

An Embodied vs a Silicon-based Priesthood: AIs can never be Catholic Priests

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Some months ago, I read Sister Ilia Delio’s Vox interview and it left me baffled. I took my time to think through what she said. Having experienced COVID, I realised evermore the need for the human aspect of the priest.

Franciscan sister and two PhD holder Ilia Delio, in an interview with Vox magazine said:

The Catholic notion would say the priest is ontologically changed upon ordination. Is that really true?” she asked. Maybe priestliness is not an esoteric essence but a programmable trait that even a “fallen” creation like a robot can embody. “We have these fixed philosophical ideas and AI challenges those ideas — it challenges Catholicism to move toward a post-human priesthood.¹

She furthered:

Take the Catholic Church. It’s very male, very patriarchal, and we have this whole sexual abuse crisis. So would I want a robot priest? Maybe!²

A robot can be gender-neutral. It might be able to transcend some of those divides and be able to enhance community in a way that’s more liberating.³

In this short article I would like to draw from the Second Vatican Council’s decree *Presbyterium Ordinis* (PO) to humbly rebut the said idea of having gender-neutral robo- priests so

¹Delio, Illia quoted in Sigal Samuel, ‘Robot Priests Can Bless You, Advise You, and Even Perform Your Funeral’, Vox, 13 January 2020.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

as “to avoid abuses.” Shocked as I am with every news of another abuse hitting the Church, I would be weary to offer solutions which are counter-sacramental and possibly even counter-biblical.

Sister Delio is reported as having joked about the distinction between the Catholic and Protestant understanding of priesthood on the grounds that AI challenges these definitions. While I do agree with her that as a Catholic Church we need to start theologising in a post-human world, some definitions need to be adhered to and carefully studied.

The Catholic understanding of priesthood is the sign and the symbol of Christ the Mediator, and thus, the priest is not himself the mediator, but the sacrament of Christ the Mediator. The Incarnate Logos was made like his brethren in every respect (Heb 2) as opposed to the Jewish understanding of the priesthood as being set apart. By her understanding of having robo-priests, Delio is reviving the understanding of setting apart, as opposed to the ‘sacramentalising-the-mediator’ role as understood by Catholic theology.

PO speaks of priests as being “signed with a special character and are conformed to Christ the Priest in such a way that they can act in the person of Christ the Head.”⁴ The priest’s own being is ontologically assimilated to Christ, a change which is not to be taken lightly. Hence, we understand the priest as ‘another Christ’ and not a functionary office, thus he is a representative of our Saviour in the world. Christ having been sacrificed outside the temple and the city ends the separation between worship and life, and thus, the ontologically-changed man is an embodiment of this lack of separation between worship and life. In sum, the Catholic priest is a changed being, not merely allowed to perform some rites. This lays the main argument against Delio’s comments. How can an unconscious being act *in persona Christi Capiti*? How can a piece of *techne* be configured to God?

This ontological change further constitutes the foundation of being ordained for the service of the community. PO speaks of priests as receiving a “special grace to be ministers of Christ among the people” so that “the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is made perfect in union with the sacrifice of Christ.”⁵ I believe the crux of this quote is the ‘people’. The priest is a person amongst persons, a human being, of the same nature as the Incarnate Second Person. Hence, the priest is not a dispenser of graces, but an ecclesial-community builder, as opposed to the caricature offered by the robo-priest.

Speaking of the priest as a helper of his siblings to consecrate their lives, George Aschenbrenner highlights the priestly vocation to call down the fire of the Holy Spirit to quicken the fire of love in our midst to form the universal priesthood. The priest is further called to be the

⁴Pope Paul VI, ‘Presbyterorum Ordinis’ (Vatican City: Vatican Media, 1965), para. 2.

⁵ Ibid.

“catechist of the human heart”⁶ and thus a proclaimer of the Gospel to all (Mk 16:15).

Moreover, the priest, by virtue of his ordination, is received in the ‘ordo’ of presbyters (as liturgically symbolised by the laying of hands of the other priests during the priestly ordination) and becomes a member of the sacramental brotherhood of priests. Thus, it is impossible for the robo-priest to be received in this brotherhood, lacking more than one essential parts of the priesthood.

Out of the ministerial roles of the priest, of a special mention is the Eucharist. The intrinsic relationship between the priesthood and the Eucharist is paramount in our reflection on the robo-priest. In offering the Sacrifice of the Mass, the priest invites the community to join in offering their lives. This great dignity of priesthood has “not been granted (to) the angels,”⁷ but only received by the priest. Only the priest is allowed to consecrate the Body of Christ because in the consecration itself, the priest is not substituting for Christ, but personifying him.⁸ As Cardinal Wright rightly put it, there is “no priesthood without the Eucharist; there cannot be any Eucharist without the priesthood.”⁹ Archbishop Lepicier further notes, that it was in view of this divine Sacrament that Jesus instituted the order of priests. Thus, it is not a matter of dispensing blessings and maybe some good council, but the priest is ordained to be intrinsically united to the Eucharist which is the source and summit of all the earthly liturgy.¹⁰

Another potential rebuttal of Delio’s idea of robo-priest is the fact that what she proposes may be seen as dualistic. We do not separate the importance of the sacraments and other liturgical rites, and the bodily involvement of all the senses in the rites. As Christina Nutt outlined, as Catholics we need the interior cooperation of the intellect and will.¹¹ Only a rational soul can be conformed to Christ, and the soul needs to belong to someone willing to participate in the sacraments for the sacrament to be efficacious.

In conclusion, while I agree with Sister Delio that as a Catholic Church we are invited to discern beyond the ministerial priesthood, including celibacy and the patriarchal ecclesiastical understanding of doing ecclesiology, I have outlined several qualms with her observations.

I believe that today’s transhuman world still needs the priest to bring God into our lives and

⁶G A Aschenbrenner, *Quickening the Fire in Our Midst: The Challenge of Diocesan Priestly Spirituality* (Pennsylvania: Loyola Press, 2002), 97.

⁷T Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, ed. M von Habsburg and R Jeffery, Penguin Classics (Penguin Books Limited, 2013), chap. 5.

⁸Pope Paul VI, ‘Presbyterorum Ordinis’.

⁹John Wright, ‘Priesthood and the Eucharist’, in *Real Presence Eucharistic Education and Adoration Association* (Seoul: Real Presence Eucharistic Education and Adoration Association, n.d.).

¹⁰Second Vatican Council, ‘Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church’ (Vatican: Vatican Press, 1964), para. 11.

¹¹Nutt, Christina quoted in Mary Farrow, ‘In Robota Christi? Why Robots Can Never Be Catholic Priests’, *Eurasia Review*, September 2019.

particularly to have the priest to bend down on his knees and minister to the aches and pains caused by the technocratic paradigm and embalm the wounds with Christ's graces, especially the sacramental ones. Today's vocation of the priest is still to live and preach the Word of Life and consecrate the Bread of Life to nourish the community. Through *being an alter Christus* the priest enables the community to live in the Absolute, a vocation which is ever more pronounced in a virtual and augmented-reality age. No metallic travesty would be able to achieve that but can only be achieved by the laying of hands on a deacon who lets himself be configured by Christ to be another servant of the community as outlined by the *ô*t of the foot-washing.

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