

# WHY PRIESTS?

ANSWERS GUIDED BY THE  
TEACHING OF BENEDICT XVI

PAUL JOSEF CARDINAL CORDES

*English translation by Peter Spring  
and Monsignor Anthony J. Figueiredo, STD*

 Scepter

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## BIBLICAL ROOTS

What is special to theology is that it addresses itself to what we have not discovered ourselves and what can be for us, precisely as a result of such study, the foundation of life, because it precedes us and supports us, in other words is greater than our own capacity for thought. The way of theology is effectively described by the axiom "*credo ut intelligam*." I believe, I accept the presupposition, the preordained truth of a sign, so that through it and in it I may gain access to the just life, to the right understanding of myself. But that means that theology, by its very nature, presupposes *auctoritas*. That theology exists at all is only by virtue of the fact that its truths are able to break into the closed circle of our own thought, and that a hand is so to say stretched out to our thought: a hand that draws it upwards and elevates it beyond its own inherent strengths. Without this presupposition, which is always more than what the self itself is able to think of and which is never reduced to a merely personal attainment, theology would not exist.

But now another question is posed: What does this presupposition look like—this sign that conducts human thought onto the right path and shows it the way? In the first place we can say that this authority is a word. This is wholly logical, if we consider the matter: for the word comes from understanding and wishes to lead to understanding. The sign given to the human mind in the search for meaning coincides, reasonably, with the word. In the process

of science thought precedes the word; it is translated into words. But here, where our own thought fails, the Word is thrown towards us like a lifeline from the eternal wisdom, the Word in which a splinter of its splendor is concealed—as much as we can support, as much as we need, as much as human words can comprehend. To recognize the significance of this Word, to understand this Word—that is the root cause of theology, which can never be completely lacking even in the life of faith of the simplest believer.

—Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Words of Thanks for the degree Doctor honoris causa at the Theological Faculty of the University of Navarre in Pamplona, January 31, 1998*

## THE NEW ECCLESIOLOGY OF VATICAN II

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) was undoubtedly the major event in the life of the Church in the last century. Although over fifty years have elapsed since its conclusion, its teachings have so far not been completely absorbed into the life of the Church. In its reception into the consciousness and action of the Church, various observers think they can continue its theological theses as if were in a vacuum, without taking into consideration the process that led to their formulation. They propose to reinterpret the Council by isolating and using certain statements of the conciliar documents to promote or support their own ideas. They start out from the assumption that the conciliar Fathers in reality meant something rather different from what was formulated at the time. They thus use the conciliar resolutions to demand a radical theological upheaval, a fresh start. The Holy Father Pope Benedict has on various occasions urged the teachings of Vatican II be placed in the context of the Church's tradition and warned against reading into the Council a breach with the apostolic transmission of the doctrine of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For instance in his first Christmas address to the College of Cardinals and staff of the Roman Curia (December 22, 2005).

The theological and pastoral statements of the bishops at Vatican II, and the intentions that lie behind them, can best be interpreted if one looks at the process of their formulation. We have learned to appreciate the positive gains to be drawn from the history of the redaction of a text from the exegesis of the Old and New Testaments. Many verses of Holy Scripture can be better understood if we know and attend to the various stages of their writing; for instance, in the New Testament by distinguishing what Jesus himself said (“*ipsissima vox*”) from the testimonies of the young Church and those of the Evangelists. This method of exegesis should also be helpful in illuminating the conciliar texts. Assuming we really desire to trace the spirit of the Council, this method should be adopted. For example, in the process of drafting the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (LG), the method is revealing both in clarifying the ecclesiology expressed and the theological movements that predominated at the time. In the context of this study, it goes without saying that special attention will be paid to the Church’s ordained ministry.

#### *De-Christianized West*

An aspect of particular importance for the conciliar understanding of the ordained ministry is the heightened sensitivity in the field of pastoral theology that developed in France in the first half of the last century. In the years between 1932 and 1937 the Dominican Father Yves Congar examined the concept of “mission” and contributed to its understanding in the Church’s thought. He wanted especially to offer theological insights and clarifications to Catholic Action in France. He sought a dynamic theology that would give new impulses. The publication of a small book, *La France, pays de mission* (France, mission country),<sup>2</sup> gave an additional impulse. The community of all the baptized was called to open itself to the task of mission, and to the preaching

<sup>2</sup>The two chaplains of the Young Christian Workers (CAJ) Henri Godin and Y. Daniels delivered a severe blow to the myth of Catholic France with their book published in 1943.

of the Gospel to the whole world. The laity thereby received further theological affirmation for their role in the firm structure of the ministerial Church that was their due because of baptism.

The French Catholic theologian and Dominican priest Marie-Dominique Chenu supplemented Yves Congar's perspective. He underlined the reciprocity between mission and world: there is not only a mission-conscious Church that brings her message to the world, but also a world that through changing situations leads to the introduction of new emphases in the Church's message. In July 1947, during an annual assembly of the *Mission de France*, the phrase was coined of the Church "*en état de mission*": the Church in a permanent missionary state. The task of mission thus underlined primarily involves the missionary who goes to foreign lands to proclaim the Gospel of Christ; but the de-Christianized society of the "Christian West" also needs witnesses of the Gospel, and to fulfill this task, the ordained ministers of the Church are neither exclusively equipped nor able—either then nor now—to accomplish it alone.

In this way the dimension of salvation history was restored to the concept of *missio*: the baptized and confirmed were involved in the transmission of God's Word. They all have a part to play in the Lord's mission. At the same time, the dependence of each Christian life on the Gospel does not mean that the concrete form of participation in mission is unalterable, that it necessarily remains the same forever, or that it has been historically 'petrified' once and for all. On the contrary, the call that arises in the here and now constantly modifies and renews the one and only mission that springs from the Gospel.

### *The Authority of Holy Scripture*

All these contents are implicit in the concept of *missio* as Vatican II uses it, with the result that it gains a high value in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* and the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*). Yves Congar described how this concept was received in the conciliar