

# Concern for the Identity of the Priest in Light of Benedict XVI's Teaching

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**Abstract:** In the article, the author reflects on the issue of priestly identity, being experienced in a mature way, in light of the teachings of Pope Benedict XVI. Based on an analysis of the Pope's selected statements addressed to the clergy, three fundamental, internal dimensions of priestly identity have been identified: spiritual, psychological, and intellectual. They should find expression in the priest's external ministry as a shepherd and minister of the sacraments, a witness to the world, as well as a teacher and evangelizer. The juxtaposition of these two dimensions—internal and external—illustrates their mutual complementarity, which determines the need for their integral development. The article demonstrates the formative potential of Benedict XVI's teaching for the renewal of priestly life in the contemporary Church.

**Keywords:** priestly identity, concern for formation, Benedict XVI, priest, clergy

Concern for the identity of the priest<sup>1</sup> is one of the key challenges for the contemporary Church. In the face of increasing secularization, the wave of criticism pouring down on the Church and priests, and a crisis of priestly vocations, we need priests who are “deeply and fully immersed in the mystery of Christ and capable of embodying a new style of pastoral life.” (PDV 18)

Although the sacrament of Holy Orders imbues the priest with an indelible spiritual character that forever defines his identity and enables cooperation with the grace of the sacrament, it does not determine his way of life in the contemporary world. This stems from the fact that priestly identity has a complex structure and is experienced both internally and externally. It is expressed in the internal life of the priest, but also in his external attitudes, his way of life and pastoral ministry.

In light of the above remarks, the aim of this article is to present the specific nature of priestly identity and its essential dimensions, which require a special formative concern as specified in the teaching of Benedict XVI. The article is an attempt to answer the following research questions: How did Benedict XVI define the essence of

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the terms “priest” and “priesthood” refer to the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood, conferred through the sacrament of Holy Orders. Therefore, we are not dealing with the common priesthood of the faithful, but with the participation in the one priesthood of Christ, consecrated by Holy Orders in the priesthood (cf. *LG* 10, 34).

the identity of the priest? What does the concern for a mature priestly identity entail? What is the significance of ongoing formation for the development of priestly identity? How to care for the proper building up of priestly identity and ministry within the Church community?

Following a research study, we have analyzed the Pope's statements, included primarily in his homilies, catecheses, addresses, and speeches directed at the clergy. The selection of material stems from the assumption that they show Benedict XVI's specific pastoral guidelines and encouragement to reflect on the priestly vocation. Accordingly, his concern for the identity of the priest and its essential dimensions, as well as his directions on building up priestly identity were most fully demonstrated. In analyzing the material, we have employed the method of theological hermeneutics, which has allowed us to interpret the Pope's statements within their pastoral, doctrinal, and existential contexts, while simultaneously considering the coherence of his teaching, and the challenges related to priestly formation.

The issue addressed in this article fits into the broader current of contemporary research on priestly identity, developed in theological literature in various contexts. Previous studies emphasized the complexity and multifaceted nature of this issue, but rarely highlighted the dimension of the concern for the integrity, development, and consolidation of priestly identity.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Benedict XVI's teaching constitutes a valuable and coherent contribution that remains relevant today. Presenting a positive perspective rooted in the Pope's teachings can help priests strengthen and "renew" their identity, as well as encourage them to development and ongoing formation. Furthermore, presenting the beauty and depth of the gift of the presbyterate can contribute to a more fruitful pastoral ministry and provide effective decision-making assistance for those who consider the ministerial priesthood a mission and lifelong passion.

## 1. The Specificity of Priestly Identity

Personal identity is a vision of oneself and a lasting belief about who one is (Radecki 2010, 28). The human being, understood in terms of a person, is a free and responsible subject, and although a person reveals himself in his complex somatic-psychic-spiritual wholeness, he is not limited to any of these dimensions, nor to their sum. Therefore, personal identity is not limited to the sense of one's body

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<sup>2</sup> Among publications focusing on the identity of the priest, it is worth mentioning: Nocko 2013, 139–49; Smuniewski 2017, 65–94; Dyrek 1999; Słomka 1996; Kondracikowski 2014, 207–20; Kowalski 2025, 37–52; Rabczyński 2020, 247–58; Ponce Cuéllar 2020, 465–90; Mullady 2011, 294–305; McGovern 2002; Fabidun 2021; O'Malley 1988, 223–57; Nikić 2010, 847–68; de Boer 2005, 369–77.

or sense of one's mental states and processes, but, taken integrally, it refers to the very being a person, because personal vocation and mission, the sense of coming into existence, and the guidelines that influence the lifestyle appropriate to one's vocation are closely linked to this fact and mystery (Paszkowska 2007, 67–68). Also, the identity of the priest is not limited solely to the role he fulfills, but encompasses, above all, his internal development and awareness of his vocation. It contains elements of continuity and individualization, combining the person's coherence with his uniqueness (Dyrek 2014, 9). As we read in *Pastores dabo vobis*, priestly identity is "built upon the type of formation which must be provided for priesthood and then endure throughout the priest's whole life." (PDV 11) According to Teresa Paszkowska, it is precisely "the lack of a clear definition of identity that gives rise to most of the crises we are dealing with today." (Paszkowska 2007, 67)

In a context of widespread secularization, which is systematically eliminating God from the public sphere and weaken his presence in the social conscience, the priest is often perceived as "foreign." This is because the priesthood is a sacramental and existential reality, and not merely functional. It is not limited to fulfilling specific tasks in society, but has its source in the ontological transformation that occurs within a person through receiving Holy Orders (Benedict XVI 2010a). Thus, as Benedict XVI observes, the priest is "a man of the sacred, removed from the world to intercede on behalf of the world," (Benedict XVI 2010a) is consecrated for God to act in the world in his name. Therefore, he cannot be merely a "religious worker," because the essence of his identity is a deep relationship with Christ, being an "alter Christus," called, chosen, and sent by Christ in a special way (Benedict XVI 2009h). It is in this relationship, called the Christocentrism of priesthood, that the Holy Father saw the essence of the priestly ministry (Pudło 2024, 127).

By virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, the priest is ontologically linked to Christ the Priest in the Mystery of the Trinitarian God. Therefore, the true foundation of the priest's life, the foundation of his priestly existence, is God himself. It is this relationship, defined by the Pope as "theocentricity of the priestly existence," meaning truly knowing God within through a personal relationship with him and expressed in the mission of bringing God to the world, that constitutes the core of priestly identity and vocation. In the priest's life, it is also crucial not to lose the zeal in his actions (Benedict XVI 2006d). For "the priest learns the 'methods' of leading man to an encounter with God from Kyrios himself" (Paszkowska 2007, 69)

The courage to follow Christ on the path of vocation, despite the many difficulties priests face in fulfilling their pastoral duties, is born above all from love. Therefore, sacrificial love for others should be the sign distinguishing contemporary clergy (Kozioł 2013, 148). The point is that the priest is a clear sign of the Gospel values for the world. In this way, he can be a continuator of the love of Christ the Lord. As the Pope stated unequivocally, the priesthood and the priestly ministry are rooted and deeply embedded in the Heart of Jesus (Benedict XVI 2010g). Through the liturgical

sign of the laying on of hands during the ordination rite, Christ takes the priest under his special protection and enshrines him in his hands and heart. By virtue of the sacrament he receives, the priest receives the fullness of who he is as a servant of Christ. By uttering the sacramental words, he acts not in his own name, but in the name of Christ—*in persona Christi*. Christ uses his lips, hands, generosity, and talents (Benedict XVI 2006c). From the moment of ordination, the priest has been freed from the dependence of the world and offered to God; he has given himself completely to God, to be his property, to be at the disposal of all (Benedict XVI 2009f).

The identity of the priest, according to Benedict XVI, is an identity received, not earned (Paszkowska 2007, 74), since the priesthood is an undeserved gift that cannot be the result of personal ambition or spontaneous choice. In the opinion of the Holy Father, “[t]he priesthood is the response to the Lord’s call, to his will, in order to become a herald of his truth, not a personal truth but of his truth” (Benedict XVI 2010f) and thus, “in the way of thinking, speaking, and judging events of the world, of serving and loving, of relating to people, also in his habits, the priest must draw prophetic power from his sacramental belonging, from his profound being.” (Benedict XVI 2010a)

Referring to the Book of Deuteronomy (Deut 18:5, 7) that define the mission of the Old Testament priests, Benedict XVI highlighted two expressions that define the essence of the priestly ministry: *astare coram te et tibi ministrare*. Explaining their meanings, the Pope recalled that in the Old Testament context, the vocation of priests was a life of total dedication to God. They did not undertake paid work, but their task was to remain in God’s presence and to do priestly service on behalf of the people. According to the Holy Father, the presence of these words in the Second Canon of the Mass, immediately after the consecration of the gifts, indicates that the priest stands before the truly present Lord, and that the Eucharist is the center of the priest’s life and vocation (Benedict XVI 2008c).

The Pope attempted to reinterpret the Old Testament vision of priesthood in light of the Christian priestly identity. Presumably, his goal was to emphasize the sacramental nature of the attitude of the priest, which constitutes an ontological consequence of the sacrament of Holy Orders and makes the priest a servant of God’s presence.

Standing before God during the Eucharistic celebration is, therefore, not merely a liturgical gesture, but a real participation in the one priesthood of Christ. The Eucharist constitutes the essence of priestly identity; within it lies the secret of the priest’s own sanctification, and its celebration should be the focal point of his ecclesial mission (Kozioł 2013, 153).

The papal apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* includes a fundamental statement that help understand priestly identity: “in the Church and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ—the head and shepherd.” (PDV 15) This brings us to another important aspect of priestly identity, which

is evident in the Pope's teaching. According to Benedict XVI, it consists in the fact that the priesthood, by its very nature, exists in the Church and for the Church, because it "has a constitutive relationship with the Body of Christ in his dual and inseparable dimensions as Eucharist and as Church, as Eucharistic body and Ecclesial body." (Benedict XVI 2005a) Therefore, in reflecting on the essence of priestly identity, which the Church constantly reminds us of in the context of the formation of future priests, it is crucial to recognize the primary role of the sacramental-ontic dimension, which means that the priest is deeply rooted in Christ and his Church (RFIS 30, 31).

Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, the priest can imitate Christ in his life, dedicate himself entirely to preaching, and contribute to the healing of people, both bodily and spiritually. Ultimately, his mission leads to the supreme act of sacrifice and "giving his life" for others, "which finds its sacramental expression in the Eucharist, the perpetual memorial of Jesus." (Benedict XVI 2012)

Through the service of the ministerial priesthood, which is a visible sign of Christ's presence, Christ the Head and Shepherd of the community of believers, the Church carries out her mission in a world that is undergoing constant changes that influence the condition of contemporary man. In this mission, as Benedict XVI repeatedly recalled, Mary, the Mother of Priests, always accompanies priests, "because of his identification with and sacramental conformation to Jesus, Son of God and Son of Mary, every priest can and must feel that he really is a specially beloved son of this loftiest and humblest of Mothers." (Benedict XVI 2009e)

## **2. The Importance of Ongoing Formation for the Development of Priestly Identity**

The Church's pastoral activity provides ample evidence that neglect in the areas of education and formation leads to serious crises. An example of this negligence was the crisis of the priesthood, which emerged with considerable force after the Second Vatican Council. It concerned the dispute over the identity of the priest and the specific nature of his vocation. In the theological debate and pastoral practice of the Church during that period, two opposing conceptions of priesthood emerged. On the one hand, there was a sacramental-ontological vision, emphasizing the supernatural nature of the priesthood and the hierarchical structure of the Church; on the other hand, there was a socio-functional vision, in which the priesthood was understood as a service to the community and a service undertaken by the mandate of that community. This was a dispute between the sacred and social understanding of the priesthood. In the society, whose sense of the sacred was weakened, there was a tendency to replace supernatural values with more "human" categories, based on functionality. Priests were then forced to confront dominant trends that led to the relativization of

their identity. The weakening and disappearance of the sense of the sacred and the understanding of their own identity fostered attitudes of frustration, compromises, and sometimes even abandonments of their vocation (Giemza 2007, 78–80).

It seems that today priests are exposed to an even greater number of external factors that can lead to crisis situations and undermine their own identity, e.g., sudden dismissal from office, unjust accusation, physical or mental illness, problems with school work, conflicts with superiors, crisis of faith, feeling of unimportance and being on the margin, or criticism in the media (Plata 2020, 267). Identity confusion, growing self-uncertainty, and decreasing psychological resilience make one susceptible to the influence of others (Augustyn 1999, 202). Therefore, in the perspective of continuing formation, priests need to deepen the awareness of their own identity (Bramorski 2005, 265). A renewed and joyful awareness of the greatness of God's gift of priesthood can help priests themselves and the Church, which suffers from the infidelity and immaturity of some of her servants. It can also be a significant point of reference for those responsible for priestly formation and for spiritual directors (Benedict XVI 2009h).

Given the numerous manifestations of human immaturity in the socio-cultural area, there is a need for mature priests, capable of serving as leaders in the faith. Therefore, among the most important elements of priestly formation, according to Benedict XVI's teaching, there are: education into the truth, recognition of one's own weaknesses, willingness to convert, extensive study, liturgical and spiritual formation, proper discipline and daily routine, sacrificing ability, and cultural formation (Giemza 2007, 89–91). Therefore, the priesthood, rooted in the sacrament of Holy Orders, enables priests not only to minister the sacraments but also to care for people in all their complexity, which includes the individual and social dimensions, considering their earthly and eternal lives as well as religious and moral lives (CV 30).

The identity of the priest is also defined as commitment to all that is essential to the priestly lifestyle. Such activity should manifest itself in predictable and consistent attitudes of the priest, unchanging over time and independent of circumstances. Commitment is also intended to connect his various activities, subordinating them to his vocational values. According to Krzysztof Dyrek, there should be congruence between ideals and lifestyle, meaning fidelity to undertaken commitments and renunciation of anything that contradicts this lifestyle (Dyre 2014, 12). Since priestly formation aims at gradually achieving maturity, understood as inner coherence, freedom from one's own problems and hurts, as well as the ability to consistently follow the values stemming from priestly vocation. A mature priest is a person whose inner support is centered on Christ, a person with psychological integrity and transparency in his witness of life and in the way of proclaiming the Gospel (Cencini and Manenti 1985, 122–33).

This is the kind of life attitude, based on personal holiness, that the faithful expect from priests. They want to see them as genuine religious and moral authorities,

as well as ethical models in which they can find reference for their own daily lives. The example of priestly holiness and faith is an important contribution to the holiness and faith of lay Catholics. Hence, there is a need for constant concern for the unity between the ministerial vocation and personal holiness. This is expected and demanded by the faithful, whom priests are to lead as shepherds (Baniak 2000, 16).

The spectrum of contemporary problems and phenomena that affect humanity and, consequently, also threaten the Church and priests, leading to a “spiritual wilderness” and causing an identity crisis, is becoming wider and wider (Benedict XVI 2005a). Therefore, in the Pope's statements, addressed directly to the clergy, there is a clear concern for priests, that they should continually return to the roots of their vocation. This source and model for living priestly identity is the person of Jesus Christ, whom the priest is to continually imitate.

Analyzing these papal statements allows us to identify and order the dimensions of a mature experience of priestly identity, which require an ongoing formation care. The statements cover both the internal forum and the external dimension of the priestly ministry.

### **3. Concern for Shaping the Fundamental Dimensions of Priestly Identity**

In light of Benedict XVI's statements, the identity of the priest in its internal aspect is expressed primarily through spiritual, psychological, and intellectual dimensions. These individual dimensions interpenetrate and are revealed in the priest's mature attitude.

#### **3.1. Concern for the Spiritual Dimension**

In our cultural reality in which one can observe the blurring of all permanent references and suspicion towards the concept of identity, sometimes considered contrary to freedom and democracy, cultivating the spiritual depth of the priest becomes particularly important. According to Benedict XVI, only by grounding his life in the theological truth of priesthood as participation in the priesthood of Christ can the priest maintain fidelity and internal unity, without succumbing to “temptation to reduce it to the prevalent cultural categories.” (Benedict XVI 2010a) Consequently, there is a need for people called from the Heart of God, ready to become workers in his harvest “so that this harvest which is ripening in people's hearts may truly be brought into the storehouses of eternity and become an enduring, divine communion of joy and love.” (Benedict XVI 2006a) Thus, the Pope proposed a positive,

spiritually and theologically deepened, vision of priesthood that could provide an answer to the crisis of contemporary anthropology.

The essence and foundation of the priestly ministry is, therefore, a profound relationship with Christ, which is to be the focal point of the entire priestly formation and spiritual life. The condition for building and developing this relationship is prayer and contemplation, which lead to “a constitutive relationship with the Body of Christ in his dual and inseparable dimensions as Eucharist and as the Church, as Eucharistic body and the Ecclesial body.” (Benedict XVI 2005a) The priest must be a man of prayer, a deeply spiritual person, aware that he does not act in his own name or for his own benefit, but as an instrument in the hands of God, who makes his own action present through the priestly ministry (Benedict 2010f). Thanks to his well-established spirituality, constantly animated by faith, hope and love, the priest can fruitfully continue the saving mission of Jesus (Benedict XVI 2007c).

The spiritual rooting of the priest in the Mystery of the Eucharist and the Church protects him from activism and an individualistic understanding of spirituality, and directs him toward an attitude of service to the community. Therefore, in the Pope’s teaching, prayer and contemplation are not optional practices, but constitute a necessary environment in which the priest’s identity matures.

Prayer should be a place for constant discovery of the depths of the person of Jesus Christ and a source of renewal of the priestly ministry. According to Benedict XVI, for the priest, personal prayer, especially the Prayer of the Hours, is the fundamental nourishment for his soul, empowering for all his actions (Benedict XVI 2010c). “Only those who have a profound relationship with the Lord are grasped by him, can take him to others, can be sent out.” (Benedict XVI 2010h) The Pope reminded the ordinands that a profound relationship with the Lord was not an addition to pastoral work, but its central part, especially when the pressure of duties seemed to obscure the contemplative dimension of the priestly mission. Regardless of the place and circumstances, the priest is called to constantly “abide with him,” because abiding with Christ gives meaning and strength to every dimension of the priestly ministry (Benedict XVI 2010h). Spending time in God’s presence in prayer is a real pastoral priority of every priest (Benedict XVI 2005a). The formulas of the Rite for the Ordination of Priests lead to this unity with Christ. Through the generous response of the priest himself to the question: “Are you resolved to consecrate your life to God for the salvation of his people, and to unite yourself more closely every day to Christ the High Priest, who offered himself for us to the Father as a perfect sacrifice?”, this unity, which happens in the sacrament, can “become closer every day” (Benedict XVI 2012) and thanks to the daily celebration of the Eucharist, it can be constantly renewed (Benedict XVI 2005a).

The Eucharist is the source and summit of the priest’s spiritual life, determining its meaning, direction and style of service (Benedict XVI 2005c). It is of key importance to the sanctification of the priest (Benedict XVI 2010d), and that is why the

Pope encouraged priests to celebrate and deeply experience the Eucharist every day (Benedict XVI 2010c). Time spent in the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament can help them in that (Benedict XVI 2005c), since

it is Jesus who wants to be with us, to live in us, to give himself to us, to show us God's infinite mercy and tenderness; it is the one sacrifice of the love of Christ who makes himself present, who makes himself real among us and arrives at the throne of Grace, at God's presence.... And the priest is called to be a minister of this great Mystery, in the Sacrament and in life. (Benedict XVI 2010d)

In the Pope's reflection, the Eucharistic piety of the priest appears as the hermeneutical key to his entire identity and mission. In closeness to the truly present Lord, the priest discovers the truth about himself and his mission. The Eucharist thus becomes not only the place of his sanctification but also a touchstone of his spiritual maturity and the authenticity of his ministry.

Benedict XVI warned against the routine celebration of Holy Mass, calling for the celebration to identify with the words, gestures, and event, which becomes a saving event. For the priest who celebrates the Eucharist, participating deeply in it, with faith and prayer, continually and anew receives a great richness from it and "communicates to people more than just what comes from the priest, namely, the presence of Christ." (Benedict XVI 2006a)

In the context of the sacraments administrated by the priest, the Pope drew attention to the need to strive for moral perfection, which should characterize a true priestly heart (Benedict XVI 2010d). The priest who ministers in the sacrament of Reconciliation should constantly strive for the holiness of life. His attitude should stem from prayer, penance, and the constant entrustment of human souls to Divine Mercy (Benedict XVI 2007d).

Of fundamental importance in the priest's life is the awareness of his own limitations and the need to have recourse to Divine Mercy to ask for forgiveness, to convert his heart and to receive spiritual support on the path to holiness (Benedict XVI 2010b). The lack of regular confession, despite the priest's deep desire to imitate Christ, carries the danger of a gradual slowing down of the rhythm of his spiritual life, which may gradually weaken or even die out (Benedict XVI 2008a). In this way, Benedict XVI recalled the truth that the path of holiness for the priest does not consist in moral impeccability, but in constant conversion of his heart and submission to the action of grace, which continually purifies, strengthens, and leads the priest to a deeper unity with Christ.

Therefore, in the Year of Priests, the Pope pointed to St. John Vianney as a model of unfailing trust in the power of the sacrament of Penance, which should occupy a central place in the pastoral concerns of every priest. A priest who has deeply experienced his own limitations and the healing power of Divine Mercy can carry

out the ministry of reconciliation with conviction and humility. As a minister of Penance, he becomes a steward revealing God's merciful love (Benedict XVI 2010b) in a world where there is so much noise and bewilderment (Benedict XVI 2006c).

### **3.2. Concern for the Psychological Dimension**

Maturity is a concept that expresses a synthesis of reality. It encompasses a series of coordinated aspects and elements of psychomotor, affective, relational, professional, motivational, spiritual, and other traits that contribute to defining the maturity of a person. It develops gradually under the influence of personal, relational, and socio-environmental conditions (Decaminada 1997, 72–75). In psychological terms, maturity marks the phase of personality development that corresponds to biological and psychological maturation. According to Alexander Franz, after reaching a certain level of intelligence and the ability to reflect on one's own emotions and experiences, a person can be called emotionally mature (Franz 1967, 1).

Thanks to maturity, persons can consciously and responsibly manage their emotional and affective behavior, make life choices, and accept all the consequences of their decisions and actions. They recognize their dignity, worth, and uniqueness and are able to adapt to life in society. They can interact with others, endowing them with positive feelings: love, kindness, friendship, and cordiality. And if such a situation arises, they can also overcome the negative feelings that arise within them: anger, malice, hatred, jealousy (Plata 2020, 83).

In light of the above assumptions, Benedict XVI also recognized the need to concern for the identity of the priest, which is expressed, among other things, in his psychological maturity. In the face of so many forms of human immaturity, visible at the social, economic, and political levels, there is a need for priests, who will become mature guides in the faith, specialists in the encounter between man and God, and experts in the spiritual life, to be able to help others in situations of great burden. Priests themselves must demonstrate an appropriate level of maturity, since "Christ needs priests who are mature, virile, capable of cultivating an authentic spiritual paternity." (Benedict XVI 2006c)

A priest who has not built up priestly identity or has a weak one (and this is also expressed in his weakened psychological maturity) may be internally divided, frustrated, uncertain, and unstable in his attitudes, choices, and ministry, more vulnerable to vocational crises and difficulties. Persevering in his vocation and priesthood may then become too difficult a task for him, an unbearable burden (Benedict XVI 2006a). He may be exposed to sin, lack of freedom, and the temptation to leave (Benedict XVI 2007a).

In his speech during a meeting with the clergy at the Archcathedral of St. John in Warsaw, Benedict XVI appealed to priests from all over the world to renew their faith in the power of the priesthood, in which they received everything they are:

[b]e authentic in your life and your ministry. Gazing upon Christ, live a modest life, in solidarity with the faithful to whom you have been sent. Serve everyone; be accessible in the parishes and in the confessionals, accompany the new movements and associations, support families, do not forget the link with young people, remember the poor and the abandoned. (Benedict XVI 2006c)

To meet these demands, the Pope identified specific psychological predispositions that priests should possess. They must be ones who keep watch. They must be steadfast in the face of the currents of the times, unwavering in truth and in doing good. Also, they must be righteous, fearless, and ready to endure any insult for the Lord (Benedict XVI 2008c). For “[t]he priesthood, let us always remember, is based on having the courage to say ‘yes’ to another will, in the awareness that we are growing every day, that precisely by conforming to God’s will.” (Benedict XVI 2010h)

This level of psychological resilience is possible to achieve when priests remain in a deep communion of feelings and desires with Jesus. This means getting to know Jesus in an increasingly personal way, listening to him, living with him, and being close to him in a friendly relationship (Benedict XVI 2006f). It is crucial that priests believe in the transforming power of faith and consciously nurture its development. Faith is present not only in their religious moods and experiences, but encompasses their entire existence, inner struggles, community life, apostolate, thoughts, actions, and intentions (Benedict XVI 2006b). Therefore, a concern for a consciously cultivating faith should permeate their entire lives, thus shaping their identity and becoming a source of unity between thought, action, and attitude. In this way, faith becomes not only the foundation of the identity of the priest but also the instrument of his authentic witness to the world.

The Pope reminded priests that they must live in deep friendship with Christ and thus discover true freedom and great joy in their ministry (Benedict XVI 2009a). They should be aware that at the moment of their ordination, they essentially renounce the pursuit of “self-fulfillment,” and by joining Christ, they enter a path that requires renunciation and responsibility (Benedict XVI 2009f). As a result, without succumbing to short-lived cultural trends, changing opinions, their own ambitions, the temptation of power, flattering others to gain respect (Benedict XVI 2010h), through their lives, they are able to proclaim to the contemporary world the prophecy of fidelity, which has its origin and source in Christ’s fidelity to humanity (Benedict XVI 2010a).

According to Benedict XVI, in the priest’s life, freedom does not mean a lack of obligations or self-sufficiency, but is expressed in his total dedication to Christ. Only then can a priest live his ministry in the truth and authenticity. In this way, he becomes a prophet of fidelity and a witness to God’s love, which does not enslave but liberates from superficial dependencies, opening him to a deeper freedom in the service of God and others.

A clear sign of priestly freedom and fidelity is celibacy, which the Pope presented in very positive terms, seeing it as a great gift. Responding to contemporary criticism, he presented celibacy as an expression of the priest's psychological and spiritual maturity. Only a mentally stable person, free from internal conflicts and self-centeredness, can authentically communicate to others the true love he himself has experienced in his relationship with God. Therefore, in presenting the essence of the priesthood, Benedict XVI unequivocally stated that celibacy is, above all, a witness to love and faith in God. It is not only a form of external discipline but an indicator of the priest's personal identity (Benedict XVI 2006d), which the modern world needs so that thanks to the eschatological life of celibacy, the future world of God can be seen (Benedict XVI 2010c).

Analyzing the thoughts of Benedict XVI, one can conclude that the contemporary Church needs priests who are deeply religious, having an integrated personality, emotionally stable, able to work upon themselves, open to others, with a very effective power of influence, whose words, actions and attitudes are resistant to the pressure of the changing socio-cultural reality.

### **3.3. Concern for the Intellectual Dimension**

In addition to the spiritual and psychological dimensions, an essential pillar of the priest's mature identity is the intellectual dimension. The Holy Father repeatedly expressed concern for a solid education as well as personal cultural and intellectual development (Benedict XVI 2007c), so that priests may be able to proclaim the Gospel "in a cultural context marked by the hedonistic and relativistic mindset that tends to delete God from the horizon of life and does not encourage the acquisition of a clear set of values to refer to that would help one to discern good from evil." (Benedict XVI 2010b) Given this type of mentality, even among the clergy, there may be a temptation to reduce religious life to the sphere of feelings, thus weakening the Church's ability to build a consistent vision of the world and to engage in a profound dialogue with the many other worldviews competing for the hearts and minds of people living in our times (Benedict XVI 2008d).

Young priests in particular may succumb to this temptation to get lost amidst the proposals of the culture of the moment, and therefore, they need serious mentors at their side, who will help them especially in the first years of their priestly ministry (Benedict XVI 2006c). As the Pope stated: "in the face of the temptations of relativism or the permissive society, there is absolutely no need for the priest to know all the latest, changing currents of thought; what the faithful expect from him is that he be a witness to the eternal wisdom contained in the revealed word." (Benedict XVI 2006c)

For this purpose, the priest should deeply assimilate the teaching he is to pass on and should experience as his own the truth of the faith, i.e. all that Jesus taught

and that the Church has passed on (Benedict XVI 2010f). Addressing bishops as the first formators of priests and religious under their care, the Pope reminded them that “theological formation, as well as education in sacred sciences, needs to be constantly updated, but this must always be done in accord with the Church’s authentic Magisterium.” (Benedict XVI 2007b) “The priest does not teach his own ideas, a philosophy that he himself has invented, that he has discovered or likes … but, in the medley of all the philosophies, the priest teaches in the name of Christ present, he proposes the truth that is Christ himself, his word and his way of living and of moving ahead.” (Benedict XVI 2010f)

One of the fundamental tasks of the Church, especially of priests, is the concern for deepened intellectual and cultural formation, and in order to minister adequately, they need a cultural preparation, including the knowledge of foreign languages, of history and of law, with wise openness to different cultures (Benedict XVI 2005b). In this aspect, the intellectual formation of the priest should not stop at the academic knowledge acquired in the study of theology, but should lead to his personal synthesis of knowledge and faith, which allows him to pass on the faith in an authentic and understandable way (Benedict XVI 2009b). Along these lines, intellectual and cultural formation appears to be a crucial element of the priest’s mature identity. Attention to this dimension reveals a significant feature of Benedict XVI’s teaching, which emphasizes not only the development of the spiritual life but also the shaping of the priest’s identity through the acquisition of in-depth theological, philosophical, and cultural knowledge.

During a meeting with seminarians and priests participating in a course for confessors, organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary, the Pope stressed that the confessor should have a proven knowledge of Christian behavior and experience of human affairs. To be able to fulfil this important mission, he must be faithful to the Church’s Magisterium concerning moral doctrine, aware that the law of good and evil is not determined by the situation, but by God (Benedict XVI 2007d). For this reason, it is important that priests have a constant aspiration to ascetism, and “that they tirelessly dedicate themselves to keeping up to date in the study of moral theology and the human sciences.” (Benedict XVI 2010b)

The Holy Father reminded priests that one of their duties is to penetrate faith with thought, because it is important that in confronting the contemporary world, priests must be able to show competently and convincingly the reason for the hope they lived. On the other hand, Benedict XVI warned that speaking alone does not suffice, it must be rooted in vivid faith and personal witness (Benedict XVI 2009g), because “it is absolutely indispensable, fundamental, to give credibility to this word through witness so that it does not only appear as a lofty philosophy or a fine utopia, but as reality.” (Benedict XVI 2009b)

The intellectual dimension is, therefore, an indispensable pillar of the priest’s mature identity, enabling him to proclaim the Gospel with wisdom, courage, and

fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church. In the papal teaching, concern for this dimension centers around a solid theological preparation and a profound integration of the revealed truth with the priest's personal experience, so that he may be a credible witness to what he teaches.

#### **4. Concern for the Realization of the Priest's Identity and Ministry in the Church Community**

In light of Benedict XVI's statements addressed to the clergy, the identity of the priest is expressed internally but is also realized externally in his specific ministry. Therefore, this identity must be integrated, and the priest's internal formation should harmonize with his external witness. Otherwise, there is a risk of reducing the priesthood to a mere professional function, instead of perceiving it in its profound ontological dimension (Benedict XVI 2010a).

Caring for the priest's internal experience of identity is complemented by nurturing its external manifestations. The priest's mature experience of his identity should find its expression in his ministry, as a shepherd and minister of the sacraments, a witness to Christ in the world, as well a teacher and evangelizer.

##### **4.1. The Priest as a Shepherd and Minister of the Sacraments**

Pastoral charity has its source in the Eucharist and finds its highest fulfillment there. Through a fruitful experience of Holy Mass, the priest's life takes on a sacrificial character and allows him to integrate his vocation more fully. In the Eucharist, the priest discovers his identity as a person who should give of himself to others (Benedict XVI 2012). Therefore, at the end of the Year of Priests, Benedict XVI pointed out that priestly ministry should always be anchored in the heart of Jesus. Priests are called to share with God their concern for people at this particular point in history so that people are able to experience God's protection in a tangible way. For this reason, priests must know their sheep. It is not about merely exterior knowledge, loving people, striving to walk with them along the path of God's friendship (Benedict XVI 2010g). The essence of the priesthood consists of two inseparably linked aspects: accompanying Jesus and being sent to people. "Anyone who has been with him cannot keep to himself what he has found; instead, he has to pass it on." (Benedict XVI 2006e)

Above all, the priest is obliged to share love—*caritas*, specifically with the suffering, the little ones, the children, for people in difficulty, and for the marginalized. Thus, he can make present the love of the Good Shepherd (Benedict XVI 2010c).

Also, the People of God expect their shepherds to share “the example of faith and the testimony of holiness.” (Benedict XVI 2010d)

In one of his homilies, the Pope asked: “Where can a priest today find the strength for such an exercise of his ministry, in full fidelity to Christ and to the Church, and complete devotion to his flock? There is only one answer: in Christ the Lord.” (Benedict XVI 2010e) Jesus, who sets the example of humble and loving service, provides priests with a point of reference for exercising authority that is a true expression of pastoral love. In this way, the Pope recalled that the paradigm of authority in the Church, as indicated by Christ, is one of service, not domination. It is focused on caring for the people entrusted to the priest, not on the fulfillment of his own ambitions. Only in this sense can the service of authority exercised by the priest be an expression of his authentic pastoral love.

Another equally important point of reference for the exercising of that authority, which is the true expression of pastoral charity, can be found in the numerous saints, among them St. John Mary Vianney, who with love and devotion carried out the task of caring for the portion of God’s People entrusted to them, showing themselves to be strong and determined men with the single aim of promoting the true good of souls (Benedict XVI 2010e). It can be noted that Benedict XVI tried to present the saints as living witnesses to the fact that priestly identity reaches its full realization in selfless pastoral charity, rooted in Christ and directed towards the good of the faithful.

The source of strength for many holy priests was their intimate relationships with Jesus, which is why for priests, prayer is the fundamental pastoral ministry. The Pope explained that prayer is not a retreat into privacy, but a priority pastoral task. It is an action in which the priest himself is filled anew with Christ and draws others into the communion of the praying Church, through which the presence of Jesus Christ flows into the world (Benedict XVI 2006a). In a world gripped by feverish activism, time dedicated to prayer is, according to Benedict XVI, a time of truly pastoral activity (Benedict XVI 2005c). Showing the example of Father Pio, the Pope stated that daily prayer, listening to the Word, an assiduous practice of the Sacraments and cordial membership in the community of the Church must be the basis of the program of life of each priest and religious (Benedict XVI 2009c).

Priests, rooted in God, despite their human poverty, but through the Sacrament of Orders, can “become sharers in his own priesthood, ministers of this sanctification, stewards of his mysteries, ‘bridges’ to the encounter with him and of his mediation between God and man and between man and God.” (Benedict XVI 2010d) This is accomplished through the administration of the sacraments, in which God is always the one who acts, and the priest is his instrument through which the effects of sanctification are realized. The Pope explained that “it is in the celebration of the Holy Mysteries that the priest finds the root of his holiness.” (Benedict XVI 2010d) This is a fundamental truth for the identity of the priest and results from fulfilling the task of sanctification; therefore, the Pope warned against renouncing the sacramental

pastoral care, without which it is impossible to exercise the priestly ministry in an authentic way. The priest, as an ordained minister continues the mission Christ, not only through the “word” but also the “sacrament,” in this totality of body and soul, of sign and word (Benedict XVI 2010d).

The task of the priest is to accompany people in such a way that they can truly experience the love of Christ and discover his presence in specific events of their own lives (Benedict XVI 2007d). Hence, the Holy Father encouraged priests to always experience the Liturgy and worship with hearts full of joy and love, because it is an action which the Risen One carries out with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Sacrament of Reconciliation should be given special attention as a place where the faithful may find compassion, advice and comfort, where they can feel that they are loved and understood by God, and experience the presence of Divine Mercy beside the Real Presence in the Eucharist (Benedict XVI 2010d).

In order to be a shepherd according to the heart of God, the priest needs inner freedom, mature will, a clear awareness of the identity received in Priestly Ordination, and an unconditional readiness to lead the flock entrusted to him in accordance with the Will of the Lord, without personal calculations. Since only the one who lives in profound and true obedience to Christ and the Church, is able to lead the People of God, fulfilling his pastoral ministry (Benedict XVI 2010e).

In the teaching of Benedict XVI, the priest’s pastoral ministry stems from his ontological bond with Christ. The Pope consistently reminded priests that true spiritual authority is based on obedience and unity with the Lord. Then, priests become transparent signs of Christ the Good Shepherd, and their ministry gains credibility and the power of evangelical witness.

#### **4.2. The Priest as a Witness of Christ in the World**

In the face of pastoral challenges and a constantly changing reality that contests Christian values, there is a need of priests with strong and balanced personalities. The apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* emphasizes that priests should be capable of bearing the burdens of pastoral responsibility, as “living images” of Jesus, and following his example, they should be able to know the depths of the human heart, to perceive difficulties and problems, to facilitate encounters and dialogue, to create trust, to express serene and objective judgments, and to establish cooperation with others (PDV 43).

The requirements for priestly predispositions are reflected in the teaching of Benedict XVI, who placed a strong emphasis on the need to bear witness to charity. On numerous occasions, his wish was that priests be wise, generous, gentle, strong, respectful and convinced witnesses, as well as confident servants (Benedict XVI 2008e). Since this witness is especially needed by young people, for whom the priest becomes a point of reference (Benedict XVI 2009b). Although priests

have various tasks entrusted to them and their charisms may differ, they should always carry them out in the same spirit so that their presence and action among the Christian people become an eloquent witness of God's primacy in their lives (Benedict XVI 2009c).

The core of the priest's mission is to witness joy and to be a collaborator in the joy of others in a world that is often sad and negative. The Pope said that the priest is able to be a messenger and multiplier of joy, bringing it to all, especially to those who are sorrowful and disheartened, only when he himself have the joy of the Lord dwelling in him (Benedict XVI 2008e). It is precisely this example of joyful service to the Lord that can contribute to young people generously following their calling (Benedict XVI 2009b).

In his concern for joy in the life of the priest, the Pope expressed profound discernment of the existential needs of young people. In a world marked by pessimism and existential crisis, joy present in the priest's life appears as a sign of hope and fruit of the Holy Spirit, rooted in the experience of God's love. It is worth noting that in the Pope's teaching, joy had not only personal and communal but also vocational significance. The example of a life filled with joy positively presents the priestly vocation as the fullness of life and service.

In this context, priestly fraternity is an immense resource for the renewal of the priesthood and the raising up of new vocations. The Pope encouraged bishops to foster opportunities for ever greater dialogue and fraternal encounter among their priests, and especially the younger priests. He was convinced that this would bear great fruit for their own enrichment, for the increase of their love for the priesthood and the Church, and for the effectiveness of their apostolate (Benedict XVI 2008f). "Hierarchy implies a triple bond: in the first place the bond with Christ and with the order given by Our Lord to his Church; then the bond with the other Pastors in the one communion of the Church; and lastly, the bond with the faithful who are entrusted to the individual, in the order of the Church." (Benedict XVI 2010e)

Another important aspect of witness, which our world with its desire for "self-realization" and "self-determination" needs is obedience that has nothing to do with external constraint and the loss of oneself (Benedict XVI 2007a). Obedience to God's will and obedience to Jesus Christ must be practically humble obedience to the Church (Benedict XVI 2007a). Priestly obedience "is a believing with the Church, a thinking and speaking with the Church, serving through her." (Benedict XVI 2008c) This obedience then extends to obedience without reservations before the Truth itself that is Christ. This obedience not only purifies priests but above all also frees them "for service to Christ and thus for the salvation of the world, which nevertheless always begins with the obedient purification of one's own soul through the truth." (Benedict XVI 2009g)

Benedict XVI noted that a witness to faith must be chastity and celibacy, which only have meaning if they are based on God (Benedict XVI 2006d). Chastity

means an intensive relationship with the living Christ and with the Father (Benedict XVI 2007a). Therefore, in the contemporary world, living in voluntary celibacy is a sign of “freedom and joy which can draw others to the Love which lies beyond all other loves.” (Benedict XVI 2008d) By the vow of celibate chastity, priests solemnly promise to put themselves completely and unreservedly at the service of God’s Kingdom and at the service of others, wanting to build deep relationships with them. Thus, amid so much greed, egoism that cannot wait, consumerism and the cult of the individual, priests and religious show that selfless love for men and women is possible (Benedict XVI 2007a).

In the Pope’s reflection on the identity of the priest, there are also references to evangelical poverty, which is an important pillar of the priest’s life. That is why the Holy Father encouraged priests to a constant and serious examination of conscience in this aspect, since anyone who wants to follow Christ in a radical way must renounce material goods, so that he lives this poverty in a way centered on Christ, as a means of becoming inwardly free for their neighbor (Benedict XVI 2007a). In the broader context of the Pope’s statements under analysis, one can conclude that concern for evangelical poverty is not merely about material sacrifice, but rather a deeper attitude of freedom of the heart. Only priests who are internally free, available to the needs of others, and capable of living in simplicity and the logic of gift, can be credible witnesses to the Gospel.

In the teaching of Benedict XVI, the testimony of the priest’s life appears as a fundamental and irreplaceable element of evangelization. Rooted in a deep relationship with God and obedience to the Church, joyful and dedicated service in fidelity to commitments is in itself a form of proclamation to people in the contemporary world.

#### **4.3. The Priest as a Teacher and Evangelizer**

One of the fundamental tasks of the priest is the service of the word, which includes preaching the Gospel and teaching the truths of faith. Since the priest is the sacramental presence of Christ the Teacher, in contacts with all people he should be a man of mission and of dialogue (*RFIS* 40, 42). According to the instructions of *Pastores dabo vobis*, “deeply rooted in the truth and charity of Christ, and impelled by the desire and imperative to proclaim Christ’s salvation to all, the priest is called to witness in all his relationships to fraternity, service and a common quest for the truth, as well as a concern for the promotion of justice and peace.” (*PDV* 18)

In this spirit, Benedict XVI placed particular emphasis on the need for the priest to be deeply rooted in the truth. During a meeting with the clergy of the Aosta diocese, he encouraged them to renew their confidence that Jesus is the Truth, and that only by walking in his footsteps do priests go in the right direction, and it is in this direction that they lead others (Benedict XVI 2005d). This renewal happens through contact with God’s word, since when read and pondered in the Church, it acts upon

the priest and transforms him. As the manifestation of divine Wisdom, that word becomes his “life companion,” “good counsellor” and an “encouragement in cares and grief.” (Benedict XVI 2008b)

The priest, who lives in a deep relationship with the Word of God, becomes in a natural way a teacher and evangelizer. According to Benedict XVI, he can fulfill this mission in many ways: carefully preparing homilies, imparting catechetical formation in schools, in academic institutions; and above all, giving an example of his own life, he can teach and proclaim the Gospel. Since he does not do it from a position of superiority, but “with the humble, glad certainty of someone who has encountered the Truth, who has been grasped and transformed by it, hence cannot but proclaim it.” (Benedict XVI 2010f)

In light of the above, it is worth drawing attention to the aspect of the priest’s ordinary life, which resonated strongly in the teachings of Benedict XVI. The Pope pointed to the ordinariness of the priest’s daily ministry as a space in which the Gospel gains credibility. This ordinariness does not imply banality, but rather the simplicity and clarity of a life rooted in Christ. In the face of various falsifications and identity crises, it is precisely this ordinariness of the life of the priest that can be an effective tool for evangelization.

Benedict XVI emphasized that in the context of contemporary educational challenges, the task of teaching, which is one of the fundamental duties of the priest, takes on particular importance: “we are very confused about the fundamental choices in our life and question what the world is, where it comes from, where we are going, what we must do in order to do good, how we should live and what the truly pertinent values are.” (Benedict XVI 2010f) Referring to this type of doubt, catechesis can be of valuable help. Therefore, the Holy Father encouraged priests to intensify the catechesis and the faith formation not only of children but also of young people and adults, since “mature reflection on faith is a light for the path of life and a source of strength for witnessing to Christ.” (Benedict XVI 2007c)

Indicating the great need to teach and evangelize, the Pope encouraged priests to use modern forms of communication. Homilies, lectures, Bible courses or theology courses do not exhaust the possibilities of formation today. It is necessary to “have recourse also to the communications media: press, radio and television, websites, forums and many other methods for effectively communicating the message of Christ to a large number of people.” (Benedict XVI 2007c)

This openness to new communication tools and the encouragement for priests to fearlessly use new forms of communication reveal a significant aspect of the Pope’s concern for the fulfillment of the priest’s identity and ministry within the Church community. As a teacher and evangelizer, the priest should harmoniously combine fidelity to Christ’s message with the courage needed to enter new socio-cultural contexts. In this way, the Pope emphasized that the priest’s mission cannot be limited to traditional pastoral areas but must also encompass the new realms of the digital reality.

The priest, as a herald of the Good News, is sent especially where people struggle with poverty, exclusion, and loneliness. Benedict XVI expressed great appreciation for clergy and laity who, despite difficulties, carry not only the word of truth but also a concrete sign of love through their presence, solidarity, and action for justice (Benedict XVI 2007a). This mission requires courage, humility and readiness to enter into dialogue with everyone in a spirit of understanding, sensitivity and charity (Benedict XVI 2007b).

The Pope emphasized that priests need to show openness and collaboration in the Church's mission of evangelization. Therefore, he appealed to priests to accompany the new movements and associations, support families, and do not forget the link with young people (Benedict XVI 2006c).

Special attention must be paid to young people who need help to enter a culture inspired by faith (Benedict XVI 2009b). Since the priest as an educator and evangelizer cannot be a passive observer of modern day culture, but is called to appreciate its merits and critically evaluate its limits. The task of the priest is the proclamation of the Gospel with the firm assurance that it is the greatest service to render to man, because it leads people to God, reawakens faith, lifts the person out of his inertia and desperation (Benedict XVI 2010e).

In his teaching, Benedict XVI raised awareness that teaching and evangelizing should be carried out in a positive way, showing the beauty of the Gospel "as an integral way of life, offering an attractive and true answer, intellectually and practically, to real human problems." (Benedict XVI 2008f) In this aspect, the priest's task is to create a place for an authentic "dialogue of salvation," which is born from the deep certainty of being loved unconditionally by God. This certainty "helps the human being to recognize his sin and gradually to enter that stable dynamic of conversion of heart which leads to radical renouncement of evil and to a life in accordance with God." (Benedict XVI 2010b) Therefore, in the spirit of responsibility for educating the faithful, the Pope encouraged priests to assume a sacrificial and generous approach to sacramental confession as a space that allows priests to demonstrate the merciful love of God in words and in drawing near to the penitent (Benedict XVI 2007d).

In view of the emerging tendencies, concerning the priest's identity and mission, to emphasize only the dimension of preaching the word, while marginalizing or even omitting the aspect of sanctification stemming from the sacramental pastoral ministry (Benedict XVI 2010d), it is necessary to retell and explain that true priesthood is only possible when it is rooted in the sacramental ministry.

The Lord makes his own action present in the person who carries out these gestures. These three duties of the priest which Tradition has identified in the Lord's different words about mission: teaching, sanctifying and governing in their difference and in their deep unity are a specification of this effective representation. In fact, they are the three

actions of the Risen Christ, the same that he teaches today, in the Church and in the world. Thereby he creates faith, gathers together his people, creates the presence of truth and really builds the communion of the universal Church; and sanctifies and guides. (Benedict XVI 2010f)

In light of these reflections of Pope Benedict XVI, the essence of the priest's identity also includes his active participation in the formation of the faithful and his constant search for ways to reach them with the message of the Gospel. The foundation of this ministry, despite changing circumstances, is the priest's rooting in Christ—the Truth so that he can effectively undertake the task of teaching the Truth, sanctifying through the sacraments, and guiding the faithful toward salvation.

## Conclusions

The teachings of Pope Benedict XVI constitute valuable and extensive research material, particularly in the context of reflection on the identity of the priest. Therefore, the primary goal of the analyses undertaken in this paper was not to provide an exhaustive discussion of all issues concerning priestly identity, but rather to reveal its essence and to identify and order those dimensions of its experience that, in light of Benedict XVI's pronouncements, require ongoing formational concern. This approach has allowed us to show the theological depth of the Pope's teachings and their significance for contemporary priestly formation.

Benedict XVI consistently presented the priest's identity as a sacramental-ontological reality, deeply rooted in the mystery of participation in the priesthood of Christ. This identity appears as a complex and dynamic reality that is not limited to the internal sphere but necessarily and naturally demands realization and visibility in the external dimension.

The identity of the priest, embedded in his inner being, encompasses spiritual, psychological, and intellectual dimensions and is expressed externally in his ministry in the Church and in the world. It is noteworthy that the Pope strongly emphasized the unity and complementarity of these two dimensions, which fully correspond to the threefold mission entrusted to the priest in the Church: shepherding, sanctifying, and teaching. For the priest to effectively fulfill his external tasks—as a shepherd and minister of the sacraments, a witness to the world, a teacher and evangelizer—he must, internally, maintain a deep relationship with Christ and be spiritually grounded, develop psychologically toward greater maturity, and continually improve his education.

Benedict XVI's teaching clearly demonstrates a profound concern for an integral and integrated understanding of the priest's identity, which presupposes the unity of

his spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral life. The Pope advocated a return to a person-alistic model of formation rooted in a living and personal relationship with Christ. Implementing this principle continues to be an adequate response to contemporary identity crises and formation challenges.

A significant and innovative aspect of the Pope's teaching is his strong emphasis on the need to shape the intellectual dimension of priestly identity. In the context of cultural relativism and the axiological confusion, which the Church is facing in the contemporary world, this intellectual dimension is treated as an indispensable tool for evangelization.

A particularly valuable and effective way of demonstrating the essence of priestly identity is Benedict XVI's reference to the examples of saint priests. Reflecting on the multifaceted maturity of priests, especially during the Year of Priests, the Pope frequently invoked the figure of St. John Mary Vianney, presenting his life as a living and compelling embodiment of what the priesthood is all about. Thus, the theological content was grounded in concrete experience, and the identity of the priest was presented as a feasible vocational path rather than an abstract concept.

Numerous thoughts of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI have been implemented in *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis* (RFIS 1, 36, 87, 97, 103, 131, 166, 172). Thus, his concern for the priest's mature identity can be understood as a proposal for a comprehensive formation program, encompassing the internal and external aspects through which priestly identity is expressed. His words, addressed to the clergy, remain relevant regardless of the changing socio-cultural and pastoral context, and their acceptance and implementation in the priestly formation seem essential for the renewal of the priest's life and the regaining of the Church's credibility in the world.

*Translated by Maria Kantor*

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