

Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis

Revising a Berullian Theology of Priesthood

by Clare McGrath-Merkle

This article explores aspects of the theology of priesthood of *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* that reflect the influence of Pierre de Bérulle. It also explores alternatives proposed by his one-time follower St. Vincent de Paul, who created his own theology of priesthood, long underestimated for its potential importance to both the Church's official theology of the priesthood and pastoral formation.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In 2024, the Synod on Synodality established Study Group no. 4 in order to explore the revision of the instrument for formation known as *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* or *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation* (henceforward *Ratio*), in light of the goal of selecting and forming seminarians in a synodal way.¹ The document, first promulgated in 1970 and amended in 1998 and 2016, incorporated teachings on the priesthood as put forth in official Church documents.²

Subsequently, in March 2026, the Group opted against a revision, choosing instead to issue a proposal for a guiding document³ for the implementation of the 2016 document “in a missionary key,” stating the reason for this halt was that the document was still in

¹ See *Pope Francis and The XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, For a Synodal Church – Communion, Participation, Mission Final Document*, November 24, 2024. See section 148, available at https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf [last accessed on 05/31/2026]: “The Assembly calls for a revision of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* in order to incorporate the requests made by the Synod. They should be translated into precise guidelines for a formation to synodality. Formation pathways should awaken in candidates their passion for the mission to all peoples (*ad gentes*)...”

² See *Congregation for the Clergy, Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis – The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, 8 December 2016, available at <https://www.clerus.va/content/dam/clerus/documenti/ratio-2026/Ratio-EN-2017-01-03.pdf> [last accessed on 05/31/2026].

³ General Secretariat of the Synod, Study Group N. 4, *The Revision of the Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis from a Synodal Missionary Perspective. Final Report*, in: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*, s. d., 1, available at https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/process/implementation/10workinggroups/final-reports/sg4/SG-4_ENG_Final-Report.pdf [last accessed on 05/31/2026].

the process of being received⁴ and “still considered valid in its fundamental principles.”⁵ It was determined that “it seemed appropriate not to touch the *Ratio* as such, but rather to draw up a preliminary document that would clearly outline the relational identity of ordained ministers in a synodal missionary Church and indicate principles and criteria for the implementation of the *Ratio Fundamental*is and the *Ratio National*is in harmony with this ecclesiological and missiological framework.”⁶ This preliminary document was then submitted to the Holy Father, General Secretariat of the Synod, and relevant Dicasteries for their consideration.

This article will make the case that the principles of *Ratio* remain in need of revision, as the Synod Fathers originally sought to accomplish. Such a revision would include a difficult task – discerning how to apply new insights to established norms related to not just formation, but the underlying theological and philosophical concepts that are at their foundation. Another key challenge would confront this effort – that of aporias, the over-extending and mixing of concepts, which have resulted in inconsistencies that neither proposed changes in praxis nor applications of ecclesiological and missiological considerations can remedy alone.

Addressing what it saw as extreme pressures on today’s priests, the General Secretariat of the Synod issued a brief video discussing the formerly planned revision of *Ratio*.⁷ It begins with a voice-over discussing the need for compassionate accompaniment for seminarians:

“For many in our societies, the figure of the priest has often lost its meaning. His natural authority is sometimes even besmirched. This often results in loneliness, suffering, depression, hyperactivity, inadequacy to deal with today’s issues, loss of motivation, and burnout, if not even suicide. It is only through a seminary training based on a pastoral style of closeness, compassion, humility, and patience that one can form priests who know the smell of the sheep and who walk with them at their own pace.”

A revised *Ratio* would need to pinpoint the fundamental theological and philosophical principles that support seminary formation’s role in restoring this sense of meaning, as well as how to form men as good “shepherds.” Fr. Timothy Costello set out the following definition of this role: “The purpose of seminary formation is to support the candidate in his desire to be transformed, psychologically and sacramentally, into a living image of Jesus Christ, head and shepherd of the Church, an idea put forth in the post-synodal document, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*.” Notably, he referred to the main problem with this effort as “the difficulty encountered in forming a stable sacerdotal identity.”⁸

This difficulty is ages old and has also been linked to past crises, which were addressed,

⁴ General Secretariat of the Synod, 4.

⁵ “Synod Office Releases First Two Final Reports of the Study Groups,” 3 March 2026, available at <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2026-03/note-of-the-general-secretariat-of-the-synod.html>. [last accessed on 05/31/2026].

⁶ General Secretariat of the Synod, 1.

⁷ See *Synod.va*, “The revision of the *Ratio Fundamental*is in a missionary synodal perspective,” YouTube, posted 12 October 2024, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzbJeHh8lC0> [last accessed on 06/12/2026].

⁸ Timothy Costello, *Forming a Priestly Identity. Anthropology of Priestly Formation in the Documents of the VIII Synod of Bishops and the Apostolic Exhortation Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Roma 2002, 42.

in turn, by such works as Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Rule*, utilized for a millennium in pastoral formation,⁹ and the adoption of the post-Reformation-era Berullian formation manual *Traité des saints ordres*, which effectively replaced the *Rule* and held sway until the Second Vatican Council.¹⁰ The Church is still faced with both the decades-long crisis of clergy child sexual abuse and cover-up that prompted Pope St. John Paul II's *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (henceforward *PDV*). It also continues to confront the crises of church unity, the paucity of priestly vocations, and attrition.¹¹

The theology of priesthood and its metaphysical foundations as found in *Ratio* were influenced by the French School of spirituality, also known as Berullism, a movement begun under Pierre de Bérulle. Fr. Bérulle founded the Congregation of the Oratory of Jesus and Mary Immaculate in 1611. His teachings on the metaphysics and spiritual theology of the priesthood formed the basis for centuries of pastoral formation.¹²

This article will also explore several key alternatives to the Berullian priesthood initiated by his long-time follower St. Vincent de Paul, who left Fr. Bérulle's orbit and came to found the Congregation of the Mission in 1625. St. Vincent created his own rich theology of priesthood through conferences and other documents.¹³

1.2 Two Men Devoted to the Reform of the Priesthood

Fr. Bérulle and St. Vincent de Paul, whose lives intersected and parted at a pivotal time in the renewal of the priesthood in post-Reformation France, proposed two very different models of priesthood in the service of the renewal of the clergy. The first, Pierre de Bérulle, became a cardinal and statesman. Fr. Bérulle's concept of an exalted priest, one in identity with Christ, created a fundamental sea change in the theology of the priesthood, lasting even until today. The second, St. Vincent de Paul, is rightly considered to have birthed a spiritual way of pastoral service to the poor.¹⁴

St. Vincent gave spiritual exercises for thousands of ordinands – through conferences, at retreats, and at seminaries, thereby having a major role in the renewal of the clergy in his era.¹⁵ While including many complex Berullian theological and metaphysical catego-

⁹ See *Gregory the Great*; George Demacopoulos, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, Crestwood, NY, 2007. See also Clare McGrath-Merkle, *Gregory the Great's Metaphor of the Physician of the Heart as a Model for Pastoral Identity*, in: *Journal of Religion and Health* 50.2 (2011) 374–388.

¹⁰ See Louis Tronson; Gilles Chaillot; Paul Cochois; Irénée Noye, *Traité des saints ordres* (1676). Comparé aux écrits authentiques de Jean-Jacques Olier (1657), Paris 1984.

¹¹ *Pope St. John Paul II*, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* of His Holiness John Paul II: To the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day, Vatican City, 1992.

¹² See Clare McGrath-Merkle, *Bérulle's Spiritual Theology of Priesthood. A Study in Speculative Mysticism and Applied Metaphysics*, Münster 2018, for all citations referencing Fr. Bérulle. The book is an in-depth treatment by chapter of each of Fr. Bérulle's metaphysical terms.

¹³ See St. Vincent's works digitized in the Vincentian Digital Books collection, available at https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentian_ebooks/ [last accessed on 05/31/2026].

¹⁴ See André Dodin, C.M., *Vincent de Paul and Charity*, New Rochelle, NY, 1993.

¹⁵ J. B. Rouanet, S.J., *Saint Vincent de Paul. Prêtre instrument de Jésus Christ*, Bourges 1960, 25. By the time of his death in 1660, St. Vincent had given retreats to some 11,000 to 14,000 ordinands to prepare them for ordina-

ries in his own teachings, he respectfully reinterpreted, in his usual self-deprecating manner, key errors and exaggerations. His body of thought has been underappreciated for its speculative character, its profundity, and its potential prophetic contribution to the Church's official theology of the priesthood today.

1.3 *Pastores Dabo Vobis*

Over fifty years ago, Jacques Maritain explored the French School's sway over the formation of priests, questioning how it was possible that so many remained under its influence despite having different educations in doctrinal matters. Maritain believed that they were formed by the French School in seminary and so were unable to perceive the Platonic defects of a vague theology that had escaped rigorous intellectual systemization and therefore any kind of critical review. The result, he noted, was the production of an ideology rather than a theology.¹⁶

The unnoticed and profound influence of these vague Platonic defects continues today, notably renewed by the promulgation and now widespread use of *PDV*, which includes a plethora of Berullian terms related to the metaphysics of the theology of the priesthood. Referenced over fifty times in *Ratio*, the influence of *PDV* cannot be underestimated. Lawrence Terrien is a former Superior General of the Society of Saint-Sulpice, which was founded by Jean-Jacques Olier, another clerical leader of the French School and the inheritor of Fr. Bérulle's system of priestly spiritual theology and identity. Writing on the school's ideals as found in recent magisterial documents, Terrien firmly established the importance of its influence on the Church's current official theology of priesthood.¹⁷ For this reason, it is critical to follow his review, which addressed three key aspects of the French School's theology of priesthood as found in *PDV*: its Trinitarian foundations; its basis in the priest's special configuration to Christ, Head of the Church; and the ideal of sacerdotal mission.¹⁸ Locating these same Berullian themes in *Ratio* and comparing them to St. Vincent's own revisions can provide a schema for corrections.

2. Configuration

2.1 *Configuration and Relation*

Fr. Bérulle proposed that the priest be considered merely a relation to Christ, a misapplication of the Scotist idea of sacerdotal character as relation, itself an idea hard to sustain,

tion. See Hugh F. O'Donnell, C.M., Vincent de Paul. His Life and Way, in: Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, Mahwah, NJ, 1995, 25.

¹⁶ Jacques Maritain, À propos de l'école française, in: Revue thomiste (1971) 474–475. Maritain's article was only translated into English in 1997: Jacques Maritain, Apropos of the French School, in: Untrammelled Approaches, trans. Bernard Doering, with a preface by Ernst R. Korn (a pseudonym for Heinz R. Schmitz), Notre Dame/IN, 1997, 424–441.

¹⁷ Lawrence Terrien, Living Sacraments. Some Reflections on Priesthood in Light of the French School and Documents of the Magisterium, in: Bulletin de Saint-Sulpice 31 (2005) 243–259.

¹⁸ Ibid., 244, nos. 12–18.

according to Michel Dupuy, after Trent had defined it.¹⁹ Fr. Bérulle further misapplied this notion of relation by insisting his priests meditate to maintain union with Christ in order to best exercise their priesthood, a not-so-subtle Donatist echo.²⁰ Dupuy noted that for Fr. Bérulle, “The priest is united to Christ more than as an instrument, he is conjoined to Him, he is not only in His hand, he is in a sense His hand itself; he is a member of Christ.”²¹ The basis of the superiority of the sacerdotal state was, as Maritain noted, that “the sacerdotal anointing emanates from that of Jesus, who (and this is the thesis dearest to Fr. Bérulle) is a priest because of and as a direct consequence of the hypostatic union.”²²

Gérard Yelle analyzed the history of the debates surrounding the core error underlying Fr. Bérulle’s system: the notion of the holiness of Christ, in which Christ’s human nature is considered to have been made holy by the grace of union with the Word – a mistaken understanding of the communication of idioms. This error served as the basis for the holiness and sacerdotal power of Fr. Bérulle’s priest.

According to Giuseppe Toscani, St. Vincent did not treat “the ontology of the ‘grace of union’ in Christ himself. On the contrary, he lays stress on the dynamic aspect which aims at bringing [an analogue of] that union in the course of the disciple’s life.”²³

André Hayen signaled already in 1953 the difficulty with the concept of sacerdotal relation, when he asked a question about the possible influence of the differing ideas of Duns Scotus and Aquinas on the formation of priests.²⁴ Hayen gave the example of whether it was legitimate for a prince to baptize a child against the wishes of the parents. Aquinas answered in the negative, while Scotus answered in the affirmative, based on a univocal order of power and authority.²⁵

¹⁹ See McGrath-Merkle, *Bérulle’s Spiritual Theology* (see fn. 12), 239, citing Michel Dupuy; *Pierre de Bérulle, Bérulle et le sacerdoce. Étude historique et doctrinale*, Paris 1969, 188, esp. footnote 3. See texts related to the Oratory within the text: *OR* 15, no. 2, 290–291; *OR* 18, no. 2, 297 and 192–193.

²⁰ See McGrath-Merkle, *Bérulle’s Spiritual Theology of Priesthood* (see fn. 12), ch. 17.

²¹ Dupuy; *Bérulle, Bérulle et le sacerdoce* (see fn. 19), 195n1. See *Oeuvres de piété*, 87, no. 2, quoted in Maritain, *Apropos of the French School* (see fn. 16), 428n10. Maritain clarified that priests are not members of Christ in the sense that Christians are members of the Mystical Body but “members of His divine Person itself.”

²² Maritain, *Apropos of the French School* (see fn. 16), 428. See also G. Yelle, *Le mystère de la sainteté du Christ selon le cardinal Pierre de Bérulle*, Montréal 1938.

²³ Giuseppe Toscani, *The Mystique of the Poor*, with an introduction by Luigi Mezzadri, trans. Myles Reardon, Malang (Indonesia) 2012, 52–53, citing Vincent de Paul, *Vincent de Paul and Pierre Coste C.M.*, Correspondance, entretiens, documents, volume 11, 74, Paris 1923. Note: St. Vincent de Paul is cited throughout via either Correspondance, entretiens, documents, ed. Pierre Coste, 14 vols., Paris 1920–1925, or Correspondence, Conferences, Documents, 14 vols., New York 1985–2014. All are available at <https://via.library.depaul.edu/lcd/> [last accessed on 20/07/2026].

²⁴ André Hayen, *Deux théologiens. Jean Duns Scot et Thomas d’Aquin*, in: *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, 3rd ser., 51.30 (1953), esp. 289.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 269. See John Duns Scotus, *Opera omnia*, vol. 8, ed. Luke Wadding, Lyon 1639, 275–276, 1.4.4.9, nos. 1–2. Aquinas did not place character in the essence of the soul but in a power or faculty of the soul.

2.2 Configuration and Conformity

Ratio defines configuration, quoting the *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, as follows: “It can therefore be said that the configuration to Christ through sacramental consecration defines the priest within the People of God, making him participate in his own way in the sanctifying, magisterial and pastoral power of Jesus Christ himself, Head and Pastor of the Church.”²⁶ To clarify the meaning of configuration, it is helpful to explore a distinction that has been typically made between three kinds of likeness in the soul: that associated with sacramental character, which is legal and official; that of the natural image and likeness of God; and that of the likeness produced by grace, faith, hope, and charity.²⁷ The conferral of Holy Orders involves the first kind, a special configuration to Christ, as well as an added grace associated with priesthood as a modality of habitual grace and calling for actual graces for the priest’s growth in holiness, related to the third likeness. In preparation for ordination, men go through years of seminary training to become conformed to Christ in the way of the third, moral likeness, which will be for them a lifelong endeavor aided by this grace of priesthood. The challenge arises when the first and third likenesses become conflated.

Despite its accurate definition of configuration, *Ratio* also uses the term “configuration” to mean “conformity,” seeming to conflate the first and third likenesses, the ontological and the moral. Configuration is presented, for example, as a *continuous* effort: “Hence every priest should always feel that he is a disciple on a journey, constantly needing an integrated formation, understood as a continuous configuration to Christ.”²⁸ This idea is repeated: “The priest not only ‘learns to know Christ’ but, under the action of the Holy Spirit, he finds himself within a process of gradual and continuous configuration to Him, in his being and his acting, which constantly challenges the person to inner growth.”²⁹

Arguably, the rhetoric found in *Ratio* could be interpreted as echoing an essentialist union with Christ rather than a moral union because it seems to be following a Scotist notion of character as a relation, one that must be held in place by the will.

2.3 Instrumentality

Following Francisco Suarez and in response to Reformers’ criticism of the Mass as a repeated sacrifice, Fr. Bérulle emphasized the idea of conjoint instrumentality, in opposition to the nonconjoint instrumentality held by Aquinas. Fr. Bérulle held to a miscon-

²⁶ *Congregation for the Clergy*, *Ratio* (see fn. 2), 32, n. 98, quoting *Congregation for the Clergy*, *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 11 February 2013, no. 8.

²⁷ Michael James Ryan, *Character* (in *Catholic Theology*), in: *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, New York 1908, 2, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03586a.htm> [last accessed on 05/31/2026].

²⁸ *Congregation for the Clergy*, *Ratio* (see fn. 2), 4, no. 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 35, no. 80.

strued exemplar causality in which the priest participates in the idea of the Word or Son as resemblance. In this schema, Christ acts as proximate cause at all times.³⁰

St. Vincent, following Bérulle in the notion of conjoint instrumentality, chose to emphasize a moral instrumentality apart from sacramental instrumentality.³¹ Importantly, Toscani viewed exemplarity as presented by St. Vincent as based on love, which “in Christ, takes on limitless meaning and installs it in us so as to become ‘the life of our life,’ the soul of our soul.”³²

The question that arises in *Ratio* is whether its depiction of how the priest acts in relation to Christ follows a Thomistic understanding or whether it has been elided by an over-identification of the priest with Christ and with His authority.

2.4 Configuration to Christ the Head

According to Terrien, the idea of the priest’s configuration to Christ as Head is still under debate, although, he conceded, it is the current official position of the Church.³³ Luther held that there was an “invisible Church” in opposition to what he saw as the external, corrupt organization of the Catholic Church.³⁴ The Fathers of the Council of Trent responded by insisting on the visible aspects of the Church, including a visible priesthood.³⁵ Fr. Bérulle took a step further, focusing on Christ as invisible Head with the priest as visible head.³⁶ Terrien noted, without detail, that Pope St. John Paul II tried to build in correctives to *PDV*, as he saw the limitations of the notion of the priest as configured to Christ the Head.³⁷

³⁰ See McGrath-Merkle, Bérulle’s Spiritual Theology (see fn. 12), ch. 14. As Lawrence Feingold explained, sacramental signs are separated and extrinsic instruments of God the Son. While Christ’s Sacred Humanity is “conjoined,” that is, joined to His divinity through the hypostatic union, the priest is a living instrument of Christ, a “separated” instrument, not one that is conjoined. See Lawrence Feingold, *The Eucharist. Mystery of Presence, Sacrifice, and Communion*, Steubenville, OH, 2018, 189.

³¹ See Jacques Delarue, *The Missionary Ideal of the Priesthood according to Saint Vincent de Paul*, ed. Hugh O’Donnell, trans. Joseph Lilly, DePaul University 2021, 42. As Delarue noted: “The priest is an instrument, but an instrument aimed at action so as to bring to happy issue the work to which he is applied, positively and concretely.” Delarue’s study is an important one for its summary of the many similarities and differences between the thought of St. Vincent and Fr. Bérulle. The updated foreword by Hugh O’Donnell is also important in revealing his thoughts on their differences.

³² Toscani, *The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 58, citing St. Vincent, *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondance*, vol. 6, 562; vol. 7, 241.

³³ Terrien, *Living Sacraments* (see fn. 17), 257–258.

³⁴ Mark A. Noll, Martin Luther and the Concept of a ‘True’ Church, in: *Evangelical Quarterly* 50.2 (Apr.–June 1978) 79–85, esp. 81. See *Martin Luther, Sermon. Von der heiligen christlichen Kirche* (1531), in: D. Martin Luthers staatliche Schriften, St. Louis 1880–1910, vol. 14, 319.

³⁵ *Council of Trent* (1545–1563), session 23, ch. 1, in: Heinrich Denzinger; Peter Hünermann; Helmut Hoping, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum = Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen*, Freiburg 2014, 1563.

³⁶ Dupuy; Bérulle, Bérulle et le sacerdoce (see fn. 19), 426, quoting OR 83. See *Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, December 7, 1965 [*Presbyterorum Ordinis*], Washington, DC, 1965, no. 2.

³⁷ Terrien, *Living Sacraments* (see fn. 17), 257–258.

In this one example, the challenge of aporias is evidenced. The questions to address include how the priest is like Christ the Head and what the limits of this metaphor are in terms of delineating the authority of individual priests.

3. Conformity

3.1 Non-Distinct Union and Conformity to Christ as Priest

Ratio echoes a Pauline phrase to indicate the importance to priestly identity of imitation of and union with Christ: “becoming increasingly like unto Christ, the priest is – thanks to Him, and to himself – a coworker in the salvation of his brethren: it is no longer he who loves and exists, but Christ in him (cf. Gal 2:20).”³⁸ This Pauline phrase was taken up by both Fr. Bérulle and St. Vincent and is also found in contemporary formation documents. Its misinterpretation can lead to a further misunderstanding of priestly identity.

Joseph de Guibert helped to clarify what this phrase means in terms of the theology of the spiritual life. He noted that union with Christ, the result of sanctifying grace and obtained at baptism, can grow to a point where one can have an identification with Christ that is profound. The soul can ‘put on Christ,’ as Guibert noted, by being more conformed to Him. This identification refers to an affective union, rather than an essential one.³⁹ This union and identification refers to growth in holiness and is a matter of degree, not kind.

In the priesthood’s specific call to holiness, *PDV* asserts that conformity to Christ as Priest is at issue: “the spiritual life of the priest is marked, molded, and characterized by the ways of thinking and acting proper to Jesus Christ, head and shepherd of the Church.”⁴⁰ In this effort at conformity, Terrien noted, *PDV* enunciated a central French School ideal and practice, that “cultivating a constant awareness or consciousness of one’s configuration to Christ will promote responsiveness to the call to holiness.”⁴¹

Ratio follows this line of thinking:

“This configuration demands that the seminarian enter profoundly into the contemplation of the person of Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of the Father, sent as Shepherd of the People of

³⁸ Ibid., 32, n. 98, quoting *Congregation for the Clergy*, Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests (see fn. 26), n. 8.

³⁹ Joseph de Guibert, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, New York 1953, 82–83.

⁴⁰ Pope St. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (see fn. 11), no. 21.

⁴¹ Terrien, *Living Sacraments* (see fn. 17), 249. See Pope St. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (see fn. 11), no. 25.: “The bond with Jesus Christ assured by consecration and configuration to him in the sacrament of orders gives rise to and requires in the priest the further bond which comes from his ‘intention,’ that is, from a conscious and free choice to do in his ministerial activities what the Church intends to do. This bond tends by its very nature to become as extensive and profound as possible, affecting one’s way of thinking, feeling and life itself: in other words, creating a series of moral and spiritual ‘dispositions’ which correspond to the ministerial actions performed by the priest.” See also no. 57: “It is a question of a type of formation meant not only to ensure scientific, pastoral competence and practical skill, but also and especially a way of being in communion with the very sentiments and behavior of Christ the good shepherd...”

God. It will make the relationship with Christ more intimate and personal and, at the same time, will lead to an awareness and an assumption of priestly identity.”⁴²

The question is what exactly does this entrance into contemplation of Christ demand. How can men in formation grow in their relationship with Christ through this kind of prayer, wherein their inner freedom and their humanity are respected? Hans Urs von Balthasar provided a caution in this regard:

“Thus this philosophy of spirit also lacks the decisive experience of reality: the shock of a head-on encounter with *another* ego, a dialogue between an I and a Thou which is radically open to its own vulnerable depths of being. This shock was missing in Fr. Bérulle, Condren and Fénelon, which is why their elevated spirituality retains something spectrally unreal, journeying in a world of ideas without a basis in Nature [...]”⁴³

The question becomes how to conquer an overemphasis on any technology of the priestly self that would turn men in training inward to an exclusive focus on pursuing sanctity, a proximate goal of the spiritual life, rather than that of the glory of God, its primary goal. As *Ratio* urges, the seminarian is “to make his way, in Christ, towards the Father and towards others, embracing the call to priesthood, dedicating himself to work with the Holy Spirit, to achieve a serene and creative interior synthesis between strength and weakness.”⁴⁴

3.2 Conformity to Christ’s Interior Life

Fr. Bérulle wanted priests to live the grace of priesthood by obtaining the same dispositions as Christ, to pay homage to Christ’s priesthood, which was to be accomplished through what he called “adherence.” Adherence, for Fr. Bérulle, required priests to make a constant effort to conform their interior life to the interior life of Jesus, aided by the practice of making mental elevations, placing themselves in a kind of mystical servitude, “annihilating” their wills, and emptying themselves so that, joined to Christ, Christ could act in them.

St. Vincent also emphasized that love, esteem, and adoration of God were fundamental. That said, whereas for Fr. Bérulle charity took the form of adoration – a religious attitude – the emphasis for St. Vincent was instead on charity itself as a means to witness to God.⁴⁵ While Fr. Bérulle emphasized the “state” of the Incarnate Word as a model for believers to be in union with God, like Christ’s union with the Father, St. Vincent’s treatment of the states of Christ focused on love as the connection between Christ and believers.⁴⁶

⁴² *Congregation for the Clergy*, *Ratio* (see fn. 2), 31, no. 68.

⁴³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 5, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, transl. and edited by John K. Riches and Brian McNeil, Edinburgh 1991, 481.

⁴⁴ *Congregation for the Clergy*, *Ratio* (see fn. 2), 17, no. 29.

⁴⁵ Jacques Delarue, *The Missionary Ideal of the Priesthood* (see fn. 31), 46–49.

⁴⁶ Toscani, *The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 52–53, citing *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 11, 74. See also McGrath-Merkle, *Bérulle’s Spiritual Theology* (see fn. 12), ch. 13.

As Hugh O'Donnell importantly wrote, "He [St. Vincent] had been led beyond Bérulle's elevations to the absolute conviction of God's presence in time, history, events, and people. His spiritual way was radically incarnational, historical, existential. 'God is here' [...]." ⁴⁷ This was not a rejection of the transcendence of God or of the holiness required of priests, but a reorientation from a preoccupation with the self to a concern for seeking God's will amid the needs of others. ⁴⁸

As Luigi Mezzadri wrote, while Fr. Bérulle founded his company to pay homage to the priesthood of Christ, St. Vincent founded his to pay homage to the needs of Christ as mystically seen in the poor. For St. Vincent, the "encounter with the poor becomes the memory of Jesus." ⁴⁹ This fundamental difference in orientation reflected St. Vincent's understanding of the Thomistic notion of perfection as necessarily including charity toward both God and others.

This encounter was not one of drudgery, according to Toscani. St. Vincent's company had a goal of providing not simply the justice demanded of charity but joy. Charity for St. Vincent and his men was characterized by the joy of friendship and was gentle, sweet, and tender. ⁵⁰

According to Toscani, it was the awareness of the terrible circumstances of the poor that actually "plunges him [St. Vincent] into adoration, that is to say, into action for the Love of Christ [...]. He is conscious of being sacrificed. A prisoner forever of the Love of Christ, his 'consent' corresponds to the seal of the Spirit. He has no need of servitude such as his master Bérulle required; a chain that can never be undone binds him definitively." ⁵¹ In fact, Toscani saw St. Vincent as actually being and working in a state of ecstasy. ⁵²

3.3 Conformity to Christ as Savior

Fr. Bérulle's acceptance and promulgation of the ideas of the priest as a mediator of Redemption (rather than salvation) and one in the order of being were distinctions to be reserved for Christ alone. In this error, Fr. Bérulle was responding to Reformation critiques of the role of the priest as sacrificer in what was seen as a repeated sacrifice of the Cross. ⁵³

In contradistinction, St. Vincent's focus on charity and poverty in the imitation of Christ had its basis in Christ as Exemplum and in His mission as sole Redeemer and Sav-

⁴⁷ Hugh O'Donnell, *Vincent de Paul: His Life and Way*, (see fn. 15), 30.

⁴⁸ See *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 12, 132, quoted in O'Donnell, *Vincent de Paul* (see fn. 15), 32.

⁴⁹ Luigi Mezzadri, C.M., *Jésus-Christ, figure du Prêtre-Missionnaire*, dans l'oeuvre de Monsieur Vincent, in: *Vincentiana* 30.3 (1986) 332, available at <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol30/iss3/2> [last accessed on 05/31/2026].

⁵⁰ Toscani, *The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 129, citing *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 9, 14–26, 411–428.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 106, citing *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 9, 623–643; vol. 12, 107–111; vol. 11, 133–137; and vol. 12, 139.

⁵² Toscani, *The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 138.

⁵³ See McGrath-Merkle, *Bérulle's Spiritual Theology* (see fn. 12), ch. 11.

ior. J. B. Rouanet compared the thoughts of Fr. Bérulle and Jean-Jacques Olier, the major inheritor of Fr. Bérulle's ideals, to that of St. Vincent:

"In contrast with Bérulle and Olier, whose thinking always returns to the eternal states of the Incarnate Word, Vincent insists above all on the 'redemptive' aspect of the Incarnation and the priesthood. For him, Jesus is above all the 'Redeemer at work,' the 'Savior.' It is under this latter title that he spontaneously invokes him in his conferences. Because he is fundamentally a 'missionary,' it is not the virtue of religion that is at the forefront of his conception of the priesthood, but charity, the zeal of the Good Shepherd."⁵⁴

St. Vincent saw his men as following Christ, giving themselves to Christ so that He would continue to save others through their work:

"Whoever says *Missioner*, says a man called by God to save souls; for our aim is to work at their salvation, in imitation of Our Lord, who is the only true Redeemer and who fulfilled perfectly this amiable name of Jesus, that is, *Savior* . . .

[...] By His example, He taught us all the virtues proper to the function of Savior."⁵⁵

Ratio only briefly references salvation, quoting the *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*: "[...] each priest is called to have a missionary spirit, that is to say a truly 'catholic' spirit, which, beginning from Christ, reaches out to all so that 'they may be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth' (1Tm 2:4)."⁵⁶

A restoration of the ancient icon and understanding of Christ as sole Redeemer and Savior and the image of priests as workers in the vineyard could do much to release the psychological pressures created by Berullian inflations.

3.4 Conformity to Christ in Service to the Poor

While Fr. Bérulle was seeking to restore the dignity of the priesthood by forging a rhetoric of applied metaphysics to reflect closer ties between the priest and Christ, St. Vincent looked to nurture priestly identities through closer ties between his men and the poor, with an emphasis on pastoral charity as central to conformity to Christ:

"In this vocation, we're very much in conformity with Our Lord Jesus Christ, who seems to have made His principal aim, in coming into the world, to assist poor people and to take care of them [...]."⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Rouanet, Saint Vincent de Paul (see fn. 15), 26. See also Delarue, The Missionary Ideal of the Priesthood (see fn. 31), 44: "The mission of the priest according to St. Vincent de Paul, can be summed up in these words: to do what Jesus did and to do it in the manner in which He did it. If it is true that the priest is the instrument which Jesus uses to prolong His redemptive mission inaugurated so many centuries ago, the priest can discharge his role in no better way than by striving to reproduce the very mission of Jesus Christ as the gospel depicts it for us, in other words, by striving to imitate Jesus the Savior and Jesus the Missionary."

⁵⁵ Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondence (see fn. 23), vol. 11, 62.

⁵⁶ Congregation for the Clergy, Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests (see fn. 26), no. 16.

⁵⁷ "He sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor." Lk 4:18-19. Is 61:1 (NAB).

“And if we ask Our Lord, ‘What did you come to do on earth?’ ‘To assist the poor.’ ‘Anything else?’ ‘To assist the poor,’ etc.”⁵⁸

Importantly, St. Vincent chose to look at the poor as examples of conformity themselves: “Let there be no discrimination; let the poor one be as dear to us as the rich one, and even more so, since he’s in greater conformity with the life Jesus Christ led on earth.”⁵⁹

Ratio also treats conformity to Christ in terms of embracing poverty, as well as the poor.⁶⁰ This is a firm basis to build upon in reorienting pastoral identity across cultures, wherein so many suffer not just from forms of obvious material poverty, but from other forms of poverty, such as psychological and spiritual poverty, and the lack of social acceptance, support, freedom, and dignity.

A return to a Thomistic understanding of being as act can restore the spirituality of men in formation from that of an effort at perfectionism to one of service.

3.5 Forming Pastoral Identities

Fr. Bérulle sought to restore the priesthood through the training of more educated men, even noblemen, to be associated together as secular priests, members of a society not bound by religious vows but in the spirit of the evangelical counsels. Theirs was to be a society made by the divine Persons, with no other tie than that of charity, that is, the Holy Spirit.⁶¹

St. Vincent’s Congregation of the Mission was also not a religious order, but a company of men who took vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability.⁶² He also wanted his missionaries to see themselves as not only materially poor but also lacking any education or talents themselves.⁶³

Today, formators face serious obstacles in attempting to form men who lack basic education and even religious training.⁶⁴ Hard questions present themselves: Is the celibate priesthood limiting the pool of qualified candidates? Do we need educated priests? Might a return to simplex priests be advisable during the current crisis?

Other, more fundamental questions arise. The word “seminary” derives from the Latin *seminarium*, meaning “nursery.” Should seminaries’ role be to attempt to turn psychosocially immature boys into mature adults? Should formators impose a priestly identity over an immature identity? Is adding more time in the cloistered seminary environment

⁵⁸ *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondence* (see fn. 23), vol. 11, 98.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 11, 15.

⁶⁰ *Congregation for the Clergy, Ratio* (see fn. 2), 48, no. 111: “Seminarians should cultivate the spirit of poverty in practical ways.”

⁶¹ McGrath-Merkle, Bérulle’s Spiritual Theology (see fn. 12), 94, citing Dupuy; Bérulle, Bérulle et le sacerdoce (see fn. 19), OR 15, no. 1, 289.

⁶² *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondence* (see fn. 23), vol. 12, 297–324.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, vol. 12, 228.

⁶⁴ See Etienne Huard, Changes to College Priestly Formation. A Defense, in: Homiletic and Pastoral Review (24 May 2024), available at <https://www.hprweb.com/2024/05/changes-to-college-priestly-formation-a-defense/>.

good for character formation and psychosexual maturity?⁶⁵ Do new attempts to return to the practice of having high-school and college-aged men enter seminary in order to better prepare them for holy lives represent a good trend?

As one of the first formators to follow Trent's mandate to create seminaries, and ones that would educate boys from the age of twelve, St. Vincent had something to say about the education of young seminarians. His conclusion:

"The Council's ruling is to be respected as coming from the Holy Spirit. Experience, shows nevertheless that the manner of carrying it out with regard to the age of the seminarians has not been successful in Italy or in France. Some left before the time, others had no inclination for the clerical life, others went to Communities, and still others fled the places to which they were in obligation bound by their training, preferring to seek their fortune elsewhere [...] It is quite another story to take them from twenty to twenty-five years of age. We have twenty-two students in our Bons-Enfants Seminary. Among them only three or four seem passable [...]."⁶⁶

3.6 Moral Instrumentality and Charity

St. Vincent emphasized a moral union with Christ for both priests and laity, rather than an essentialist one. Exploring further the theme of charity, St. Vincent chose to emphasize the idea of his priests, specifically, as instruments of charity:

"We've been chosen by God as instruments of His immense, paternal charity, which is intended to be established and to expand in souls [...].

So, our vocation is to go [...] all over the world; and do what? To set people's hearts on fire, to do what the Son of God did. He came to set the world on fire in order to inflame it with His love. He came to bring fire to the earth to inflame it with His love."⁶⁷

As St. Vincent counseled Jean Martin, a priest and superior of the Missioners, he was to consider himself but a "poor instrument which, if it were not in the hand of such an excellent Craftsman, would spoil everything."⁶⁸

Ratio, quoting Pope Francis, importantly refers to the priest as an instrument of the mercy of God: "The priest is, therefore, called to form himself so that his heart and his life are conformed to the Lord Jesus, in this way becoming a sign of the love God has for each person. By being intimately united to Christ, he will be able to preach the Gospel and become an instrument of the mercy of God."⁶⁹

⁶⁵ See Clare McGrath-Merkle, Generativity and the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Response to the Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests, in: *Journal of Religion and Health* 49.1 (2010) 73–86. This article discusses the body of Eriksonian research regarding seminary-formation-related psycho-social maladaptions.

⁶⁶ Delarue, *The Missionary Ideal* (see fn. 31), 15, quoting St. Vincent, *Vincent de Paul*; Coste, *Correspondence* (see fn. 23), vol. 2, 505–506.

⁶⁷ *Vincent de Paul*; Coste, *Correspondence* (see fn. 23), vol. 12, 214–215, also quoted in Delarue, *The Missionary Ideal* (see fn. 31), 49.

⁶⁸ St. Vincent, *Vincent de Paul*; Coste, *Correspondence* (see fn. 23), vol. 7, 291, also quoted in Delarue, *The Missionary Ideal* (see fn. 31), 37.

⁶⁹ *Congregation for the Clergy*, *Ratio* (see fn. 2), 21, no. 40, citing Pope Francis, Address to the Rectors and Students of the Pontifical Colleges and Residences of Rome (12 May 2014), in: *L'Osservatore Romano* 108 (14 May

3.7 The Spirit of Charity and Effective Love

The Berullian priesthood is characterized by the notion of the priest as a victim with Christ, an “immolated victim” himself.⁷⁰ Mezzadri noted, importantly, that St. Vincent seemed to avoid an accent on victimhood in insisting that the offering of Christ was love. This marked a decided return to a Thomistic understanding of Christ’s sacrifice as love:⁷¹

“O my Savior, what love did You not show for Your Father! Could there have been any greater love, my dear confreres, than to annihilate himself for Him? For when Saint Paul speaks of the birth of the Son of God on earth, he says that He annihilated himself. Could He show any greater love in that than by dying through love in the way He died? O love of my Savior! O love!”⁷²

For St. Vincent, according to Toscani, “All dimensions of the state of sacrifice come together in ‘compassion.’”⁷³ This sacrifice involves conformity to Christ, capable of practicing charity.⁷⁴

As noted, Fr. Bérulle focused on the state of the priesthood as emanating from Christ Himself. St. Vincent used the language of states as well and held that his men were to be in a “state of charity,” in which Christ is glorified.⁷⁵ St. Vincent considered his men to be doing the greatest works of Christ by focusing on the evangelization of the poor: “it’s such a lofty ministry to evangelize poor persons, which is, par excellence, the work of the Son of God, and we’ve been included in it as instruments by which the Son of God continues to do from heaven what He did on earth.”⁷⁶ This pastoral charity amounts to an identification with those St. Vincent calls our neighbors, not a bending down in condescension.⁷⁷ However, as Toscani wrote, the so-called “preferential option for the poor” is “related too often, and by preference, to sociological issues.”⁷⁸ For St. Vincent, rather, it was supernatural charity, the charity of Christ Himself.⁷⁹

Importantly, PDV noted, “The internal principle, the virtue which animates and guides the spiritual life of the priest inasmuch as he is configured to Christ the Head and Shepherd, is pastoral charity, as a participation in Jesus Christ’s own pastoral charity, a *gift*

2014) 5; cf. also *Pope Francis*, General Audience, 26 March 2014, in: *L’Osservatore Romano* 70 (27 March 2014) 8; Address to the Priests of the Diocese of Rome (6 March 2014), in: *L’Osservatore Romano* 54 (7 March 2014) 8.

⁷⁰ OR 6, no. 4, 277, quoted in *Dupuy; Bérulle, Bérulle et le sacerdoce* (see fn. 19), 132.

⁷¹ See *Thomas Aquinas*, S.th. III, q. 48, a. 3 co. (The *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd ed., London 1920).

⁷² Mezzadri, *Jésus-Christ* (see fn. 49), 336, quoting St. Vincent, *Vincent de Paul; Coste*, *Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 12, 94 in the English edition.

⁷³ Toscani, *The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 85. See *Vincent de Paul; Coste*, *Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 11, 215–222.

⁷⁴ Toscani, *The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 85. See *Vincent de Paul; Coste*, *Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 12, 244–252.

⁷⁵ Mezzadri, *Jésus-Christ* (see fn. 49), 349, quoting St. Vincent, *Vincent de Paul; Coste*, *Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 12, 328; 224 in the English edition.

⁷⁶ Quoting St. Vincent, *Vincent de Paul; Coste*, *Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 12, 71–72.

⁷⁷ *Vincent de Paul; Coste*, *Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 11, 308.

⁷⁸ Toscani, *The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 121.

⁷⁹ Rouanet, *Saint Vincent de Paul* (see fn. 15), 46.

freely bestowed by the Holy Spirit and likewise a *task* and a *call* which demand a free and committed response on the part of the priest.”⁸⁰

St. Vincent’s return to the Thomistic understanding of Christ’s offering of Himself as one of love was to be the foundation of his priests’ pastoral charity. An expanded treatment of pastoral charity as the core of priestly identity could aid men in turning away from popular inordinate sacrificial pieties and practices that can turn their attention away from being present to others, and it could aid them in their training to “go out of themselves.” It is in seeking to love and serve others that crosses will come.

4. Trinity, Mission, and the Kingdom

4.1 Trinitarian Immersion

In responding to the Protestant reformers’ rejection of apostolic succession and hierarchical authority, Fr. Bérulle countered with the idea of sacerdotal mission based on the Trinitarian processions, erroneously citing St. Augustine as holding procession and mission as synonymous.⁸¹ In doing so, Fr. Bérulle embraced a centuries-long strain of emanationism and used this conflation to extend the notion of Trinitarian relations to the relation between Christ and priests.

For St. Vincent, Toscani noted, “in the ‘service of the poor’ the processions and missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit are expressed historically in the most emphatic way to bring about the communion of every human being with God experienced through service to the poor.”⁸² St. Vincent emphasized the love between the three Persons as the impetus for his men to love the poorest of the poor. Toscani importantly summarized the architectonic of St. Vincent’s pastoral project, “Charity is the Trinity of Persons who love one another and communicate themselves as infinite amiability. Charity becomes Church and, in the Church, the Kingdom of God: grace, life, law, activity, salvation, Paradise. Nothing else has meaning or value.”⁸³

As O’Donnell noted, St. Vincent transformed Fr. Bérulle’s spirituality into an apostolic spirituality.⁸⁴ “Vocation and mission being an exceptional participation in the procession of the Holy Spirit, they require also the fruits that St. Vincent sums up in the word ‘unity.’ Put otherwise, they can be included in ‘belonging to’ the Kingdom of God.”⁸⁵ In this, St.

⁸⁰ Pope St. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (see fn. 11), no. 23.

⁸¹ McGrath-Merkle, Bérulle’s Spiritual Theology (see fn. 12), 152n4 and 210–211, citing *Discours de controverse, Œuvres complètes de Bérulle, cardinal de l’Église Romaine, fondateur et premier supérieur de l’Oratoire*, Paris 1856, 673. Also treated in André Rétif, *Trinité et mission d’après Bérulle*, in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 13 (1957) 3.

⁸² Toscani, *The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 104, citing *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 9, 128–142; vol. 11, 364–365.

⁸³ Toscani, *The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 132.

⁸⁴ O’Donnell, *Vincent de Paul* (see fn. 15), 13. See also Toscani, *The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 107, citing *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 10, 331–347; vol. 12, 100.

⁸⁵ Toscani, *The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 107, citing *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 10, 331–347; vol. 12, 100; vol. 12, 270.

Vincent turned from a Berullian Trinitarian emanationist spirituality, based on a misapplied exemplarist causality, to an apostolic spirituality emphasizing final causality and the goal of establishment of the Kingdom.

PDV noted that all mission is an extension of the mission of the Son and the Spirit in the world. The Trinity is described as the source of priestly identity in terms of both *perichoresis* and mission, giving the priest a “relational” identity with a strong sense of mission.⁸⁶

Ratio, in turn, states that conformity to Christ requires immersion in the mystery of the Trinity.⁸⁷

Clarifying the statements in both documents could dispel any hints of emanationism, essentialist union, willed immensity, or a special kind of indwelling reserved to priests.

4.2 The Holy Spirit

Fr. Bérulle proposed that just as the Word’s union with the Humanity made it disposed to purchase or liberate humankind, so too, in the priest, a human person is united to the Holy Spirit, making the priest disposed to sanctify humankind.⁸⁸ Tied to God by the spirit of charity, Fr. Bérulle asserted that his men had a new tie with the Spirit of Jesus through a new grace that God wanted to give the Church by means of their taking a vow of servitude to Jesus.⁸⁹ While Fr. Bérulle wanted them to focus on honoring the mysteries of Christ through devotion, however, St. Vincent emphasized carrying out actions in the spirit of Jesus Christ.⁹⁰ As Toscani wrote, the Spirit “becomes the Spirit of perfect Charity, which animates Jesus Christ in his relationships with his Father and with humankind.”⁹¹

Ratio does link the action of the Holy Spirit with growth in pastoral charity, as follows: “the desire to dedicate his life generously to pastoral charity will gradually emerge and be strengthened in the heart of the seminarian, molded by the action of the Holy Spirit.”⁹²

Expanding on the theme of the role of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of pastoral charity in the life of ministry could provide men in training with a better understanding of authentic priestly spirituality, that is, life in the Spirit.

⁸⁶ Terrien, *Living Sacraments* (see fn. 17), 244–245. See Pope St. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (see fn. 11), no. 12.

⁸⁷ *Congregation for the Clergy*, *Ratio* (see fn. 2), 19, no. 35: “Priests, who are configured to Christ, Head and Shepherd, Servant and Spouse, participate in his one priesthood and saving mission as co-workers with the Bishops. In this way they are visible signs of the merciful love of the Father in the Church and in the world. These characteristics of the person of Christ help us to understand better the ministerial priesthood in the Church. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they inspire and guide the formation of seminarians, so that they can be conformed to Christ by their immersion in the mystery of the Trinity.”

⁸⁸ Dupuy, *Bérulle, Bérulle et le sacerdoce* (see fn. 19), 120, *OR* 22, no. 4, 316–317. See 317m wherein Dupuy noted the similarity of this theology with that of Petau.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 248, citing *OR* 18, no. 2, 297.

⁹⁰ Pierre Deffrennes, *La vocation de Saint Vincent de Paul* (1932), 7, https://via.library.depaul.edu/vdpstd_assorted/6.

⁹¹ Toscani, *The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 54, citing St. Vincent, *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondance* (see fn. 23), vol. 12, 108.

⁹² *Congregation for the Clergy*, *Ratio* (see fn. 2), no. 108.

4.3 For the Coming of the Kingdom

St. Vincent, influenced by Fr. Bérulle's piety and concern for the establishment of the Kingdom, urged his men on to the same, "So let's seek, Messieurs, and what? Let's seek the glory of God, the reign of Jesus Christ." [...] "After that word 'seek' comes 'first,' that is, seek the kingdom of God before all else."⁹³ As Toscani wrote, "In Communion with the Poor, the company has the role of awakening in the church the eschatological dimension of the Kingdom of God."⁹⁴ Importantly, St. Vincent made service to the coming of the Kingdom the main aspect of his theology of priesthood.⁹⁵ As St. Vincent urged, "So then, let's have this constant desire that the kingdom of God may be extended, and the zeal to work with all our might at it so that, having obtained the kingdom of God on earth, we may go to enjoy it in heaven. Let's keep this lamp always lit in our hearts."⁹⁶

St. Vincent de Paul held a devotion to St. Vincent Ferrer, who had prophesied that an order of priests would one day arise who, by their zeal, would set the whole world on fire. St. Vincent hoped his men would realize that prophecy or be the precursors of those who would.⁹⁷

5. Healing Priesthood

To understand the scope of St. Vincent's potential contribution to a renewal of the Church's current official theology of the priesthood and to the formation of seminarians, this article includes a final look into additional foundational aspects of his Thomistic synthesis.

St. Vincent was an ardent opponent of Jansenist spirituality, which shared characteristics with Fr. Bérulle's Oratorians. Krumenacker wrote on some of these shared characteristics, including, a strict moral rigorism; a pessimistic anthropology; and the importance of contrition.⁹⁸ Fr. Bérulle applied the complex essentialist metaphysics outlined here to enforce a distorted asceticism, psychologizing metaphysical categories. St. Vincent answered this transfer of categories with an emphasis on charity, rather than perfection.

St. Vincent was an educated Thomist, having earned both a bachelor's degree in sacred theology from the University of Toulouse, a Thomistic center, (which entitled him to teach Book II of Lombard's *Sentences*), as well as a licentiate of canon law from the University of Paris.⁹⁹ All this, despite his protestations of having the equivalent of a high

⁹³ *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondence* (see fn. 23), vol. 12, 111.

⁹⁴ *Toscani, The Mystique* (see fn. 23), 121.

⁹⁵ See *Rouanet, Saint Vincent de Paul* (see fn. 15), 43.

⁹⁶ Quoting St. Vincent, *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondence* (see fn. 23), vol. 12, 116.

⁹⁷ *Vincent de Paul; Coste, Correspondence* (see fn. 23), vol. 11, 62–63.

⁹⁸ *Yves Krumenacker, L'école française de spiritualité: Des mystiques, des fondateurs, des courants et leurs interprètes* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1998), 480, cited in *Clare McGrath-Merkle, Bérulle's Spiritual Theology of Priesthood* (see fn. 12), 100.

⁹⁹ Kelley noted, "While Vincent's degree gave him permission to teach Book II of Lombard's *Sentences*, he also appears to have had a relatively sophisticated knowledge of the thought of Thomas Aquinas." *Scott Kelley, "Emergent Catholicity: Forming the Mind of Vincent," in Vincentian Heritage* 34, no. 1 (2017), n. p., available at

school degree, an exercise in humility that also likely obscured for centuries his systematic contributions.¹⁰⁰

There remains a key unexplored Thomistic aspect of his mysticism of the poor that could serve as an important corrective in any seminary formation that might become hyper-focused on the pursuit of perfection. It lies in the centrality of beauty for St. Vincent, in seeing the poor both in God and as icons of Christ, who is Beauty Himself. As St. Vincent wrote,

“I must not judge a poor peasant man or woman by their appearance or their apparent intelligence, especially since very often they scarcely have the expression or the mind of rational persons, so crude and vulgar they are. But turn the medal, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who willed to be poor, is represented to us by these poor people [...] How beautiful it is to see poor people if we consider them in God and with the esteem in which Jesus Christ held them! [...]”¹⁰¹

St. Vincent’s men were urged to see the poor as they were, *in* God, according to the doctrine of immensity and Christ’s own respect for them. He also wanted his men to see them as icons of the poor Christ Himself. Lastly, he wanted them to bring the Gospel to the poor so that they might be in God, transformed in Christ and sharers in the divine life, in beatitude.¹⁰²

Formators can attest that young men at first entry into seminary are filled with a zeal for souls and joyful love toward Jesus and others that could describe St. Vincent himself. Years of training and a focus on the pursuit of perfection can quench this love and zeal and worsen ministerial burnout.

Servais Pinckaers’ analysis can provide a way forward. He noted that we have lost the idea of beauty as the first cause of love: “The inclusion of the question of love in Christian moral teaching brings up a great theme that has completely disappeared from it: beauty. Beauty is in fact the first and specific cause of love, according to St Thomas. Beauty differs from the good only in its notion.” Pinckaers continued: “It is surprising that modern ethicists have lost the sense of beauty to such a point that they no longer attribute a moral dimension to it.”¹⁰³

In efforts to transform the culture of a wounded priestly formation, notably through a renewal of virtue ethics, we must necessarily include this apostolic and contemplative dimension – that of seeing others in God, of truly seeing their unique beauty as reflections of the divine beauty just as they are, and also as they could be. In addition, men in training often have their own devotional practices and preferred saints, which should be encouraged.

<https://via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1479&context=vhj> [last accessed on 05/31/2026]. See footnote 64, citing Document 110, in *Vincent de Paul; Coste*, Correspondence, vol. 13a, 403.

¹⁰⁰ St. Vincent noted in a conference to confreres: “You, Messieurs, have studied theology and I’m an ignorant man, a fourth form student.” See Conference 198, in *Vincent de Paul; Coste*, Correspondence, vol. 12, 114.

¹⁰¹ Quoting St. Vincent, *Vincent de Paul; Coste*, Conferences, vol. 11, 26.

¹⁰² As St. Thomas wrote, “Now the aspect under which our neighbor is to be loved, is God, since what we ought to love in our neighbor is that he may be in God.” *Aquinas*, S.th. II-II, q. 25, a. 1 co.

¹⁰³ *Servais Pinckaers*, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P., 3rd ed., Washington, D. C. 1995, 30–31, citing *Aquinas*, S.th. I-II, q. 27, a.1 ad. 3.

Importantly, Vincent also knew that the love of others includes the idea that we desire their good, and that they might share happiness in God with us, another idea put forth by St. Thomas.¹⁰⁴

St. Vincent's life of contemplative action, which he urged his followers to pursue, was the beginning of beatitude for him, in which he gazed in love on the beauty of God in the poor, on the beauty of the poor themselves. It became the beginning of a shared beatitude as the poor themselves accepted Christ.¹⁰⁵

The foundation of St. Vincent's theology of priesthood was pastoral charity, characterized by an effective love, in joyful service to the sole Redeemer and Savior and to the poor, for the sake of the coming of the Kingdom. His contributions remain an undiscovered treasure for the renewal of the priesthood and arguably merit him elevation to Doctor of the Universal Church, perhaps under the title of *Doctor Sacerdotii Christi*.

Morals follow metaphysics. The sea change in the theology of the priesthood that was the Berullian project still can be seen in formation documents and seminary training now over four hundred years later. The healing of priests crushed by the burden of the resultant, simultaneously de-ontologizing and self-aggrandizing identity will occur only when the theology of our current Berullian priesthood itself is healed.

A revision of the theological and philosophical foundations of *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, inspired by the prophetic witness and teachings of St. Vincent de Paul, can chart a new course for men called to go out into the deep to follow Jesus Christ into the new millennium.¹⁰⁶

Dieser Artikel untersucht Aspekte der Theologie des Priestertums der *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, die den Einfluss von Pierre de Bérulle widerspiegelt. Es werden außerdem Alternativen vorgestellt, die von Bérulles einstigen Nachfolger St. Vincent de Paul vorgeschlagen wurden, der eine eigene Theologie des Priestertums formulierte, die hinsichtlich ihrer potenziellen Bedeutung sowohl für die offizielle Theologie des Priestertums als auch für die pastorale Ausbildung der Kirche lange unterschätzt wurde.

¹⁰⁴ *Aquinas*, S.th. II-II, q. 26, a. 2 co.: "[...] our neighbor is loved as receiving together with us a share of happiness from Him."

¹⁰⁵ *Aquinas*, S.th. II-II, q. 180, a. 4 co.: "Hence it [contemplation of the divine truth] bestows on us a certain inchoate beatitude, which begins now and will be continued in the life to come;"

¹⁰⁶ The author would like to acknowledge Fr. Hugh O'Donnell, C.M., PhD, for his encouragement to take on this comparative analysis, for fruitful conversations, and for the research support offered by the Vincentian Fathers in the form of a visit to the Vincentian Studies Collection at the *DePaul University* Library in Chicago, Illinois. Jennifer Ottman provided copyediting assistance.