"PRUDENT COOPERATORS OF THE EPISCOPAL COLLEGE" (*LUMEN GENTIUM* 28): AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROMISE OF OBEDIENCE IN THE RITE OF ORDINATION TO THE PRESBYTERATE

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Introduction

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 1567, the presbyter's call to serve the People of God is intrinsically linked to the mission of the bishop. Presbyters perform their duties in the name of the bishop, who has entrusted them with their pastoral mission. Therefore, presbyters should not act as if they own the parish or are entitled to its privileges. Instead, they must remember that they are "sent" by the bishop to fulfill their duties. This dependence of the presbyter on the bishop reflects the shared priesthood between them. At ordination, presbyters receive the bishop's threefold function to preach, sanctify, and govern. The liturgical gestures in the ordination ritual vividly manifest the relationship between the bishop and the presbyters. Presbyters should relate to the bishop as their father, while the bishop must regard the presbyters as his sons, brothers, and friends. This relationship is a crucial element of the promise of obedience that presbyters make. Obedience thus becomes a harmonizing aspect of the theology of priesthood, enabling presbyters to truly become prudent cooperators of the episcopal order.

However, one may ask how a priest can faithfully live out his promise of obedience. For some, to obey means to follow the bishop at all costs and not ask questions, and thus, being engaged in the discernment process regarding important matters in the diocese may be misconstrued as questioning the authority of the bishop *vis-à-vis* disobedience. This paper aims to look into the promise of obedience as LG 28 understands it, as it says: "On account of this sharing in their priesthood and mission, let priests sincerely look upon the bishop as their father and reverently obey him. And let the bishop regard his priests as his co-workers and as sons and friends, just as Christ called His disciples now not servants but friends." Therefore, in the study of the promise of obedience, there are two essential elements: a.) sharing of priesthood and mission, and b.) how obedience should be characterized. Furthermore, to provide a greater understanding of the promise of obedience, this paper will delve into the historical development of the promise of obedience in the ordination ritual. By doing so, the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi et vivendi* may be applied.

The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (*Lumen Gentium)* offers a vision of priests as "prudent cooperators with the Episcopal order, its aid, and instrument, called to serve the people of God, constitute one priesthood with their bishop, although bound by a diversity of duties."[1] Among the significant theological developments in Vatican II is the revival of the patristic understanding of the figure of the bishop as the possessor and embodiment of the fullness of the priesthood. The *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 7 reads:

1. Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution On The Church (Lumen Gentium)*, 21 November 1964, Vatican Archive https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

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> Priests, never losing sight of the fullness of the priesthood that the bishops enjoy, must respect in them the authority of Christ, the Supreme Shepherd. They must, therefore, stand by their bishops in sincere charity and obedience. This priestly obedience, imbued with a spirit of cooperation, is based on the very sharing in the episcopal ministry, which is conferred on priests through the Sacrament of Orders and the canonical mission.

This portion of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* affirms the dogmatic and sacramental context of *Lumen Gentium* 28 and highlights the authority of Christ in the office of the bishop. It is important to note that the concept of the "fullness of priesthood" is a necessary element in studying the promise of obedience, as presbyters only share in the priesthood and mission of the bishop. The priesthood and mission of the presbyters are rooted in the priesthood and mission of the bishop.

The *Decree on the Life and Ministry of the Priest* (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) also states: "By sacred ordination and by the mission they receive from their bishops, presbyters are promoted to the service of Christ the Teacher, the Priest, and the King. They share his ministry of unceasingly building up the Church on earth into the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit." This statement highlights the identity of the priests in union with the bishop who possesses the "fullness of the priesthood," a phrase also found in *Lumen Gentium* 41. *The Decree on the Pastoral Office of the Bishop* further highlights the dependence of presbyters on their respective bishops: "For bishops enjoy the fullness of the sacrament of orders and priests depend on them in the use of their power." Thus, the ministry of priests should be understood as a stewardship of the mission entrusted to them by the local ordinary. Priests function not just in their capacity but are always in union with their local ordinary.

Furthermore, as the presbyters and the bishop are united in priesthood and mission, the presbyters promise obedience to the episcopal order, envisioning a universal ecclesial communion actualized in the concrete communion of bishops and priests in constant pastoral dialogue.[2] The council fathers also point out an essential feature of the sharing of priests in the one priesthood of the bishop by claiming that it is "an expression of the *communio* between bishops and priests as it had existed in the ancient Church."[3] Hence, the obedience of the priest to his bishop is his participation in the universal *koinonia*. This universal communion is oriented towards fulfilling the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles, which is also extended to the order of bishops as their successors.

The promise of obedience is a necessary element of priesthood and mission. But what does it look like in the life of a diocesan clergy? *LG* 28 asserts that presbyters should regard their bishop as their father and reverently obey him, and the bishop should treat the presbyters as his co-workers and as sons and friends. The relationship between the presbyterate and the episcopate goes beyond the characterization of "boss-employee." But it can be surmised how necessary the dialogical relationship between the bishop and the priests is in fulfilling the promise of obedience. Obedience is not simply for the sake of unity and to avoid disruptions in the diocese, but rather it is about cultivating trust and charity for the sake of fulfilling the mission. As *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 15 puts it: This obedience is designed to promote the mature freedom of the children of God; by its very nature, it postulates that

2. Robert Billing, "The Presbyteral Council as an Expression of Synodality," Doctorate on Canon Law Thesis (Ottawa: Canada: St. Paul University, 2022), 302.

3. Billing, "The Presbyteral Council as an Expression of Synodality," 314.

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in the carrying out of their work, spurred on by charity, they develop new approaches and methods for the greater good of the Church.

The Promise of Obedience Before the Pontificals

The concept of obedience, before its formalization within the pontifical, was largely implicit and expected of presbyters during the early Church. Obedience was closely linked to stability within a parish or assignment, with presbyters expected to remain and be stable in the locations to which they were assigned. However, as the Church expanded, so did its political structures. This growth led to some presbyters becoming itinerant preachers, wandering and conducting their ministry without a fixed assignment. Thus, these itinerant preachers have become a cause of conflict and problems in pursuing the pastoral activity of the local church. In response, Church laws were instituted to regulate these itinerant preachers, ensuring that presbyters remained in their current assignments. It mandated that no presbyter shall be ordained without a permanent and stable attachment.[4]

Furthermore, in the work of Strieder, he highlights the significance of Boniface, the metropolitan bishop of the Kingdom of the Franks, in pledging obedience to the Roman pontiff. This pledge was a practice previously observed only by the suffragan bishops of Rome. In the manuscript authored by Boniface, the promise of obedience is presented in a personalistic form, where he explicitly states his name and intention of allegiance to the Pope as the metropolitan bishop of

4. For more on the development of the promise of obedience before its codification in the 1917 *Code of Canon Law*, See Scott J. Hill, "Canon 273: Clerical Obedience: Canonical Obedience towards One's Bishop and Its Application," ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (J.C.D., United States -- District of Columbia, The Catholic University of America, 2021), 6–9.

Rome. This promise, ritualized by Boniface and signed at the altar of St. Peter, underscores his close connection with the Roman Pontiff and his dedication to pursuing the welfare of the Church within his metropolitan see. Boniface's promise of obedience demonstrates his commitment to the Church and papal authority.

It must be noted that the written promise of obedience was made outside the context of episcopal ordination. Boniface's gesture of sincerity and loyalty to the pope is particularly highlighted as he addresses it directly to the person of the Roman Pontiff. Regarding the relational aspect of the promise of obedience made by Boniface, Strieder writes:

> The promise is made to another person, here 'to you blessed Peter and his successors.' This is part of the relational nature of obedience. The promise is made from one person to another and his vicars and successors. It crosses time and structure but binds the person involved.[5]

As Boniface made a promise to the Roman Pontiff, Strieder intuits that "it would seem logical that the presbyters would make a promise of obedience to their bishop."[6] The promise of obedience made by Boniface must be noted for the form used by the Romano-Germanic pontifical that first indicated the promise of obedience used the personalistic form, *promitto* [I promise].

On the other hand, there are other forms by which the goal, the promise of obedience, wishes to attain is made manifest. For the Early Church, the relationship between the bishop and the presbyter is manifested through a simple ritual gesture – the kiss of peace. Aubry notes that in antiquity, there was no

5. Leon Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience: A Ritual History* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1980), 8.

6. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 9.

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oath or formal bond of obedience, except by way of a silent kiss of peace, which remains the only form of the *Promitto* in the Eastern Church.[7] The kiss of peace, which precedes the literal articulation of the promise of obedience, already embodies the goal it wishes to achieve, serving as a ritual gesture that signifies the bond and unity between the presbyter and the bishop. Schneider thus observes that "when the promise of obedience was incorporated into the conclusion of the rite, the strong connection with feudal law overshadowed the kiss of peace as a sign of sacramental unity; the sealing of the oath of fidelity by the embrace of the lord became more prominent than the ancient sign of unity." [8]

The Promise of Obedience in the Romano-Germanic Pontifical

The oldest extant rite of the promise of obedience is found in the Romano-Germanic Pontifical (RGP), a *liber sacramentorum* [book of sacraments] written around 950. This text is a compilation of various ordines [ritual orders], which supersedes older versions by absorbing and combining them into a single book, known as the Romano-Germanic Pontifical of the tenth century, the Pontifical of Otto the Great, or simply, the Mainz Pontifical.[9] Regarding the dating of this pontifical, Vogel observes that the Romano-Germanic Pontifical is widely used in Rome. He notes that 'even as late as 1150, when the *Ordo officiorum Ecclesiae Lateranensis* [official liturgical book of

7. Andre Aubry, "A propos de la signification du 'Promitto,'" NRT v. 85 (1963): pp. 1063-1085, quoted in John Patrick Zenz, "Spirituality of Obedience for Diocesan Priests in Vatican II" (Rome, Italy, Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana Institutum Spiritualitatis, n.d.), 547.

8. Francis James Schneider, "Obedience to the Bishop by the Diocesan Priest in the 1983 Code of Canon Law," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (J.C.D., United States -- District of Columbia, The Catholic University of America, 1990), 18.

9. Vogel, *Medieval Liturgy*, 143.

the Lateran Basilica] cited the RGP, it referred to it as an Ordo Romanus [Roman Guide].' By this time, the RGP had effectively become 'Roman' in the Latin Church."[10]

Regarding the structure of the promise of obedience in the Romano-Germanic Pontifical (RGP), Strieder observes that the formula adopts a personalistic form. He notes that the shift from the more personal *promitto* [I promise] to the more legalistic *vis-volo* [will you—I will] is driven by an increased emphasis on free consent, *consentiens* [consenting], which was also an essential element in the concept of marriage at the time.[11] Strieder further notes that the use of *consentiens* in the rite signifies that the ordinand is entering into a contract with the Church. The local ordinary is required to ask the ordinand if he is submitting to the Church›s authority freely and willingly, a process that is accomplished effortlessly in the form of a question.[12] Strieder additionally notes:

> Concerning the structure, we can see that we have an amalgamation of two structures. First, we find the will-you-I-will structure followed by the more ancient and personalistic *I promise* structure common to the promises we have already seen.[13]

Strieder emphasizes the importance of relationality in the promise of obedience, asserting that the ordinand must freely commit himself to the service of the Church.[14] This relational aspect is further underscored by the inclusion of *iustitiam et ministerium* [justice and ministry] in the ritual text, as Strieder suggests. The promise of obedience in the Romano-Germanic

10. Vogel, *Medieval Liturgy*, 239.

11. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 20.

12. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 20.

13. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 21.

14. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 21.

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Pontifical is directed solely to the ordaining prelate. The ritual text of the promise of obedience reflects the context in which the RGP is written, where the bishop must ensure that the presbyters he ordains are loyal to him and willingly serve the diocese. The RGP is thus crafted to provide structural freedom for the diocese to perform its pastoral duties, in contrast to the proprietary churches controlled by local lords. Moreover, the ritual text notably uses the term *parrochiam* [parish] in the rite. Strieder writes:

> The text uses the words 'parish' or 'diocese' (*parocchia*). Like 'diocese' (*diocesis*), 'parish' has become part of the common vocabulary. Both terms have roots in the Greek vocabulary of marriage and running households. In Greek, 'parochos' was one who goes beside another riding in a chariot, and the 'ochos' was one who attends a bridegroom. Later, he was seen as the administrator of that person›s affairs. In our text, it is clear that *parochia* means what we would today call 'diocese.[15]

As noted above, since the ordinand ministers within the territory of the local ordinary, he must ensure that the person he ordains will fulfill his responsibilities. During this period, proprietary churches are prevalent in Germany, where lesser nobles and private families frequently award ecclesiastical offices, take shares of income (including tithes), and freely buy, sell, and bequeath ecclesiastical rights with little regard for the perils of simony. [16] Against this backdrop, the promise of obedience is included in the rite of ordination for priests. The transfer of vassalage from local lords to local ordinaries liberates presbyters from the interference of the nobility.

15. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 21.

16. John Howe, "The Nobility's Reform of the Medieval Church," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (April, 1988), 320.

Immixtio Manuum [Joining of Hands]: The Promise of Obedience in the Pontifical of William Durandus

The ordination rites in the Pontifical of William Durandus introduce new gestures that add symbolic significance to the priestly ministry. Durandus combines various customs with Roman traditions to create a series of enriched rites for pontifical services, including the *immixtio manuum*. Strieder notes that this ritual mirrors the feudal rite of vassalage, although during the time of Durandus, proprietary churches were not a concern. He likely adopts these gestures to illustrate the homage or fealty common during this period.

The inclusion of *immixtio manuum* may also be influenced by the rites of religious profession in monasteries, particularly those initiated by the Cluniac reform. In this reform, dependent priories run by priors take oaths of loyalty into the hands of their abbots, resembling vassals. This gesture is adopted by the Rule of Augustine in the twelfth century and subsequently by other mendicant and monastic orders. [17] Strieder postulates that the rapid incorporation of *immixtio manuum* into the Pontifical of Durandus reflects the influence of these religious professions. He further asserts that "the promise made by joining hands symbolizes a reciprocal relationship... In this sense, it is a richer symbol of the nature of obedience as relational." [18]

Pontificale Romanum of 1596: Ordination of Presbyters

During the time of the Council of Trent, the primary concern was power and jurisdiction. This context is reflected

17. Kempf in Jedin, *Handbook of Church History*, 3:325 quoted in Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience: A Ritual History*, 63.

18. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 64.

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in the promise of obedience in the *Pontificale Romanum* of 1596. The rite carefully specifies to whom the ordinand makes his promise of obedience, directing it to his immediate superior. Consequently, a cleric regularly promises obedience to his superior, while a diocesan cleric promises it to his bishop.

The promise of obedience in the *Roman Pontifical* of 1596 is formulated with a keen awareness of its juridical implications. It provides specific guidelines regarding whom the ordinand makes his promise, offering distinct options for both secular and regular clerics. Furthermore, the kiss of peace following the promise of obedience seals the sacred bond between the bishop and the presbyter.

Strieder theorizes that the prevailing issue was jurisdiction, not priestly powers. He writes: "The major theological concern now bound up with this promise of obedience is that of priestly faculties. To be a presbyter of good standing who could offer Mass and hear confessions."[19] The promise of obedience thus revolves around this area, and its context has shifted to a juridical one. The newly ordained minister promises obedience to his bishop in return for the faculties necessary to function as a priest. Furthermore, Strieder writes:

> Obedience implies that a presbyter will do what his bishop wishes in return for the jurisdiction to do his presbyteral work. A disobedient presbyter will have his faculties withdrawn. Thus, obedience for presbyters had become a method of both good order and control.[20]

19. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 49.

20. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 49.

The 1968 Rites of Ordination: *De Ordinatione Diaconi, Presbyteri et Episcopi*

The reform inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council is distinguished from all other historical liturgical reforms by its pastoral emphasis. The primary goal of this reform is to encourage the participation and active involvement of the people of God in liturgical celebrations.[21] *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) mandated the revision of the ordination rites. Specifically, *SC* 76 states: "Both the ceremonies and texts of the ordination rites are to be revised. The address given by the bishop at the beginning of each ordination or consecration may be in the mother tongue." To achieve this, the Sacred Council mandated the creation of a preparatory commission to pave the way for its implementation.

The Apostolic Constitution *Pontificalis Romani* promulgates the revised ordination rites for deacons, presbyters, and bishops in 1968. In its preliminaries, it elucidates the Church's teaching on the nature and effects of the three degrees of the sacrament of orders, drawing heavily on the writings of the Second Vatican Council, particularly *Lumen Gentium*. In the 1968 rite of ordination, the promise of obedience is moved from post-communion to immediately following the bishop's examination of the ordinand. This repositioning underscores the significance of both the examination and the promise of obedience, emphasizing their precedence before the actual ordination. In the ritual text, the examination and the promise of obedience are implied as essential prerequisites for ordination. By placing the promise of obedience directly after the bishop's examination, it acquires new liturgical meaning,

21. Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), 5.

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highlighted by the questions posed by the bishop during the examination. The examination embodies the threefold ministry of Jesus Christ as priest, prophet, and king, reflecting the Second Vatican Council's understanding that the priest is not merely one who celebrates the Eucharist for the faithful but also bears the responsibility to preach the Word of God and shepherd God's flock.

1990 Revised Rites: The Ordination of Bishops, Presbyters, and Deacons

In the 1990 revised rites for the ordination of bishops, presbyters, and deacons, the formulation of the promise of obedience remains unchanged. However, there is a notable shift in the order presented in the title: the ordination of a bishop is now listed first, followed by that of presbyters and then deacons. This reordering reflects the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which emphasize that a bishop possesses the fullness of the priesthood, a role in which presbyters and deacons share. Strieder elaborates on this by stating, "The use of the singular reflects the unitive function of the one who serves in the place of the apostles."[22] The rites for the ordination of presbyters and deacons follow in the plural, illustrating the theological reality of an order of presbyters and deacons surrounding the local bishop.

Regarding the promise of obedience, the same wording is used in the ordination of both presbyters and deacons. Strieder notes that the similarity in wording between the rites of ordination for these two distinct orders fails to reflect the differences in ministry that deacons and presbyters exercise. He points out that the promise of obedience, as expressed in both ordinations, does not correspond to the theological

22. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 94.

reality they represent: presbyters share in the priesthood of their bishops, while deacons are ordained for ministry, not for the priesthood.[23]

Another innovation in the 1990 revised rites is that when the ordinand is a cleric regular, he is asked to make a promise of obedience to both the diocesan bishop and his legitimate superior. The inclusion of this dual promise of obedience in the ordination of cleric regulars reflects the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* 28, which states:

> In virtue of their common sacred ordination and mission, all priests are bound together in intimate brotherhood, which naturally and freely manifests itself in mutual aid, spiritual as well as material, pastoral as well as personal, in their meetings and the communion of life, of labor and charity.

Furthermore, *Christus Dominus* 35, particularly sections 1 and 4, indicates that clerics regular or religious individuals, in general, must align themselves with the bishop to ensure pastoral harmony within the diocese. This necessitates proper coordination between the religious and the diocesan bishop. The commitment of obedience made by clerics regular to the diocesan bishop transcends the mere delegation of priestly authority, which is conferred by the bishop to benefit the local diocese. This promise of obedience signifies a broader evolution within the Church's ecclesiology and enriches the theological understanding of the episcopacy as the fullness of the order of the priesthood. Consequently, the intention of including the promise of obedience of clerics regular to the diocesan bishop is to ensure that their public ministry and worship are aligned with the vision and mission of the Diocese in which they reside.

23. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 110-113.

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However, the promise of obedience of the clerics regularly imposes certain difficulties. Susan Wood writes:

> The problems with the promise of obedience for a religious presbyter are: (1) the conflict between his potential mobility and the original purpose of such a promise; (2) the normativity of a diocesan parish life for our understanding of presbyteral ministry which is not the pastoral experience of many religious presbyters; and (3) the conflict between obedience to a diocesan bishop and religious autonomy and exemption.[24]

With that said, the promise of obedience made by clerics regular should be different from the promise made by diocesan presbyters. It must be clear that clerics regular enjoy a privilege of exemption stipulated by *Christus Dominus* 35. Therefore, the bishop must respect this exemption and recognize the limits of his authority. He can approve or deny a presbyter's assignment to a parish in his diocese staffed by a religious community, but he cannot arbitrarily reassign that presbyter to another ministry.[25]

Notable in the 1990 revised rites is the introductory note, which provides a general introduction to all the rites, focusing on the theology of ordination, the structure, and potential adaptations. The *praenotanda generalia* offers this introduction regarding the ordination of presbyters. It states that although the presbyter does not possess the fullness of the priesthood and only shares their *potestas* [power] with the bishop, they are consecrated in the image of Christ, the supreme Shepherd and

24. Susan Wood, *Sacramental Orders* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 109.

25. Wood, *Sacramental Orders*, 111.

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priest. Consequently, they should preach the gospel, feed the faithful, and celebrate the sacraments.[26]

Lastly, the 1990 revised edition fortifies the 1968 edition of the rites of ordination as regards the role of the priests as helpers of the bishop and that they are consecrated to: preach the Gospel, shepherd the faithful, and celebrate divine worship as true Priests of the New Testament. The *praetonanda* in the ordination of presbyters mentions the strong image of presbyters as "cooperators" with the bishops. Strieder notes that the word is important because it contains the theology of the priesthood of Vatican II. It echoes the theology of the priesthood, which is not just centered on the Eucharist but rather a sharing in the fullness of the priesthood of the bishop, whose duty is to preach the word of God, celebrate the sacraments, and shepherd God's flock.

Providi cooperatores Ordinis Nostri in the Consecratory Prayers of the 6th Century Until the Tridentine Reforms

At the outset of the ordination rituals, the perception of the presbyterate as inferior to the bishop becomes more pronounced. The term "sacerdos" is used exclusively to address the bishop, indicating that the bishop holds the highest rank of priesthood. The phrase "ordinis nostri" or "order" should not be mistaken for episcopal collegiality, a prominent theological framework during the Second Vatican Council. Power notes that "ordo" during this period pertains to "rank," indicating

26. "Decretum," *De Ordinatione Episcopi, Presbyterorum et Diaconurum: "Presbyteri, quamvis pontificatus apicem non habeant et in exercenda sua potestate ab Episcopis pendeant, cum eis tamen sacerdotali honore coniuncti sunt et, vi sacramenti Ordinis, ad imaginem Christi, summi atque æterni Sacerdotis, ad Evangelium prædicandum fidelesque pascendos et ad divinum cultum celebrandum consecrantur ut veri Sacerdotes Novi Testamenti."*

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that the episcopate constitutes the first order, and the presbyterate represents a lesser rank, as the ritual text refers to it as the second order.[27] Therefore, each presbyter holds an inferior position compared to his local bishop.

The phrase "*sint providi cooperatores ordinis nostri*" appears in the *Veronense*, a collection of *Libelli Missarum* (leaflets for mass) dated to approximately the 6th century CE. This phrase is found in the Verona Sacramentary as part of the intercessory prayer in the consecratory prayer for ordination to the presbyterate. The Church intercedes that the ordinand receive the second rank of priesthood, proper to presbyters. During this time, the Church enjoyed the freedom offered by the state, gaining prominence in the courts and palaces of the kingdoms. Catholicism in the 6th century became a formidable force in society, and the number of Catholics increased. To address the growing number of the faithful, the Church ordains men as presbyters so they can administer to the faithful in the celebration of the Eucharist and lead the community. As prudent cooperators with the bishops, presbyters are expected to live out the values of the Kingdom and be pastorally zealous in the communities to which they are sent. The inclusion of this phrase in the consecratory prayer shaped the theology of priesthood at that time and predominantly influenced the life and ministry of the presbyters.

Despite the Church facing various challenges as it grows in number and prominence, the understanding of the presbyterate as a cooperator with the bishop remains prevalent and necessary. The presbyterate during the early medieval period, from the 6th to the 10th century, gained its rank in the social class, with its work largely associated with the administration

27. David N. Power, *Ministers of Christ and His Church: The Theology of the Priesthood* (London: G. Chapman, 1969), 70.

of sacraments in various localities. Thus, the phrase retains its theological meaning in the Gelasian Sacramentary and the Pontifical of Egbert from the 8th century. The ministry of bishops during this time was crucial in every locality, with specific sacramental duties reserved exclusively for them. The seven clerical orders—ostiarius, exorcist, lector, acolyte, subdeacon, deacon, and presbyter—represent degrees of participation in the ministry of the Episcopacy. These ranks are seen as a ladder of offices through which a candidate, starting from the lowest, might progress through the *cursus honorum* to the highest rank, the Episcopacy, considered the most perfect in divine service.[28]

The *Roman Pontifical* is revised after 500 years, following the Second Vatican Council. The 1968 edition, based on the *Romano-Germanic Pontifical*, retains Durandus's gestures and reflects Vatican II's theological and liturgical reforms. Key revisions include the repositioning of the promise of obedience to precede the prayer of ordination, now situated after the ordinand's examination. This restructured ordination ritual emphasizes the alignment between ritual actions and the spoken formula, a notable departure from the 1596 *Pontifical*. The phrase 'providi cooperatores ordinis nostri,' integrated into the Dogmatic Constitution (article 28) as "*presbyteri, ordinis Episcopalis providi cooperatores*," emerges as a central theme in Vatican II's theology of priesthood.

Development of "Providi Cooperatores Ordinis Nostri" in the Text of LG 28: Salient Points from the Council Interventions and Drafts

The first mention of "cooperator" can be found in the intervention made by Bishop Alexander Renard of Versailles.

28. Margaret Deanesly, *A History of the Medieval Church 590 - 1500*, Reprinted (London: Routledge, 1994), 29.

Bishop Renard pointed out several things in the intervention he made. He noted how lacking the dogmatic foundation of the priesthood was. When the schema mentioned the share in the "paternal abundance" of the bishop, the schema failed to discuss the dogmatic foundation of the phrase. Bishop Renard used the phrase *Presbyter etenim episcopi sacerdotio participat*[29] to describe the priesthood of the presbyters. He noted that presbyters share the priesthood of the bishop and thus, the presbyters should function not only in the work of administration of sacraments and celebrating the Eucharist but also in the work of preaching and prayer.

Two significant points emerge from Bishop Renard's intervention. First, presbyters cooperate with the episcopal college. Bishop Renard deliberately avoids the term *adiumentum* in his intervention, choosing instead to use "cooperator," a term present in the liturgical text. He describes presbyters as priests of the second rank, reflecting the view of priesthood in the liturgical prayers. Second, presbyters form a presbyteral college where the ontological bond between the presbyters and the bishop requires nurturing. Bishop Renard's intervention becomes a crucial foundation in shaping the dogmatic understanding of the priesthood.

Following the written and oral interventions during the first session, the Theological Commission begins drafting a new version of *De Ecclesia*. This revised text aims to fulfill the Council Fathers' desire for a more pastoral document that establishes a stronger foundation for the relationship between the episcopacy and the presbyterate. During this process, the Commission receives a significant contribution in the form

29. "Indeed, the priest participates in the priesthood of the bishop". See *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II: Periodus prima, pars IV*, 345.

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of a text primarily authored by Monsignor Gerard Philips of Louvain.

In the second version of the draft, priests are defined in relation to bishops. First, they are described as "helpers" of the bishops in their societal work. Second, they are acknowledged as true priests, albeit of "second dignity," since bishops hold the highest degree of priesthood.

Priests act on behalf of the bishop as his "representatives," having received "the grace of their abundant paternal fullness." In the footnote, Philips notes that the image of priests is derived from the *Roman Pontifical*, using the analogy of Aaron and his sons, a theme prevalent in many liturgical texts. He further explains that this depiction is based on the seventy wise men chosen to assist Moses, a motif present in all liturgical texts, including the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome.[30]

In the new draft written by Philips, the phrase *providi cooperatores ordinis episcopalis* appears. Philips uses the term *providi cooperatores* to illustrate the seventy wise men who ruled with Moses, as noted in his footnote, which references the ordination prayers in the *Roman Pontifical*. Philips interestingly draws from ancient texts to support the notion that priests belong to a secondary rank, lower than the priesthood of bishops.

In the commentary of the text found in the *Acta,* Philips writes that the section on priesthood was drawn upon from the *Roman Pontifical*. The notes on the draft read:

> Priests, according to the words of the Pontifical book, are priests of the second rank and co-operators of the Episcopal Order, whose principal functions are enumerated. They are sent by the Bishop, or if they are exempt, by the Roman Pontiff, to care for souls.

30. Philips, "History of the Constitution," 113.

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> All, however, from their union with the Bishop, obtain spiritual and apostolic vigor, and are three times united with one another in solidarity.[31]

The presbyterate, as cooperators of the Episcopal College, gave rise to several interventions from the council fathers. They noted how the *providi cooperatores* should be exercised. They also lobbied for a longer section on the presbyterate, which can nuance the framework of the priesthood of the Second Vatican Council. After the session, the council fathers considered the draft presented by Msgr. Gerard Philips is inadequate, especially in its treatment of the topic of priesthood. They identified a significant omission in acknowledging the role of priests as collaborators within the Episcopal College.

In the *praenotanda* given at the beginning of the third session of Vatican II, the drafters of the third draft of *Lumen Gentium* removed phrases such as "of second rank" and "of second dignity" from the *Roman Pontifical*, as well as the phrase "of the abundance of his paternal fullness." These revisions aimed to eliminate any juridical and external implications of the priesthood. They clarified the understanding of *gratiam de sua paternae plenitudinis abundantia transfundere*,[32] emphasizing that priesthood is not derived from the bishop but is a participation in the priesthood of Christ. Consequently, the bishop and the presbyters form one presbyterium, with the bishop serving as the head. The document then discusses the relationship between the bishop and the presbyters, highlighting

31. *"Presbyteri, secundum verba libri Pontificalis, sunt secundae dignitatis sacerdotes et cooperatores Ordinis episcopalis, quorum praecipua munera enumerantur. Ab Episcopo, vel si exempti sunt, a Romano Pontifice ad curam animarum mittuntur. Omnes autem, ex coniunctione cum Episcopo, vigorem spiritualem et apostolicum obtinent, ac solidari ter inter se uniuntur."* See *AS* II/I, 254.

32. Author's translation of a phrase meaning "Pours grace out of the abundance of his paternal fullness."

the mutual obedience and trust that should characterize their interaction. The bishop, in turn, must exhibit both paternal and filial affection towards the presbyters.[33]

As requested by 226 Fathers, the article concerning priests and deacons has been repositioned after the section discussing bishops. This repositioning enhances the logical progression of the discussion on episcopacy and emphasizes the nature, role, and dignity of priests as bishops.[34]

After the discussions and intervention in the second session of the council, the dogmatic framework of the priesthood was expanded. Hence, as the main focus of this section, the phrase *providi cooperatores ordinis nostri* can be found in the third paragraph of article 28. It reads:

> Presbyters, as prudent cooperators of the episcopal order, its complement and organ, are called to serve the people of God and constitute one presbyterium, albeit entrusted with diverse offices. In each local congregation of the faithful, they make the bishop present in a certain way, with whom they are associated with trust and a generous spirit, taking on part of his duties and concerns and exercising daily care.

The new text presented in 1964 reflects the final version of Article 28, incorporating substantial paragraphs dedicated to presbyters and points raised during the 1963 discussions. One significant modification in the 1964 draft emphasized the bond between the presbyter and the bishop, surpassing a merely cultic function.[35]

The *praenotanda* explains the changes in the text. Notably, the new text mentions priestly obedience, anchoring the

33. *AS* III/I, 258.

34. *AS* III/II, 211-212.

35. *AS* III/VIII, 96-97.

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priesthood of bishops and presbyters in their participation in the priesthood of Christ. This perspective moves away from a purely juridical understanding of the priesthood, showcasing a more holistic viewpoint. The shared priesthood of Christ between presbyters and bishops is presented as a permanent spiritual endowment, forming a genuine, necessary partnership in leading the people of God.[36] This bond is not defined by positivistic definitions or juridical acts but as a gift of the Spirit.[37]

Grillmeier notes that the cooperation of the presbyters is deeply rooted not just with his local ordinary but with the entire episcopal order. "The office of priest in the Church cannot be properly seen unless the order of bishops includes in some way the priestly state, which must be seen in the perspective of the common priesthood of all the faithful." [38] Consequently, the collaboration between presbyters and the Episcopal Order, including the Pope, transforms into a service for the world and humanity. The pastoral efforts of presbyters unite and organize God's family, serving as a unifying influence for all people.[39]

The role of presbyters encompasses more than just cultic activities, as described by Trent. The phrase *providi cooperatores ordinis nostri*, found in the consecratory prayers of the ordination ritual, has guided the Council Fathers in discerning the role of presbyters during the Second Vatican Council.

36. Paul Cordes, "Article 7," Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. IV (Vatican Council, New York: Crossroad, 1989), 239.

37. Grillmeier, "Chapter III, Article 28," on Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 1989, II:223.

38. Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 1989, II:223.

39. Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 1989, II:227.

This phrase takes on new significance as the understanding of priesthood evolves. Presbyters, as *providi cooperatores ordinis nostri*, share in the office of the bishop, participating in Christ's three-fold mission of teaching, sanctifying, and governing. While the phrase emphasizes the personal responsibility of the presbyter in his office, he remains under the authority of the local ordinary and must obediently follow his directives. However, the nature of this obedience has shifted. As *providi cooperatores*, the presbyter owes his bishop filial love and obedience, for both are sharers in the priesthood of the Eternal High Priest. The shared priesthood of the presbyters and the bishop anchors priestly obedience in a deeper spiritual and collegial context.

Conclusion

Obedience is more accurately understood as a gift to the presbyterate rather than a hindrance. It grants the presbyter genuine freedom, allowing all his actions to be oriented towards advancing the Kingdom by participating in Christ's threefold ministry of preaching, sanctifying, and governing. Obedience, as envisioned by the Second Vatican Council, is not marked by servility or blind submission to authority; rather, it is characterized by a spirit of cooperation. A presbyter fulfills his vow of obedience by collaborating with his bishop and serving as a faithful co-worker. He places complete trust in his bishop, prioritizing the common good over personal interests.

However, obedience is not a one-sided obligation but a reciprocal relationship. Just as presbyters offer trust and loyalty to their bishops, bishops are called to be fathers and friends to their presbyters, treating them as co-workers rather than competitors. In this dynamic, obedience nurtures the bond between the presbyter and the bishop. As Pope Francis writes, "Obedience is not a disciplinary attribute but the

deepest sign of the bonds uniting us in communion. To obey, in this case obeying the Bishop, means to learn how to listen, to remember that no one 'owns' God's will, which must be understood only through discernment."[40] Problems arise when this relationship becomes imbalanced—either when bishops fail to listen to their presbyters, disrupting harmony within the presbyterate, or when presbyters forget their role as sons and helpers to their bishops, neglecting the reality that they share in the priesthood only through their union with the bishop. To address such issues, both the Second Vatican Council and Canon Law mandate the establishment of a presbyteral council in every diocese, fostering authentic dialogue and ensuring that presbyters can fully engage in the mission they share with the episcopal order. This reciprocal relationship enhances the unity and effectiveness of the Church's mission.

40. Pope Francis, "Address in the International Theological Symposium on the Priesthood," in Marc Ouellet, ed., *A Fundamental Theology of the Priesthood* (New York: Paulist Press, 2023), xxi.

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