

## Are ‘the Bishops . . . the “High Priests” Who Preside at the Eucharist’?: A Note on the Sources of the Text of *Sensus Fidei*

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In *Sensus Fidei*, n.75, we meet this statement:

The faithful are baptised into the royal priesthood, exercised principally in the Eucharist, and the bishops are the ‘high priests’ who preside at the Eucharist, regularly exercising there their teaching office, also.<sup>1</sup>

It is the middle statement that the bishops are, or are to be understood as, ‘high priests’ in relation to the presidency of the Eucharist that is the concern of this note.

At first sight this would appear to refer to the Letter to the Hebrews, which is the only canonical Christian document that makes reference to the office of high priest as having a place within the New Covenant.<sup>2</sup> However, even a cursory reading of Hebrews shows that it imagines the high priesthood of the Christ to be unique to him precisely because he exercises it alone and that he has, in contrast to other sinful creatures, ‘entered once for all into the Holy Place’ (Heb 9:12). Moreover, the term ‘high priest’ has very specific resonances for all who read the scriptures, for it was a central office of the liturgy of the covenant in which God was present among his people in the tabernacle and later in the temple. Moreover, it has rich echoes in the canonical literature of the New Covenant, not just from the Letter to the Hebrews but from many other places in the Gospels. However, *Sensus Fidei* deliberately uses the plural (and the historical office was always singular) and sees their work as a continuing aspect of the life of the Church, and imagines that it is quoting an authoritative source: hence the use of quotation marks and a footnote, n. 91, after the phrase. That note reads: ‘Cf. *L[umen] G[entium]* 21, 26; *S[acrosanctum] C[oncilium]* 41.’

<sup>1</sup> International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (Rome 2014), n.75; the text used is that on the Vatican’s website.

<sup>2</sup> See Heb 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-5; 5:1, 5, 10; 6:20; 7:26; 8:1, 3; 9:7, 11, 25; and 13:11; all other references in documents in the canonical collection (e.g. Mt 26:51) are to individuals who held the office of high priest in the Jerusalem temple.

Before proceeding further we need to note the ways that ‘high priest’ is translated in the New Testament. The word in Greek is always *archiereus* (in its various cases) and is found on 50 occasions. This same consistency is found in the NRSV which always uses ‘high priest,’ but the Vulgate is not a consistent translation in terms of its translation strategy and uses a variety of terms for this one word in Greek. When translating Matthew it always uses *princeps sacerdotum* (in its various cases);<sup>3</sup> and the same term is used for the one use in Luke at 22:50. Rendering Mark, it used *princeps sacerdotum* at 2:26 but *summus sacerdos* is used on the other seven occasions<sup>4</sup> – and it is this usage that stands behind the standard English rendering of ‘high priest.’ The reverse of this is what we find in Acts. At 23:4 we find *summus sacerdos* and on the other ten occasions *princeps sacerdotum*.<sup>5</sup> However, in both John and Hebrews we find a completely different approach. In these books it is, with one exception, rendered with the word *pontifex*.<sup>6</sup> The one exception is Hebrews 4:14 where it is rendered *pontifex magnus*. This verbal variety will become important for our reading of *Lumen gentium*.

Turning to *Lumen gentium* 21 we find:

In the person of the bishops . . . the Lord Jesus Christ, supreme high priest, is present in the midst of the faithful. Though seated at the right hand of the Father, he is not absent from the assembly of his pontiffs . . . .<sup>7</sup>

This is a statement that the Christ is present in the church in the ministerial priesthood, which is generally accepted Catholic teaching, and then the Lord’s name is glossed with the designation that he is ‘supreme high priest,’ which seems to echo Hebrews, but it is not equivalent to saying that the bishops are to be identified as ‘the high priests’ of the church. The Latin text identifies Jesus as the ‘*Pontifex Summus*’, which can be taken as a direct echo of Hebrews, and then that he is not absent from the congregation in ‘*suorum . . . pontificum*.’<sup>8</sup> The conciliar text is somewhat rhetorical in its notion of the ministerial priesthood – those who have been ordained ‘priests’ (*pontifices* being used as the equivalent of *sacerdotes* and as the common term for *presbyteri* and *episcopi*) – which has

<sup>3</sup> Mt 26:51, 57, 58, 62, 63 and 65.

<sup>4</sup> Mk 14:47, 53, 54, 60, 61, 63 and 66.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 4:6; 5:17, 21; 7:1; 9:1; 19:14; 22:5; 23:2, 5; and 24:1

<sup>6</sup> The word is used on 9 occasions in John (e.g. 11:49) and on 15 occasions in Hebrews (e.g. 2:17).

<sup>7</sup> The translation is taken from A. Flannery ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Dublin 1975). There is a reference to the sermons of Leo the Great (note the misprint in the translation: *magnus* became ‘martyr’) but this does not add any significant information.

<sup>8</sup> The Latin text is that found on the Vatican website.

led it to mention Jesus as the ‘Pontifex Summus’ without sufficient differentiation of terms, and ‘supreme’ could be taken to be the highest in a sequence (i.e. there are ‘high priests’ and ‘the highest high priest’) rather than as a unique high priest beyond, in the sense of Hebrews, any others. But this would be to force the text. Clearly, this passage views the Christ, who is the High Priest, as being present in the church in its ordained ministers especially bishops, but, crucially, it does not make them out to be ‘high priests.’ Given the sensitivity around the question of the relationship of the unique High Priesthood of Jesus and the ministry of those of the baptised who are ordained – which has been a matter of bitter contention among the western churches since the Reformation – we might consider *LG 21* to be a rather imprecise use of language, but it still does not ground the statement in *SF 75*.

*Lumen gentium 26* is hardly more useful. This passage, like *SF 75*, is concerned with the connection between the bishop and the Eucharist, and it is, presumably, the opening sentence that the recent authors had in mind:

The bishop, invested with the fullness of the sacrament of Orders, is “the steward of the grace of the supreme priesthood (*oeconomus gratiae supremi sacerdotii*)” above all in the Eucharist . . . .

Again this falls far short of identifying bishops as ‘high priests’ but refers to a minister who acts in relationship with the Christ’s action, his grace, in the community. Moreover, the quotation comes from the Byzantine consecration prayer for a bishop and its emphasis is not upon declaring the identity of the man being consecrated but his duty and manner of behaviour: he is to act as the faithful steward in God’s household. In Greek, the quotation it is a direct echo of Titus 1:7: ‘For a bishop, as God’s steward (*oikonomos*),<sup>9</sup> must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain . . . .’<sup>10</sup>

The third reference in *SF 75* to *Sacrosanctum concilium 41* is at first sight more explicit:

The bishop is to be considered as the High Priest (*ut sacerdos magnus sui gregis habendus est*) from whom the life in Christ of his faithful is

<sup>9</sup> This care-of-household dimension was not picked up in the Vulgate which uses *dispensator*.

<sup>10</sup> We need to keep in mind the problems of interpretation, within the reception of the Church, of the Pastoral Epistles: we locate these, probably in the second century, within communities with well established histories; early generations treated them as Paul’s work and belonging to the first days of the movement. See A. Yarbro Collins, ‘The Female Body as Social Space in 1 Timothy’, *New Testament Studies* 57 (2011) pp.155-75 for an example of these problems.

in some way (*quodammodo*) derived and upon whom it in some way depends.

However, a more careful reading shows that this not only does not support the statement in *SF* 75 but undermines it. The concern of *SC* 41 is to point out that the bishop is not the High Priest of his flock, and that the relationship of bishop to flock should not be seen as simply parallel to that of the Christ and his flock. The use of *sacerdos magnus* is a Vulgate usage for the office of the High Priest,<sup>11</sup> but that is not what is being echoed in the Council's text. In the unreformed liturgy there were several occasions when the bishop, arriving in the church in full ceremonial fashion, was greeted with the antiphon: *ecce sacerdos magnus qui in diebus suis placuit Deo . . .*<sup>12</sup> The implication was obvious: the actual Christian minister entering the building was to be identified as the High Priest, now beheld by the congregation. Moreover, many bishops saw this as part of their identity: he was a high priest – as witness the number of tombs and memorials to bishops in their cathedrals which use this text. The text itself – quite apart from its theological difficulties in relationship to the uniqueness of the role of the Son – was also problematic. While the editions of the 1570 Missal boldly claimed that it was a piece of scripture (Sir 44:16-27; 45:3, 20),<sup>13</sup> no such text could be found in the Vulgate.<sup>14</sup> What is found in that Missal and in the antiphons is a ghost – a reading that was patched together in the course of musical developments – and which then gained an entirely spurious authority.<sup>15</sup> The purpose of the reference in *SC* was to detach Catholics, ever so gently, from the practice of thinking of bishops as high priests: they might be considered (*ut . . . habendus est*) in such terms – as indeed they were – but that should not lead us to imagine a bishop as a High Priest. The relationship of bishops to others of the baptised might have analogies with that of the High Priest and the People of God but is not identical.

So if the three references given in *SF* do not justify its claim, did they just imagine the claim that Christians have 'high priests' in their midst? The probable source that was echoing in the memories of the

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Num 35:25; Jos 20:6; Neh 3:1; Sir 50:1; Hag 1:12; and 1 Macc 14:30.

<sup>12</sup> There were variations in the text of the remainder of the antiphon but these need not concern us.

<sup>13</sup> It was given as the 'Epistle' for the Common of a Confessor Bishop; and the biblical claim is taken from the *editio typica* of 1962.

<sup>14</sup> Nor could it be found in any other biblical version (e.g. the *Vetus Latina*).

<sup>15</sup> This reading is examined in detail by P. Jeffrey in *Translating Tradition: A Chant Historian Reads Liturgiam Authenticam* (Collegeville, MN 2005) pp.56-7.

authors was the only usage of the term ‘high priests’ in Christian usage which is in the *Didache* 13:3.<sup>16</sup> This reads:

So take the first fruits of the vine and the harvest, of cattle and sheep, and present these first fruits to the prophets because they are, to you, the high priests (*oi archiereis humón*).<sup>17</sup>

However, we should note that it is not the bishop or bishops (and in *Didache* 15:1 we have the statement ‘select for yourselves bishops and deacons’) who is mentioned but the prophets. Moreover, the reference is not concerned in any way with the liturgy – or the function of the priests *qua* priests – but with the need that these prophets (who moved around between the churches) should be provided for adequately by the communities. In order to justify this the *Didache* transfers the known obligation to support the Jerusalem priesthood<sup>18</sup> to this distinctive group in the Jesus movement. This is a regulation about money, not a theological statement.<sup>19</sup> As such this reference could not be confused – when later the theology the Letter to the Hebrews had gained currency in the churches<sup>20</sup> – with the ‘high priesthood’ that is attributed to the Christ.

It might be asked if, allowing that it has nothing to do either with the cult or the ontological status of those involved, the statement in *SF* is not a legitimate transfer of the notion to ‘high priests’ from prophets to bishops, who after all claim to be the significant members of the community from the time of their institution which traditionally was seen as one of the events of the Last Supper. Such a statement may be an obligatory doctrinal proposition, but it must not be seen as one that can be verified by historical investigation, nor a position that can be appealed to, as *SF* appears to do, for which there is historical precedent. In the earliest communities it was ‘the prophets’

<sup>16</sup> It is increasing common in scholarly literature to reserve the use of the term Christian for situations later than the time of the composition of the *Didache*, it is used here because the *Didache* remained in widespread use for several centuries.

<sup>17</sup> The translation is from T. O’Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (London 2010) p.169; it is based on the Greek text as edited by M.W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI 1992) p.266.

<sup>18</sup> For example: Ex 23:19; 34:26; Lev 2:12; Num 18:12; and Dt 18:4.

<sup>19</sup> See the extensive commentaries on this in K. Niederwimmer, *The Didache* (Minneapolis, MN 1998), 188-93; and A. Milavec, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, and Love of the Earliest Christian Communities, 50-70 C.E.* (Mahwah, NJ 2003) pp.491-525.

<sup>20</sup> The *Didache* is a first century document and while there have been many debates as to its dating (see my ‘Reactions to the *Didache* in Early Twentieth-century Britain: A Dispute over the Relationship of History and Doctrine?’ in S.J. Brown, F. Knight, and J. Morgan-Guy eds, *Religion, Identity and Conflict in Britain: From the Restoration to the Twentieth Century. Essays in Honour of Keith Robbins* (Farnham 2013) pp.177-94.), there would be few who do not envisage it as revealing a situation much earlier than that in which Hebrews was written.

(apparently always distinct from those who were known as ‘bishops and deacons’ who were localised leaders rather than moving around between churches) who were the objects of special honour: those, for example, who offer could a eucharistic prayer in whatever way they wished,<sup>21</sup> and it was that group also that was subject to special scrutiny lest they abuse their position.<sup>22</sup> For the earliest generations it was this group, the itinerant prophets, that was significant;<sup>23</sup> and it was only at some stage in the second century that in some places the localised leaders, now simply called ‘bishops’ and by now distinct from a second group called ‘deacons,’ came to the fore and were now viewed as having unique inherited authority.<sup>24</sup>

That the reference in *SF* to bishops as ‘high priests’ is probably to be explained as a momentary lapse of concentration: Homer nods! However, it is important that it be corrected, not merely as inaccurate but as likely to give scandal to those who see a persistent danger within Catholicism, despite the statements of Vatican II and, indeed, of *SF* itself when it refers to the ‘royal priesthood’ into which all are baptised.<sup>25</sup> This is to avoid confusing the liturgical activity of those who preside at the Eucharist with the unique priestly work of Jesus that is explored in terms of the High Priesthood of the new covenant in the Letter to the Hebrews. It is also important that we take note of a tendency, of which this is a symptom, to imagine that that which later emerged – in this case, the emergence of bishops having a unique ecclesial status in relation to the Christ – as being there at all times, using the model of ‘development’ so common in nineteenth-century writings, that that which came to be was always there ‘*in nuce*’ or ‘in embryo’ or ‘inchoately.’ While this may be a doctrinal proposition

<sup>21</sup> *Didache* 10:7; and see T. O’Loughlin, ‘The “Eucharistic Words of Jesus”: An Unnoticed Silence in our Earliest Sources,’ *Anaphora* 8,1 (2014) pp.1-12.

<sup>22</sup> *Didache* 11:3-12; and see A. Milavec, ‘Distinguishing True from False Prophets: The Protective Wisdom of the *Didache*,’ *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994) pp.117-36.

<sup>23</sup> On the identity of ‘the prophets’ and their place in the early churches, see J.A. Draper, ‘Social Ambiguity and the Production of the Text: Prophets, Teachers, Bishops, and Deacons and the Development of the Jesus Tradition in the Community of the *Didache*’ in C.N. Jefford ed., *The Didache in Context: Essays on its Text, History, and Transmission* (Leiden 1995) pp.284-312; idem, ‘Weber, Theissen, and “Wandering Charismatics” in the *Didache*,’ *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998) pp.541-76; and idem, ‘Performing the Cosmic Mystery of the Church in the Communities of the *Didache*,’ in J. Knight and K. Sullivan eds, *The Open Mind: Essay in Honour of Christopher Rowland* (London 2015) pp.37-57 (I am indebted to Prof. Draper for drawing my attention to the latter article while writing this note).

<sup>24</sup> This late emergence of the *episkopoi* as the significant group has been obscured by the common reliance on the Eusebian dating of the letters of Ignatius to the first decade of the second century CE; however, these need to be dated to sometime in the latter half of the second century, see T.D. Barnes, ‘The Date of Ignatius,’ *Expository Times* 120 (2008) pp.119-30.

<sup>25</sup> *SF* 75.

which a contemporary theologian wishes to defend, it should be explicitly flagged as such; in the interest of dialogue with others and simple clarity of communication it should not be presented as simply another fact within a historical discourse. Both our evidence base and our interpretative understanding have increased enormously since the mid-nineteenth century when that approach seemed to answer many of the problems of relating later structures and their origin-claims with our evidence for early structures.

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