§ 1 Liturgy and Politics

1. The etymology and meaning of the Greek term *leitourgia* (from which our word *liturgy* derives) are clear. *Leitourgia* (from *laos,* people, and *ergon*, work) means "public work" and in classical Greece designates the obligation that the city imposes on the citizens who have a certain income to provide a series of services for the common interest. These services ranged from the organization of gymnasia and gymnastic games (*gymnasiarchia*) to the preparation of a chorus for the city festival (*chorēgia*, for example the tragic choruses for the Dionysian festival), from the acquisition of grain and oil (*sitēgia*) to arming and commanding a trireme (*triērarchia*) in case of war, from directing the city's delegation to the Olympic or Delphic games (*architheōria*) to the expectation that the fifteen richest citizens would pay the city for all the citizens' property taxes (*proeisphora*). It was a matter of services that were of a personal and real character ("each one," writes Demosthenes, "liturgizes both with person and with property" [*tois sōmasi kai tais ousiais lēitourgēsai*]; Fourth Philippic Oration 28) that, even if they were not numbered among the magistracies (*archai*), had a part in the "care of common things" (*tōn koinōn epimeleian*; Isocrates 25). Although the services of the liturgy could be extremely onerous (the verb *kataleitourgeō* meant "to be ruined by liturgies") and there were citizens (called for this reason *diadrasipolitai*, "citizens in hiding") who sought by every means to exempt themselves from them, the fulfillment of the liturgies

was seen as a way of obtaining honor and reputation, to the point that many (the prime example, referred to by Lysis, is that of a citizen who had spent in nine years more than twenty thousand drachmae for the liturgies) did not hesitate to renounce their right not to serve the liturgies for the two following years. Aristotle, in the *Politics* (1309a18–21), cautions against the custom, typical of democracies, of "costly but useless liturgies like equipping choruses and torch-races and all other similar services."

Since the expenses for the cult also concern the community (*ta pros tous theous dapanēmata koina pasēs tēs poleōs estin*), Aristotle can write that a part of the common land must be assigned to the liturgies for the gods (*pros tous theous leitourgias*; ibid., 1330a13). The lexicons register numerous witnesses, both epigraphic and literary, of this cultic use of the term, which we will see taken up again with a singular continuity both in Judaism and among Christian authors. Moreover, as often happens in these cases, the technico-political meaning of the term, in which the reference to the "public" is always primary, is extended, at times jokingly, to services that have nothing to do with politics. A few pages after the passage cited, Aristotle can thus speak, in reference to the season best suited to sexual reproduction, of a "public service for the procreation of children" (*leitourgein . . . pros teknopoiian*; ibid., 1335b29); in the same sense, with even more accentuated irony, an epigram will evoke "the liturgies" of a prostitute (*Anthologia Palatina* 5.49.1; qtd. in Strathmann, 217). It is inexact to claim that in these cases "the significance of the *lēitos* [public element] is lost" (Strathmann, 217). On the contrary, the expression always acquires its antiphrastic sense only in relation to the originary political meaning. When the same Aristotle presents as a "liturgy" the nursing of puppies on the part of the mother (*De animalia incessu* 711b30; qtd. in Strathmann, 217) or when we read in a papyrus the expression "to oblige to private liturgies" (*Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 3.475.18; qtd. in Strathmann, 218), in both cases the ear must perceive the forcing implicit in the metaphorical shift of the term from the public and social sphere to the private and natural sphere.

א. The system of liturgies (*munera* in Latin) reached its greatest diffusion in imperial Rome starting in the third century AD. Once Christianity becomes so to speak the religion of the State, the problem of the exemption of the clergy from the obligation of public services acquires a special interest. Already Constantine had established that "those who see to the ministry of the divine cult [*divini cultui ministeria impendunt*], that is, those who are called clergy, must be completely exempted from any public service [*ab omnibus omnino muneribus excusentur*]" (qtd. in Drecoll, 56). Although this exemption implied the risk that affluent people would become clergy to escape onerous *munera*, as a subsequent decree of Constantine that prohibited *decuriones* from taking part in the clergy proves, the privilege was maintained, albeit with various limitations.

This proves that the priesthood was seen in some way as a public service and this may be among the reasons that will lead to the specialization of the term *leitourgia* in a cultic sense in the sphere of Greek-speaking Christianity.

2. The history of a term often coincides with the history of its translations or of its use in translations. An important moment in the history of the term *leitourgia* thus comes when the Alexandrian rabbis who carried out the translation of the Bible into Greek choose the verb *leitourgeō* (often combined with *leitourgia*) to translate the Hebrew *šeret* whenever this term, which means generically "to serve," is used in a cultic sense. Starting from its first appearance in reference to Aaron's priestly functions, in which *leitourgeō* is used absolutely (*en tōi leitourgein*: Exodus 28:35), the term is often used in a technical combination with *leitourgia* to indicate the cult in the "tent of the Lord" (*leitourgein tēn leitourgian . . . en tēi skēnēi*; Numbers 8:22, referring to the Levites; *leitourgein tas leitourgias tēs skēnēs kyriou*, in 16:9). Scholars have wondered about this choice with respect to other available Greek terms, like *latreuō* or *douleō*, which are generally reserved for less technical meanings in the Septuagint. It is more than probable that the translators were well aware of the "political" meaning of the Greek term, if one remembers that the Lord's instructions for the organization of the cult in Exodus 25–30 (in

which the term *leitourgein* appears for the first time) are only an explication of the pact that a few pages earlier constituted Israel as a chosen people and as a "kingdom of priests" (*mamleket kohanim*) and a "holy nation" (*goj qados*) (Exodus 19:6). It is significant that the Septuagint here has recourse to the Greek term *laos* (*esesthe moi laos periousios apo pantōn tōn ethnōn*, "you shall be my treasured people out of all the nations"; Exodus 19:5) in order then to subsequently reinforce its "political" meaning by translating the text's "kingdom of priests" as "royal priesthood" (*basileion hierateuma*, an image significantly taken up again in the First Epistle of Peter 2:9—"you are a chosen race, a *basileon hierateuma*"—and in Revelation 1:6) and *goj qados* as *ethnos hagion*.

The election of Israel as "people of God" immediately institutes its liturgical function (the priesthood is immediately royal, that is, political) and thus sanctifies it insofar as it is a nation (the normal term for Israel is not *goj*, but *am qados*, *laos hagios*, "holy people"; Deuteronomy 7:6).

א. The technical meaning of *leitourgia* and *leitourgeō* to indicate the priestly cult is standard in Alexandrian Judaism. Thus, in the *Letter of Aristeas* (second century BCE), *tōn hiereōn hē leitourgia* refers to the cultic functions of the priest, meticulously laid out, from the choice of victim to the care of the oil and the spice (Aristeas 92). A little after *Eleazar en tēi leitourgiai* designates the high priest in the act of officiating, whose holy vestments and paraments are described with care (96ff.). The same can be said for Flavius Josephus and Philo (who also use the term in a metaphorical sense, for example with respect to the intellect: "when the mind is ministering to God [*leitourgei theoi*] in purity, it is not human, but divine"; Philo 84).

3. All the more significant is the lack of importance of this lexical group in the New Testament (with the notable exception of the Letter to the Hebrews). Beyond the Pauline corpus (where one also reads the term *leitourgos* five times), *leitourgein* and *leitourgia* figure only twice, the first time quite generically in reference to Zechariah's priestly functions in the Temple (Luke 1:23) and the second in reference to five "prophets and teachers" of the *ecclēsia*

of Antioch (Acts 13:1–2). The passage from Acts (*leitourgountōn de autōn tōi kyriōi*; 13:2) does not mean, as some have wanted to suggest with an obvious anachronism, "while they were celebrating the divine service in honor of the Lord." As the Vulgate had already understood in translating it simply as *ministrantibus autem illis Domino*, *leitourgein* is here the equivalent of "while they were carrying out their function in the community for the Lord" (which was precisely, as the text had just specified, that of prophets and teachers—*prophētai kai didaskaloi*; Acts 13:1—and not of priests, nor is it clear what other *leitourgia* could be in question at this point; as to prayer, Luke generally refers to it with the term *orare*).

Even in the Pauline letters the term often has the secular meaning of "service for the community," as in the passage in which the collection made for the community is presented as a *leitourgēsai* (Romans 15:27) or as *diakonia tēs leitourgias* (2 Corinthians 9:12). It is also said of the action of Epaphroditus, who has put his life at risk, that he has carried it out in order to make up for the "liturgy" that the Philippians have not been able to perform (Philippians 2:30). But even in the passages where *leitourgia* is deliberately connected to a properly priestly terminology, it is necessary to take care not to incautiously mix up the respective meanings, thus allowing the specificity and audacity of Paul's linguistic choice, which intentionally juxtaposes heterogeneous terms, to pass unnoticed. The exemplary case is Romans 15:16: "to be a *leitourgos* of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, carrying out the holy action of the good news of God [*hierourgounta to euangelion tou theou*]." Here commentators project onto *leitourgos* the cultic meaning of *hierourgeo*, writing: "What follows shows that [Paul] is using *leitourgos* cultically almost in the sense of priest. For he construes it in terms of *hierourgein to euanglion*. He discharges a priestly ministry in relation to the Gospel" (Strathmann, 230). The hapax *hierourgein to euanglion*, in which the good news becomes, with an extraordinary forcing, the impossible object of a *sacrum facere* (just as, with an analogous *tour de force*, *latreia*, the sacrificial cult, is linked

in Romans 12:1 to the adjective *logikē*, "linguistic"), is all the more effective if *leitourgos* conserves its proper meaning as "one entrusted with a community function" (*minister*, as the Vulgate correctly translates it). The connection of the cultic terminology of the Temple to something—the announcement made to the pagans and, as is said immediately after, the "offering of the Gentiles," *prosphora tōn ethnōn*—which can in no way take place in the Temple, has an obvious polemical meaning and does not intend to confer a sacrificial aura to Paul's preaching.

Analogous considerations can be made for Philippians 2:17: "But even if I am being poured out as a libation [*spendomai*] over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith [*epi tēi thysiai kai leitourgiai tēs pisteōs*], I am glad and rejoice with all of you." Whatever the connection between *spendomai* and the words that follow, the affirmation gains its pregnancy only if, leaving aside the anachronism that sees in *leitourgia* a priestly service (the Pauline community obviously could not have been familiar with priests), one perceives the contrast and almost the tension that Paul skillfully introduces between cultic terminology and "liturgical" terminology in the proper sense.

א. It has been known for some time (see Dunin-Borkowski) that in the earliest Christian literature the terms *hiereus* and *archiereus* (priest and high priest) are reserved solely for Christ, while for the members or heads of the communities, a properly priestly vocabulary is never used (leaders are defined simply as *episkopoi* [superintendents], *presbyteroi* [elders], or *diakonoi* [servants]). A priestly vocabulary appears only with Tertullian (*On Baptism* 17.1; *Against the Jews* 6.1.14), Cyprian (*Epistle* 59.14, 66.8), and Origen (*Homiliae in Numeros* 10.1). In the Pauline letters, which mention *episkopoi* and *diakonoi* (in Colossians 1:25, Paul calls himself a *diakonos*), particular attention is dedicated to the various functions carried out in the community, none of which is defined in priestly terms. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:28–31: "And God has appointed in the church first apostles [*apostolous*], second prophets [*profētas*], third teachers [*didaskalous*]; then deeds of power [*dynameis*], then gifts of healing [*charismata iamatōn*], forms of assistance [*antilēpseis*], of leadership [*kybernēseis*], various kinds of tongues [*genē*

glōssōn]"; Romans 12:6–8: "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering [*diakonian en tēi diakoniai*], the teacher, in teaching [*didaskōn en tēi didaskaliai*], the comforter, in comforting [*parakalōn en tēi paraklēsei*].")

4. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews elaborates a theology of the messianic priesthood of Christ, in the context of which the lexical group that interests us occurs four times. Developing the Pauline argumentation about the two covenants (2 Corinthians 3:1–14), the theological nucleus of the letter plays on the opposition between the Levitical priesthood (*levitikē hierōsynē*, 7:11), corresponding to the old Mosaic covenant and encompassing the descendants of Aaron, and the new covenant, in which the one who assumes the "liturgy" of the high priest (*archiereus,* this time encompassing the descendants of Melchizedek) is Christ himself. Of the four appearances from the lexical family, two refer to the Levitical cult: in 9:21 Moses sprinkles with blood "the tent and all the vessels used in the liturgy" (*panta ta skeuē tēs leitourgias*); in 10:11 the author evokes the priest of the old covenant, who "stands day after day for his liturgical functions [*leitourgōn*], offering again and again the same sacrifices." The remaining two occurrences refer in turn to Christ, the high priest of the new covenant. In the first (8:2) he is defined as "liturgue of the holy things and of the true tent" (*tōn hagiōn leitourgos kai tēs skēnēs tēs alēthinēs*; cf. Numbers 16:9); in the second (8:6) it is said that he "has obtained a different and better liturgy (*diaphorōteras tetychen leitourgias*), to the degree to which the covenant of which he is mediator is better." While in fact the sacrifices of the Levites are only an example and shadow (*hypodeigma kai skia*, 8:5) of heavenly things and cannot therefore complete or render perfect (*teleiōsai*, 9:9, 10:1) those who offer them, the sacrifice of the new covenant, in which Christ sacrifices himself, annuls sin (*athetēsin hamartias*, 9:26) and purifies (*kathariei*, 9:14) and sanctifies the faithful once and for all (*teteleiōken eis to diēnekes tous hagiazomenous*, 10:14).

Let us reflect on the identity that the text presupposes between the action of Christ and liturgy. His salvific action is not only presented as a "liturgy," but as the high priest of a sacrifice in which the officiator sacrifices himself (*heauton prosēnenken*, 9:14), Christ accomplishes a liturgical action that is, so to speak, absolute and perfect and that for this reason can be carried out only once (*hapax prosenechtheis*, 9:28; *mian . . . prosenenkas thysian*, 10:12). In this sense Christ coincides without remainder with his liturgy—he is essentially liturgy—and precisely this coincidence confers on his liturgy its incomparable efficacy.

The intention of the author in decisively opposing the two figures of the priest is doubtless to present the messiah in the hieratic vestments of a celebrant, and so one must not forget that the messianic priesthood that is here in question presents some entirely peculiar characteristics that distinguish it point by point from the Levitical priesthood and that the sense of the letter lies precisely in this counterposition. It is decisive that while the Levitical sacrifices must be ceaselessly repeated and each year renew the memory of sins (*anamnēsis hamartiōn*, 10:3), the sacrifice of the new covenant happens, as the author never stops repeating, only once and cannot be repeated in any way. In the affirmation of this unrepeatability of the sacrifice, whose unique priest, "having obtained an eternal redemption, enters once for all [*ephapax*] into the sanctuary" (9:12), the author of Hebrews remains faithful to a genuine messianic inspiration, on the basis of which (with all due respect to subsequent ecclesiastical practice) it is not possible to found any cultic liturgy. In the same instant in which he defines him as *leitourgos* and evokes for him a "different and better liturgy," the author of Hebrews knows that the high priest of the new covenant has irrevocably closed the door of the temple behind him. The *diaphorōtera leitourgia* is not, in this sense, a celebration, that is, something essentially repeatable (this is the etymological meaning of *celeber*). The paradox of the Christian liturgy is that by taking as the model of its priesthood the liturgical action of the *archiereus* Christ and founding its celebrations on the Letter to the Hebrews, it

devotes itself to repeating an unrepeatable act, to celebrating what cannot be celebrated.

5. Rudolf Sohm defined the primitive church as a charismatic community, within which no properly juridical organization was possible. "As soon as it is certain that no human Word but only God's Word shall rule in the Church, so is it also certain that there can be no power or official appointment in Christendom which should have *legal* authority over the congregation. One apprehends the Word of God not in some form or other but in its inner power. Christianity has only to follow that Word which by the power of an inner, free assent it *recognizes* as the Word of God. . . . *There can be no legal power to rule* [rechtliche Regierungsgewalt] *in the Church*" (Sohm, 22–23/13–14). The organization of the primitive community can consequently have only a charismatic character: "Christendom is organized through the distribution of the *gifts of grace* (*Charismen*), which both qualify and call the individual Christian to different activities in Christendom. The charisma is from God. Thus the service (*diakonia*) to which the charisma calls is a service imposed by God" (Sohm, 26/15). Hence the radical thesis, according to which "canon law stands in contradiction with the nature of the church. The true church, the church of Christ knows no canon law" (Sohm, 459).

According to Sohm the situation changes when—in a moment to which the Letter of Clement to the Corinthians testifies—the way was paved for the idea that the presbyters and bishops have a right to exercise their "liturgy" and that the community cannot remove them from their position, which thus comes to acquire a "legal meaning" (Sohm, 159). "The immediate consequence of the letter of Clement," writes Sohm, "was a change in the constitution of the Roman community" (165), whose ultimate demand is the transformation of the primitive church into the Catholic Church, of the original charismatic community into the juridical organization that is familiar to us.

Here is not the place to enter into the merits of the discussion provoked by Sohm's thesis among church historians and students

of canon law. What interests us rather, in the economy of our archaeological inquiry, are the meaning and special relevance that the term *leitourgia* and its derivatives have in Clement's letter.

6. The Letter of Clement to the Corinthians is the first text in which a pastoral preoccupation assumes the form of a theorization of the ecclesiastical hierarchy understood as a "liturgy." The context of the problem is well known: Clement, who represents "the church of God, which sojourns in exile [*paroikousa*] at Rome" (preamble; translation altered), writes to the church in exile at Corinth, in which a conflict (indeed, a true and proper *stasis*, a civil war, 1.1) is dividing the faithful from the heads of the community, who have been dismissed from their function. In the struggle that opposes "those of no repute against the highly reputed, the foolish against the wise, the young against the elders" (3.3), Clement resolutely takes the side of the latter. What is decisive in his strategy is not the recourse to military metaphors, which will have considerable success in the history of the church (as in an army, "each in his own rank executes the orders given by the emperor and the commanders," 37.3), so much as the idea of founding the function of the presbyters and bishops in the Levitical priesthood. Clement knows the priestly Christology of the Letter to the Hebrews and once defines Christ as "the High Priest of our offerings" (*archierea tōn prosphorōn hēmōn*, 36.1). But what interests him are not the special characteristics and effectiveness of this priesthood but rather the fact that Christ constitutes the foundation of the apostolic succession: "So then Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ" (42.2). Contradicting what is said in the Letter to the Hebrews (which had substituted the priesthood of Christ for the Levitical priesthood) and with a curious anachronism (the priestly functions in the Temple of Jerusalem, destroyed in AD 70 by the Romans, had been halted for some time), Clement institutes a paradigmatic relation between the hereditary order of the Levites and that of the apostolic succession in the Church. In the construction of this analogy the concept of *leitourgia* takes on a central role. Just as in

the Temple of Jerusalem "the offerings and liturgical functions [*prosphoras kai leitourgias*]" are "not to be done carelessly or in disorder, but at designated times and seasons . . . for to the high priest the proper liturgies [*idiai leitourgiai*] have been given, and to the priests the proper office has been assigned, and upon the Levites the proper ministries [*diakoniai*] have been imposed," so also in the Church each must act and please God in the rank that is proper to him, "not overstepping the designated rule of his liturgy [*ton hōrismenon tēs leitourgias autou kanona*]" (40.2–41.1). The apostles, in fact, foreseeing that there would be a sort of dispute over the episcopal function (*peri tou onomatos tēs episkopēs*), "have established as a rule that, after the death of those they had appointed, other approved men should succeed to their liturgy [*diadexontai tēn leitourgian autōn*]" (44.2). For this reason Clement can now forcefully claim that "these men we consider to be unjustly removed from their liturgy [*apoballesthai tēs leitourgias*] . . . who have carried out their liturgical function blamelessly [*leitourgēsantas amemptōs*] before the flock of Christ" (44.3). And he can conclude with an encomium to those "presbyters [*presbyteroi*] who have gone on ahead, who took their departure at a mature and fruitful age" (44.5) and with a reproach of the faithful in Corinth who have deprived them "of the liturgy that they had exercised honorably and blamelessly" (44.6).

It is obvious that in the letter the term *leitourgia*, while also maintaining the originary meaning of a service for the community, acquires the characteristics of a stable and lifelong office, an object of a canon (*kanōn*) and rule (*epinomē*, which the old Latin version of the letter renders as *lex*). All of Clement's vocabulary tends in this direction: *kathistēmi* (establish, nominate), *diadechomai* (a technical term for succession in an office), *hypotassō* (to submit oneself to an authority; conversely, those who are disobeying are responsible for a *stasis* [civil war, insurrection]). The paradigmatic reference to the Levitical cult, moreover, confers on the term a priestly character and aura (as it had already had in the Septuagint) that was anything but taken for granted at that point (as we have seen, none of the original documents use the

term *priest*—*hierus*, *sacerdos*—to indicate a member of the community). From an occasional public service, which does not have a specific title within the community, liturgy begins to transform into a special activity, into a "ministry" that tends to define a particular subject as entitled to it: the bishop and the presbyters in the letter and, later, the priest. What defines this activity? What constitutes a determined sphere of action as a liturgy?

א. In the section of the *Apostolic Constitutions* known as the *Canones apostolici* one can see how the passage from a charismatic community to an organization of a juridical type was not only a fact already in some sense achieved, but had constituted the object of a precise strategy. The text—which, although composed around the end of the fourth century, pretends to be a work of the apostles themselves—actually opens with a lengthy treatment of the traditional charismas (glossolalia, etc.), but the goal of the author is obviously to minimize their relevance with respect to what he defines immediately after as "ecclesiastical organization" (*ekklēsiastikē diatypōsis*). In question are precisely the "constitutions" (*diatexeis*, a technical term for testamentary provisions) that the apostles had established as a configuration or general model (*typos*) of the church, from the ordination of the bishop to the articulation of the hierarchy to the rituals of the sacraments. What is evident in the *Constitutions* is the construction of a separate ecclesiastical hierarchy which culminates in the bishop: "Those which were then the sacrifices now are prayers, and intercessions, and thanksgivings [*eucharistiai*]. Those which were then first-fruits, and tithes, and offerings, and gifts, now are oblations, which are presented by holy bishops to the Lord God, through Jesus Christ, who has died for them. For these are your high priests [*archiereis*] and presbyters are your priests, and your present deacons instead of your Levites" (*Apostolic Constitutions* 2.4.25). "If anyone does anything without the bishop," one reads a little further down, "he does it to no purpose [*matēn*]" (2.4.27). "For neither may we address ourselves to Almighty God, but only by Christ. In the same manner, therefore, let the laity make known all their desires to the bishop by the deacon" (2.4.28).

In Irenaeus, by contrast, the charismas are still not subordinated to the succession according to apostolic ordination. The passage in which he recommends obedience to the presbyters, "who, together with the

succession of the episcopate, have received a *charisma veritatis certum*" (Irenaeus 4.26.2), does not mean, as has been suggested, that he claims a sort of infallibility for the bishop. Rather, the fact that immediately afterward he distinguishes between good and evil presbyters and confirms the importance of the *charismata Dei* shows that Irenaeus conceives the latter as an equally important element of ecclesiastical ordination: "Where, therefore, the gifts of the Lord have been placed [*ubi igitur charismata dei posita sunt*], there it behooves us to learn the truth, namely, from those who possess the succession of the Church which is from the apostles, and among whom exists what is sound and blameless in conduct, as well as that which is unadulterated and incorrupt in speech" (Irenaeus 4.26.5). At the end of the second century, a charismatic community and a hierarchical organization still cohabitated in a functional unity in the church.

7. Guy Stroumsa has recently called attention to the persistence of sacrificial ideology in Christianity. It is well known that after the second destruction of the Temple, rabbinic Judaism oriented itself in the direction of a spiritualization of the liturgy, transforming it from a sequence of rites that accompanied the sacrificial action into a collection of prayers that were actually substituted for the sacrifices. From this perspective the *talmud Torah*, the study of the Torah, supplanted sacrificial practices, and "the rabbis gathered in Yavneh in 70 succeeded in transforming Judaism—without admitting doing so, and perhaps also without admitting it completely even to themselves—into a non-sacrificial religion" (Stroumsa, 129/72). Christianity, by contrast, defined itself early on "as a religion centered on sacrifice, even if it was a reinterpreted sacrifice. The Christian *anamnēsis* of the sacrifice of Jesus has a power very different from that of the Hebrew memory of Temple sacrifices, because the *anamnēsis* is the reactivation of the sacrifice of the Son of God, performed by the priests" (Stroumsa, 129/72).

Stroumsa could have added that the construction of the sacramental liturgy is founded, starting already with the Church Fathers, on explicit and unreserved opposition of the sacraments of the Old Law—which signify and announce but do not achieve

what they signify—to the sacraments of the New Law, which accomplish what they signify.

In reality the author of the Letter to the Hebrews does not establish any connection between the doctrine of Christ's priesthood and the eucharistic celebration. This is not the place to reconstruct the genealogy of this connection, whose strategic importance for the Church is obvious. Already implicit in Origen (*Homiliae in Numeros* 9.5.2, 10.21), it often appears surreptitiously, through the simple juxtaposition of the two motifs. Thus in two passages of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, in which the ecclesiological preoccupation is evident: "Lord, grant that this your servant, whom you have chosen to be a bishop, may feed your holy flock and discharge the office of a high priest [*archierateuein*] before you blamelessly night and day . . . offering to you a pure and unbloody sacrifice, which you have appointed through Christ as the mystery of the new covenant" (*Apostolic Constitutions* 8.2.5; translation altered); "The first High Priest therefore, who is so by nature [*prōtos . . . tēi physēi archiereus*], is Christ the only begotten; not having snatched that honor to himself but having been appointed such by the Father. He was made man for our sake, and offering the spiritual sacrifice to his God and Father, before his suffering charged us alone to do this" (8.5.46); and in Epiphanius ("so as to be made a priest for us after the order of Melchizedek . . . for he abides forever to offer gifts for us—after first offering himself by the cross, to abolish every sacrifice of the old covenant"; Epiphanius 55.4.5–7, 2:80–81). Later, we find the two terms connected in Ambrose ("Who then is the author of the sacraments but the Lord Jesus? . . . We learn that those sacraments were prefigured in the times of Abraham, when holy Melchizedek offered sacrifice, having neither beginning nor end of days. Hear, O man, what the Apostle Paul says to the Hebrews"; *On the Sacraments* 4.13, 5.1) and in Augustine ("Also, our priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, he offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins, and recommended the reenactment of that sacrifice to be celebrated in memory of his suffering and death, so that what Melchizedek offered to God now we see offered in the Church of Christ

throughout the whole world"; *De diversis questionibus*, question 61 [117]).

In each case, in bringing together two distinct texts, it is a matter of conceiving the institution of the Eucharist as a priestly service of Jesus, who according to the doctrine of the letter acts as high priest of the order of Melchizedek and in this way transmits the priestly ministry to the apostles and to their successors in the Church. In this sense one can say that the definition of the priestly character of the ecclesiastical hierarchy is constructed precisely through founding the sacramental liturgy in the doctrine of Christ as high priest. In the *summa* of the Catholic liturgy that is William Durand's *Rationale divinorum officiorum*, the connection already has the obviousness of a formula: *Missa instituit Dominus Iesus, sacerdos secundum ordinem Melchisedech, quando panem et vinum in corpus et sanguinem suum transmutavit, dicens: "Hoc est corpus meus, hic est sanguis meus," subiungens: "Hoc facite in meam commemorationem"* (The Lord Jesus instituted the mass as priest according to the order of Melchizedek, when he transmuted bread and wine into his body and blood, saying, 'This is my body, this is my blood,' and enjoining, 'Do this in memory of me'"; Durand, bk. 1, 240).

The Council of Trent (session XXII, chap. 1) confirms beyond any doubt the foundational and eternal character of Christ's priesthood, which is renewed and perpetuated in the eucharistic liturgy, in the celebration of which the Church is linked to Christ as the liturgue of the Letter to the Hebrews:

> He, therefore, our God and Lord, though He was by His death about to offer Himself once upon the altar of the cross to God the Father that He might there accomplish an eternal redemption, nevertheless, that His priesthood might not come to an end with His death, at the last supper, on the night He was betrayed, that He might leave to His beloved spouse the Church a visible sacrifice, such as the nature of man requires, whereby that bloody sacrifice once to be accomplished on the cross might be represented . . . , declaring Himself constituted a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, offered up to God the Father His own body and blood under the form of bread

> and wine, and under the forms of those same things gave to the Apostles, whom He then made priests of the New Testament, that they might partake, commanding them and their successors in the priesthood by these words to do likewise: Do this in memory of me.

In the idea of Christ as a "priest forever," the "once for all" (*hapax*) of the Letter to the Hebrews is joined with the "forever and ever" of the eucharistic celebration ceaselessly repeated by the Church, and the continuity of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Clement's letter receives its priestly seal.

The definition of the liturgy in twentieth-century encyclicals has only confirmed this connection: "The sacred liturgy is, consequently, the public worship which our Redeemer as Head of the Church renders to the Father, as well as the worship which the community of the faithful renders to its Founder, and through Him to the heavenly Father" (*Mediator Dei* §20; cf. Braga and Bugnini, 571).

The fact that the Church has founded its liturgical praxis on the Letter to the Hebrews, namely by putting at its center an unceasing reactualization of the sacrifice achieved by Christ the *leitourgos* and high priest, constitutes both the truth and the aporia of Christian liturgy (which Augustine summarizes in the antithesis *semel immolatus . . . et tamen quotidie immolatur* [offered once . . . and yet he is offered daily]). The problem, which will never cease to appear again and again in the history of the Church as its central "mystery," is precisely that of how one is to understand the reality and effectiveness of the sacramental liturgy and, at the same time, of how this "mystery" can take the form of a "ministry," which defines the specific praxis of the members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

8. The doctrine of the liturgical character of Christ's sacrifice has its root in the doctrine of the Trinity itself. We have shown how the Fathers, in order to reconcile the unity of substance with the plurality of persons in God and in close hand-to-hand combat with Gnosis, initially formulate the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of an *oikonomia*, of an activity of "administration"

and "management" of the divine life and of creation (Agamben, 17–50). In the words of Tertullian, who (in opposition to the monarchians) was among the first to elaborate the doctrine of the Trinity as a divine "economy": "they must believe in one only [God], yet they must believe in him along with his *oikonomia*. . . . A unity which derives from itself a trinity is not destroyed but administered by it [*non destruatur ab illa sed administretur*]" (*Against Praxeas* 3.1; qtd. in Agamben, 42). Reversing an expression of Paul, who in his letters had spoken, in reference to the divine plan of redemption, of an "economy of the mystery" (*oikonomia tou mystēriou*, Ephesians 3:9), Hippolytus, Irenaeus, and Tertullian thus presented the very articulation of the Trinity and its salvific action as a "mystery of the economy" (*mystērion tēs oikonomias, oikonomias sacramentum*). The insistence on the "mysterious" character of the divine work of salvation shows, however, that the caesura they had wanted to avoid on the level of being reappears as a fracture between God and his action, between ontology and praxis. What is mysterious is now no longer, as in Paul, the divine plan of redemption, which demanded an *oikonomia* that was clear in itself. What is inscrutable or mysterious is now the "economy" itself, the very praxis through which God secures the salvation of his creation. Whatever meaning is to be assigned to the term *mystērion* and its Latin equivalent *sacramentum*, what is essential here is that the divine economy takes the form of a mystery.

Through the incarnation, Christ takes this mysterious economy on himself. But on the basis of the passage from John according to which "the Son of Man has been glorified by God and God has been glorified in him" (13:31), the "economy" is understood simultaneously as a glorification and as a reciprocal manifestation of the Father through the Son and of the Son in doing the Father's work. In Origen's commentary on the Gospel of John, the "economy of the passion" of the savior thus coincides perfectly with the economy of the glory by which the Son reveals and celebrates the Father. The mystery of the economy is a doxological, which is to say liturgical, mystery.