COLLOQUY · A DIALOGUE, AFTER JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

Who Is Main? or, On the Priesthood

A week after his ordination, a young priest meets the friend who was meant to enter seminary with him fifteen years ago and didn't come. Which priesthood is the end of the other, and what a programmer means by main.

Richard Verver · November 2026

> *But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood.*
> — 1 Peter 2:9

> *For you I am a bishop; with you I am a Christian.*
> — Augustine, Sermon 340

In John Chrysostom's *On the Priesthood*, John and his friend Basil agree to face ordination together, and on the day, John hides. Basil is ordained alone, and John spends six books explaining himself: the priesthood is too high and too dangerous for him. The names here are borrowed from that dialogue. The two friends are invented and live in Toronto. Words quoted as anyone's are their own, from the works named in the notes at the end. The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood are taken as the Second Vatican Council teaches them: they differ in essence, and each is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ.

A café on Dundas Street West, Toronto, on a Saturday morning in November. Rain on the window. Basil, thirty-nine, a week a priest, still not used to the collar, is at a table by the window with two cups. John, the same age, a programmer, comes in shaking out an umbrella.

John. Father.

Basil. Don't. Not from you. Sit down, I ordered for you. The barista said you always have the same thing.

John. She knows everyone's order. It's a kind of priesthood.

Basil. We'll come to that. First you owe me something. Fifteen years ago we were going to walk into the seminary together. I stood on the steps with two suitcases and you never came.

John. I know.

Basil. You sent a text. "Go in. I can't." That was all I had for fifteen years.

John. I owe you a better answer than that. Chrysostom did the same to his Basil, you know. He hid on the day, and then wrote six books to explain why.

Basil. I read them in my first year. His reason was that the priesthood was too high. He was afraid he'd fall from it.

John. Mine was the opposite. I was afraid I'd think it was the top.

Basil. The top of what?

John. Of being a Christian. I was twenty-four and I thought that's what it was: the real thing, the inner circle. And something in me said that if I went in thinking that, I'd spend my life mistaking the office for the life.

Basil. And you thought I wouldn't?

John. I thought you went in for the right reason. You wanted to serve. I wanted to arrive.

Basil. *(after a moment)* That's a better answer than the text.

The barista brings two pastries they didn't order, says "from the kitchen," and goes back to the counter.

Basil. But I want to argue with your premise, because something did happen to me last Saturday. The bishop laid his hands on my head and said nothing. Then the prayer. I am not who I was. The Church says the character is indelible.

John. I believe it. I'm not here to tell you nothing happened. I want to know *what* happened. You're a priest. So am I.

Basil. By baptism.

John. By baptism. Peter calls it a royal priesthood. So there are two priesthoods at this table. Which one is the end of the other?

Basil. Careful. The Council was precise about this. The two "differ from one another in essence and not only in degree." And yet "each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ." That's *Lumen gentium*, paragraph ten.

John. I know the text. Now read me the Catechism on what yours is *for*.

Basil. *(taking out his phone, then putting it face down)* I don't need to look it up. I had to memorize it. The common priesthood is exercised "by the unfolding of baptismal grace — a life of faith, hope, and charity, a life according to the Spirit." And "the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood." It is "a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church."

John. A means.

Basil. A means.

John. And a means is for its end. So mine is higher than yours, in degree, as an end is higher than a means.

Basil. No. That's the one thing you can't say. Not because it flatters me less, but because it doesn't parse. They differ in essence. You can't put two things that differ in essence on one scale and ask which is more. Is a key more of a door than the house is?

John. Then I've put it badly. Let me try again. What is the end of both?

Basil. Holiness. Charity. The thing the Catechism just named: faith, hope and love, a life according to the Spirit.

John. Then I'll say it this way. The res outranks the sacramentum.

Basil. That I'll grant, and so will Thomas. He says the grace that makes a man pleasing to God is far nobler than the graces given to one man for the sake of others. Mine is the second kind. The power to absolve, to consecrate: none of it is for me. It's for you.

John. So it's not that my priesthood is above yours. It's that the thing both of them are for is above both of them.

Basil. Yes. And you only reach it the way I do: by living it.

John. Here's what I wanted to ask you. When you stand at the altar, you act in the person of Christ the head. You're an icon of him.

Basil. That's the old way of putting it, yes.

John. Then I thought: your priesthood is the icon, and mine is the thing itself, Christ's priesthood participated in. Not signified. Lived.

Basil. You're half right, and the wrong half is the interesting one. Your baptism gave you a character too. Thomas says the characters, all of them, are "nothing else than certain participations of Christ's Priesthood, flowing from Christ Himself." Yours is a power to receive, mine a power to give. But they're both signs. You're an icon as much as I am.

John. Then where's the participation that isn't an icon?

Basil. Charity. Neither character is the fullness. The fullness is a man offering himself, his body "a living sacrifice," as Paul says. That isn't mine by ordination or yours by baptism. It's anyone's who does it.

John. Every character is an icon. Only charity is the participation.

Basil. Write that down. That's why Mary had no ministerial priesthood and is its fullness anyway. The Catechism quotes John Paul II: "the Marian dimension of the Church precedes the Petrine." The hierarchy exists for the holiness of the members. Not the other way round.

John. Can I explain it the way I'd explain it at work?

Basil. If you must.

John. We keep our code in a history, a chain of changes. Every change points back at the one before it. The main line of the history is called main. When someone needs to do a particular piece of work, they open a branch.

Basil. Off main.

John. Always off main. A branch has to start from something already there. You can't open a branch from nothing.

Basil. Canon 842. Someone who hasn't been baptized can't validly receive any other sacrament. Orders always branches off baptism.

John. Then the branch does its work. And here's the thing about a branch: it exists to be merged. Its whole point is to bring something back into main. That's orders. A branch opened for the service of main.

Basil. And baptism?

John. Baptism isn't a branch. It's main. It points straight at the head.

Basil. And a priest who never merges?

John. An orphaned branch. Commits piling up on their own line. Busy, valid, real work, and none of it ever joins the trunk.

Basil. *(quietly)* That's what Chrysostom was really afraid of. Not the height. The man who has the sacrament and misses the thing it's for. We've all seen one. Some of us have been shown, in the last few years, how far it can go.

John. And the work still counts. The sacraments he gave were real.

Basil. They were. That's the mercy of *ex opere operato*, and it's also the danger. My sacraments work whether or not I'm holy. That makes my road easier in one way, and much more dangerous in another. Nothing about the office forces me to merge.

John. Then I can tell you what clericalism is.

Basil. Go on.

John. A branch that thinks it's main. Or worse, one that force-pushes: it writes over the main line and tells everyone their own work doesn't count.

Basil. Francis said almost that. Clericalism "tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people." But read the next line, because it's about you.

John. Me?

Basil. "Clericalism, whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body." You didn't come to seminary because you thought the priesthood was the top of being a Christian. That was clericalism too. You just practised it from the steps outside.

John. *(laughing)* Fifteen years, and that's my penance.

Basil. That and three Hail Marys. And there's the opposite error, which you also have to refuse: deleting the branch. Saying main can merge itself, that the Church needs no one set apart. It does. The branch is real, and it can't be deleted.

John. No. In our history nothing is ever edited. Every change is named by its own content. You can merge a branch or abandon it. You can't unmake it.

Basil. An indelible character.

John. Precisely.

Basil. Here's something Chrysostom said that I didn't expect, after all his fear. Preaching to his people, he said there are occasions when there is "no difference at all between the priest and those under him." At communion, "we are all alike counted worthy of the same things." And at the Eucharistic prayer: "The offering of thanksgiving again is common: for neither does he give thanks alone, but also all the people."

John. Then tomorrow, when you say the prayer—

Basil. It isn't my prayer. I say it. You make it yours with the Amen. Augustine said it to his people the day he was made bishop: for you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian. The first is frightening. The second is the consolation.

John. Branch and main.

Basil. I have to work on both. You only have to work on one.

John. Only.

At the counter the barista is steaming milk for an old man who comes in every Saturday. She writes nothing on his cup. She already knows his order, and she asks after his wife.

Basil. Look at her.

John. The priestess of the counter. I called her that once, half as a joke. She told me she goes to the early Mass at St Cecilia's.

Basil. It isn't a joke, and it isn't a likeness either. Thomas says the reality of the Eucharist, the thing the sacrament is for, is "the unity of the mystical body." What she's doing for that man is it.

John. Not a sacrament.

Basil. No. No matter and form, nothing that works whatever she's like. That's mine. Hers is the thing mine is for. The Council says it of the laity in so many words: their work, their family life, "their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne," all of these "become 'spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.'" And then: "Together with the offering of the Lord's body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist."

John. So she brings her week to your altar.

Basil. And takes my altar back to her counter. That's what the dismissal means. *Ite, missa est*: go, it is sent. The Mass isn't finished when I stop speaking. It's handed to her.

John. There's a little book on abandonment that goes under de Caussade's name. It calls this the sacrament of the present moment.

Basil. An analogy, but a true one. Each moment is the matter of her offering, and the love she does it with is its form. A Mass made to measure for one old man on a Saturday morning, and it will never be said again.

John. "Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God."

Basil. You memorized that one.

John. It was the only thing that got me through the years after the seminary steps.

Basil. And notice that none of it depends on her knowing. If you told her, she'd laugh.

John. Then I won't tell her.

Basil. Good. It's hidden from her too. "Your life is hid with Christ in God." That's what keeps it safe.

Basil. One more question, then I have to go and prepare a homily. At my ordination they sang the psalm. "Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek." For ever. What happens to the branch in the world to come?

John. What happens to a branch when its work is done?

Basil. It's merged.

John. In heaven there are no sacraments left to give. John saw "no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it." The work of the branch is finished. It merges.

Basil. And the character?

John. When a branch merges, its history isn't erased. It becomes part of main for good. Thomas says the character remains after this life, "in the good as adding to their glory."

Basil. Merged, not deleted.

John. And look at whose order it is. Melchizedek is a king. Hebrews spells it out: "first being by interpretation King of righteousness, and after that also King of Salem, which is, King of peace." He brought out bread and wine. His is a king's priesthood. A royal priesthood.

Basil. Christ's first.

John. Christ's first. Then yours, by the laying on of hands. And at the end, everyone's. "And hath made us kings and priests unto God." "They shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him." The verse they sang over you isn't the privilege of the branch. It's the destiny of main.

Basil. Then in the world to come, everything is main.

John. A kingdom of priests. Nothing deleted. Every branch remembered.

Basil stands and puts on his coat. Outside, the rain has thinned.

Basil. You still haven't answered your own question.

John. Which one?

Basil. Who is main?

John. In a history there's a pointer called HEAD. It marks where you are: the commit everything else is read from.

Basil. "He is the head of the body, the church."

John. Then main is wherever the head is. Neither of us is main. We're both on it.

Basil. Come to my first Sunday Mass tomorrow, at eleven.

John. What should I do?

Basil. The hardest part. Say Amen.

Notes and sources

- **The frame.** John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book I, for the friends' agreement and John's hiding; the six books are his defence. Described, not quoted.
- **Priest and people.** John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Second Corinthians*, Homily 18, in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers translation: "no difference at all," "all alike counted worthy," and "the offering of thanksgiving again is common." Augustine, Sermon 340, for "for you I am a bishop; with you I am a Christian."
- **The two priesthoods.** Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* 10. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1547, for the common priesthood as "a life of faith, hope, and charity" and the ministerial priesthood as "a means." CCC 773, quoting John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* 27, for the Marian and the Petrine.
- **Thomas Aquinas.** *Summa theologiae* I-II q.111 a.5, on sanctifying grace as nobler than graces given for others (paraphrased). III q.63 a.3, the characters as "certain participations of Christ's Priesthood," and a.5, the character remaining after this life, "in the good as adding to their glory." III q.73 a.3, the reality of the Eucharist as "the unity of the mystical body."
- **The laity's offering.** *Lumen gentium* 34, for the spiritual sacrifices of daily life, their offering with the Lord's body, and "as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God." "The sacrament of the present moment" is from *L'Abandon à la Providence divine*, long published under Jean-Pierre de Caussade's name; the attribution is disputed. Described, not quoted.
- **The law.** Code of Canon Law (1983), c. 842 §1, paraphrased: a person who has not received baptism cannot validly be admitted to the other sacraments.
- **Clericalism.** Francis, Letter to the People of God, 20 August 2018.
- **Scripture (KJV).** Genesis 14:18; Psalm 110:4; Romans 12:1; Colossians 1:18, 3:3; Hebrews 7:2; 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6, 20:6, 21:22.

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