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*The Assault on Priesthood: A Biblical and Theological  
Rejoinder* by Lawrence B. Porter (review)

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And on this journey into a foreign land, Karnes's later chapters can be a fascinating guide.

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*The Assault on Priesthood: A Biblical and Theological Rejoinder.* By LAWRENCE B. PORTER. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2012. Pp. 422. \$46.00 (paper). ISBN: 978-1-61097-292-5.

As rich as the teaching of the Second Vatican Council was, there are points of emphasis and de-emphasis that continue to raise concern. Often the most important concepts are the most problematic. Take, for example, "communion," which, on the eve of his resignation, Pope Benedict XVI called *the* central concept of the council. Yet, in the same address to the Roman clergy, distinguishing between the "real council" and the "council of the media," Benedict lamented that the latter propagated a "political hermeneutic" according to which the liturgy was seen primarily as a "community activity" rather than an "act of faith."

Something similar happened to the concept of the priesthood. The council deepened our understanding of the ministerial aspect of the priesthood, but, in doing so, lightened the emphasis on its sacrificial nature. Furthermore, though it broadened the magisterial teaching on bishops and the laity, it gave less attention to elaborating a theology of the priesthood.

In *The Assault on Priesthood*, Lawrence Porter laments these conciliar de-emphases, and he is not alone. Avery Dulles and Joseph Ratzinger raised similar complaints, and John Henry Newman had foreseen the day when a shift in the theology of the priesthood would result in confusion over its essence. Porter tries to repair the damage by exploring a range of biblical passages that deal with the priesthood. He focuses on ten examples of the Levitical priesthood and on the priestly ministries of Jesus and Paul. Porter's method is both original and practical, relying on scriptural insights to formulate concrete applications to everyday ministry. His goal is not to put together a comprehensive theology of the priesthood but to survey the main concerns that have occupied the Church since Vatican II.

Thomas Aquinas does not play a major role in Porter's project, but he does appear frequently. A few preliminary remarks about Aquinas's theology of the priesthood are therefore in order. In his commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews, Aquinas lays what many deem the cornerstone of his theology of the

priesthood: "Only Christ is the true priest, the others being only his ministers" (chap. 7, lect. 4). This principle features prominently in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (par. 1545). The priesthood of Christ is one and unique. Ordained ministers share in it to the extent that they are empowered to continue Christ's ministry. Without eschewing the proper hierarchical ordering of bishops over priests, Aquinas views holy orders as remarkably sacerdo-centric in contradistinction to the episcopo-centric emphasis of Vatican II. Porter illustrates the latter through a comparison of the Decree on the Pastoral Office of the Bishops (*Christus Dominus*) to the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*), uncovering the theological sophistication of the former and the "poorly formulated" theology of the latter. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, like *Lumen Gentium*, avoids "cultic language" in favor of "pastoral service," placing the "work" of priests ahead of their "life" (xxxv). As a result, "priests themselves find it difficult to determine exactly where they belong in the people of God" (xlv). Aquinas, Porter believes, was clearer in the matter. The priest's identity revolves around the power to confect the Eucharist *in persona Christi*. This sacerdo-centric view emerges from the way Aquinas distinguishes between priest and bishop. In question 40, article 5 of the *Tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, he asserts that, in one sense, a bishop has no power superior to that of a priest since both are able to consecrate the species of bread and wine. The bishop's power is rather one of jurisdiction and authority in ecclesial governance. The distinction between priest and deacon is sharper since the former can consecrate the Eucharist while the latter cannot (see *STh* III, q. 82, a. 1).

Aquinas did not develop a full, systematic theology of the priesthood, but if he had, he may have begun on a natural level. "Natural reason," he writes in the *Summa* (*STh* II-II, q. 85, a. 1), "prescribes that man make use of certain sensible things, offering them to God as a sign of due obedience and honor [*ex naturali ratione procedit quod homo quibusdam sensibilibus rebus utatur offerens eas Deo, in signum debitae subiectionis et honoris*]." Since sacrifice is the supreme act of worship and the constitutive mark of religion, it is also the specifying act of the priesthood. Aquinas thus considers the priesthood "reasonable," not only to the extent that it has an intermediary role, but more importantly in the sense that to offer sacrifice is an essentially human activity disclosed through man's inexorable religious inclination. Porter capitalizes on Aquinas's point in order to justify his own use of anecdotes drawn from pagan rituals.

The bulk of Porter's book deals with the Old Testament, from which he draws key themes: Aaron illustrates the dignity and fragility of priests, Jonathan the importance of pastoral stability, Eli the dangerous allure of sex and money, Ahimelech the recurrence of anticlerical hatred, Zadok the temptation to political power, Ezra the importance of learning, Simon the Just the need to combine aesthetic and social sensibilities, Mattathias the courage to be counter-cultural, Caiaphas the call to moral integrity, Zechariah the

virtues of a “simple priest,” Jesus the preeminence of the New Priesthood, and Paul the mutual relation of preaching and sacraments. Porter performs a thorough exegesis on the relevant biblical passages with particular attention to their literal meaning. He quotes them at length, virtually eliminating the need for the reader to have a Bible at hand. He then gives the cultural and cultic background crucial for grasping their meaning. This leads to an examination of how the Church Fathers and other prominent authors interpreted the passages throughout history. Finally, Porter proposes specific ways in which the lessons gleaned from the passages can be applied to ministry today.

As for Aquinas, Porter extolls his example of priestly humility, noting that the *Doctor communis* refused episcopal appointments at least twice. He contrasts this with the *curricula vitae* of the American prelates William O’Connell and Francis Spellman. He also notes Aquinas’s solicitude for the observance of liturgical precepts and the use of sensible beauty in the liturgy (*STh* I-II, q. 100, a. 2; II-II, q. 81, a. 7). He analyzes Aquinas’s argument for the illicitness of killing by clerics (*STh* II-II, q. 64) and his “defense” of Zechariah’s questioning of the angel in the temple.

Porter’s straightforward prose and refusal to get bogged down in academic quibbles is refreshing. However, his innovative method of using fundamental biblical narratives as a framework for addressing contemporary issues in priestly ministry occasionally diverges from traditional theological methodologies. More specifically, he does not always read the Old Testament explicitly through the lens of the New. He acknowledges the differences between Christ’s priesthood and the priesthood of the Old Testament, relying on Aquinas to justify his extensive use of the latter. Indeed Aquinas, as he rightly points out, notes the insufficiency of the Old Testament for an adequate understanding of Christ’s priesthood, placing the accent on the dissimilarity between the two as the key to understanding the latter. The priesthood of the Law neither washed away sins nor was eternal as is the priesthood of Christ. Yet, as Porter also indicates, Aquinas did not hesitate to compare Christ’s priesthood to the priesthood of the Old Testament, asserting that the priesthood of the Law was more accurate in foreshadowing Christ’s priesthood than the priesthood of Melchizedek, insofar as the former involves blood-shedding and the latter does not (see *STh* III, a. 22, q. 6). Porter’s justification of a *ressourcement* of the Old Testament, however, should actually have been made the hermeneutical key for interpreting all the biblical passages he selects. In other words, when interpreting passages of the Old Testament, he should have viewed them primarily through the lens of Christ to preserve the desired typology he introduces at the beginning of the book. Instead, he often takes the moral message from the Old Testament and applies it immediately to contemporary priestly ministry without passing it through the prism of Jesus’s high priesthood.

Ahimelech, for example, is extolled as an “outstanding example of solidarity” (120) in his decision to die alongside his brother priests (1 Sam

22:11-19). Yet according to Old Testament typology, the full meaning of Ahimelech's death is attained only in light of the death and resurrection of Christ. Only in this way is Ahimelech's natural solidarity with his priests raised to the level of supernatural grace. To make this clearer, Porter could have utilized the council's teaching that, by humility and obedience, priests conform themselves to Christ through a deep spiritual communion of self-emptying (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 15). Without this, Ahimelech's example is applicable to any situation in which people feel connected by a common cause. By passing Ahimelech through the Christological prism of Philippians 2:7-8, his example would have been transformed and elevated to a whole new level that confers a spiritual dimension on a priest's solidarity with Jesus and, through him, with his brother priests.

Porter's book still has much to offer in the way of correcting a skewed theology of the priesthood since the Second Vatican Council. Priestly life and ministry were just as much victims of the "council of the media" as was the concept of "communion." Borrowing Benedict's language, we could say that priestly ministry has often been considered primarily as "activity for the community" rather than as "acting from faith." Porter retrieves the sacred character that ensures that priests have an indispensable role in sanctifying the Church and evangelizing the world. He concludes that the "most distinctively sacral task" of the priest is "presiding at the altar" where "Christ's sacrifice is renewed and celebrated" for the salvation of the world (352).

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