,⁵³ has a particular import here, bearing in mind that inasmuch as the acts of other virtues are directed to the end of sacrifice, they partake "somewhat (*quodammodo*) of its species."⁵⁴ Humility and obedience, listed at *PO* 15 as virtues that are indispensable for the ministry of priests, furnish two examples.⁵⁵ By these two virtues "priests conform themselves to Christ. They make their own the sentiments of Jesus Christ who "emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant," becoming obedient even to death (Phil 2:7-9)." By these two virtues the priest participates in the form of Christ's priestly existence, which is intrinsically sacrificial in tenor.

Celibacy, which is an intrinsic element of the form of Christ's charity and sacrifice, is to be viewed in these terms. The ordained priest who is celibate participates in something that enters into the constitution of the concrete manner in which Christ conducted his priestly existence

⁵¹ Here we are in the realm of formal causality. For a treatment of the notion of cognitive participation, albeit in the context of the eternal law, cfr. J. RZIH, *Perfecting Human Actions: Thomas Aquinas on Human Participation in Eternal Law*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2009, 184-256.

⁵² Cfr. *STh* I, q. 79, *sed contra*: "The speculative intellect by extension becomes practical" (*intellectus speculativus per extensionem fit practicus*). Thomas borrows the idea from ARISTOTLE, *De Anima* III, 10.

⁵³ Cfr. *STh* II-II, q. 85, a. 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ AAS 58 (1966), 1014-1015.

here on earth.⁵⁶ While celibacy is not a virtue but rather a state of life dependent on a promise made to a bishop, it nevertheless serves the *virtus* proper to the priesthood. This participation in an element constitutive of concrete form of existence in which Christ lived out his High Priesthood must therefore necessarily be regarded as a perfection of this same aspect of the ordained minister's priesthood. Among other things it serves the sacrificial character of priestly *virtus* in freeing the priest from the bonds of flesh and blood in order to dedicate himself to the service of the Church.⁵⁷ By virtue of the sacramental character imparted by the Sacrament of Holy Orders all priests, celibate and married, are placed in a relationship of service to the Church. A nuptial dimension necessarily attends all priestly existence by virtue of this ontological participation in Christ's Priesthood. When celebrating the Eucharist however the celibate priest, acting *in persona Christi capitis*, can offer up his whole life as a holocaust while representing Christ in His spousal relationship to the Church. The directness and the clarity of this holocaust escape the married priest since he has also committed his whole being to his wife and he devotes himself to whatever children he may be blessed with. The nuptial dimension of the ordained priesthood vis-à-vis the Church, which is necessarily present when any priest celebrates the Eucharistic Sacrifice, is thus thrown into greater relief by his celibate state of life. Moreover, as will be argued in the final section of this article, priestly celibacy serves to throw an existential light on the nuptial significance of the Eucharist.

Paul VI in effect asserts this understanding in *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*. According to the Pontiff we witness in Christ an intimate link between celibacy as a constitutive aspect of the form of His earthly existence, on the one hand, and His Priesthood, on the other hand: Christ's celibacy, he writes, is wholly in accord with His mission as "Mediator between heaven and earth, between the Father and the human race."⁵⁸ With re-

⁵⁶ The priestly task undertaken by Christ is done so in perfect obedience to the divine will. Its execution in terms of a celibate existence is necessarily according to the form of a life that is perfectly attuned to the divine will since human nature in its entirety has been assumed by the Person of the Word.

⁵⁷ Some other virtues are configured accordingly. Thus, for example, the celibate priest's obedience and his attitude to temporal goods are not compromised by commitments to his family.

⁵⁸ *SC* 21 (AAS 59 [1967], 665).

spect to Christ's lifelong celibacy itself, Paul VI argues that it "signified His total dedication to the service of God and men."⁵⁹ Celibacy "signifies a love without reservations; it stimulates to a charity which is open to all."⁶⁰ The celibate priest not only participates in Christ's priestly office but also shares with Him "His very condition of living."⁶¹ In a statement that communicates something of Thomas's participatory construal of the ordained priesthood, the Supreme Pontiff writes that the close connection between celibacy and priesthood "is reflected in those whose fortune it is to share in the dignity and mission of the Mediator and eternal Priest"⁶² and posits that "this sharing will be more perfect the freer the sacred minister is from the bonds of flesh and blood."⁶³

Paul VI contends that is possible to understand the Christian priesthood "only in the light of the newness of Christ, the Supreme Pontiff and eternal Priest, who instituted the priesthood of the ministry as a real participation in His own unique priesthood."⁶⁴ Christ, who "introduced into time and into the world a new form of life which is sublime and divine and which radically transforms the human condition"⁶⁵ therefore furnishes the model and supreme ideal of the ordained priest. This new form of life is one in which, in contrast to marriage, a man's existence adheres "wholly and directly to the Lord, and is concerned only with Him and with His affairs."⁶⁶ With regard to the relationship between the priesthood and the Eucharist, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* tells us that "acting in the person of Christ, the priest unites himself most intimately with the offering, and places on the altar his entire life, which bears the marks of the holocaust."⁶⁷

This section has argued that the ordained priest's participation in the form of Christ's priestly existence in the sense of "receiving the

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ SC 24 (AAS 59 [1967], 667).

⁶¹ SC 23 (AAS 59 [1967], 666).

⁶² SC 21 (AAS 59 [1967], 665).

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ SC 19 (AAS 59 [1967], 664).

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ SC 20 (AAS 59 [1967], 665).

⁶⁷ SC 29 (AAS 59 [1967], 669).

property of its nature,” is a function (1) of his having received it by “cognitive intention” and, (2) of his service of the *virtus* proper to the form of life in which he participates by way of cognitive intention.⁶⁸ The latter however is inconceivable without the particular state of life constituted by celibacy which, to repeat Paul VI, furnishes an intrinsic element of the “assimilation to the form of charity and sacrifice proper to Christ our Savior.”⁶⁹ Celibacy, according to the argument being put forward here, conforms the ordained priest more perfectly to the form of Christ’s priestly existence.

At this point we can say, on the basis of Paul VI’s encyclical in particular, that imitation of Christ’s celibacy has a profound import for the priest. Stated briefly, it conduces to the perfection of the form of life that attends priesthood. In other words, it constitutes an intrinsic part of the “assimilation to the form of charity and sacrifice proper to Christ our Savior.”⁷⁰ One might however object that this observation could be made equally well with regard to the religious state. John Paul II, commenting on the evangelical counsels, tells us that they “call for and make manifest in those who accept them *an explicit desire to be totally conformed to him*.”⁷¹ The way of living characterized by the evangelical counsels can be described as divine since “it was embraced by him, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the Only-Begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit.”⁷² Christian tradition has consequently always spoken of the “*objective superiority of the consecrated life*.”⁷³ Intrinsic to this “*objective superiority*” is chastity lived out in the celibate state.⁷⁴ In what way, one might wonder, does priestly celibacy differ from the evangelical counsel proper to the religious state?

⁶⁸ The *virtus* (translated as ‘power’ or ‘virtue’) proper to priestly existence is to be distinguished from sacramental character as a certain (*quaedam*) spiritual *potentia* (also translated as ‘power’). Cfr. *STh* III, q. 63, a. 2: “[A] character signifies a certain spiritual power ordained unto things pertaining to the Divine worship” (*character importat quandam potentiam spiritualem ordinatam ad ea quae sunt divini cultus*).

⁶⁹ *SC* 25 (AAS 59 [1967], 667).

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* 18 (AAS [1996], 392-393).

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ Cfr. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 915.

The final section of this article in effect brings together the two modes of participation in Christ's Priesthood discussed in this article thus far: the ontological participation of the ordained priest in Christ's Priesthood by virtue of the sacramental character impressed on his soul by the Sacrament of Holy Orders and the existential participation in the form of Christ's charity and sacrifice by way of celibacy. This last part of the argument unfolded in this article seeks to clarify the distinctiveness of priestly celibacy in terms of the nuptial imagery which the New Testament employs in order to portray the relationship between Christ and His Church. In one commentator's view, St. Paul regarded the torture and crucifixion of Jesus on Calvary as "nothing less than an expression of *spousal love*."⁷⁵ In this marriage between God and man, prophesied in the Old Testament,⁷⁶ Jesus is the Divine Bridegroom and the Church is the Bride. The Eucharist, which re-presents the once-and-for-all Sacrifice of Christ for us on the Cross, constitutes in turn "Christ's bridal gift to the Church."⁷⁷ Although priestly celibacy is not required for confecting the Eucharist – the ontological configuration to Christ in His Hypostatic Union effected by Holy Orders alone is required – it turns out that it nevertheless serves to highlight its nuptial significance, which is connected primarily with Christ's redemptive offering. A celibate priesthood therefore illumines the nuptial symbolism of the Eucharist in a way not possible for a non-celibate priesthood.

III. PRIESTLY CELIBACY AND THE NUPTIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EUCHARIST

The New Testament employs nuptial imagery to represent the relationship between Christ and the Church: Christ is the bridegroom and the Church is His bride. As Laurent Touze points out, this imagery has its roots in the Old Covenant. Indeed, the notion of covenant is one of the keystones of Scripture, one particularly necessary for any discourse concerning nuptiality.⁷⁸ In the New Testament the

⁷⁵ B. PITRE, *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*, Image, New York 2014, 2.

⁷⁶ Cfr. *ibidem*, 17-20.

⁷⁷ D. CONNELL, *Women Priests: Why Not?*, «Osservatore Romano English Edition» (7 March 1988) 7.

⁷⁸ Cfr. L. TOUZE, *L'avenir du célibat sacerdotal et sa logique sacramentelle*, Parole et Silence,

association between covenant and marriage is extended to embrace the notion of sacrifice since, as Touze observes, “the covenant is no longer a pact sealed by an external sacrifice but rather a covenant of love requiring a sacrifice which “manifests a maximum of love [or charity],”⁷⁹ a maximum which is instantiated concretely in the sacrifice of the bridegroom for his bride.”⁸⁰ Eph. 5:25-27 describes this covenant, effected by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, in the following words: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” In His death on the cross, therefore, Jesus is joined to His wife, the Church, in an everlasting marriage covenant.⁸¹ It is on this account that sacramental marriage symbolizes the union between Christ and His Church, effected through the blood of the cross.⁸² In

Lethielleux 2009, 75-76: “La nuptialité dans la Bible est un développement, une précision du concept premier d’alliance” qui est “une des clefs de voûte de l’édifice scripturaire, une clef spécialement nécessaire pour construire un discours sur la nuptialité.” Brant Pitre, commenting on the understanding of the covenant at Mount Sinai espoused by the prophets, writes : “[W]hat happened at Sinai was not just the giving of a set of laws, but the spiritual wedding of God and Israel. From this perspective, the God of Israel is not only the Lord of creation; he is the Bridegroom. Likewise the twelve tribes of Jacob are not just a people; together they constitute the bride of God” (*Jesus the Bridegroom*, 11). In support of this point, Pitre cites Hos 2:14, 15; Jer 2:1-2; and, Ez 16:8). The confines of this article do not permit a treatment of the theme of nuptiality in Scripture and Tradition. For such a treatment, cfr. TOUZE, *L’avenir du célibat sacerdotal et sa logique sacramentelle*, 75-111; and, PITRE, *Jesus the Bridegroom*.

⁷⁹ Recall that celibacy is an element of the form of Christ’s charity and sacrifice.

⁸⁰ TOUZE, *L’avenir du célibat sacerdotal et sa logique sacramentelle*, 80: “[L]’alliance n’est plus seulement un pacte scellé par un sacrifice extérieur, mais une alliance d’amour requérant un sacrifice qui « manifeste un maximum d’amour », maximum concrétisé dans le sacrifice de l’époux pour la vie de son épouse.”

⁸¹ Cfr. PITRE, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 113.

⁸² Cfr. LG 11: “Finally, Christian spouses, in virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony, whereby they signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and His Church (Cfr. Rom; 8:17; Col. 1:24; 2 Tim. 2:11-12; 1 Pet. 4:13), help each other to attain to holiness in their married life and in the rearing and education of their children. By reason of their state and rank in life they have their own special gift among the people of God (Cfr. 1 Cor. 7:7)” (AAS 57 [1965], 15).

other words the union between Christ and His Church is expressed in nuptial terms.⁸³

What however is the significance of nuptial symbolism for priestly celibacy?⁸⁴ The key to answering this question is the fact that, as Desmond Connell notes, nuptial symbolism also enters into the signification of the Eucharist, “the sacrament *par excellence* of Christ’s union with the Church.”⁸⁵ In the Eucharist we are united with Christ by the sacramental eating of His flesh, which is food indeed, and drinking of His blood, which is drink indeed.⁸⁶ This meal does not however simply constitute a sacred meal by means of which Christ’s union with the Church is perfected; it is a meal that represents sacramentally His sacrifice on the Cross whereby He purified her and prepared for Himself a spotless

⁸³ Cfr. PITRE, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 7-27, for a treatment of how the expression in nuptial terms of this union between Christ and His Church is prefigured in the Old Testament. A significant text in this regard is Hos 2:15-20: “[S]he shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. “And in that day, says the LORD, you will call me, ‘My husband,’ and no longer will you call me, ‘My Ba’al.’ For I will remove the names of the Ba’als from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. And I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.” Cfr. also Is 54:5-8, 10; Jer 31:31-32, 34; Ezek 16:16, 62-63. As Pitre writes, “Although in Jewish Scripture the people of Israel betray their divine Bridegroom in repeated acts of spiritual adultery, *God does not give up on his bride, but promises to one day forgive her sins by establishing a new marriage covenant with her*” (PITRE, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 17).

⁸⁴ The focus of this article, namely priestly celibacy, precludes a treatment of the notion of nuptiality with respect to sacramental marriage. For an extended treatment of marriage in this regard, cfr. A. SCOLA, *The Nuptial Mystery*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids – Cambridge 2005. Scola remarks that indissolubility is “ultimately what makes Christian marriage a sacrament, that is, an objective and subjective expression (*ex opere operato et ex opere operationis*) of nuptiality” (*ibidem*, 104-5). He continues: “In fact, only by its being indissoluble does marriage participate in the nuptial sacrifice that the Word incarnate makes of himself on the cross to his immaculate bride, thereby revealing the essence of the spousal love that circulates in the Trinity” (*ibidem*, 105).

⁸⁵ CONNELL, *Women Priests*, 6.

⁸⁶ Cfr. *ibidem*. Cfr. Jn 6:55.

Bride.⁸⁷ As Connell writes, “The Eucharist is Christ’s bridal gift to the Church: it expresses and effects the perfection of his union with the Church in the sacrifice of his body and blood.”⁸⁸ Of course, as Thomas points out, “The Sacrifice which is offered every day in the Church is not distinct from that which Christ Himself offered, but is a commemoration thereof.”⁸⁹ He cites St. Augustine in support: “Wherefore Augustine says (*De Civ. Dei*. X. 20): *Christ Himself both is the priest who offers it and the victim: the sacred token of which He wished to be the daily Sacrifice of the Church.*”⁹⁰

The nuptial symbolism of the Eucharist lends support to the contention that celibacy is fitting for those ordained to the priesthood since, as Thomas writes, “such is the dignity of this sacrament that it is performed only as in the person of Christ.”⁹¹ Elsewhere Thomas notes that “the priest [...] bears Christ’s image, in Whose image and by Whose power he pronounces the words of consecration [...] And so, in a certain way (*quodammodo*), the priest and the victim are one and the same.”⁹² Thus, in confecting the Eucharist, the ordained minister is in some way (*quodammodo*) identified with Christ. This is precisely the point of the expression *in persona Christi* as applied to the priestly ministry. As Thomas J. McGovern writes: “Precisely because the mediation, priesthood and

⁸⁷ Cfr. Eph. 5:25-27.

⁸⁸ CONNELL, *Women Priests*, 7.

⁸⁹ *STh* III, q. 22, a. 3, ad 2.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*. On Christ’s sacrifice and the Eucharist, cfr. M. LEVERING, *Sacrifice and Community: Jewish Offering and Christian Eucharist*, Blackwell, Oxford 2005, 82-92. Levering expresses the point just made as follows: “There is only one sacrifice, Christ’s, through which human beings receive true communion in the forgiveness of sins. Christ makes clear to his disciples at the Last Supper that what he is offering is none other than “my body which is given for you” and “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:19-20). In offering his sacrificial body and blood to his disciples at the Last Supper, he witnesses to the sacramental mode in which he makes his sacrifice present to his Church” (*ibidem.*, 84-5). Cfr. also JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 12: “Jesus did not simply state that what he was giving them to eat and drink was his body and his blood; he also expressed *its sacrificial meaning* and made sacramentally present his sacrifice which would soon be offered on the Cross for the salvation of all” (AAS 95 [2003], 441).

⁹¹ *STh* III, q. 82, a. 1.

⁹² *STh* III, q. 83, a. 1, ad 3. Translation slightly emended.

sacrifice of Christ are unique, the actions of the priest are not added to or juxtaposed to the actions by which Christ gathers and sanctifies his Church. Rather they are instrumental actions by means of which Christ himself continues to exercise his priesthood.”⁹³ Priestly celibacy throws as it were an existential light on this ontological fact in order to bring it into greater relief. Although celibacy is not required for sacramental efficacy in confecting the Eucharist, it nevertheless witnesses to the nuptial symbolism of the Eucharist.⁹⁴ The Eucharist itself in turn demands celibacy as the most fitting state for a man who celebrates it. A married priest can of course consecrate validly but the fact of being married arguably obscures the spousal symbolism that is intrinsic to the Eucharist, Christ’s bridal gift to the Church which expresses and perfects His union with her. By the same token the married state dims the nuptial aspect of the priesthood. In contrast, priestly celibacy allows the nuptial symbolism of both Sacraments to shine forth in all its splendour.⁹⁵

⁹³ T.J. MCGOVERN, *Priestly Identity: A Study in the Theology of Priesthood* Wipf and Stock 2010, 79.

⁹⁴ Hints of an understanding of the Eucharist as the wedding banquet of Christ and the Church can be found in the Book of Revelation: “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready [...] And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’” (Rev 19:7-9). While the wedding feast described here is meant to represent the eschatological kingdom of God it is, as Pitre points out, “an allusion to the wedding banquet of the Eucharist, to which Christians on earth (known as the “saints”) are invited” (PITRE, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 145-46). He cites Roch Kereszty in support: “The Eucharistic connotation of the wedding feast [...] is hard to miss. Already in the 50s in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul uses the phrase *deipnon kuriakon* [“supper of the Lord”] to designate the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 11:20)” (R. KERESZTY, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, Hillenbrand, Chicago 2007, 80). In other words, Pitre continues, “the book of Revelation is deliberately describing the heavenly banquet of the kingdom of God in terms that are evocative of the Lord’s Supper, to which Christians are invited and for which they should prepare themselves. This supper is both a participation in heavenly glory and an anticipation of the eternal marriage that will be fulfilled at the end of time” (PITRE, *Jesus the Bridegroom*, 46). Further on Pitre describes the Eucharist as “the wedding banquet at which the Bridegroom Messiah is united to his bride in both body and spirit” (*ibidem*).

⁹⁵ The position argued for in this article ought not to be viewed as being in complete opposition to the practice of the Eastern Churches in allowing a married clergy. As

IV. CONCLUSION

In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, John Paul II asserts that the ultimate motivation for the Church's discipline concerning priestly celibacy resides precisely "in the link between celibacy and sacred ordination, which configures the priest to Jesus Christ the head and spouse of the Church."⁹⁶ He explains that "The Church, as the spouse of Jesus Christ, wishes to be loved by the priest in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ her head and spouse loved her."⁹⁷ Here John Paul II clearly has in mind the idea of celibacy as an element of the form of Christ's charity and sacrifice. Since the priest's identity is "a specific participation in and continuation of Christ himself, the one high priest of the new and eternal covenant"⁹⁸ priestly celibacy properly understood is therefore "the gift of self in and with Christ to his Church and expresses the priest's

Roman Cholij writes in his study of clerical celibacy: "The long tradition of temporary continence in the Eastern churches, together with the other aspects of marriage legislation for Eastern clerics, not only does not deny such an understanding of priestly celibacy but indeed does, in fact support it." Cholij goes on to point out that the Eastern Churches, since the Council of Trullo (convoked towards the end of 691), have "demonstrated the very close tie between celibacy and the priesthood; traditionally, when at least partial celibacy (temporal continence) has not been lived, exercise of the ministry is prohibited. And this on account of the dignity of the priesthood" (R. CHOLIJ, *Clerical Celibacy in East and West*, Fowler Wright, Hertfordshire 1989, 202.) Cholij concludes his study with the observation that the legislation of the Oriental Churches in fact entails a theology of the celibate priesthood, "even if not explicitly or in its totality" (*ibidem*). The divergence between East and West in practice is due to the circumstances of history. In Cholij's estimation, however, "The desirability of celibacy as being the best way of living the priesthood, given the right circumstances, appears to be equally present" (*ibidem*, 203). The recognition that celibacy is the best mode of priestly existence is reflected in the practice of celibate priests alone being ordained bishops and priests not being allowed to marry after their ordination to the priesthood. Paul VI concludes that these facts indicate that "these venerable Churches also possess to a certain extent the principle of a celibate priesthood and even of the appropriateness of celibacy for the Christian priesthood, of which the bishops possess the summit and fullness" (SC 40: AAS 59 [1967], 673).

⁹⁶ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, 29 (AAS 84 [1992], 704).

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 12.

service to the Church in and with the Lord.”⁹⁹ While sacramental ordination objectively imprints the image of Christ on the priest’s soul and thus grants him a participation in Christ’s priesthood regardless of his personal moral qualities, celibacy nevertheless furnishes a means when truly lived whereby the priest becomes conformed to a constitutive element of the form of Christ the High Priest’s charity and sacrifice. Celibacy, therefore, while it does not pertain to what is essential for priesthood in terms of the ministration of the Sacraments, nevertheless (when its demands are lived out earnestly) perfects the form of priestly existence in a way that lies beyond the ken of possibility for a married priest. This point in no way negates the fact that a married priest might well achieve greater perfection than a celibate one in other respects. Celibacy does however offer an objective framework in which, all other things being equal, a greater degree of priestly perfection is possible.

McGovern’s formulation accords with what has been argued in this article by way of appeal to the notion of participation: as a participation in the ontological structure of Christ’s priesthood, the sacramental character conferred by Holy Orders is an objective given that cannot be altered. To the priest alone it belongs to consecrate the Eucharist. Consecration is in effect the highest act proper to the priesthood. As John Paul II writes: “The priest fulfils his principal mission and is manifested in all his fullness when he celebrates the Eucharist.”¹⁰⁰ He adds, however, that “this manifestation is more complete when he himself allows the depth of that mystery to become visible, so that it alone shines forth

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, 29. As Selin comments, the Christological dimension of priestly celibacy, according to which the priest is united to Jesus Christ, “consequently orders him toward ministerial service to the Church (the ecclesiological dimension)” (G. SELIN, *Priestly Celibacy*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington 2016, 92).

¹⁰⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Letter *Dominicae Cenae*, 2 (hereafter *DC*: AAS 72 [1980], 116). This point is a simple application of the metaphysical dictum, *finis est causa omnium causarum* (“the end is the cause of all causes”). Cfr. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Super Sent.*, lib. 1 d. 1 q. 4 a. 2 expos.; Cfr. also *STh* I, q. 5, a. 2 ad 1. It does not however negate the idea that “the prophetic office is more fundamental and more encompassing” (DULLES, *The Priestly Office*, 22). As we read at *PO* 6, “the preaching of the word is needed for the very ministering of the sacraments. They are precisely sacraments of faith, a faith which is born of and nourished by the word” (AAS 58 [1966], 996).

in people's hearts and minds, through his ministry."¹⁰¹ Celibacy, a participation in the form of Christ's priestly existence, thus not only illuminates the meaning of the priesthood but also that of the Eucharist – not surprisingly, given the intimate bond between these two Sacraments.

In the light of the arguments offered in this article, it seems that to move away from the Latin Church's long-standing tradition of priestly celibacy would in the first instance have two intimately related and undesirable consequences: it would obscure the full meaning both of the priesthood and of the Eucharist. Finally, one might signal the implications of the intimate connection between the Eucharist and the Church insofar as priestly celibacy is concerned. The connection between the Eucharist and the Church is famously articulated by Henri de Lubac, as follows: "[T]he Church produces the Eucharist, but the Eucharist also produces the Church."¹⁰² On this basis one might venture that priestly celibacy also possesses an ecclesiological significance such that a change in the Church's discipline would lead to a shift in her self-understanding. That contention must however remain unsubstantiated for the time being.

¹⁰¹ *DC* 2 (AAS 72 [1980], 116). Cfr. *PDV* 23 (AAS 84 [1992], 693): "[T]he priest's pastoral charity not only flows from the Eucharist but finds in the celebration of the Eucharist its highest realization – just as it is from the Eucharist that he receives the grace and obligation to give his whole life a 'sacrificial' dimension."

¹⁰² H. DE LUBAC, *The Splendour of the Church*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1999, 133.