

In Persona Christi: The Concept Explained

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ~ John 15:16

THE PHRASE “*IN PERSONA CHRISTI*” is not one that is commonly understood. Apart from it being a Latin phrase which is seldom translated, further confusion results from wrong ideas about the nature and meaning of the priesthood. However, when understood correctly, it makes clear the essential difference between the baptismal priesthood and the ministerial priesthood and provides one of the fundamental truths needed to understand the sacraments of the

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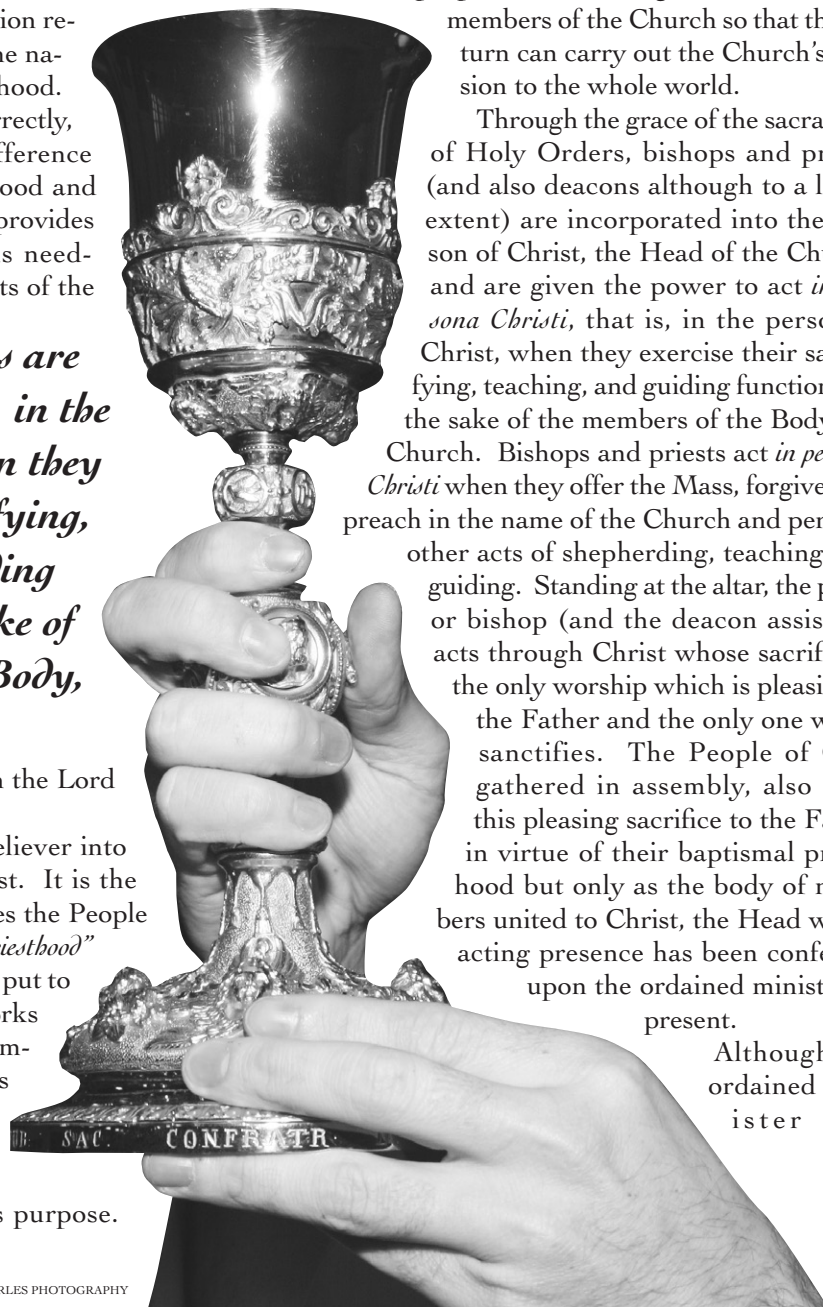
Church as real encounters with the Lord Jesus himself.

Baptism incorporates the believer into the eternal priesthood of Christ. It is the means by which the Lord makes the People of God into a “*holy*” and “*royal priesthood*” (1 Pt 2:5, 9). This priesthood is put to the service of humanity and works to draw all people back into communion with God. It receives its sustaining power and grace from Christ through the ministerial priesthood that he has created in the Church for this purpose.

The ministerial priesthood is made up of bishops and priests who, assisted by deacons, are given the specific purpose of sustaining and renewing the members of the Church so that they in turn can carry out the Church’s mission to the whole world.

Through the grace of the sacrament of Holy Orders, bishops and priests (and also deacons although to a lesser extent) are incorporated into the person of Christ, the Head of the Church, and are given the power to act *in persona Christi*, that is, in the person of Christ, when they exercise their sanctifying, teaching, and guiding functions for the sake of the members of the Body, the Church. Bishops and priests act *in persona Christi* when they offer the Mass, forgive sins, preach in the name of the Church and perform other acts of shepherding, teaching, and guiding. Standing at the altar, the priest or bishop (and the deacon assisting) acts through Christ whose sacrifice is the only worship which is pleasing to the Father and the only one which sanctifies. The People of God, gathered in assembly, also offer this pleasing sacrifice to the Father in virtue of their baptismal priesthood but only as the body of members united to Christ, the Head whose acting presence has been conferred upon the ordained minister(s) present.

Although the ordained minister has



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been configured to Christ and his being permanently made to image him as Head, his ability to act *in persona Christi* extends only to those functions given to him by Christ. A priest who takes a plane to go on vacation for a week is not acting *in persona Christi*. However, this does not mean that he takes a vacation from *being* a priest but underscores the primacy of his priestly actions from his other more mundane ones (for example, driving a car, taking a plane, eating a meal, etc.).

The presence of Christ in the priest does not erase his human frailty. Like the rest of the baptized, he must struggle with human weakness and sin, a struggle characteristic of all the members of the Church, including its ministers. However, the minister's sins or errors cannot impede the validity and fruitfulness of the sacraments because these acts which are proper to his ordained function are guaranteed by the presence of Christ in whose name he acts. Thus, the sacraments are efficacious — that is, they give the grace they signify — because the true minister is always Christ. The sacraments act *ex opere operato* (Latin for “by the very fact of the action’s being performed”). The sacraments are effective *even if the minister of the sacrament is utterly depraved and mired in sin*. The righteousness of the minister does not give the sacraments their power; God does. This is a phenomenal example of God’s mercy and loving-kindness toward his people.

For our part, we should offer respect and love to our bishops and priests, as St. Paul instructs us: “*But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work*” (1 Thes 5:12-13). We should pray daily for our Holy Father and our bishops, priests, and deacons, even, and especially, for those who sin, that they may be “*conformed to the image of Christ*” (Rom 8:29).

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