



Martin EBNER:
Czy Kościół potrzebuje księży? Perspektywa biblijna
[Does the Church Need Priests?
A Biblical Perspective].
Translated from German by Arkadiusz Ziernicki,
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In 2024, publishing house WAM of Kraków released a Polish translation of *Braucht die katholische Kirche Priester? Eine Vergewisserung aus dem Neuen Testament* [Does the Catholic Church Need Priests? A New Testament Scrutiny], a thought-provoking book by Martin Ebner. The publication in question plays a significant role in the ongoing discussion about the nature of the ministry of presbyters and bishops in the Church, particularly the clerical estate, and the division of the faithful into clergy and laity. It also examines the use of the term “priest,” which is absent from the language of the New Testament.

In the theological research it is interesting to see the theories concerning the transition from biblical indications to the monarchical model, as noted in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch. Among the hypotheses explored is Gregory Dix’s finding that initially local presbyteral colleges elected the leaders and over time these delegates began overseeing multiple communities. As urban Christian populations grew, the idea emerged that these leaders should be successors of the apostles. It is also important to see the diversity of organizational structures among Christian communities in the early 2nd century, although in some churches the monarchical episcopate exists as a matter of course. Importantly, the early Church

viewed presbyters and bishops as leaders tasked with guiding local communities, presiding over prayers (the liturgy), and teaching. Notably, until the First Council of Nicaea, presbyters often ordained bishops locally.

However, the term “priest” (Greek *hiereus*) was not applied to these leaders, as Christ was seen as the one true priest and bishops and presbyters presided over the Eucharist as a collective sacrifice of Christ’s body — the Church. In some regions (such as Gaul), deacons also presided over the liturgy. The first recorded use of the term priest to refer to presbyters appears in the writings of Cyprian of Carthage. The problem of identification in other texts is that only Latin translations (such as those by Origen) are available. The shift toward associating clergy with the term priest became more pronounced after Christianity was declared the state religion by Emperor Theodosius the Great in 380 CE. This period saw a rise in the social status of presbyters and bishops. The development of the Church and theology brought deeper reflection on ordination. Among the key documents addressing the priesthood of presbyters and bishops are the *Bull of Union with the Armenians Exsultate Deo* (1439), the *Doctrine touching the Sacrament of Holy Orders* from the Council of Trent (1563),¹ the decree *Lamentabili* (1907),² and Constitution *Lumen gentium* of the Second Vatican Council (1964).³

With clear testimonies of the Tradition, the importance of presbyters’ and bishops’ ministries is rarely questioned today. However, critical questions are raised about terminology. Should the term priest (Latin *sacerdos*) be maintained? Is it appropriate to define the Church in terms of *states*, where the clerical estate (bishops, presbyters, and deacons) has specific legitimacy in the canon law? These questions gain urgency in light of ongoing concerns about sexual abuse, power dynamics, relation-

¹ “Sacrifice and priesthood are, by the ordinance of God, in such wise conjoined, as that both have existed in every law. Whereas, therefore, in the New Testament, the Catholic Church has received, from the institution of Christ, the holy visible sacrifice of the Eucharist; it must needs also be confessed, that there is, in that Church, a new, visible, and external priesthood, into which the old has been translated. And the sacred Scriptures show, and the tradition of the Catholic Church has always taught, that this priesthood was instituted by the same Lord our Saviour, and that to the apostles, and their successors in the priesthood, was the power delivered of consecrating, offering, and administering His Body and Blood, as also of forgiving and of retaining sins” (chap. I).

² “When the Christian supper gradually assumed the nature of a liturgical action those who customarily presided over the supper acquired the sacerdotal character” (no. 49).

³ “Bishops, therefore, with their helpers, the priests and deacons, have taken up the service of the community, presiding in place of God over the flock, whose shepherds they are, as teachers for doctrine, priests for sacred worship, and ministers for governing” (no. 20).

ships among the baptized in the Church and the functioning of communities. They are further amplified by the challenges of mission work and the Church's role in increasingly secularized societies. Therefore, there is a growing need for a thorough discussion on the Church's structures and mechanisms.

Taking these considerations into account, Martin Ebner's book offers an engaging exploration of this pressing topic. The author, born in 1956, is a presbyter of the Diocese of Würzburg and professor emeritus of New Testament exegesis at the Universities of Münster and Bonn.

The book is structured into fifteen concise chapters, each focusing on a specific issue. The opening chapter, "The Parish Priest Must Be Abolished!," serves as an introduction, laying out the contemporary challenges facing the Catholic Church. Ebner examines the declining number of presbyters and the resulting impact on Church communities. It is increasingly difficult to see the Eucharist as central to the overall life of the Church, as many communities do not have it on a daily basis. Scandals within the Church also contribute to the erosion of its integrity. Ebner references the German *Synodaler Weg's* General Assembly, during which the legitimacy of the priestly ministry was questioned, with the discussion culminating in the document *Priesterliche Existenz heute (Priestly Existence Today)*. The central question Ebner frames in his book is: "What do we do if what we consider typically Catholic is not even typically Christian, and is therefore not supported by the testimonies of the New Testament, and may even contradict them?" (p. 13).

The second chapter, "No Priests in the Early Christian Communities," explores the early Church's structure, which did not include a distinct clerical estate. Presbyters, or elders, worked collectively, similar to the way municipal councils operated. They were not referred to as priests, which does not mean that early Christian communities lacked organization or designated roles. The testimony of the communities founded by St. Paul shows a division of tasks based on individual charisms. In some instances, a group of communities was overseen by an *episcopos*, a role inspired by the Roman *pater familias*.

The third chapter, "Priests in the Old World Are Managers of Worship," takes the readers to the topic of ancient religious practices. In antiquity, the title "priest" was linked to temple worship. In the Roman world, priests were often municipal officials who personally funded their priestly duties. Women, too, could hold these roles. In Jewish society, priests formed a distinct group within the Israelite community, performing their duties on assigned days. Outside their priestly service, they worked regular jobs but were entitled to tithes for their support. The core purpose of the priestly ministry was to act as mediators between God and the people.

Chapter Four, “Something Only Priests in the Jerusalem Temple Could Do: Forgive Sins Through Animal Sacrifices,” explores the Old Testament understanding of the purification of sins, which took place through ethical conversion (as emphasized by the prophets) and the liturgical and sacramental system of atonement (which involved priests offering expiatory sacrifices in the Temple). Particularly significant was the high priest’s role on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), especially his entry into the Holy of Holies.

The fifth chapter, “Ideas of Purity Lead to Distinctions Between People,” examines the structure of the Jerusalem temple and its concept of holiness, which created divisions among the Israelites (high priests, priests, men, women, and gentiles). Ebner also discusses the tension between the ethical focus (inner conversion) and an adherence to ritual practices only.

In the sixth chapter, “Opposition of the Early Christians: the Baptised Enter a Barrier-Free Social Space,” the author highlights how early Christianity dismantled identity dichotomy — in Christ, all are one (Gal 3:27—28).

Chapter Seven, “The Forgiveness of Sins Also Takes Place Among Christians, But Without the Mediation of Priests,” delves into the New Testament teaching on the forgiveness of sins. Jesus died for our sins. There is no place for liturgical (or financial) efforts. Jesus is the means of propitiation (Rom 3:25—26) and the meeting point between humanity and God. Freedom from sin is granted freely by faith.

Chapter Eight, “Jesus Acts as the Unforeseen Priest,” explores the Letter to the Hebrews, where Christ is depicted as the heavenly high priest. True salvation occurs in the heavenly temple, which the Jewish temple and worship merely prefigured. In this view, the ultimate sacrifice is a life fully dedicated to God. At the same time, it must be remembered that Jesus was not a priest according to Jewish law, as he did not belong to the priestly lineage, but is instead positioned as priest like Melchizedek.

The ninth chapter, “All Believers Live a Common Priesthood,” highlights the New Testament teaching that all baptized Christians have access to the spiritual temple and offer spiritual sacrifices. The author points out that the idea of the priesthood of believers (the concept of priestly people in the First Epistle of Peter) has its origins in Exodus: “I will count you a kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation” (Ex 19:6). The ethical dimension of priestly dignity, which involves keeping God’s commandments, is crucial. The author also refers to the Apostle Peter’s depiction of the Church as a house, with believers as the living stones of the spiritual temple.

Chapter Ten, “The Future City of God Is Without a Temple, Yet Filled with Priests,” shifts focus to the Book of Revelation, with its apocalyptic vision of the heavenly city (Rev 21—22). The lack of a temple and the enormous size of the city (12,000 stadia is over 1,200 kilometres in length, width, and height) are provocative to Jewish thought. Its cubic shape mirrors the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple. In this vision, all inhabitants serve as priests and reign forever, a reality that, Ebner argues, should inspire how Christian communities live today.

Chapter Eleven, “The Roots of the Historical Jesus,” examines Gospel accounts of Jesus challenging priestly purity laws, assuming priestly roles, criticizing the priesthood, and foretelling the destruction of the Temple. The author offers a compelling insight: a prediction of the destruction might not have been seen as blasphemous if it had been regarded as prophetic. However, Jesus was not granted this status during his lifetime, though his followers later recognized it.

Chapter Twelve, “‘In Remembrance of Me’: Not a Sacrifice but a Meal,” explores the Christian practice of the Lord’s Supper. Modelled on the Jewish sacred meal with the blessing of bread, this gathering of the baptized was a sacred feast. The author examines 1 Corinthians 11:23—25, which provides both a narrative outline of the rite and its deeper meaning. The ritual reflects Jesus’ saving death and his pro-existence. In this sense, the Lord’s Supper is not a sacrifice in the Old Testament sense of the word.

In Chapter Thirteen, “How ‘Priests’ Appeared in Christianity,” the discussion moves beyond the biblical era. The author traces how the term “priest” (Greek *hiereus*, Latin *sacerdos*) gradually came to be applied to presbyters and bishops. Ebner argues that the term’s adoption was driven by the need to financially support these ministers by the faithful, as the growth of Christian communities and the number of duties made it impossible for the clergy to sustain themselves through other professions. The author also highlights Cyprian of Carthage’s writings, which framed clergy primarily in terms of their role at the altar, emphasizing a cultic rationale. Ebner also notes that this shift elevated the status of presbyters and bishops in the Roman world, aligning them with the priests of other religions.

Chapter Fourteen, “Conclusion,” argues that the adoption of the title of priest was more a matter of practicality than theology or sacraments. Ebner explains that while the New Testament attests to leadership roles within Christian communities, it does not establish a distinct clerical class. He concludes: “The priest in the current conception — as a central leadership and sacramental-mediation figure — contradicts the essential structural requirements of the New Testament and the organizing principles of the life of the community of believers” (p. 117).

The fifteenth chapter, “Perspectives: What’s Next?,” addresses the need for various reforms within the Church. The author points out that it is inappropriate to focus all ministries on ordained persons. The challenge remains to discover and utilize the charisms God bestows on the faithful. Ebner draws on the insights of Karl Rahner, suggesting that meaningful Church-wide reforms require “micromutations” in the present.

The content of the reviewed book offers significant inspiration for further scholarly, historical, and theological exploration. Its strong biblical foundations make it a vital resource for theological reflection. Martin Ebner’s publication should inspire patrology scholars, Church historians, and dogmatic theologians to delve deeper into the theology of ordination, Church offices, and the overall structure of the Church. The historical dimension of the book is particularly valuable for understanding the multifaceted development of the clerical estate, especially in the context of the medieval concept of societal divisions. Additionally, the historical evolution of the doctrine of ordination provides crucial insights. In dogmatic theology, there is a pressing need for in-depth studies of the theology of the diaconate, presbyterate, and episcopate, as well as the sacramental and charismatic (or synodal) structure of the Church. Such research and future publications could serve as essential follow-ups to the questions raised in Ebner’s work.

The greatest strengths of *Braucht die katholische Kirche Priester?...* include concise content, accessible language, cultural context of the analyzed texts and the fact that the biblical analysis is put in the context of the challenges faced by the contemporary Church. The book’s structure is another asset, with its division into fifteen short chapters, each preceded by a brief summary that introduces the main themes. This format enhances readability and sustains the reader’s interest. The explanatory and supplementary endnotes further enrich the content. However, the book does have some drawbacks. The said endnotes (instead of footnotes) disrupt the flow of reading and hinder deeper reflection. Additionally, the bibliography is relatively sparse, consisting of merely fifteen items. A more extensive bibliography would have strengthened the work further.

In conclusion, Martin Ebner’s book is a much-needed addition to the field of theological studies. It is highly recommended for its potential to spark dialogue among theologians and provide a foundation for further questions and research.

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