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THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST IN THE LIGHT OF JOHN PAUL II'S LETTERS TO PRIESTS FOR MAUNDY THURSDAY

Summary: The long pontificate of John Paul II was a time for the Church to continue reflecting on the fundamental themes that constitute the identity of the community of Christ's disciples. Among many subjects, the priesthood appears to be a special topic: on the one hand, through the pope himself and his pastoral activity, and on the other – through a series of documents devoted to the priesthood. This article will present the person of Christ as a priest since it is the starting point for reflection on the priesthood as such. In the mind of the Polish Pope, Christ is the only priest who connects His priesthood with the sacrifice on the cross. This sacrifice includes the perfection of mediation between God and people, and simultaneously, the completion of what Christ possesses eternally as the Son. Sonship, mediation and the priesthood are topics that should be considered together as they not only interpenetrate but also complement each other. Such a broad approach to the subject, however, is limited to the analysis of the Letters to priests for Maundy Thursday.

Keywords: John Paul II, priesthood, letters, Holy Thursday, Christ, mediator, sacrifice.

The priesthood and John Paul II – *quid novi?* In the context of the long pontificate of Polish Pope, it may seem that every aspect has already been raised and developed. After two exhortations dedicated separately to priests and bishops,¹ after analyzing annual letters to priests, and finally two specific autobiographies,² what more can be said about the priesthood in the teaching of John Paul II? Against all appearances, it is possible and not always preliminary assumptions appear to be sufficiently correct.

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¹ It concerns exhortations: *Pastores Dabo Vobis* from 1992 and *Pastores gregis* from 2003.

² The first autobiography, entitled *Dar i tajemnica*, was published on the 50th anniversary of Wojtyła's priestly ordination (November 1996), and the second one, *Wstańcie, chodźmy!* (published in 2004), described his activities as a bishop in Krakow and Rome.

The topic discussed in this study is included in the title. Somehow John Paul II presents the priesthood of Christ in letters to priests written every year on the occasion of Maundy Thursday. The emphasis here is on the person of Jesus Christ, who is the first and greatest priest of the New Testament. The point is not, therefore, to repeat the content that pertains to and characterizes the sacramental priesthood in the Church, but rather to pay attention to Christ as a priest.³ For if Christ remains the key to understanding the history of the Church and the world, it is no different with the priesthood, which is fulfilled in the Church as an extension of His, Christ's, priesthood.

Before presenting the very person of Christ the priest, however, it is necessary to draw attention to some undeniable facts relating to Him, and then to show the general essence of His priesthood. Only in this context can we try to indicate the main threads in the thoughts of the Polish Pope about Christ as a priest. The basis for the analysis will be the letters for Maundy Thursday, which, although not the most important in the Church's magisterium, due to the addressees – priests, should present the priesthood of Christ as the principle and starting point.

Obvious and not obvious

In the writings of John Paul II under discussion, there are expressions that are classic in understanding the priesthood of Christ. He is called a priest, (cf. John Paul II, 1979, 11; 1988, 21; 1992, 1; 1995, 1) the only priest, (cf. John Paul II, 1993, 1; 1979, 3) great priest, (cf. John Paul II, 1996) eternal priest, (cf. John Paul II, 1979, 6; 1980,8; 1982, 6; 1997, 1) true priest, (cf. John Paul II, 1980, 8) the highest priest, (cf. John Paul II, 1997, 1; 1998, 1; 2004, 5-6) New Covenant priest, (cf. John Paul II, 1989, 1; 1990, 1) high priest, (cf. John Paul II, 1980,8) priest in the order of Melchizedek. (Cf. John Paul II, 1996, 1) The vocabulary used by the Pope does not go beyond the message of the authors of the New Testament, especially the Letter to the Hebrews. All the expressions quoted are of biblical origin and constitute a definitive limit of speaking about the priesthood as such. This means that Christ is not only a priest, but also that He has one, the only and full priesthood. (Cf. John Paul II, 1979, 4)

³ In the studies on the topic of priesthood by John Paul II I did not come across such a comprehensive study, and the number of studies is exceptionally enormous. The catalog of the Center for Documentation and Study of the Pontificate of John Paul II in Rome contains 400 records regarding the priesthood. It is probably not even possible to consult at least some of these works. From Polish publishing houses, I will mention only two: K. Czuba, 2010, *Tożsamość kapłańska – sacerdos alter Christus – w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II*, *Collectanea Theologica*, t. 80/1, pp. 81–98; J. Bramorski, 2010, *Kapłaństwo jako dar z siebie w życiu i myśli Jana Pawła II*, *Studia Gdańskie*, t. XXVI, pp. 43–66.

Already at the stage of establishing certain foundations, it can be stated that the concept of Christ's priesthood will be inscribed in the whole message of the New Testament. Moreover, it will not only result from it, but also treat it as a guarantee of seeking its meaning. Christ is not only a priest, but also exercises His priesthood in a unique, unrepeatable and non-transferable way. He alone is the true priest, and those who are called priests by the tradition of the Church can sacramentally only participate in this priesthood. Hence, they add nothing or diminish anything in the priesthood of Christ.

The main principle distinguishing Christ's priesthood is His holiness in the strongest sense of the word. If holiness defines God in the strict sense and radically separates Him from other creatures, then Christ, the holy priest, must also preserve these qualities. This means that in His priesthood He cannot be like creatures who offer a sacrifice to God, and as a priest, He never ceases to be God, that is, the Son of God. In this connection, says John Paul II, the priesthood of Christ is linked to the mission of the Son, it is essentially inscribed in it. This approach to Christ's priesthood is unusual in the tradition of the Church, although for us Christians of the 21st century it has become ordinary through the reception of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. It is enough, however, to recall the teaching of Pius XII to indicate a difference in understanding the source of the priesthood. The encyclical *Mediator Dei*, published in 1947, contains the following words:

“Mediator between God and men, the High Priest, who went before us into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, quite clearly had one aim in view when He undertook the mission of mercy which was to endow mankind with the rich blessings of supernatural grace. Sin had disturbed the right relationship between man and his Creator; the Son of God would restore it. The children of Adam [...] He would bring them back to their heavenly Father [...]. For this reason He was not content, while He dwelt with us on earth, merely to give notice that redemption had begun, and to proclaim the long-awaited Kingdom of God, but gave Himself besides in prayer and sacrifice to the task of saving souls, even to the point of offering Himself, as He hung from the cross, a Victim unspotted unto God, to purify our conscience of dead works, to serve the living God.

But what is more, the divine Redeemer so willed it that the priestly life, which began with the supplication and sacrifice of His mortal body, should continue without intermission down the ages in His Mystical Body which is the Church. That is why, He established a visible priesthood to offer everywhere the clean oblation which would enable men from East to West, freed from the shackles of sin, to offer God that unconstrained and voluntary homage which their conscience dictates.

In obedience, therefore, to its Founder's behest, the Church prolongs the priestly mission of Jesus Christ mainly by means of the sacred liturgy." (Pius XII, 1947)

For Pius XII, the priesthood is above all *munus*, a function and dignity that Christ fulfills from the moment of His incarnation. The Son of God comes into the world to accomplish salvation and becomes a priest because of it. If there had been no incarnation, there would have been no need for the priesthood. Its existence in the Church stems from the necessity to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is combined with the celebration of other sacraments and daily prayer of thanksgiving.⁴ John Paul II's thought is slightly different: the incarnation is only a revelation of what Christ possesses eternally. If there had been no incarnation, the priesthood in the Son would have remained hidden only in God. It is inscribed in the mystery of His existence. (Cf. John Paul II, 2004, 2) The question that arises here is: what is the essence of Christ's priesthood?

The essence of the priesthood

Letters from priests, published for over twenty years, describe the essence of Christ's priesthood in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, the essential element that returns regularly is the sacrifice on Golgotha. The cross of Christ is a place of special manifestation of His priestly dignity. For Christ himself, it is the culminating point where everything leads to and where everything comes true. However, for the Church, the community of Christ's disciples, it is the starting point that allows us to grasp and understand better the whole life of Christ.

John Paul II strongly emphasizes the importance of the cross as a real sacrifice. Thus, it unites priesthood and sacrifice as essential to each other. The priesthood is ordained for sacrifice, and sacrifice, if its purpose is to be God, can be offered only by God's chosen and ordained ministers. Again, we see a biblical thought, this time going back to the Old Testament. According to Jewish law, the priests were members of the tribe of Levi, whose task was to exercise sacrificial worship on behalf of the entire chosen people. Their service was related to the care of the tabernacle, initially in the tent of the meeting, and then in the Jerusalem Temple. Intuition suggests that this biblical setting reveals a certain uniqueness of Christ's priesthood and its continuity with the Old Testament tradition. This continuity is expressed in the localization of the sacrifice: Jewish priests and Christ make a sacrifice to God in Jerusalem. And

⁴ Pius XII, referring to his predecessor, Pius XI, indicates the divine psalmody, that is, the priestly breviary.

the role of an intermediary should also be added to that. Jewish priests sacrificed in the name of the chosen people, and Christ does so in the name of all mankind. Therefore, He goes beyond the Old Testament.

Making sacrifices to God is the most important privilege of the priesthood. However, it does not exhaust its essence. Testimony and service must necessarily be added to the various acts of sacrifice. The priesthood is a witness and a service whose subject is twofold: God and God's people. These two additional aspects of the priesthood as such are related to the observance of God's law, which must also be known in advance. If a priest is to serve and testify, he must do so consciously, with full responsibility for the words spoken and the action taken. The priest does not act on his own, but is a sign of God in the world, and therefore, an identity between the inner and the outer is necessary. In other words, external acts must be inspired by an authentic internal reference to God. What is greater, what is more beautiful in man than love? Through love man expresses himself most fully and it is love which determines the value of human actions. Hence, notes John Paul II, the priesthood as a testimony and service cannot be devoid of love. Rather, it should be based on it, expressed in it and lead to it. The priest's task is to lead people to love God.

And here comes some novelty. John Paul II combines the ideal of a priest – sacrifice with the ideal of a priest – a good shepherd. (Cf. John Paul II, 1992, 1) A good shepherd not only protects his sheep, but is ready to give his life for them. Willingness to sacrifice life as a quality of a priest-shepherd results not so much from observation of the temporal world as from the interpretation of the motive of a good shepherd in the teaching of Jesus Himself. It is hard to imagine, more than two thousand years ago that a shepherd would devote his life to just one sheep. Though humanly speaking, he may feel sorry for the loss of one animal, a sane shepherd does not forget about the rest of the herd. He has other sheep for which he needs to care and not to endanger them. A good shepherd, as interpreted by Christ, is a shepherd always ready to sacrifice, always ready to save his sheep, even if it is just one of them. Where does this willingness to sacrifice come from? It is precisely because you truly love your sheep, i.e. not treat them as strangers. There is also a novelty here: the priest-shepherd acts not between objects – victims, but between subjects – co-sacrifices. This is a great thought that will return like a refrain in many letters to priests. There is one priesthood of Christ which abides in all of God's people. By virtue of this one priesthood, all the people are ready to offer sacrifices to God.⁵

Anything can be an offering to God, but its purpose is to sanctify man. To sanctify means to grow in holiness. Therefore, the very act of sacrifice

⁵ The thought is taken from *Lumen gentium* 10.

presupposes man's freedom to sin. What if this sin exists? John Paul II strongly emphasizes another aspect of the sacrifice, namely its expiatory character. Sacrifice can also be made for sins and sinners, and then it becomes a request for forgiveness and a sign of reconciliation. If the Old Testament contains descriptions of various sacrifices, they are not only sacrifices of praise to God, but also of atonement. The New Testament unites this plurality of sacrifices and applies them to the one sacrifice of Christ, which is praise, thanksgiving, petition and atonement. Thus, the New Testament order does not have to be based on the number of sacrifices, but on their effectiveness. The one and only sacrifice of the Priest of the New Covenant brings everything that a person needs. It is perfect because the Giver Himself is perfect. In this context, it is worth analyzing the priesthood of Christ presented in the letters to priests.

Christ – priest and...

As mentioned above, John Paul II strongly refers to biblical themes and plots. Nevertheless, limiting the question of Christ's priesthood to the biblical perspective would be a severe narrowing, and perhaps a certain impoverishment. For it seems that the priesthood of Christ cannot be grasped without reference to theological themes, both in Christology and Trinitology. These planes are complementary and only their mutual juxtaposition shows the whole understanding of who Christ was as a priest and what His priesthood was (and is).

The starting point is the mystery of Christ as a person. John Paul II refers to the fundamental truth about Christ as the Son of God, that is, the second person of the Holy Trinity. In the Trinitarian mystery, one must examine and seek understanding of the entire history of salvation. In his reflection on the prayer scene in Gethsemane, the Pope notes:

“During the Last Supper Jesus accomplished what was the Father's eternal will for Him, which was also His own will, His will as the Son [...]. The words that institute the sacrament of the new and eternal covenant, the Eucharist, constitute *in a certain way the sacramental seal of that eternal will of the Father and of the Son*, the will which has now reached that ‘hour’ of its definitive accomplishment.

In Gethsemane the name ‘*Abba*’, which on Jesus' lips always has a Trinitarian depth (for it is the name that He uses in speaking to or about the Father, and especially in prayer) casts a reflection upon the pains of the Passion concerning the meaning of the words of the Eucharist institution. Indeed, Jesus comes to Gethsemane to reveal a further aspect of the truth about Himself, the

Son, and He does so especially through this word: *Abba*. And this truth, this unheard-of truth about Jesus Christ, consists in the fact that '*being equal to the Father*' as the Father's consubstantial Son, He is at the same time the *true man*.

The prayer in Gethsemane equals and even exceeds any other prayer of Jesus, in revealing the truth about the identity, vocation and mission of the Son, who came into the world to fulfill the fatherly will of God to the very end, when He says, 'It is finished'.

Jesus Christ, then, the consubstantial Son, presents Himself to the Father and says '*Abba*'. [...] For in Gethsemane the one who beseeches the Father is a Man who at the same time is God, *consubstantial* with the Father." (John Paul II, 1987, 4-5. Cf. John Paul II, 2001, 1)⁶

The quoted text points to Christ, who is the Son of God and who, by virtue of His sonship, is equal to the Father. Only the Son can truly address God 'Father' and it is something natural for Him. From this approach it should be concluded that in the communion of the Father and the Son, complete consubstantiation is fulfilled. By virtue of this equality, everything between the Father and the Son becomes common. There is no desire of the Father and no separate desire of the Son. There is only one desire which is contained in the one will of the Father and the Son. The Pope explains further:

"The 'will of the Father' is precisely salvific love: the salvation of the world is to be accomplished through the *redemptive sacrifice of the Son*. It is very understandable that the Son of Man, taking this task upon Himself, shows in His crucial dialogue with the Father the awareness that He has of the superhuman dimension of this task, in which He fulfills the Father's will in the divine depths of His filial union with Him." (John Paul II, 1987, 6)

The object of God's will is to grant people salvation, the source of which is His own love. In the perspective of love, it is possible to understand the entire history of salvation, in which sin and redemption are inscribed. The first violation of God's order was a rejection of love, and its restoration by Christ is its granting. God did not reject people, but sent His only-begotten Son to them.

⁶ Nearly ten years later, the Pope will write: "Christ, the Son of one being with the Father, was made priest of the New Covenant according to the order of Melchizedek: therefore He too was called to the priesthood. It is the Father who 'calls' His own Son, whom He begot by an act of eternal love, to 'come into the world' (cf. Heb 10:5) and to become a man. He wills that His only-begotten Son, by taking flesh, should become 'a priest forever': the one priest of the new eternal Covenant. The Son's vocation to the priesthood expresses the depth of the Trinitarian mystery. For only the Son, the Word of the Father, in whom and through whom all things were created, can unceasingly offer creation in sacrifice to the Father, confirming that everything created has come forth from the Father and must become an offering of praise to the Creator. Thus, the mystery of the priesthood has its beginning in the Trinity and is, at the same time, a consequence of the incarnation. By becoming man, the only-begotten and eternal Son of the Father is born of woman, enters into the created order and thus becomes a priest, the one eternal priest." (John Paul II, 1996, 1)

With the advent of the Son, the work of salvation for all mankind is accomplished: “In fact, the mystery of the redemption is not just a theological abstraction but an unceasing reality, through which God embraces man in Christ with His eternal love – and man recognizes this love, allows himself to be guided and permeated by it, interiorly transformed by it, and through it become ‘a new creation.’⁶ Man, thus created anew by love, the love that is revealed to him in Jesus Christ, raises the eyes of his soul to God and together with the Psalmist declares, ‘With Him is plenteous redemption!’” (John Paul II, 1983, 2. Cf. John Paul II 1995, 1; 2005, 3)

God’s Son becomes a man. The mystery of the Son’s incarnation appears as a way of realizing the eternal will of the Father, which from now on will be fulfilled not only by God but also by man. Christ is true God and true man through the fact of accepting the humanity of Mary. (Cf. John Paul II, 1995, 3-4) In Nazareth, the Son of God becomes *homo assumptus* (cf. John Paul II, 1988, 1) in the unity of His divine person. What He had as a Son, He also retained after the incarnation since despite a radical change in the way of existence, He did not cease to be the second person of the Holy Trinity. (Cf. John Paul II, 1981, 3) The incarnation does not violate the dignity of the Son, who, though humbling Himself, (cf. John Paul II, 2000, 4) at the same time exalts a single human nature to be His own nature. Such adoption of humanity enables the saving will of God to be realized as it is in and through the mystery of the incarnation that other features of Christ’s priesthood are inscribed.

In His adopted humanity, Christ reveals Himself as a perfect man. Simultaneously, this perfection, although assumed morally, relates more to the truth of humanity. Christ was a human being like any other. He grew up in a human family, had parents whom He depended on, worked like any other human.⁷ All this makes Him closer to people who see Him as God and Brother. The Pope explains this union with Christ by referring to the Book of Genesis. God created man in His image and likeness. Unfortunately, sin introduced disorder into the harmony of creation and turned man away from his Creator. However, if God created man out of love, He also renews him through love. It is love that leads to the formation of a new image of God in man, “an image that corresponds to the one that Christ revealed in us. As we thus become adorers of the Father ‘in spirit and truth,’ we mature in an ever fuller union with Christ, we are ever more united to Him, and – if one may use the expression – we are ever more in harmony with Him.” (John Paul II, 1980, 5)

Christ’s non-distinctive humanity binds Him to all mankind, not as an indefinite community, but as a community made up of individual people.

⁷ In a letter from 1981 (letter *A concilio Constantinopolitano I*), the Pope refers to the formula of the Councils of Constantinople I and Ephesus, in order to show the role of Mary in the mystery of salvation.

(Cf. John Paul II, 1995, 4) Through His humanity, Christ unites Himself with every human being. Consequently, the gifts of love and forgiveness, which are the essence of redemption, turn out to be universal gifts. There is no man whom Christ would not embrace with His love and would not include in His sacrifice. “The redemption – explains John Paul II – remains connected in the closest possible way with forgiveness. God redeemed us in Jesus Christ; God caused us to become, in Christ, a ‘new creation’, for in Him He has granted us the gift of forgiveness. God reconciled the world to Himself in Christ. And precisely because He reconciled it in Jesus Christ as the firstborn of all creation, *the union of man with God has been irreversibly consolidated*. This union, which once the ‘first Adam’ had consented to be taken away from the whole human family, cannot be taken from humanity by anyone, since it was rooted and consolidated in Christ, the ‘second Adam’. And, therefore, humanity becomes continually, in Jesus Christ, a ‘new creation’. It becomes this as in Him and through Him the grace of the remission of sins remains inexhaustible before every human being, ‘With Him is plenteous redemption.’” (John Paul II 1983, 3)

The sacrifice of Christ remains the cause and sign of this grace, made possible only by the adopted humanity. Christ offers His body to the Father (a material sign of humanity), which is nailed to the cross. (Cf. John Paul II, 1996, 1) On the cross, the only Son of God offers His life in sacrifice as propitiation and thanksgiving to the Father. This act of offering is an act of the highest love since Christ does not die for strangers, but for friends. It is also a confirmation of the indivisibility of life and service (cf. John Paul II, 1979, 4) that Christ fulfills until the end. Love and service are the best qualities of a priest, and Christ is their constant source, perfect model, unchanging and effective expression. (Cf. John Paul II, 1979, 5) On the cross, Christ performs the definitive act of His priesthood (cf. John Paul II, 1979, 5): He not only offers a sacrifice, but also becomes a victim Himself. (Cf. John Paul II, 2000, 8)

Through His sacrifice, Christ glorifies God, that is, the entire Holy Trinity. (Cf. John Paul II, 1980, 3) There is no broader explanation of this worship in the letters. Nevertheless, it seems that the Pope is here on the basis of the realism of the incarnation, and shows the Son – the sacrifice precisely as a man. Although in His person He is equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit, however in adopted humanity He becomes inferior to Them and to Himself as God.

By humanity, sacrifice to God is made and the mediation between people and God is fulfilled. These two aspects come together in the fact that it is the uniqueness of the sacrifice that best corresponds to the Father's will. (Cf. John Paul II, 1980, 7) The Pope explains that Christ “is the author and principal subject of this sacrifice, a sacrifice in which, in truth, nobody can take His place.

Only He – only Christ – was able and is always able to be the true and effective ‘expiation for our sins and... for the sins of the whole world’. Only His sacrifice – and no one else’s – was able and is able to have a ‘propitiatory power’ before God, the Trinity, and the transcendent holiness.” (John Paul II, 1980, 8)

This atonement concerns man and the world, (cf. John Paul II, 1980, 9; 1982, 2; 1984, 2) and is no other than Christ’s gift of Himself. (Cf. John Paul II, 1983, 2; 1985, 1) By giving Himself, Christ shows the power of authentic love. It is capable of sacrifice and it is voluntary. Christ does not choose the cross as the imposed will of the Father, but wants it freely.⁸ Passion, cross and death are a conscious and deliberate choice. In them the fulfillment of Christ’s entire earthly life takes place. And if God’s love for man is revealed at the moment of the incarnation, then on the cross this love receives concretization and fullness. Christ ‘as the Good Shepherd, He was about to give His life for His sheep, to save man, to reconcile him with his Father and bring him into a new life.’ (John Paul II, 1986, 1) Christ in the hour of His passion “is the eternal Son, who coming into the world says to the Father, ‘A body You prepared for me... Behold, I come to do Your will.’” (John Paul II, 1988, 1)

The beginning and the end of the Savior’s earthly life constitute the end of the one mystery of salvation in which Christ restores God to man and man to God.⁹ This is the essence of mediation. It is worth recalling the statement made at the very beginning. According to John Paul II, Christ’s priesthood is linked not only to His mission, but also to His existence. If in the Holy Trinity the Son, the eternal Logos, is the vehicle of God’s rationality and a tool in creating the world, then the history of salvation is a revelation of His divine ‘instrumentality’. Everything happened through the Word and in the Word: first as the mediator of all creation and then as the mediator of universal salvation. In the act of creation, the Son was the thanksgiving and praise of all creation to the Father; in the act of salvation, He additionally became a sin offering.

⁸ “In the context of the Jubilee of the incarnation, we can approach the priesthood of Christ from a particular perspective. The Jubilee invites us to contemplate the intimate link between Christ’s priesthood and His mystery. The priesthood of Christ is not ‘incidental’, a task which He might or might not have assumed: rather, it is integral to His identity as the Son Incarnate, as God-made-man. From now on, the relationship between mankind and God passes wholly through Christ, ‘No one comes to the Father, except through me’ (*Jn* 14:6). This is why, Christ is a priest endowed with an eternal and universal priesthood, of which the priesthood of the first Covenant was a prefigurement and a preparation (cf. *Heb* 9:9). He exercised it fully from the moment He took His seat as the High Priest ‘at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven’ (*Heb* 8:1). From that time forth, the very nature of human priesthood changed: now there is but one priesthood, that of Christ, which can be shared and exercised in different ways.” (John Paul II, 2000, 7)

⁹ “At the same time, this service is the fulness of salvific mediation: Christ entered an eternal sanctuary, ‘into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf’ (*Heb* 9:24). In truth, He was ‘appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God.’” (John Paul II, 1989, 4)

Christ stands between man and God: priest, redeemer, the only mediator. The three terms are united by the same person of the Son of God, "Redemption – notes the pope – is accomplished through the sacrifice in which Christ – the Mediator of the new and eternal covenant – 'entered once for all into the Holy Place...with His own blood', making room in the 'house of the Father' – in the bosom of the Most Holy Trinity – for all 'those who are called to the eternal inheritance.' (Cf. Heb 9:12, 15) It is precisely for this reason that crucified and risen Christ is 'the high priest of the good things to come' (Heb 9:11) and His sacrifice means a new orientation of man's spiritual history towards God – the Creator and Father, towards whom the first-born of all creation leads all in the Holy Spirit." (John Paul II, 1988, 7) It is worth noting that the functions of priest, redeemer and mediator are closely intertwined. Moreover, in the person of Christ they receive an additional attribute of eternity. Christ is an eternal priest, eternal mediator, and eternal redeemer. Regarding the priesthood, John Paul II states: "*As man Christ is a priest*: he is 'the high priest of the good things that have come'. At the same time, however, this man – priest is the Son, of one being with the Father. For this reason His priesthood – the priesthood of His redemptive sacrifice – is one and unrepeatable. It is *the transcendent fulfilment* of all that priesthood is." (John Paul II, 1989, 3)

God's filiation is the key to understanding the qualities of the indicated qualities. If Christ is an eternal priest by virtue of His divine dignity, (cf. John Paul II, 1989, 1) He is likewise an eternal mediator and redeemer. A new intermediary cannot be expected, much less another redemption. However, the unity and uniqueness of these three functions in Christ are extended in the people of whom he is the head, that is, in the Church. A priest, mediator and redeemer, or rather co-redeemer, are the hallmarks of God's new people. In Christ, these people can offer a sacrifice to God, can and should combine their own sacrifices with Christ's, and also bear a good witness to the world. The mediation of God's people is situated on a vertical line and is linked to missionary activity. All Christians are sent to preach the Gospel and make the true God known to others. In this way, the mission and service are carried out in imitation of Christ, who Himself, sent by the Father, came to serve all people. All the activities of the people are carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit, who is a gift from the risen Christ and who completes His work of redemption in the world.

Conclusions

Letters to priests for Maundy Thursday are not letters of the highest magisterial authority. Therefore, it is difficult to find in them a complete and

multi-faceted explanation of the topic of priesthood. While each of these epistles shows an aspect of the priesthood, even when put together, they do not cover the whole subject. Moreover, those addressed to the priests of the Church have the form of exhortation, which means that they are more an admonition than instruction. John Paul II, as pope, tries to encourage personal reflection on the priesthood of those who, by the grace and election of Christ, participate in His priesthood differently than through baptism.

Christ's priesthood is shown in strict accordance with the biblical message about the priesthood. The Pope does not try to go beyond the limits of Sacred Scripture and, instead of seeking new forms of expression, he rather constantly deepens what is contained in the inspired books. Hence, the inevitable repetition of texts and thoughts, albeit in a new context, often in connection with events taking place in the universal Church.

The theme of Christ's priesthood is primarily related to Him. Christ the priest is first the Son of God. According to John Paul II, in divine sonship one should seek the explanation of everything that happened in the history of salvation. This story is created by God and man, and its culminating point is the incarnation of the Son of God. He, one of the Holy Trinity, became man and did not cease to be God. Therefore, every act of life takes on the meaning beyond a specific time and place. In His humanity He is included in the history of the world, but through His deity He transcends this history and binds it as if into one above them. In this vision of salvation history, Christ's priesthood appears as a sign of God's love that is fulfilled in sacrifice and service. Christ will give God the Father a sacrifice for humanity, and simultaneously, He does not cease to extend the effects of this sacrifice in the action of those who, through the sacrament of Holy Orders, have a different share in his one priesthood. (Cf. John Paul II, 2000, 7)

What is new is the combination of the priesthood as a sacrificial service with the ideal of a good shepherd. These two dimensions, according to John Paul II, are complementary, and their model is precisely Christ. By making a sacrifice of Himself, Christ places Himself in the hands of men. This edition is a service undertaken in complete freedom and voluntary. In those who take this form of life, Christ's priesthood is realized in a sacramental way, that is, through the sacrament of Holy Orders. The priests of the Church are not new priests-sacrifices, but participate in the priesthood of Christ and offer – also sacramentally – His sacrifice.

Finally, although this theme is not particularly developed in the letters to priests, it should be noted that this continuation of Christ's mission in the priests of the Church is achieved through the actions and power of the Holy Spirit. As a gift to the Church, this Spirit completes the salvation accomplished in Christ,

and in the community of His disciples He directs everything to God. In this way, the Christian's life resulting from Christ's sacrifice contained in this sacrifice, purified, perfected and sanctified, in order to bring about the eschatological unity of everything and everyone in God. Finally, let us quote John Paul II once again:

'The mission of the Son of God reaches its fulfilment when, offering Himself, He brings about our adoption as sons and daughters and, by giving the Holy Spirit, makes it possible for human beings to share in the very communion of the Trinity. In the Paschal Mystery, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, God the Father stoops down to every man and woman, offering the possibility of redemption from sin and liberation from death.' (John Paul II, 1999, introduction)¹⁰

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¹⁰ We find a similar pattern in: John Paul II, 2000, 4.

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Kapłaństwo Chrystusa w świetle listów Jana Pawła II do kapłanów na Wielki Czwartek

Streszczenie: Długi pontyfikat Jana Pawła II był dla Kościoła czasem kontynuowania refleksji nad zasadniczymi tematami stanowiącymi o tożsamości wspólnoty uczniów Chrystusa. Wśród wielu tematów kapłaństwo jest się problemem szczególnym. Za złożonością tej problematyki przemawia sama osoba papieża i jego aktywność pastoralna, a także wiele dokumentów poświęconych tematyce kapłaństwa. W niniejszym artykule ukazano osobę Chrystusa jako kapłana, gdyż to ona jest punktem wyjścia w refleksji nad kapłaństwem. Chrystus jest, w myśli papieża Polaka, kapłanem jedynym, który swoje kapłaństwo łączy z ofiarą na krzyżu. W tej ofercie zawiera się doskonałość

pośrednictwa między Bogiem a ludźmi, a jednocześnie dopełnienie tego, co Chrystus posiada odwiecznie jako Syn. Synostwo, pośrednictwo i kapłaństwo to tematy, które należy rozpatrywać łącznie, gdyż nie tylko się przenikają, ale także wzajemnie uzupełniają. Tak szerokie ujęcie tematu zostało w artykule ograniczone do analizy *Listów do kapłanów na Wielki Czwartek*.

Słowa kluczowe: Jan Paweł II, kapłaństwo, listy, Wielki Czwartek, Chrystus, pośrednik, ofiara.

