

THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE PRIEST IN THE LIGHT OF HIS OFFICE

Karl Rahner SJ

The theme here is ‘starting points for a spirituality of the priest in the light of his office, that is, both as it is seen in what is properly the binding teaching of the Church and theology and also as it confronts us today in its historically conditioned concreteness. First of all, a few preliminary observations:

When I was invited to take part in this conference, I had to stipulate (more from necessity than from my own choice) that I should be allowed to talk freely: that is, I would not bring with me a carefully prepared, written address. There may be advantages in this procedure insofar as there will not be any attempt to cover too much ground and consequently there is less danger of talking over people’s heads. But the condition put forward and accepted has the disadvantage that I am liable to go round and round the point, to say and to stress some things and leave others in the background or forget them and thus to speak vaguely about a matter which certainly deserves exact and well-considered treatment. I must ask you, then, from the very outset to allow for this disadvantage and forgive me. In view of my declining strength, the pressure of other work, and my age, it would have been simply impossible to adopt a different procedure.

You are listening to an old man. I certainly don’t feel young; I am in my seventy-third year and at that age a person knows very exactly his limitations and particularly his limited opportunities of practical experience. You are really pastors who have borne the burden and effort of pastoral work for years and decades; I have always been a teacher and, although very occasionally engaged in pastoral work, for the most part theologizing and philosophizing in my ivory tower. I am aware of this and must ask you also to allow for the fact and forgive me if this address turns out accordingly. Moreover, if we are talking about the priestly office and the spirituality it involves, each of us has inevitably a concrete image of this office and the spirituality resulting from it which is concretely determined also by our life, by our experience of life, our sociological, ecclesial situation – so much so that none of us can adequately portray this concreteness of our image of the priest and the image of priestly spirituality and consequently we impress on this image features that may well be legitimate, but which are not present in this way in the priestly image of another colleague. And if the same thing is noticeable also in the present lecture, that is, if you have the impression that I am going on and on about things which are of no interest to you, which really do not affect you, which strike you as odd, this, too, of course is an

unavoidable situation which, we might say somewhat pretentiously and pompously, is part of the historicity and individual relativity of one man's perception of truth, particularly in his old age.

I would like to say right from the beginning that I completely agree with what Father Zulehner has said about this theme as a whole and I think that what he has said about Type B as the type to be preferred today (since it brings out more clearly than Type A the special features of the present-day priestly situation and spirituality is in perfect harmony with my own opinion. And I even have the impression that there is nothing particularly that I can add to his comments, except at most to observe that this conception is absolutely legitimate and can be maintained in the light of the dogma of the priesthood.

Obviously there are plenty of concrete individual types of priestly spirituality. Each of us has the right to give concrete shape to the possibilities of priestly existence and priestly spirituality as they occur in our own life. It is clear that a priest who allows his spirituality to be shaped and conditioned in the light of his particular office and task will have as his ideal (and as what, in fact, he realizes) a spirituality and a priestly image differing according to whether he is a teacher of religion in a city school or living as a country pastor. Each way has its concrete justification. The conservative and the 'progressive', the intellectual and the simple, devout person, the quiet spiritual adviser (or what we might call 'the spiritual man'), and the apostle creating a sensation in the world: all these types can be justified and we must simply get used to accepting one another, acknowledging their right to exist, and not insisting that as priests we must all be molded in the same pattern. Each of us must gradually crystallize out of our own situation, our own temperament, and our own life history the priestly image and the type of spirituality that are right for ourselves, naturally being humbly aware of the fact that what we present is a priest, not the priest. All this is obvious, but, if you look into the concrete circumstances of our lives as priests, you will see that it is by no means so simple in practice and that this apparently simple norm is very often infringed.

I would now like to put forward some very general ideas on office and spirituality.

We begin with a very simple thesis: priestly spirituality is first of all simply Christian spirituality, Christian life in faith, hope, and love. Priestly spirituality is not (at least, not primarily) a kind of extra to a normal Christian life, but (while, of course, determined by the concrete life task of the priest as distinct from other

Christians) the spiritual, Christian life of a Christian purely and simply. Today this is really obvious in the light of the practice and nature of the priesthood. It is obvious in the light of practice, for, exactly like other people, we have to live in a secularized milieu, we are impugned and called in question by a world of secularized values with its rationalism, with its technocracy, with its crowds, etc. One way or another, like other Christians today, we are living in a diaspora; neither for them nor for us are faith and Christian life and the hope of eternity to be taken for granted as something that we could pass over, so to speak, as unimportant for us and then find greater scope to develop a sublime spirituality as our special job or as a kind of hobby. We are poor, tormented, frightened, threatened by the world as a whole, by politics and industry; just like the others, we are caught up into the whirlpool of secularization; faith in God, in an eternal life, the persuasion that our freedom is to be exercised responsibly before God, all these things create exactly as many difficulties for us as they do for other people. If this were not the case, it would not be an advantage, but a sign that we are living out of touch not only with our time, but also with our office and our own life, since we cannot really live this office and this life otherwise than in a genuine confrontation with our time and situation, society, culture, and lack of culture.

Priestly spirituality, then, is first of all Christian spirituality which, as such, is required of every Christian if he wants to be a true Christian and not merely a conventional or folkloristic Christian. But if we say this, the question will inevitably be raised as to what exactly this Christian spirituality is. We can, of course, say that it is life out of faith, hope, and love, it is life from the Holy Spirit; we can say that it is life from the Spirit of Christ, life from the Gospel; we can say that it is life from the following of Christ; we can say that it is life from the hope of eternal life, out of an ultimate responsibility in which we are aware that, whether we want it or not, we are living our life to the very end in freedom for or against God. We can say that Christian spirituality is life oriented to God's judgment, it means coping with sin that cannot be eliminated by referring to social or psychological constraints, etc. We can say all that, it is all true, and here and now there is really nothing more that I can say; to say anything more precise would require at least an eight-day retreat.

Simply to provide a spur, a question that is meant to be disturbing, I would like to add the following in regard to this Christian spirituality which is basically identical with priestly spirituality. When we speak of 'spirituality' (whether the term is a good one, very understandable, or pastorally useful is another question) we mean 'life from the Spirit'. But then the question arises as to just what this is

supposed to mean. And the crucial point for us personally and in our pastoral work today is whether we not only succeed in getting this 'pneumatic', spiritual dimension of our existence into our own heads or the heads of other people by an abstract, conceptual indoctrination (which today will be more or less ineffective), but whether we can discover this Spirit as what we really experience in ourselves. And this is extraordinarily difficult today in the age of sociological criticism of ideologies, in the age of natural science, in the age of Freud, in the age of depth psychology and of the psychological corruption of human beings. Is there in fact anything of this kind? Have you ever really experienced the Spirit of God? Suppose you say: 'Yes, I was once touched, or I was at one time devout, or I had the impression that there is some sort of God who is good, who quite likes me, although he allows children in Vietnam to be killed by napalm bombs'. In that case you ought to unleash on this claim of yours to have discovered the Spirit in yourself all the corrupting elements of psychology, of sociological criticism of ideologies, of rational psychology, technology, etc., and then ask if anything remains or if all that is left are merely words like 'God of love, grace, Holy Spirit, God's indwelling', etc., to which we cling because of some sort of feeling that in the long run we cannot do without this sort of thing. Are these words not all mere husks, long ago deprived of meaning in a long historical process from the time of the Enlightenment?

I said earlier that I cannot answer this question now. The reason why I raise it at all is in order to make clear what are the innermost structures that a Christian, and consequently a priestly, spirituality must have in order really to cope with these problems. At most I can add only a few words which seem to be even more abstract and merely refer to the matter under discussion without getting to the root of it. In the last resort spirituality is man's absolute transcendence, beyond any categorial reality in him or outside him, into the absolute mystery that we call God; it is ultimately a transcendental dying, crucified, becoming torn apart with Christ, not as a theory but as what happens in us in our concrete existence when we confront this life with its ultimate dependence on the incomprehensible mystery of God and achieve the acceptance, the endurance, of this life concretely with Christ through all categorial breakdowns, through all death, through all disappointment. Of course, such an experience of our own absolute transcendentality, crucified with Jesus into the absolute mystery, has a history in us. This is something that comes into existence slowly, we reach these things only gradually; perhaps there will be some people who never notice it or do not consider and cannot express in words what has taken place in them. At the present time, I think, at least the priest (we shall come to practical matters later) should slowly come to see that something of this kind exists.

For the moment that must suffice to mark out the problems involved in the first statement that I wanted to make, to the effect that priestly spirituality today more than ever is simply Christian spirituality and not an addition to the Christian life. In this sense spirituality is understood as truly Christian life emerging from the innermost centre of our own existence and not merely as a fulfillment of religious conventions prevailing in Christianity and in the Church. Spirituality, Christian spirituality, is the active participation in the death of Jesus and, since he is risen, in that death as successful and as assumed into that ineffable, incomprehensible, not controllable, not manoeuvrable ultimate mystery quod omnes (as Aquinas would say) vocant Deum.

II

Coming now from the first part of our reflections to the question of priestly office. It is obvious that our priestly office must also determine the character of our spirituality and even provide its essential foundation. Not, properly speaking, as an external addition to our Christian life, but as the radicalness of that life which is required from us as official representatives of Christianity and the Church. From that standpoint we must ask what we actually understand by this priestly office. For you know just as well as I do that in the last decades there has been a tremendous amount of writing and discussion about the nature of the ministerial priesthood and some very diverse opinions have been expressed. Clearly, I cannot explain and work out all these things again here. I would like to say from the outset that what I am putting forward here by way of commentary on these themes is not to be understood and interpreted as the sole possible, more or less official theory. In Catholic theology today there is a great deal that is obscure, that is being discussed and giving rise to very varied opinions. This is because very many questions in the history of dogma confront us today as a result of our attempt to gain a more exact and impartial understanding of these things: questions, for instance, of the relationship and connection between Jesus and the Church, of the existence of seven sacraments, of the relationship of the sacraments to the Church, of the possibility of a further development, and of the possibilities and limits of changes in the sacramental life of the Church.

If you read Hans Küng to the effect that Jesus did not institute a Church, or if theologians like him are saying that (whatever Trent may have defined) the sacraments are, of course, not instituted by Jesus Christ, however little I share these views and however much I have opposed them, I do not advise you to raise an outcry against them in the name of orthodoxy, but quite impartially to ask first

of all how these views came to be expressed. We must note, for example, that it was about a thousand years before it was known that there are seven sacraments. Or if you really take seriously the most modern exegesis on what is known as Jesus' 'imminent expectation', if you take seriously the historical, concrete, theological relativity of the human consciousness of Jesus (a consciousness that could be developed, gain new experiences, produce new formulations), then, of course, questions like those on the understanding of the Church and the priestly office are not actually as simple to answer as Catholic theology assumed even as recently as thirty years ago. So much by way of preliminary remarks.

In regard to the priestly office I want firstly to issue a warning against a misunderstanding. To express it very cautiously, as this office is conceived today in concrete practice and in the Church's official teaching, normally (not allowing for emergency situations, but leaving these aside for the moment) only the legitimately ordained priest in virtue of his sacramental ordination can preside over and lead a legitimate eucharistic celebration. This we can certainly assume as a fixed point of theology on the nature of the priestly office, notwithstanding all the problems it implies. But we need not deduce from this that the priest must necessarily see his actual nature in the light of that fixed point or give expression to it in his spirituality. Not that anyone is forbidden to do so. But to say, because this power of consecration as part of his priestly existence is reserved (at least in the ordinary way and in the normal case) exclusively to him, that this is also necessarily the proper, most fundamental, and most decisive point from which he gains his own total understanding of his nature is something that is not (at any rate, not logically) demonstrated by this priestly reservation.

For we can also see an extraordinarily great historical variability in the official nature of the priesthood. No one denies, for example, that Ignatius of Loyola wanted to found an order of priests, and Pope Paul firmly restrained us Jesuits from imperiling or dissolving the priestly character of the order. If we look at the life of Ignatius of Loyola, it is clear that he certainly wanted to be ordained. I would say, however, that this was simply because, for him, it was concretely the most practical way and the condition of the possibility of getting on with what he really wanted to do. In his own spirituality he was not at all terribly insistent about saying mass; if I remember rightly, he waited for a whole year after his ordination before he got as far as that, but then he said mass very gladly and with immense devotion. But with his first companions he went into prisons and ministered to the sick. For him it was enormously important to be in the closest possible contact with the poor and the socially underprivileged of his time in the prisons and to go into the hideous hospitals of that period, to convert prostitutes

in Rome, perhaps also to run a school to inspire pious princesses, etc. In a word, what he in fact did seems open to the inane verdict or objection that it could all have been achieved by people who were not priests. Against this, it must be pointed out that precisely in view of historical variability and of theology it is impossible to describe anything as properly and solely priestly, as what only the priest can do. That is to say: preaching the Gospel, ministering to the poor, defending the underprivileged, following Jesus in this sense, prayer, a mystical sphere of one's own existence, are just as much part of the priestly office as – and I do not mean it in a pejorative sense – ‘being able to say mass’.

How can this thesis be substantiated merely with an appeal to actual images of the priest in history, in which the function of presiding (in the strict sense) at the eucharist was by no means always and necessarily the central feature? How can such a thesis or such an image of the priest be demonstrated more precisely in terms of dogmatic theology? Here I am touching on opinions and theses which I really do not want to pass off as the Church's official teaching, views about which we can think what we like. In a question like this, where there is no really clear and binding official teaching of the Church, the theologian has no choice except to follow his own opinion.

Dogmatically and ‘ontologically’, from the nature of the case, the absolutely primary datum is not the pope, not the bishops, and not the priests, but Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, who simply would not be the Risen One, would not be, as Vatican II says, the indefectible, irreversible sign of the salvation of the whole world, who would not be the sacrament of salvation for all times, if he had not with him by the invincible power of his grace the Church of the believers, of those who love him, of those who follow him. Such a Church which, as one and whole, is primarily the permanent sign of salvation, the permanent sacrament, which is God's presence permanently established in the world, such a Church as a sociological reality has an office, a power of government, which must be seen in the first place as one and whole.

Such a power of government can and must be split up into definite individual functions. The Church has always a function of government – not just of any kind like that of the state or of some other society, but one which is part of this indefectible nature of the Church which maintains to the end of time the presence of Jesus Christ as the irreversible sign of salvation. This one office is first and foremost one and whole. We cannot go on for ten hours or so here about dogmatics or ecclesiology and consequently cannot worry about how this ultimately one office is split up, articulated, and shared, and where in all of this

divine law ends and merely ecclesiastical law begins; this is true even if we say that the papacy and the episcopate (and perhaps also a presbyterate split off from the episcopate) are of divine law – all of which is by no means obvious.

I would venture to say that, abstractly and in principle, I could imagine the whole Church as consisting of pope and bishops (in the sense that every priest is also a bishop). I would not want this. But what articulations of the ultimately one office are present unchangeably in the Church itself by its very nature (or, we might say, by the will of Christ), and what further articulations of office are left to the Church's free decision, is an extraordinarily difficult and obscure question. All through the Middle Ages there were minor orders and St. Thomas was sure that all minor orders were also sacraments, that, consequently, the conferring of these orders was also sacramental; the subdiaconate, too, was obviously regarded as a sacrament. In addition, of course – and this again is a difficult and obscure question which I cannot examine closely here – even when people speak of a divine right of papacy, episcopate, and presbyterate, it must be remembered that these factors as expositions and articulations of the one office nevertheless have had a history in the Church. How am I to answer a Protestant exegete when he says that the primitive Church, as described in Paul's Letters (or elsewhere before Ignatius of Antioch), had a presbyteral constitution, since the apostles were still alive and were the true bishops, and so on? I can get out of the problem by admitting absolutely that even divine law has had a historical development in the Church and yet remains divine law, even though there was a long struggle before this development itself came to be recognized in the later Church in its own irreversibility and validity. Such a development toward irreversibility can certainly involve also an element of decision and of free institution by the Church, and yet the result of the development can be described as of divine law.

Why am I talking about all these odd things? It is from this standpoint that we can understand the great variability of the image of the presbyter in the Church, in other words, how functions expressly portrayed there can later fall into the background or even drop out completely, while other elements which were present at most in a rudimentary or potential way stand out more clearly than formerly. Consequently, even among such a large number of factors involved in a concrete priestly mandate, one or another may become more relevant to priestly spirituality and later cease to be so. Father Zulehner has drawn attention to some of these factors: representative of God, the person leading the community, etc. These are features which were wholly legitimate in a former priestly image, since they could also have a positive meaning even in their ambivalence; they could even have predominated in the image of the priest in former times, but that is no

reason why they should have the same importance for all times. Nor can this plurality of features in the priestly image be regarded as a basis for the question of whether there are certain things that can be done by someone who is not a priest. Even if there are, it is wrong to conclude that these things are not fundamental for priestly existence and priestly spirituality. A priest might say: 'My priestly self- understanding and my priestly spirituality have their living roots in the fact that, welcome or unwelcome, I proclaim the unique message of the kingdom of God, of the crucified and risen Christ, to rich and poor, to privileged and underprivileged, that I commit my life to this task which I regard constantly as the centre of my life, that I do not regard it as any kind of casual occupation, but as something in which I am investing my whole life'. Such a person has a concept of the priesthood that excludes as irrelevant the question as to whether another person, a pastoral assistant, a layman, can do anything of this kind. This is not to deny that priestly existence can also be seen in the perspective of the altar.

It might be said that the actual core of a priestly existence and spirituality, in the light of which the latter can be understood, may also be grasped and lived by someone who is by no means a priest. I would answer that such a person obviously ought to be ordained a priest. I would also say that if there are or must be pastoral assistants today who are permanent official leaders of a parish which is without a priest, then in God's name let them be ordained. Why? Because it would mean no more than giving them the sacramental ratification and palpability of what they really are. The same is true of someone who in practice does what is essentially the task of the deacon. By ordination nothing is really added that he did not already possess, but what he had is sacramentally palpably secured in the dimension of office in the Church. If someone were to tell me that this is an outrageous idea, I would ask him how he would cope with another situation. Suppose a person comes to the priest and tells him: 'I am really living as a Christian in imitation of the crucified Christ, I believe, I hope, I love, I sacrifice my life for my neighbour, I live my life more or less after the fashion of Mother Teresa in Calcutta, but now, Father, I have discovered that I was never baptized'. Is the answer: 'For God's sake, whatever you did up to now was of no account; it was certainly not Christianity, it was not life coming from the Holy Spirit'? No, here was a Christian, here is a Christian. Baptize him. Why? So that the life he is already living can be seen expressly in the dimension of the sociological and historical palpability of the Church.

We find the same thing in Aquinas. In his theology it was taken for granted that anyone who came into the confessional had in reality (in virtue of his repentance)

already been forgiven by God. The whole late scholastic and post-Tridentine controversy about attrition and contrition and the like would have had no real meaning for Aquinas. In other words, for St. Thomas, the penitent received the sacrament because he was the sinner once more justified, which does not mean, however, that the efficacy or the causality of the sacrament is denied. This is something I cannot explain here and now. In other words, the conception of a human and official task which in a sense precedes its sacramental ratification is certainly one that is involved in other comparable cases of the Church's sacramental life. What I wanted to say ought, of course, to be developed in a more exact theology of the relationship between word and sacrament, but this is not possible here. All I want to say now is that the priest can certainly regard himself today as the officially commissioned mystagogue of the faith of the parish and as its leader, as minister in all dimensions of its life, including the eucharist as the culmination of the sacramental word in the Church, and, therefore, I think, could by all means consider his priestly spirituality as the radicalness of his Christian existence and not as something added to it.

It would be possible, of course, to ask more closely what is 'official', to raise the question of whether it is necessarily identical (in the light of the Church's dogma, not that of its present legal practice) with 'lifelong'. But all that must be left aside here. Before attempting to pass on to some more concrete images resulting from this way of understanding the priestly office (today both dogmatically justifiable and appropriate to our time), I would like to call attention only to one more assumption: that is, that with priestly spirituality, office absorbs a person's own life and life absorbs office. Here we find a difference from all other forms of work in society. Of course, a master shoemaker or a businessman, a diplomat or a politician, will develop out of his specific calling (if he pursues it in the right way) quite definite attitudes also for his personal life, his ethic, etc. But, from the nature of the case, since the officeholder here attests the whole of human and (by God's self-communication) deified life as such, and works for and must concern himself with the formation of the Church as the historico-sociological presence of this vast, gracious endowment of the world as a whole, this is something that cannot be understood as a particular calling in addition to which it is possible to have an independent private life in the strict sense. And, conversely, if the priest is someone who wants to be radically Christian and surrenders power over his whole life to this Spirit of God whom he can experience at the heart of his existence, then priestly existence is not a supplementary task, obligation, and burden of Christian life, as it might perhaps otherwise seem to be. Of course, just like members of religious orders in their own way, the priest is thus up to a point authorized and condemned to be (if I may use the ugly word) something of

a religious 'pro'. All this involves problems: the danger of overexertion, the danger of a mere legalistic ritualism, the danger of attempting to reserve for oneself a private sphere which cannot absorb one's personality. I did not want to do more than allude to these things.

III

In the first part of my comments I could do no more than mark out the questions of office and understanding of office on the one hand and that of spirituality on the other. I am well aware of the aphoristic and very vaguely selective character of what I have said up to now. I want to attempt now to become a little more concrete and to point to aspects of the image of the priest today which belong to it possibly from the dogmatic nature of this office and necessarily in our present situation.

When I was considering these things, I did not pay much attention to the very cleverly and correctly designed chart of such aspects by Father Zulehner. I approve of it and find it very good, but I shall permit myself to allude to these aspects in a slightly different way. The first thing to be said perhaps is that the priest of today must be someone who can pray in a personal way. This does not mean, of course, that someone else, a lay person, who is not a priest in the Catholic Church, could not manage, cultivate, and do the same thing just as well. And it certainly does not mean that this capacity for personal prayer for a priest (since he is the official representative and the commissioned mystagogue of the faith of the parish and its leader) is something that is merely presupposed to his priestly existence as such. No, the priest as such ought to be someone who is able to pray personally and not only as officially carrying out the liturgy or reading his breviary, but by his very nature and going far beyond these duties. This ability to pray ought not to be seen as a sectoral occupation in his life, but as a basic structure of his existence, since he is the very man who ought always to accept, as dependent on it, the presence of the absolute mystery facing every man and truly to live it in freedom.

I have, of course, a very bad conscience and almost an aversion, in face of my own inadequacy, to saying anything of this kind. But how can a priest today, confronted by man's rational scepticism, proclaim something of the faith if he has not a genuine, original, religious, and spiritual experience in a sense entirely absorbing him, from which he simply cannot escape? How can he do this unless in his concrete experience of life, in his disappointments and in his fundamental joys, in his love, in fidelity, in his dependence on other people, in his

responsibility, in his grief, in his confrontation with death, he is always someone for whom all this means the approach, the closeness of God himself? At a time when there is not a homogeneous Christian public opinion to support our proclamation of the faith and to make it almost inescapable for the normal human being, at a time when none of this exists any longer, we cannot simply say in the light of Scripture: 'That's how it is, there is a loving God and there are grace and eternity, etc. ' I must discover in myself and also in others and make increasingly clear such a religious, original experience of existence (which can be freely rejected but is inescapable) open to the mystery of God, and then speak from this centre. How precisely this is done and how it 'comes off', and how an actual failure in this respect can be given a religious interpretation, are additional questions which cannot be discussed here, since that would take us too far. But we ought to be able to start out from an original, religious experience in this sense, which is prior, not in time, but by its nature, to verbalized, objectified Christianity as officially taught and institutionalized; otherwise we shall get nowhere today. How many people we then reach or do not reach is another question and not one that is really of the greatest importance.

Anyone, I might say, who has taken up music seriously will not allow his attitude to music to be affected by the fact that there are musical philistines for whom it is no more than complicated noise. It is more or less similar in the sphere of religion. The priest under any circumstances ought to be a man of personal prayer, a mystic. I do not want to presuppose or to develop any theology of mysticism. In the classical understanding of mysticism it has been seen too much as a higher sphere of religious experience, accessible only to a very few chosen individuals. I do not deny that such a conception has a certain importance and contains some truth. But in the last resort, measured against the extraordinary psychological states of mystics like John of the Cross and others, faith, hope, and love are not something lying beneath these states, something merely ordinary, but that which permeates these extraordinary phenomena of submergence and the like and is wholly accessible as properly religious experience also to the normal Christian and particularly to the priest – in fact, to anyone who faces in freedom the radical incomprehensibility, depth, and absoluteness of his existence toward God.

A second thing that might be said is that the priest of today and tomorrow is the poor priest who willingly admits this poverty into his actual existence and gives it a positive emphasis there. There can be no doubt that the Church, measured against social conditions elsewhere, is increasingly becoming a poor Church; the only question is whether or not we accept this poverty as the occurrence, the

jump-off base, for man's ultimate crucified transcendentality (radicalized by grace) into the incomprehensible mystery of God. In this sense poverty has of course, not only an economic, but also a cultural dimension. Certainly the priest today (like yesterday and tomorrow) should not be a philistine, an uncouth person, or anything of that kind. But the fact remains that if a professional ventures to carry his whole existence into a very special dimension of possible human existence, he must in some sense be the poorer, must be prepared for renunciation in regard to other dimensions. This holds quite generally. Could you imagine a musician practising at the piano for eight hours every day and then having an equal interest in other hobbies and occupations which are possible without any reservations for other people? He renounces one thing or another and we priests, who, in a sense, invest our whole life with all its resources, tasks, and possibilities in this religious existence, can nevertheless enjoy a glass of wine, do a little photography, or get away for a holiday, etc. The priest should certainly not use his piety as an excuse for cultural, intellectual, scientific philistinism, but he should see clearly that he must have the courage to be poor even from a cultural standpoint, not to have his finger in every pie everywhere, not to be keeping up with everything, not even to be tempted to do this sort of thing, and not to think he has to use a thousand secular privileges to win support for his task.

In this sense there is also a kind of cultural poverty of the priest that is part of his nature and his life. It is by no means our task or our duty to want to be in the top class in all the dimensions of the very differentiated cultural, intellectual, scientific, and artistic life of the present time. We should not renounce these things out of philistinism, uncouthness, laziness, or lack of interest, but in this respect we should want (occasionally to a very considerable extent) to be poor, if only because no one, with his time, with the finiteness of his resources, and even with the finiteness of his heart, can do everything at once and because this kind of renunciation, this crucifixion of the inward person, a renunciation of quite legitimate dimensions of human existence, is in fact the way in which we constantly break through into the mystery of God himself.

The fact that there is then also something like a spiritual poverty is really obvious to someone who provides himself with a few key words from the theology of mysticism. I get worried and uncomfortable sometimes when I hear my fellow Christians and preachers of the Gospel proclaiming that the meaning and fulfillment of life can be found only with and through and in God. Of course, in the last resort, this is true. But at the same time do we not often forget that God is the meaning of our life as the God of incomprehensible judgments, as the God whom we simply cannot take into account as a fixed and definite factor in our

life, as the God of freedom, as the God of incomprehensibility? In mystical experience there is something that is described as ‘night’: in other words, as poverty, as an ultimate innermost threat to our existence, to which the only response is to summon up the last resources of faith, hope, and love for this incomprehensible God. Of course, we Christians should be cheerful, serene, uninhibited, showing people that it is possible and desirable even at the present time to find space in our lives for something like joy in the senses, for festivity, celebration, serenity, for laughter, lightheartedness, and frankness.

All this is true and enormously important, but we need not act as if we did not also break free from ourselves to fall into God’s incomprehensibility where we know nothing more. In face of this world of horrors, of inevitabilities, of dead ends, of terrors, of ‘Auschwitzes’, how can I offer today a theodicy, a justification of God? How can I put forward credibly such a theodicy, if I am not sure that there is in the last resort nothing left but man’s capitulation, also in spiritual poverty, before God. If someone today can go to his death serene and composed, confidently and happily, there can certainly be no objection to this. But neither can there be any objection if, in an ultimate tribulation, in an ultimate poverty, torn away from ourselves, we have to die into the darkness of what is called God. In brief, there is a kind of spiritual poverty that we by no means want to deny or suppose. The troubled Christian who feels that too much is asked of him, the Christian who prays with Jesus ‘My God, my God, why have you deserted me?’, who consequently does not by any means die with Socratic serenity, is not perhaps the only possible and conceivable Christian, but he is also a genuine Christian who attains the peak of his perfection precisely in the abyss of his spiritual emptiness and poverty.

This threefold poverty – economic, cultural, and spiritual – is part of Christianity, of Christian existence, and of Christian spirituality in general, but nevertheless for that very reason is something required particularly from the priest and particularly today. In the third place it must be said that the priest today is primarily the servant of the faith of others. Father Zulehner has rightly made the extraordinarily important statement that we cannot assume today the existence of Christians as baptized, as already indoctrinated and structured by a universal, homogeneous, Christian public opinion, but must be mystagogues of faith for them. Consequently we have no reason for not accepting without prejudice this necessity of ours to be continually learning the faith afresh. We need not behave as if we were not threatened in our faith and could take it for granted. We should not trifle with temptations of faith on the ground that they are not doubts of faith in the strictly moral theological sense; we do not need to make blunders like this.

There is certainly also a religious experience that embraces all these possibilities of a Christian existence in struggling with temptation, in poverty, in darkness, in a sense in joy and peace, and that can really give a person the feeling or, better, the existential experience, a final awareness, of actually not being able at all to escape or lose God, since God's apparent remoteness itself attests and makes present God precisely as God. But this again does not exclude the fact that we ourselves have also a history of faith, that we must be lifelong adventurers of God in ever new situations.

Formerly, Christian spirituality was conceived as an ascent to a height of what was called 'Christian perfection', with the ways and stages of this ascent in a sense outlined and marked out in advance by the theology of the spiritual life. Today the older priest is less likely to have the impression that he has become more perfect than he was at the beginning; he will see himself as someone who is led by God's providence in his life history through continually new and surprising situations, in which he can never say from the outset what will happen and how he must cope with it. When St. Teresa of Lisieux was apparently tempted most of all in the final stages of her life (as compared with earlier stages), for that very reason she had reached the summit of her perfection. The courage to recognize from the outset that we are involved in a lifelong adventure which cannot be calculated in advance is part of our priestly existence today if we want to be the servants of the faith of others.

There is a further point. And now I really am getting onto thin ice. I am absolutely convinced that, apart from a special vocation from God (which may certainly exist), a priest like myself should and must devote his life – all his time and all his strength – to normal priestly functions, and that the present shortage of priests makes it impossible for the Church to do without this kind of commitment. Nevertheless, as a result of a number of experiences, I think that a certain spirituality associated with true worker-priests (if not the concrete calling itself) might be a critical, generative factor for our priestly life. The courage to be and to remain sociologically inferior, to live a life in which one belongs in some way to the underprivileged, to the plebes; the courage to lead a life in which one is no longer the village pope, in which one does not simply belong to the educated classes and where academic status counts for nothing; the courage to live shoulder to shoulder with the poor where life is bitter, monotonous, dull: all these things are characteristic of the mentality of genuine worker-priests (and I know some of them) who do not want to be worker-priests in order to abandon (like certain types) their priestly self-understanding. This is a mentality which could have a critical sting, an evocative power for us.

I must say that for me these people represent something of a threat to a well-provided bourgeois existence and may frighten us out of assuming that this existence is normal and to be taken for granted. A number of conclusions may be drawn. Although what I said earlier remains important, I think that the priest today must be something of a nonconformist. That is not to say that he should be an inveterate grumbler, forever complaining, continually at odds with his bishop and with Rome: all these infantilisms are ruled out from the beginning. But if the Church is permanently a Church also of sinners and if this sinfulness has its effect on the exercise of office, if, in this way, office by its nature necessarily leads to the temptation to institutional harshness, crudeness, reactionary attitudes, it cannot be said that a certain critical dissociation from what is actually practised in the name of office in the Church is something that is incompatible with a present-day priestly image. This should be sufficient on this topic.

The priest of today will necessarily always be overtaxed: overtaxed between what he is and what (as he himself knows) he ought to be, overtaxed by people, overtaxed by the Gospel, overtaxed by his office, overtaxed by his time. It should be noticed that this is itself the concreteness of his existential transcendence, not his speculation about transcendence. Consequently it is possible to face this continually excessive pressure with a certain composure. It acquires a positive meaning. It can be admitted that it would be terrible if I no longer had to distinguish between what ought to be and what in fact I am and what I achieve. To be able and to have to entrust our own finiteness, wretchedness, even sinfulness, completely and utterly to God and his grace: all this is part of Christian and priestly existence. As priests, we are not and need not be the sort of people who can imagine that they have done everything well and as the great experts and men of achievement ought to make a triumphant entry with flying colours into God's eternity. With Teresa of Lisieux we shall have to admit that we come at the end of our life as wretched sinners to God and it would be a terrible self-deception to think that we had 'made it'; we have the right (if I may put it in that way) to feel in a blessed defiance that we are the people from whom too much is expected. The fewer priests there are, the more we shall be in this sense the ones who are overtaxed.

It is impossible to do much more here than to suggest the headings under which some other points might be considered. In his present day priestly existence the priest must be familiar with theology. I am not saying this simply because I have been teaching this strange science all my life. Anyone who has to proclaim the Gospel responsibly today – not merely to a few schoolchildren eager to learn and

young enough to accept everything without reserve, but to the present-day despisers of Christianity – is in a difficult situation. He cannot preach that kind of neo-Protestantism which is prepared to sell off cheaply the true, Christian, completely Catholic faith, he may not offer people no more than what their superficial humanism prepares them to accept from the outset; but neither may he use expressions or adopt attitudes in regard to the faith he offers which create unnecessary difficulties for others. I think it must also be said that Rome, feeling bound to address the whole world at once, is in a desperately difficult situation. And it seems to me that Rome has not yet come round to saying the things that have to be said in a way that avoids sufficiently the difficulties and abrasions which could and ought to be avoided. Rome, too, ought to do more theology. But this is true also for us. Despite all ‘mystical existential experience’ coming from this innermost centre, we are the ones who have to present a verbalized doctrine which itself comes from the Church and requires, not only personal religious experience, but also a continually fresh recourse to the Church’s teaching and to the work that is and must be accomplished by theology for the understanding of the Church’s teaching.

There is a further point that I can indicate also only as a problem, without answering it. In the Church’s practice there was a period of sacramental enthusiasm when it was tacitly assumed, if not explicitly taught, that grace is conveyed primarily and actually more or less solely in the sacraments as such and exclusively there. This is wrong and contrary also to present-day mystical, religious experience. It remains an open question also for our spirituality whether we are really drawn in an ultimate existential radicalness into our destiny precisely in the sacramental celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus, or at the point where we see our life as a failure, or where we die, or where we go on living in an ultimate incomprehensibility of an unselfish love or freely exercising a responsibility that is not radically accepted or recognized by anyone else. Obviously a priest should attempt to direct his religious life so patiently, so impartially, so lovingly that he has always a positive relationship (one that stimulates his religious existence) to sacramental events in the Church. But a religious life of grace, experience of the Spirit, and sacramental life are not simply identical, and the priest, although he is the functionary of the sacramental aspect of the Church, need not act as if they were. If for any reasons at all, connected with his individual lot in life, someone cannot honestly claim that carrying out the eucharistic cult or administering the sacraments is even existentially the high point of his life, he has no need to lie, no need to talk or act as if it were. He can always do this sort of thing with sufficient involvement, if he goes about it in a reasonable way; he can also, of course, celebrate the eucharist

simply when he wants to do so, like Ignatius of Loyola or Philip Neri, the latter having his full, consecrated chalice in front of him for hours, sipping from it every quarter of an hour and for the rest living immersed in God. All I wanted to do was to point out that experience of grace and sacramental celebration are not simply the same thing and that the two are often separated even in priestly life and a person's individual organization of his life and lot can be readily and naturally accepted in this respect.

I had wanted finally in a nonpolitical sense to refer at least briefly to the political dimension of priestly spirituality. What I mean by this will be understood by anyone who reads without prejudice and with good will the paper produced by the joint synod of the dioceses of the German Federal Republic in 1978: 'Our Hope: A Profession of Faith in Our Time'. I do not think that we must or should practise politics in a banal, commonplace sense. But I think that the unity of love of God and love of neighbour, the knowledge that where we stand by the poor, persecuted, underprivileged there is or can be an intimate experience of grace, and that an ultimate transcendental of man radicalized by grace into the mystery of God and a self-renunciation in love of neighbour represent the two aspects of the one Christian life, the unity of love of God and love of neighbour – in the last resort, that is what I understand here as the political dimension of priestly spirituality; and that is something quite important.

In so far as we experience this transcendental of grace in the following of Christ, we cannot say as a result of an abstract reflection that we are equally indifferent to poverty and riches, higher status and lower status. Jesus fought (but not as a political revolutionary) unequivocally on the side of the poor, the persecuted, the plebs, and did not rise above them in glorious neutrality. The synodal paper says more or less that we can put up with the opposition of the educated and the clever, but that the Church cannot dissociate itself from the disappointment of the poor, of the disappointed, of the persecuted; nevertheless, the Church has been and remains today too much a Church of the middle classes. This does not mean breaking out at once in wild revolution against it. But it does mean that we ought to feel a sting and an unease in regard to the image of our Church and that the priest ought to feel these things in his spirituality since he, too, experiences God's grace only where he becomes poor with the poor and counts them among his friends. In that sense there is something like a political dimension to our own spirituality.

1 This lecture was addressed to priests in 1976. See List of Sources.

2 P. Zulehner, 'Elemente einer pastoralen Spiritualität' in *Priesterliche*

Spiritualität heute, ed. S. László (Vienna, 1977), pp. 13-40.

3 'Unsere Hoffnung' in Gemeinsame Synode der Bistümer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Official complete edition, vol. 1, ed. L. Bertsch, S. J., et al. (Freiburg, 1978), pp. 84-111.