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The Priesthood Series  
Article 2 – The identity of a priest

In talking about the priesthood, we might begin by talking about *what a priest does*. But before we do that, we need to talk about *what a priest is*. For, a priest is not defined primarily by what he does, but by who he is. So, let us begin by looking at the identity of a priest.

The Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus Christ is our “*great high priest*” (Heb 4:14). And as the Church teaches, “*The priest is a living and transparent image of Christ the priest*” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 12). Therefore, to understand the identity of a priest, we must understand the priesthood of Christ.

Let me begin with a quote from a book called *The Charism of Priestly Celibacy* (a topic we will cover soon):

*“When we priests kiss the altar, we are making a very public gesture in the presence of those gathered for the Eucharist; but at the same time kissing the altar is an intensely private gesture, an act of affection and surrender, an act of love and trust. Even more to the point, the priest’s kiss of the altar is an act of identification: he is proclaiming to Christ, to himself, and to his parishioners that it is Christ the Priest who makes him who he is. We kiss the altar, which is a sign of the Lord himself, the sacrifice of Calvary, and the table of the Last Supper. Everything we do flows from the altar and back to it. The kiss symbolizes our daily embrace of the sacrifice of Christ as our way of life, for on the day of our ordination we were totally and irrevocably joined in character to him.”* (pg. 138)

This “character” that is mentioned is important to understand. When a man is ordained, a mark, or a character, is put on his soul which identifies him with Christ the priest. Just as in baptism and confirmation we received a special character that is permanent (also called an indelible mark), so too in ordination a special character is given to the soul. This character is an identification with Jesus Christ, our high priest. And it is because of this priestly character that the priest is able to act in the person of Christ.

This is why the priest speaks in the name of Christ when celebrating the sacraments. He says, “*I baptize you...*”, “*I absolve you...*”, and “*This is my body...*”. The priest cannot say these words just because he’s really talented, or because he wants to claim the authority of God— “*Who but God alone can forgive sins?*” (Mark 2:7). No one could claim such authority simply as a human being, only through the power of Christ. As the Second Vatican Council document *Lumen Gentium* says: Through priests, “*our Lord Jesus Christ, the supreme high priest, is present in the midst of those who believe*” (LG 21). So a priest does not act in his own name, but in the name of Christ.

There is only one priesthood: that of Jesus Christ. And every Catholic priest is ordained into this one priesthood of Jesus Christ. The power and authority of the priest comes solely through his identity with Christ and His priesthood.

The “doing” of the priest must flow from his “being”. So now that we know the identity of a priest, we can talk about what the priest does. Stay tuned for next time.