

And all this He does by His *ordained* priest. As members of the Church, our priests represent us, but they do more than that: they are ‘facing’ her too, in their office, giving her what herself she could not supply. People often call a priest the ‘Vicar of God’. This is, at the very least, imprecise: you could give this name as well to fathers, mothers, kings. The priest is explicitly representing, almost ‘impersonating’ Christ, z.e., God as Incarnate, and the Incarnate as Highpriest: “He prays and offers *in persona* <88> *omnium*’, says St. Thomas, ‘but he consecrates in *persona Christi* — in the person of Christ’. ‘The priest is acting vicariously for the people’, says the Encyclical Mediator Dei, ‘because he stands in for Christ, *in so far as* He is Head of His members and sacrificing Himself for them . . . The priest is marked with the indelible character, which turns him into a kind of image of Christ’.

Further, he does not receive this character ‘from beneath’, that is, by delegation from the community, but from above, by being caught up into the stream of Apostolic Succession, descending from the origins of the Church from bishop to bishop, branching out into the entire sacerdotal body by means of the imposition of hands. This, and only this fact, would account for the amazing casualness which, up to our days, simply took for granted referring to the clergy as ‘The Church’: ‘What does the Church say ... ?’ ‘The Church forbids.. . commends ...’ This meant that, in the symbiosis — Christ-Church — the Head alone seemed to count, the Body simply fading almost out of sight. Priests were entirely and globally identified with the Head, as if an actor were treated offstage as the character he impersonates. This attitude, both among the people and among the clergy, led to the notorious and most regrettable deviations and abuses of hierarchical dominance known to history — from the terrific tyranny of Boniface VIII down to the petty arrogance of minor offenders. Today we get the impression that many priests, in a laudable effort to make up for the trespasses of their forbears, almost refuse to acknowledge even the mystical prerogative of their state.

So the pendulum, once more, is swinging gaily to the opposite extreme. For on the other hand the deep and sincere devotion, the genuine affection and respect freely and lavishly bestowed by Catholics on their priests, has no other root but their intense faith in this Christlike character of the anointed. This feeling seems to be rapidly dwindling nowadays to the verge of disappearance, the priest being considered no more than a functionary consigned to running the organisational part of the Church; and this, no doubt, might be done as well by women. This is why, priests being so diffident about it, laymen and laywomen ought, today, to stand up for the intrinsic difference between Universal priesthood and the consecrated *sacerdotium*.