



HAL
open science

”Thomas Aquinas and the Sacrement of Holy Order”

Henry Donneaud

► To cite this version:

Henry Donneaud. ”Thomas Aquinas and the Sacrement of Holy Order”. Matthew Levering, Piotr Roszal & Jörgen Vijgen. T&T Clark Handbook of Biblical Thomism, T&T Clark / Bloomsbury, p. 523-541, 2026, 978-0-567-70623-2. <hal-05568051>

HAL Id: hal-05568051

<https://hal.science/hal-05568051v1>

Submitted on 26 Mar 2026

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - ShareAlike - International License

Thomas Aquinas and the Sacrament of Holy Orders

Henry Donneaud O.P

Thomas Aquinas expounded his treatise on the sacrament of Holy Orders in only two places: in detail in the fourth book of his *Commentary on the Sentences*, and concisely in the fourth book of his *Summa contra Gentiles*. Although death prevented him from renewing this treatise in the *Summa theologiae*, he was able to evoke there the sacrament of order in connection with other sacraments such as the Eucharist and Confirmation. In addition, in his opuscule *De Perfectione vitae spiritualis* (1269), he elaborated at length on his conception of the episcopate, in response to the secular masters. Finally, his commentaries on Paul's letters (between 1260 and 1265) gave him the opportunity to correct, in the light of Pseudo-Dionysius, an exegetical option which, out of reverence, he was careful not to say had been conveyed, in the Latin tradition, under the authority of St. Jerome.

Receiving muddled, inconsistent and sometimes divergent data from his predecessors, he failed to construct a unified theology of the sacrament of Holy Orders. More precisely, conditioned by a doctrinal heritage that centered it on the power to offer the Eucharist, he failed to give the episcopate its rightful place, even though, unlike Albert the Great, he refused to reduce the latter to the exercise of jurisdictional power. Awakened to this problem as much by his speculative sense as by his attention to the sources closest to Christ and the Apostles, he succeeded in setting Latin theology on the long road to a unified and balanced dogmatic synthesis, in a process that would not be completed until the XX^e century.

1. A theology of the Order obscured in previous centuries

Thomas Aquinas inherited a theological opinion which, although recent, had become established in the Latin West in the XI–XII^{ee} centuries. The number of sacred orders was strictly limited to seven, in line with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. While Isidore of Seville still counted nine sacred orders, from the porter to the “priesthood” (*sacerdotium*) or “priestly order” (*sacerdotalis ordo*), a term which, under his pen, designated the episcopate as distinct from the “order of presbyters” (*presbyterorum ordo*)¹, the new septennium, with the suppression of the

¹ Isidore of Seville, *De Ecclesiasticis officiis*, II, cap. 5 and 7, ed. Christopher M. Lawson, CCSL 113 (1989), 57–58 and 64.

order of psalmists, merged into that of readers, culminates in a *sacerdotium* now assimilated to the presbyterate. The episcopate no longer appears as its own degree in the hierarchy of orders, but is integrated within the *sacerdotium* or *ordo presbyterorum*, as a “pre-eminent dignity”, that of the *pontifices* or *principes sacerdotum*.² Peter Damian, in the XI^e century, is a good witness to this doctrinal evolution, which has its distant origins in the way in which S. Jerome, noting that in the New Testament the names “episcopos” and “priests” referred to the same people, claimed that the distinction *in re* between bishops and priests only came about later, by decision of the Church, to offset the risk of schisms:

Like the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, there are seven orders of ecclesiastical dignity (*septem ordines ecclesiasticae dignitatis*): the fact that there are others who have precedence at the head of this set of degrees, namely patriarchs, archbishops and bishops, does not imply considering them as an additional order, but rather elevating them higher within the same priesthood (*in eodem ipsi sacerdotio videntur excellentius sublimari*). Since the priest (*sacerdos*) is called such because he gives what is sacred, that is, because he offers the sacrifice to God, what could be more sublime in the Church, more eminent than the priesthood?³

Thus, still under the influence of Jerome, Peter Damian sees in the power to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice, already fully entrusted to the priest (*presbyter*), the most specific constituent of the priesthood, and therefore the highest degree of the hierarchical order, with the episcopate constituting only a higher degree within this one and the same priesthood.

Hugh of Saint Victor and then Peter Lombard, in the XII^e century, canonized this doctrinal position, which removed from the episcopate any sacramentality other than that already received in the presbyteral priesthood. Reception of the latter, as of the six preceding degrees, was then considered an absolutely necessary prerequisite to episcopal consecration, obliterating the practice of the first millennium whereby deacons elected bishops directly received episcopal ordination without the prerequisite of presbyteral ordination⁴. Henceforth, it is considered that only promotion through the seven degrees from porter to presbyteral priest

² Yvo of Chartres, *Sermones de Ecclesiasticis sacramentis et officiis*, 2, PL 162 (1854), 518; Stephen of Autun, *Tractatus de Sacramento altaris*, 10, PL 172 (1854), 1280.

³ Peter Damian, *Liber qui dicitur gratissimus*, 15, PL 145 (1853), 118.

⁴ According to Michel Andrieu, “La carrière ecclésiastique des papes et les documents liturgiques du moyen âge,” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 21, no. 3–4 (May–October 1947), 90–120 (107), Gregory VII, elected pope in 1073 as a deacon, appears to be the first to receive presbyteral ordination between his election and his episcopal consecration. What had been practised throughout the first millennium was held to be an absolute impossibility: episcopal consecration confers no priestly power and must necessarily be preceded by presbyteral ordination, otherwise the bishop, even if consecrated, is not *summus sacerdos* and cannot preside at the Eucharist.

transmits a “spiritual power” by which the cleric is raised “ever higher to care for sacred things.”⁵ Only these seven degrees are sacramental, insofar as they are properly ordered to the making of the Eucharist. The episcopate is not one of them, nor does it constitute an order in itself, but corresponds to a simple “dignity”:

Some other names designate not orders but dignities or offices. “Bishop” is a name of dignity as well as of office.⁶

The Parisian masters of the first XIII^e century, with more numerous and varied sources at their disposal, were driven to undermine the monopoly of the septenary by juxtaposing other theological models with it. William of Auxerre, not without first expounding the doctrine received from Peter Lombard (seven degrees of the order, culminating in the presbyteral priesthood through which the Eucharistic consecration is performed, *opus excellentissimum*), prefers to it, under the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius, a nine-degree hierarchy, in which the episcopate and archiepiscopate are added to the previous seven degrees, prevailing over them “not as regards the dignity of the consecrated thing, but as regards causality,”⁷ since the bishop consecrates priests and the archbishop consecrates the bishop. Alexander of Hales begins by listing several solutions as to the number of degrees in the order: three according to Pseudo-Dionysius, nine according to Isidore of Seville, seven “by disposition of the Holy Fathers” (*ex constitutione sanctorum Patrum*),⁸ in fact according to recent Latin tradition. While honouring the doctrine of Pseudo-Dionysius, in particular concerning the *perfective* quality of the bishop, clothed with the “fullness of power” (*plenitudo potentiae*), Alexander nevertheless favours the sevenfold, according to the doctrine handed down by Peter Lombard, because “the consecration of the body and blood of the Lord is the noblest work in the ministries of the Church.”⁹ Episcopal consecration confers a grace, but does not imprint a character, the latter being, for

⁵ Hugh of Saint Victor, *De Sacramentis*, III, cap. 7, ed. Rainer Berndt, “Corpus Victorinum”, Aschendorff (2008), 345: “Sequuntur deinde septem graduum promotiones in quibus per spiritualem potestatem altius semper ad sacra tractanda conscendit. [...] Septem ergo spiritualium officiorum gradus provide in sancta Ecclesia. Secundum septiformem gratiam distributa sunt.”

⁶ Peter Lombard, *Sententiae*, IV, dist. 14–15, “Spicilegium Bonaventurianum, 5” (Grottaferrata: Quaracchi, 1981), 405–06.

⁷ William of Auxerre, *Summa aurea*, IV, tract. 16, cap. 2, ed. Jean Ribailier, “Spicilegium Bonaventurianum, 19” (Paris–Grottaferrata: CNRS–Quaracchi, 1985), 372.

⁸ Alexander of Hales, *Glossa in quatuor libros Sententiarum*, IV, dist. 24, “Bibliotheca Franciscana Scholastica Medii Aevi, 15” (Quaracchi, 1957), 403.

⁹ Alexander of Hales, *Glossa in quatuor libros Sententiarum*, 407.

the priest, an imprint of the divine work accomplished on the cross and reiterated in the Eucharist, “the character of charity in memory of the passion.”¹⁰

Albert the Great, then Bonaventure, for the sake of theological systematization, aligned themselves more exclusively with Peter Lombard's doctrine, according to which there are only seven orders, the presbyteral priesthood being the highest, and the episcopate constituting not an order as such, but a dignity. Albert does, however, introduce two interesting novelties. 1° the seven degrees of the order each comprise a “principal act” relating to the *corpus verum Christi* and a “consequent act” or “second act” relating to the *corpus mysticum*, i.e. to the members of the Church who are to be “prepared for the reception of the *corpus verum*,”¹¹ for the presbyterate, *solus ordo perfectus*,¹² the principal act is the Eucharistic consecration, the second act the sacramental absolution by the power of the keys. 2° if the episcopate is not in itself a distinct order, since it has no power of order of its own over either the *corpus verum* or the *corpus mysticum*, other than those of the priesthood, it does have its own “power of jurisdiction”¹³ exercised over the *corpus mysticum*, without which, in particular, the power of order of the keys cannot be exercised by priests; through his consecration, which is not sacramental, the bishop receives graces or charisms enabling him to perform the specific acts manifesting his “principate in the Church,”¹⁴ such as confirmation, ordination, the dedication of churches and the consecration of virgins.

Bonaventure takes up Albert's idea of the two proper acts to which each degree of the order is ordered, firstly on the *corpus verum Christi*, and, to this end, on its *corpus mysticum*. Thus, in the presbyterate, “the noblest order,” this “completion of power” (*consummatio potestatis*) unfolds in the Eucharistic consecration and in the absolution given to the faithful¹⁵. But the Franciscan doctor, no doubt dissatisfied with the Dominican's account of episcopal specificity, is not content to juxtapose the power of order for the priesthood and the power of jurisdiction for the episcopate. He recognizes that the bishop's consecration does not add a new

¹⁰ Alexander of Hales, *Glossa in quatuor libros Sententiarum*, 410 and 412.

¹¹ Albert the Great, *Tractatus de Sacramentis*, VIII, q. 3, resp., ed. A. Ohlmeyer, “Alberti Magni Opera Omnia 26” (Aschendorff, 1958), 140.

¹² Albert the Great, *IV Sent.* dist. 24, a. 5, resp., ed. E. Borgnet, “B. Alberti Magni Opera Omnia, 30” (Paris: Vivès, 1894), 36.

¹³ Albert the Great, *IV Sent.*, a. 39, resp., 81.

¹⁴ Albert the Great, *Tract. de Sacr.* q. 3, 141.

¹⁵ Bonaventure, *IV Sent.* dist. 24, pars 2, a. 2, q. 4, resp. “S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia, 4” (Quaracchi, 1889), 636.

power of order with a new character, but rather an increase in priestly power, within the same order, so that he is placed in a position of “eminence” within the same priesthood.¹⁶

2. Thomas Aquinas draws from his treasure trove of the new and the old

From a first point of view, St Thomas fits into this theological line. He systematizes and, in a way, radicalizes the Latin doctrine of the Order's seven degrees. As for the number of degrees, he does not simply list several solutions received from his predecessors (three, seven, nine), presenting them as possible (Alexander of Hales) or preferring one of them (William of Auxerre). From a sacramental point of view, he dismisses as irrelevant and even inconsistent (“that's saying nothing”) any position other than the septenary as ordered to the Eucharist, with the presbyteral priesthood at its apex:

The sacrament of order is ordered to the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is the sacrament of sacraments, as Denys says [...]. [...] Thus, the distinction between orders must be taken from the relationship to the Eucharist, since the power of order is in view either of the consecration of the Eucharist itself, or of a ministry to be ordained to it. In the first case, it is the order of priests (*ordo sacerdotum*).¹⁷

Because of its direct power over Eucharistic consecration, the presbyterate or “priestly order” constitutes the “principal order” (*principalis ordo*), to which the other six, starting with the diaconate, are attached by virtue of their service, as “orders of those who serve” (*ordines ministrantium*).¹⁸ In this respect, the episcopate is not an order, since the bishop, even if he be the pope, does not consecrate the Eucharist more or better than a simple priest, and can only do so in virtue of the same priestly character received by means of the same presbyteral ordination.¹⁹

However, in view of this categorical determination by the young sententiary bachelor, it's worth noting the care taken by Thomas to mention the order *as a sacrament*: the septennium

¹⁶ Bonaventure, *IV Sent.*, q. 3, ad 4, 634: “I concede that the episcopate necessarily includes the most perfect order (*includit necessario ordinem perfectissimum*), namely the priesthood, and that it adds to it a certain eminence (*superaddit aliquem eminentiam*), which its very name insinuates, since ‘episcopus’ comes from ‘epi’, which means ‘above’.”

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, d. 24, q. 2, a. 1, q^{la} 2, resp. The formula *sed hoc nihil est* recurs three times before the correct solution is introduced by exclusion of the previous ones: *et ideo aliter dicendum est, quod...*

¹⁸ *ScG IV*, cap. 75.

¹⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, d. 25, q. 1, a. 1, ad 3: “For the consecration of the Body of Christ, the pope possesses no greater power than a simple priest (*simplex sacerdos*).”

does indeed correspond to the “sacrament of order,” as ordered to the Eucharist, and not to “order” *simpliciter*, in an exclusive sense that would exhaust the reality of ordained ministries in the Church.

In this formalization of Latin doctrine, Thomas introduces several clarifications that sometimes border on correction. Firstly, within the primary ordination of the order to the making of the *corpus verum Christi*, he explicitly extends the sacramental power of order to all the sacraments. As early as the *Scriptum*, he takes over from Bonaventure the notion of “dispensation of the sacraments,”²⁰ to make wider use of it and thus specify order as a sacrament, “by which one is ordained to the dispensation of the other sacraments.”²¹ It is even by this means that, still with Bonaventure, he explains the sacramental nature of the order, the order being a sacrament because it confers the power to dispense the sacraments and must therefore be in itself what it is the cause of:

What a thing causes, it must all the more cause itself. Now order is the cause by which we become dispensers of the other sacraments. Order therefore has more reason than the other “sacraments” to be a sacrament.²²

But at the very moment when he seems to be pushing to the limit the Latin conception of an order strictly limited to seven degrees, with the priesthood at its apex, Thomas makes a striking overture in favor of the fact that the episcopate, too, is indeed an “order”.

3. The episcopate is an order

Until then, Peter Lombard assertion that the episcopate was not an “order” but a “dignity” had dominated all scholastic writings. Faced with the objection that both Isidore and Denys spoke of the episcopate as an “order”, Thomas's predecessors felt obliged to interpret this as an “equivocal,” improper or “amplified” use of the word, to be understood more accurately as an

²⁰ Bonaventure, *IV Sent.*, dist. 24, pars 1, a. 2, q. 2, resp., 603: “Since the power of order is ordained to the distribution of the sacraments, ministers must be ordained to this by the reception of a sacrament.”

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, d. 24, q. 1, a. 2, q^{la} 1, resp. Cf. Bonaventure, *IV Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 3, obj. 2: “By the sacrament of order are constituted the dispensers of the other sacraments”; Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, d. 17, q. 3, a. 5, q^{la} 1, resp.: “Through confession, one submits to the ministers of the Church, who are dispensers of the sacraments”; Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, d. 24, q. 1, a. 2, q^{la} 2, resp.: “The deacon possesses in the dispensation of the sacraments a certain spiritual power which the others do not possess”; *ScG IV*, cap. 74: “the power of order is ordered to the dispensation of the sacraments.”

²² Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, dist. 24, q. 1, a. 1, q^{la} 3, s.c. Cf. Bonaventure, *IV Sent.* dist. 24, pars 1, a. 2, q. 2, resp. 616: “Since this power is ordered to the distribution of the sacraments, it was necessary that the ministers be ordered to this by the reception of a certain sacrament.”

“office” or a “dignity,” the vocabulary of the Latin masters being in this respect “stricter” (*strictius*).²³

But Thomas, in fidelity to Denys, categorically affirms that the episcopate is truly an “order” in its own right. To this end, he distinguishes between two analogical ways of understanding the word:

“Order” can be taken in two senses. In the first sense, as a sacrament; then, as we have already said, the whole order is ordered to the sacrament of the Eucharist; also, since the bishop has in this respect no power superior to that of a priest, the episcopate will not be an order. In another sense, we can consider the order according to whether it concerns a certain office concerning certain sacred actions (*respectu quarundam actionum sacrarum*); and then, since the bishop possesses, above the priests, a power over the sacred actions concerning the mystical body, then the episcopate will be an order.²⁴

Whereas Albert did not grant the bishop any sacred power of his own, but only a power of jurisdiction, and Bonaventure only recognized the bishop as an amplification of the priestly power previously received, without any sacred power of his own, – Thomas recognized in the episcopate a true order, insofar as it entails the solemn reception of specific powers, which are not merely jurisdictional, but empower the bishop to perform certain specifically episcopal sacred acts:

The episcopal power is not only of jurisdiction, but also of order, in the common sense of the word ‘order’.²⁵

In one of his later developments on the subject, Thomas holds the refusal to consider the episcopate as an order to be “manifestly” erroneous and repeats that the proper nature of episcopal power is not limited to jurisdiction. With reverence and restraint, relying on the quasi-divine authority of Pseudo-Dionysius, he corrects his master Albert on these two points and

²³ Albert le Grand, *Tract. de sacr.*, VIII, q. 3, ad 3, 141; Bonaventure, *IV Sent.*, dist. 24, pars 2, a. 2, q. 3, ad 1–3, 633.

²⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, d. 24, q. 3, a. 2, q^{la} 2, resp. Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium de ecclesiastica hierarchia*, cap. 5, ed. Maria Burger, “Alberti Magni Opera Omnia 36/2” (Aschendorff, 1999), 121, had admittedly paved the way for his disciple, but in a timid and restrictive way, by limiting the meaning of the word *ordo*, “strictly speaking” (*sicut proprie dicitur*), to its application to the priestly and spiritual power to make the sacraments, its extension to episcopal power, restricted to jurisdiction, thus remaining inappropriate, even in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, ad 3.

refutes his secular opponents who, like Gerard of Abbeville, eroded the distinction between priests and bishops:

As for the fourth objection, that the episcopate is not an order, it clearly contains an error if understood absolutely. Denys explicitly states that there are three orders of ecclesiastical hierarchy, and we find [in Isidore, *De ecclesiasticis officiis*, 24] that the order of bishops is quadripartite.” The bishop in fact possesses an order in relation to the *mystical body of Christ*, the Church, over which he receives a quasi-royal office of principate; but as for the *true body of Christ* contained in the sacrament, he does not possess an order above the priest. That he possesses a certain order, and not just jurisdiction like the archdeacon or the parish priest, can be seen in the fact that the bishop can do many things that he cannot delegate, such as conferring orders, consecrating basilicas, etc., whereas he can delegate what falls under jurisdiction. This is also apparent in the fact that if a deposed bishop is reinstated, he is not consecrated again, in the manner of a power of order that remains (*tamquam potestate ordinis remanente*), as happens in other orders.²⁶

Thomas' innovation consists in centering the specific spiritual powers proper to the bishop on the *corpus mysticum Christi*. Whereas Albert granted each of the seven degrees of the order its own power and therefore also its own act over each of the two bodies, the *verum* and the *mysticum*, at the cost of confining the episcopate to the sole domain of jurisdiction, Thomas specifies the entire sacramental seven-year period through the exercise of a power of consecration exercised over the *corpus verum*, while recognizing in the episcopate a spiritual power of another kind, directly ordered to the government of the *corpus mysticum*.

4. Two juxtaposed lines of hierarchical power: priestly and royal

This undeniable revalorization of the episcopate, under the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius, certainly comes at the cost of an unfortunate juxtaposition between two lines of hierarchical power, due to the impossibility of fundamentally challenging the Latin doctrine of the sevenfold order: on the one hand, a priestly line, properly sacramental, with the septennium culminating in the presbyterate; on the other, a “royal” line, dealing with the government of the Church, with the triad of episcopate, presbyterate and diaconate. These two hierarchical lines each carry

²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *De Perfectione spiritualis vitae*, c. 28, ed. Hyacinthe F. Dondaine, Leo. 41 (1992), 108.

powers “of a different kind.”²⁷ Although the episcopate is at the apex of the royal line, it is still not considered a character-imparting sacrament, even though it is recognized as an authentic hierarchical power, sacred by its origin in a “solemn consecration or blessing,”²⁸ unamissible and non-repeatable.

Indeed, Thomas Aquinas sees the presence of a quasi-episcopal character in the fact that a deposed bishop is never consecrated again, proof that he retains in himself a stable effect of his consecration, “as happens in other orders,” unlike a power of simple jurisdiction which disappears at the discretion of the authority which had delegated it. Indeed, he is not afraid to assimilate episcopal power to a power of order, “in the manner of a power of order that remains,” and thus to recognize an indelible mark on it.

Yet he also holds that a spiritual power transmitted through a solemn consecration, as is the case for the bishop, is sacramental:

Spiritual power is twofold: sacramental and jurisdictional. Sacramental power is that which is transmitted through consecration. Now, all the consecrations of the Church are immutable, as long as the consecrated thing remains, as we see even in inanimate things, since an altar, once consecrated, is only consecrated again if it has been destroyed. Such power, then, according to its essence, remains in the man who has received it by consecration as long as he lives, even if he falls into schism and heresy, as is shown by the fact that, if he re-enters the Church, he is not consecrated again. [...] Jurisdictional power, on the other hand, is that which is conferred by simple human disposition. Such power does not remain immutable.²⁹

Given that there are only two types of spiritual power – sacramental or jurisdictional – and that sacramental power is that which is transmitted through a blessing, and therefore remains immutable in the one who receives it, and that the power received by the bishop is not jurisdictional, since it is received by consecration and therefore immutable in him, it is hard to understand why the episcopate should not be sacramental. Here again, Thomas seems to be hampered in his thinking by the weight of Latin tradition and its sacramental sevenfold order.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, d. 24, q. 3, a. 2, q^{la} 3, ad 3: “The power of the bishop surpasses the power of the priest as a power of a different kind (*alterius generis*).”

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *De Perf. spir. vit.*, c. 28, 107. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, d. 25, q. 1, a. 2, resp.: “Any power given with a certain consecration can never be lost, just as the consecration itself cannot be annulled. Therefore, since episcopal consecration is given with a certain consecration, it must remain in perpetuity, as many times as one has sinned or been cut off from the Church.”

²⁹ *ST II^a–II^{ae}*, q. 39, a. 3, resp.

Whatever the case, Thomas makes it clear that the episcopate is not an amplification by eminence of priestly power, as Bonaventure thought; still less is it a mere jurisdiction, as Albert taught. It belongs to a hierarchy of government other than that of the priesthood, and even superior to it, since, in many respects, the exercise of the priesthood is placed under the dependence of the episcopal hierarchy.

5. How can the presbyterate, which is sacramental, derive from the episcopate, which is not sacramental?

Certainly, prisoner of the error according to which episcopal consecration does not impart any character, does not confer any priestly power in itself and therefore necessarily presupposes presbyteral ordination, S. Thomas feels obliged to write that “episcopal power depends on the priestly, since no one can receive the episcopal if he does not first possess the priestly.”³⁰ But, in a very personal and innovative way, he insists much more on an inverse dependence, that which concretely links the exercise of the presbyteral priesthood to the "quasi-royal" power of the bishop. It is true that the priest possesses in himself, by virtue of his priestly character, the power to consecrate the *verum corpus Christi*, without having to hold it, as in the case of the sacrament of penance, “by commission of the bishop,”³¹ since the latter has no superior power in this respect. Thomas points out, however, that “priestly power derives from episcopal power,”³² right down to the consecration of the Eucharist. Even if the priest possesses the full priestly character and, in this respect, the bishop does not consecrate the *verum corpus* any more or better than he does, it is nonetheless true that, for the entire dispensation of the sacraments, and therefore for the entire function of sanctification, the power of priests is always exercised as a *derivative of* that of the bishops, as a mediation between the bishop and the people:

The minister of a sacrament does not produce the effect of the sacrament by his own power, as the principal agent, but by the efficacy of the sacrament he dispenses; and this efficacy comes in the first place from Christ and, from him, descends to others in an orderly fashion, namely to the people through the mediation of the ministers who dispense the sacraments, and to the lower

³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent*, d. 24, q. 3, a. 2, q^{la} 2, s.c. Cf. Alexander of Hales, *Glossa...*, IV, dist. 24, § 5, 416: “Episcopal consecration is not performed on someone who is not a priest”; Bonaventure, *IV Sent*, dist. 24, pars 2, a. 2, q. 3, contra, 616: “It is impossible to promote someone to the episcopate if he is not a priest.” These last two authors refer to the *Decretals* issued by Gregory IX in 1234.

³¹ *ST* III, q. 82, a. 1, ad 4.

³² *ScG* IV, cap. 76.

ministers through the mediation of the higher “ministers” who sanctify the matter. This is why, in all the sacraments that require a sanctified matter, the primary sanctification of the matter is done by the bishop, and its use sometimes by a priest, in order to show that priestly power is derived from episcopal (*ut ostendatur sacerdotalis potestas ab episcopali derivata*), according to what Ps 132:2 says: “Like oil on the head,” which descends first to the beard, and then to the collar of the garment.³³

This derivation of episcopal power to priestly power applies not only to sacraments requiring material that has already been consecrated, such as baptism or the anointing of the sick. It also applies in the case of the Eucharist, where priests already possess, by virtue of their ordination, the summit character of the sacrament of Holy Orders:

The sacrament of the Eucharist consists in the sanctification of the matter itself, but not in its use. Therefore, strictly speaking, what is the matter of the sacrament is not something consecrated, from which it follows that a sanctification of the matter by the bishop is not required beforehand; but the sanctification of the altar and things of this kind is required, as well as that of the priest himself, which can only be done by the bishop. This shows how, in this sacrament too (*in illo etiam sacramento*), priestly power is derived from the bishop (*ab episcopo derivata*), as Denys says. This is why the priest can consecrate matter, which is in itself a sacrament, not that which is ordained as a sacramental to a sacrament which consists in its use by the faithful, for as to the true body of Christ, no order is superior to that of priests, but as to the mystical body of Christ, the episcopal order is superior to the priestly.³⁴

While it remains true that episcopal consecration adds nothing to the person who receives it in relation to the priesthood previously conferred in presbyteral ordination, the very exercise of this priestly power by ordinary priests is always carried out according to a certain derivation from the royal power of the bishop, a sign of the concrete interweaving of the two hierarchical lines. This is evident not only in the fact that the priest himself could only be ordained by the bishop, not only in the fact that in the exercise of the consecration of the *verum corpus* the priest uses instruments and officiates on an altar that only the bishop could consecrate, but because, more profoundly, insofar as the priest himself offers the sacrifice, he “participates” in the “perfective power” proper to the bishop, through which the latter dispenses the highest spiritual goods to the whole *corpus mysticum*:

³³ Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, d. 23, q. 1, a. 3, q^a 3, resp.

³⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, ad 1.

In what is ordained, the inferior always participates in something of the perfection of the superior (*participat aliquid de perfectione superioris*), as Denys says. [...] Also, since the order of the priest is in continuity (*continuus est*) with that of the bishop, he also participates in something of the perfective power as to the perfection by which one is perfected within oneself, but not as to the perfection by which one is established in a higher degree, as is the case with order, or in a higher office, as is the case with confirmation. This is why the priest participates in the bishop's power to consecrate, but not in his power to confirm or ordain. That he possesses it in a *participatory* way, Denys says, is evident from the fact that the priest consecrates on an altar consecrated by the bishop and in vessels consecrated by the bishop, himself having also been consecrated by the bishop.³⁵

Under the beneficent influence of Pseudo-Dionysius, Thomas clearly attenuates the distinction between the two hierarchical lines – sacramental and royal – by placing the former under the authority of the latter, or rather, only the latter, in the person of the bishop, can give the former all its “perfective power”, so that the priest, even as he uses the sacramental power of the order by consecrating the *corpus verum*, also participates in the royal power of the bishop. The fact that the priest's priestly power is “in continuity” with that of the bishop, by mode of participation, clearly demonstrates, far from any watertight compartmentalization, that a real and direct influence is exerted by the bishop's royal power on the priest's priestly power, and not merely juxtaposed to it. This places the bishop in a position of superiority even within the priestly order in view of the Eucharist, and not only in the hierarchical line of government.

Thomas thus clearly implies that the bishop, in particular, is the *primary* minister of the Eucharist, the priest participating in a second and derivative way, as a “mediator”, in this perfective power which he receives from the bishop through ordination and by celebrating in the instruments consecrated by the bishop:

³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, d. 13, q. 1, a. 1, q^{la} 2, ad 2. The same doctrine, unchanged, is found in *ST* III, q. 82, a. 4, ad 3: “Just as the deacon participates in some way in the illuminating power of the priest, inasmuch as he dispenses the blood, so the priest participates in the perfective dispensation of the bishop (*participat perfectivam dispensationem episcopi*), inasmuch as he dispenses this sacrament by which man is perfected in favor of himself (*secundum se*) by conjunction with Christ. The other perfections, by which man is perfected in relation to others (*per comparationem ad alios*), are reserved to the bishop.” The bishop's dispensation of the Eucharist thus possesses a perfective quality of its own, and it's hard to see how it can be anything other than sacramental, in which the priest “participates” without fully possessing it himself. Either it does not derive from the priestly character common to priests and bishops, or this character derives from ordination, which only the bishop can communicate.

The power to consecrate is conferred not only on bishops, but also on priests, for the priestly order holds the middle ground (*est medius*) between the bishop and the people. So, just as in the angelic hierarchy the illuminations reach the lower order through the mediation of the superior, so all the sacraments that are dispensed in common to all the people are conferred by priests, and so it is with all the sacraments that do not establish in a status or degree above the others.³⁶

Thomas could have explained that the power to consecrate the Eucharist is conferred not on bishops as such, but on priests, the bishops themselves having to have received the priestly character before their consecration, which would have kept the two hierarchical lines watertightly separated. Here, however, he writes that the power to consecrate is conferred not *only* on bishops, but also on priests, making bishops the primary, though not exclusive, ministers of the Eucharist.

6. How is the dispensation of certain sacraments reserved for the episcopate, which is not sacramental?

A tricky point, for Thomas, is to account for the fact that the order “in so far as it is a sacrament”, i.e. the septennium culminating in the presbyterate, although defined by the dispensation of the sacraments, does not *de facto* have a monopoly on this dispensation, since the bishop, who is not a degree of the sacramental order, possesses in his own right the sacramental power to confirm and ordain. Thomas attempts to overcome this aporia by relying on the primacy of purpose that belongs to the Eucharist, as the summit of the sacraments, whose primary and direct effect is to sanctify those who receive it, without in itself conferring on them any particular place or mission in the *corpus mysticum*. Confirmation and ordination, on the other hand, have an effect which is not primarily an increase in sanctity, but the granting of a personal and particular promotion within the ecclesial body, with a view to a mission, which is why their dispensation is specifically the responsibility of the episcopate, which for this reason constitutes a true order, endowed with spiritual powers of its own.³⁷ In other words, the royal hierarchical order, of which the episcopate is the summit, although not in itself ordered to the dispensation

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, resp.

³⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *IV Sent.*, d. 7, q. 3, a. 1, q^{la} 2, ad 2: “The Eucharist, like confirmation and order, is a sacrament that perfects. But it differs from the others in that, in order and confirmation, what constitutes the *res et sacramentum* is something acquired in the one who receives them; so these sacraments promote the one who receives them to a certain perfection beyond the common status of the faithful. But for the Eucharist, the *res et sacramentum* is found in itself, not in the one who receives it; so by receiving the Eucharist one acquires no perfection beyond the common state, since no character is imprinted, each being perfected in his own state.”

of the sacraments, and although not formally recognized as sacramental, includes in its own right the power to confer certain sacraments, those which contribute directly to the perfecting of the *corpus mysticum*.

This solution is not really satisfactory, as it forces us to mutilate the specific purpose of the sacramental order, which is the dispensation of the sacraments. Indeed, at least two sacraments are reserved to the order of royal government of the faithful, so that the dispensation of the sacraments fails to characterize in its own right the sacramental order of the priesthood. Even from the vantage point of Eucharistic consecration, Thomas must recognize that the priestly power of priests derives from the royal power of bishops, not in its proper act, which is consecration itself, but in its origin as well as in its concrete exercise in the service of the faithful, and thus in the building up of the *corpus mysticum*. Nevertheless, Thomas's work is of great interest to the historian of theology, insofar as, on the fringes of the theology of order and even closely linked to it, he develops for the first time an authentic theology of the episcopate, which had remained embryonic among his predecessors.

7. S. Jerome and his opinion on the origin of the episcopate

If the authority of Pseudo-Dionysius provided Thomas with the authorized instruments to begin rectifying the shortcomings of Latin theology concerning the episcopate, it also enabled him to rectify the interpretation of several biblical texts, despite the patronage of S. Jerome who had initiated them.

Indeed, Jerome believed that he could base his thesis on several Pauline verses, according to which, in apostolic times, the two names “episcopos” and “presbyters” referred to the same persons, designating one and the same ministry of governing the local Churches. The identity *in re* of presbyters and episcopates enabled Jerome to affirm that there was only one ministry of collegial authority in the early Church, with no difference in degree between episcopates and presbyters, since these two titles designated the same persons. This implied that the distinction of these names into two different ministries, far from originating with Christ and the Apostles, was a later ecclesiastical decision. Jerome's intention was nothing less than to deny the divine origin of the superiority of the episcopate over the presbyterate, seeing it merely as an ecclesiastical institution, put in place to limit the effects of internal rivalries and prevent schisms.

Jerome's demonstration takes its starting point in a passage from the epistle to Titus:

Let us listen carefully to the words of the Apostle when he says: “That you may establish presbyters in the cities, as I have instructed you” (Tit. 1:5). Explaining what qualities the presbyter to be ordained must possess – namely, “he must be blameless, the husband of one wife” (Tit. 1:6), etc. – he then affirms: “the episcope, indeed, must be blameless in his capacity as God's steward” (Tit. 1:7). It is therefore the same person who is presbyter and episcope (*idem est ergo presbyter qui episcopus*). And before the devil instigated passions into religion, and communities said: “I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to Cephas” (1 Cor. 1:12), the Churches were governed by the common council of presbyters. But once everyone thought that those he had baptized belonged to him, not to Christ, it was decreed throughout the universe that one of the presbyters would be elected to be placed above the others (*unus de presbyteris electus superponeretur ceteris*), so that he would have full charge of the Church and the task of eliminating the seeds of schism.³⁸

Reading Paul, there's no doubt that the hierarchy of the local churches was not threefold (bishop, priests and deacons), but only twofold, with episcopos and deacons. Jerome, as an exegete, was not mistaken in affirming that Paul uses the words “presbyters” and “episcopos” as synonyms, to designate the same people. He finds confirmation in another Pauline verse, taken from the address of the epistle to the Philippians:

If anyone thinks that the identity of episcopus and presbyter (*episcopum et presbyterum esse unum*) – the one name designating age, the other function – is not the view of Scripture, but ours, let him reread what the Apostle says to the Philippians: “Paul and Timothy, servant of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the episcopos and deacons: to you grace and peace” (Phil. 1:1). Philip is a single city in Macedonia, and there certainly could not have been in one and the same city several episcopos [bishops] as they are now considered (*ut nunc putantur*). But because in those days episcopos were the same as those who were also called presbyters, this is why the Apostle speaks indifferently of episcopos as of presbyters (*indifferenter de episcopis quasi de presbyteris est locutus*).³⁹

In Paul's time, the title *episcopus* did not yet designate, as in Jerome's time, the sole head of a particular Church, but was applied, as a synonym, to each and every one of the presbyters who collegially exercised its government.

Paul's speech to the elders of the Church of Ephesus, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, provides further New Testament support for Jerome's exegesis:

³⁸ Jerome, *Commentarium in epistulam Pauli apostoli ad Titum*, 1, 5b, ed. Federica Bucchi, CCSL 77/C (2003), 14.

³⁹ Jerome, *Commentarium in epistulam Pauli apostoli ad Titum*.

If this still seems doubtful, here is the proof of another testimony. In the Acts of the Apostles, it is written that Paul, when he arrived in Miletus, having left Ephesus aside and called the presbyters of that city, said among other things to them: “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you bishops to feed the Church of God, which he purchased with the price of his blood” (Acts 20:28). Observe carefully how, calling the presbyters of a single city, Ephesus, he then names these same people *episcopos (unius civitatis Ephesi presbyteros vocans, postea eosdem episcopos dixerit)*.⁴⁰

From all these New Testament verses, Jerome draws the very confident conclusion that the establishment of the monarchical episcopate, as he himself knew it and as it still exists today, did not date back to Christ or the Apostles, but to a later ecclesiastical decision – about which he was obviously unable to say anything precise, other than that it was progressive – aimed at preventing rivalries between clerics and thus schisms. Episcopacy is not an institution of divine right, but merely an ecclesiastical custom. Jerome makes a point of warning bishops and priests alike:

All this is to show that among the ancients, presbyters were the same persons as bishops (*eosdem fuisse presbyteros quos et episcopos*), but that gradually (*paulatim*), in order to root out the seeds of dissension, all solicitude was transferred to one. Let the priests, then, know that it is by custom of the Church (*ex Ecclesiae consuetudine*) that they are subject to the one who was placed at their head; and let the bishops, likewise, know that it is more by custom than by a true decision of the Lord (*magis consuetudine quam dispositionis dominicæ veritate*) that they are superior to the presbyters and that they must lead the Church in common [with them].⁴¹

The strength of all these scriptural references, combined with Jerome's personal authority on this point in the Latin tradition – which indeed found here the major justification for the expulsion of the episcopate from the order's septennium – made Thomas' position a delicate one. Yet Thomas is not afraid to deploy his art of the *exponere reventer*, demonstrating the falsity of Jerome's thesis without ever directly attacking him, and shifting the responsibility to others, in particular to an obscure heretic who barely predates Jerome, and who on this point defended ideas close to his own.

⁴⁰ Jerome, *Commentarium in epistulam Pauli apostoli ad Titum*, 14–15.

⁴¹ Jerome, *Commentarium in epistulam Pauli apostoli ad Titum*, 15–16.

8. S. Thomas reverently corrects Jérôme

It was his dispute with secular theologians over the comparative status of religious and simple priests, and in particular with Gerard of Abbeville, that gave him the opportunity to develop his refutation, in *De perfectione vitae spiritualis* dated 1270. Gerard used these texts by Jerome to prove that simple priests belong to the same state of perfection as bishops and are therefore superior to religious. In the first centuries of the Church, Gerard explains, quoting Jerome, “‘presbyters’ and ‘bishops’ were synonymous names” and “the Churches were governed by the common council of priests (*communi presbyterorum consilio*),” but “later, to suppress the seeds of schisms, it was decided throughout the world that one of the presbyters would take the place [of this council] (*unus de presbyteris supponeretur*) as a remedy for schisms.”⁴² If, then, “the rectors of the whole Church (*rectores totius Ecclesiae*) from the time of the primitive Church to the time of Jerome, which was Augustine's time”, i.e. priests also known as bishops, were in a state of perfection, then so too, Gerard concludes, are today's priests.

Taking up this argument almost word for word as an objection,⁴³ Thomas responds at length, taking care not to attack Jerome head-on. He begins by disputing, on the facts, that the distinction between priests and bishops was a late one, foreign to the early Church. He first appeals to the authority of Pseudo-Dionysius, who, supposedly living at the time of the Apostles, affirms and thus testifies that there were then three degrees of the order, and thus in particular that, from that time, the bishop was already distinct from the priest and “greater than him.”⁴⁴ Implicitly, Thomas reproaches Gerard for making Saint Jerome say what he could not *a priori* have said, since a holy doctor, even an authorized one like himself, cannot have contradicted a companion of the Apostles.

To better guarantee the truth of the facts and anticipating the objection that the Apostles might have instituted a hierarchical order that did not come from Christ himself, Thomas appeals to Luke's Gospel, with the episode of the selection of the seventy-two disciples. He thus

⁴² Gerard of Abbeville, *Quodlibet* XIV, q. 1, ed. Philip Grand, “Le *Quodlibet* XIV de Gerard of Abbeville. La vie de Gerard of Abbeville,” *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 31 (1964): 207–69 (233).

⁴³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De Perf. spir. vit.*, c. 24, obj. 4, 100. Thomas corrects Gerard by substituting the verb *praeponeretur* for *supponeretur*, a mistranslation of Jerome's *superponetur*, which clearly indicates how one of the priests was placed above the others as head of the local Church with the title of bishop.

⁴⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *De Perf. spir. vit.*, c. 27, ad 4, 104: “In order that no one may falsely claim that it was in Jerome's time that the custom of considering the bishop as greater (*major sit*) than the priest arose, we must have recourse to the authority of Denys, who describes the order of the hierarchical Church as it existed in the primitive Church.”

intends to prove that the superiority of bishops, successors of the Apostles, over priests, successors of these seventy-two, is immediately divine:

So that no one says that Denys reports a hierarchical Church order instituted by the Apostles, while by institution of the Lord (*ex Domini institutione*) priests would be identical to bishops, this is manifestly false from what Luke says (Lk. 10:1): “After this the Lord appointed...,” where the Glosis writes: “Just as in the Apostles is found the type (*forma*) of bishops, so in the Seventy the type of priests.” It is astonishing to see how, while quoting this passage, they ignore its proper meaning, immediately asserting afterwards that it would only have been in Jerome's time that bishops would have been distinguished from priests.⁴⁵

In fact, in an argument set out a short time earlier, Gerard used this passage from the Glosa – taken, incidentally, from Bede's commentary on Luke's Gospel⁴⁶ – to prove that Christ had instituted no more than two orders among his disciples, the Twelve and the Seventy-two, the type of bishops and priests, without the religious, who cannot therefore claim to be in a state of perfection superior to that of priests.⁴⁷ How can we affirm, with Jerome, that the episcopate was not instituted by the Church until several centuries after Christ, after having recalled that bishops take the place of the Apostles instituted by Christ? In truth, Gerard was not the first to demonstrate such inconsistency. Already before him, several masters of the XII^e century seem not to have been stopped by this aporia. Thus, Hugh of Saint Victor, echoing Yvo of Chartres, then Peter Lombard, when dealing with the presbyterate and the episcopate, begin by recalling how Christ instituted the Twelve and then the Seventy-two, whose place in the Church is now taken by bishops and priests, before asserting that the primitive Church comprised only two orders, priests and deacons, without mentioning bishops, who therefore do not belong to a sacred order.⁴⁸ Moreover, neither Albert nor Bonaventure, in their treatises *on ordination*, referred to the figure of the Seventy-two in connection with the Twelve, thus evading the question of the historical origins of the episcopate and maintaining it outside any sacramentality. Thomas, on the other hand, removes the contradiction of upholding the purely ecclesiastical institution of the episcopate, while at the same time brandishing the figure of the

⁴⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *De Perf. spir. vit.*

⁴⁶ Cf. Bede, *In Lucae Evangelium expositio*, X, 1, ed. David Hurt, CCSL 120 (1960), 213–214: “Just as no one doubts that the Twelve manifest and at the same time anticipate the type (*formam*) of bishops, so it must be known that these Seventy-two figured (*figuram gessisse*) the presbyters, i.e. priests of the second order.”

⁴⁷ Cf. Gerard of Abbeville, *Quodlibet* XIV, q. 1, 232.

⁴⁸ Cf. Yvo of Chartres, *Sermones...*, 2, 518–519; Hugh of Saint Victor, *De Sacramentis*, III, cap. 11–12, 353.355; Peter Lombard, *Sententiae*, IV, dist. 24, cap. 11–12, 404–405.

Seventy-two as an adjunct to the Twelve. In fact, he goes even further back, pointing out that the distinction between bishops and priests had been prepared in the Old Covenant, with the “high priest (*summus pontifex*)”, Aaron, already clearly set apart and above the “lower priests (*minores sacerdotes*)”,⁴⁹ Aaron's sons.

Once the facts had been established (the divine origin of the distinction between episcopate and presbyterate), it remained for Thomas to resolve the exegetical difficulty raised by Jerome, on which the latter had stumbled without openly contradicting him. The reverence with which he treats the holy doctor only apparently conceals the correction he inflicts on him. According to him, Gerard and the seculars, in asserting the original identity of bishops and presbyters, had misunderstood Jerome's thinking. The latter would have meant that, behind the difference in names, lay a real difference between two orders, even if Paul would have applied both names indifferently to both orders:

Hence it appears that [Gerard] has a false understanding (*falsum intellectum concipit*) of Jerome's text. Indeed, Jerome does not mean to say that, in the early Church, the order or status of bishops was the same as that of priests (*idem esset ordo vel status episcoporum et presbyterorum*), but that these two words were used in very similar ways, since priests were called bishops because of their attention (*quasi intendentes*)⁵⁰, and bishops were called priests because of their dignity. This is why Isidore [*Etymologiae*, VII, 21] says that “simple priests (*presbyteri minores*), although they are *sacerdotes*, nevertheless do not possess the office of the pontificate, since they neither sign the forehead with chrism nor give the paraclete Spirit, which the reading of the Acts of the Apostles proves belongs only to the bishops;” and he concludes: “Therefore, among the ancients, the same who were bishops were also priests (*idem episcopi et presbyteri fuerunt*), for this name designates dignity, not age.” This shows that there is a real difference (*differentia in re*) but a nominal proximity (*convenientia in nomine*), due to the dignity implied in the name “presbyterate”. Subsequently, however, to avoid the error of schism arising from the synonymy of the names, it became necessary to differentiate the names as well, so that only the greatest priests (*majores presbyteri*) would be called bishops, and only the least great (*minores*) priests.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *De Perf. spir. vit.*, c. 27, ad 4, 104.

⁵⁰ Cf. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIX, 19, ed. G. Bardy, BA 37 (1960), 136–137: “The Apostle says: ‘He who desires the episcopate desires a good work’ (1 Tm 3, 1). He wanted to explain what the episcopate is: that this word indicates an office, not an honor (*nomen operis, non honoris*). This is indeed a Greek word, derived from the fact that he who is prepossessed is attentive (*superintendit*) to those to whom he is prepossessed, i.e. takes care of them (*curam eorum gerens*), for σκοπός means attention (*intentio*).” Thomas had quoted this explanation from Augustine a little earlier, *De Perf. spir. vit.*, c. 22, 95.

⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, *De Perf. spir. vit.*, c. 27, ad 4, 104.

By attributing to Jerome the idea that the two names “episcopate” and “presbyterate” had been applied indifferently to two orders clearly distinct *in re*, Thomas wanted to exonerate the holy doctor from an error that had become serious in his eyes: that of believing that these two names, like perfect synonyms, referred to one and the same order, unique, to designate two qualities: the function (overseeing the flock) and the dignity (of elders), so that the primitive Church would not have known the difference between bishops and priests. For Thomas, who lends Jerome this position as the only orthodox one in his eyes, the two names were applied to the two orders, even though they were already clearly distinguished, because of their similarities: bishops, like priests, are attentive to the sheep entrusted to their care (“episcopate”), and for this they receive a particular dignity in the ecclesial body (“presbyterate”). But as this proximity of names could lead to confusion, there came a time when each of them was reserved for a particular order.

The difficulty, for us, is that Thomas modifies Jerome's thought – without pointing it out or realizing it. He twists it in a direction that was not his own. All Jerome's texts on this subject affirm that the names “episcopus” and “presbyter” refer to the same persons, members of the same order and exercising the same functions:

It is therefore the same who is presbyter and episcopus (*idem est ergo presbyter qui episcopus*). [...] At that time, episcopos were the same as those who were also called presbyters (*eosdem episcopos illo in tempore quos et presbyteros appellabant*). [...] Calling the presbyters of a single city, Ephesus, <Paul> then names these same people episcopos (*unius civitatis Ephesi presbyteros vocans, postea eosdem episcopos dixerit*). [...] Among the ancients, presbyters were the same people as episcopos (*eosdem fuisse presbyteros quos et episcopos*).⁵²

The Apostle clearly teaches that those who are presbyters are the same as those who are bishops (*Apostolus perspicue doceat eosdem esse presbyteros quos et episcopos*). [...] Listen to yet another text (Titus 1:5–7) where it is manifestly proven that it is the same person who is an episcopus and a presbyter (*manifestissime conprobatur eundem esse episcopum atque presbyterum*).⁵³

For Jerome, the distinction *in re* between priests and bishops only arose later, in the face of the virulence of schisms; it is therefore an ecclesiastical institution. But for Thomas, for

⁵² Jerome, *Commentarium in epistulam Pauli apostoli ad Titum*, 1, 5b, 14–15.

⁵³ Jerome, *Lettre 146 au prêtre Evangelus*, ed. Labourt, t. 8, “Collection des Universités de France” (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1963), 116.

whom this distinction originated with Christ himself and has never ceased to exist in the Church, Jerome could not have meant this. He then lends him a more satisfactory interpretation, akin to that taught by John Chrysostom: despite their real difference, the two orders, episcopal and presbyteral, were each called by one and the other name, before each received its own name.⁵⁴

To point out the risk of error, however, and better ensure the authority of the thesis according to which the episcopate comes from a divine institution dating back to the origins of the Church, Thomas attributes the opposite thesis – the one professed by Jerome, but from which Thomas exonerates him – to a heretic slightly earlier than Jerome, Aerius, a priest frustrated at not having been chosen as a bishop, whom he knows from Augustine:

The presbyterate and the episcopate can be referred to in two ways. Firstly, as to the name (*quantum ad nomen*), and thus, in the past, no distinction was made between the bishop and the priest. [...] But according to reality (*secundum rem*), there has always been a distinction between them, even in the time of the Apostles, as Denys testifies in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and the Gloss on Luke 10:1. [...] Later, however, to prevent schisms, it became necessary to distinguish names as well, so that the greatest would be called “bishops” and the least “priests”. As for the claim that priests do not differ from bishops, Augustine ranks this among the heretical doctrines, when he reports that the followers of Aerius claimed that “the priest is not to be distinguished from the bishop by any difference.”⁵⁵

Of course, Jerome would never have written, as Aerius did, that in his day, there was nothing to distinguish the priest from the bishop. But he did hold, contrary to Thomas, that the difference between them did not go back to Christ or to apostolic times, but only to a more recent period, which he did not need to specify. By transferring it to the person of a heretic, Thomas can call this opinion an “error,”⁵⁶ without reaching Jerome.

⁵⁴ John Chrysostom, *On the Epistle to the Philippians*, I, 1, PG 62 (1862), 183: “Presbyters were formerly called ‘bishops and deacons of Christ’ and bishops ‘presbyters’. Hence it is that even today many bishops write to their ‘co-presbyter’ (συνπρεσβυτέρῳ) and to their ‘co-deacon.’ But now a proper name has been assigned to each: bishop and presbyter.”

⁵⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *ST II^a–II^{ae}*, q. 184, a. 6, ad 1. The quotation comes from Augustine, *De Haeresibus*, 53, ed. M.P.J. Van Den Hout, CCSL 46 (1969), 324.

⁵⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *De Articulis fidei et Ecclesiae sacramentis*, II, ed. H.-F. Dondaine, Leo. 42 (1979), 256, lin. 360–362: “Against this sacrament, there was the error of Aerius (*error Aerii*), saying that the priest must not be distinguished from the bishop.” Id, *Commentary on the Epistle to Titus*, I, 2, no. 11, ed. J.-E. Stroobant de Saint-Eloy (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 2020), 406-407: “<The Apostle> uses indifferently the name episcopes and that of elders. A heretic, who aspired to the episcopate and had been unable to obtain it, took this as a pretext to separate himself from the others and teach a great number of errors (*multa falsa*). Among other things, he claimed that bishops do not differ in any way from priests, which goes against Denys in his book of *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.”

The question is who, Jerome or Thomas, is right in substance. Strictly in terms of the literal interpretation of the New Testament texts, Jerome is right: the two names ἐπίσκοποι and πρεσβύτεροι did indeed designate, in apostolic times, the same people, exercising collegially the office of government of the local Churches, the higher hierarchical authority still being entirely in the hands of the Apostles or their itinerant delegates. It was only after the apostolic age that, in connection with the succession of the Apostles, the figure of the local mono-episcopate had to emerge, with the bishop detaching himself from the college of presbyters as its head endowed with a specific apostolic authority.⁵⁷

However, although unable to demonstrate this with any precision for lack of sufficient historical sources, Thomas is very sure of the authority of the underlying doctrine, thanks in particular to Denys, and rightly defends the essential dogmatic difference between episcopacy and presbyterate: it is wrong to say that their distinction arose from a late decision made by the Church for reasons of pastoral necessity. Without being able to describe the way in which the authority of the Apostles may have historically passed to the bishops – which today remains an aporia, “the great problem that continues to occupy historians of the Church”⁵⁸ – Thomas, supported by Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, John Chrysostom and the Venerable Bede, felt it necessary to resist the Latin inclination which, under the misperceived influence of Jerome, had gradually obscured the specifically apostolic authority of the bishops, seeing in this ministry only a non-sacramental dignity, of ecclesiastical institution, whose birth Jerome, the first before his Latin epigones, was unable to fix with any precision.

9. A lesson in exegesis

In the end, an interesting lesson in theological exegesis can be found here in the joint writings of Jerome and Thomas Aquinas. The literal meaning of the Pauline formulations, well grasped by Jerome, showed that, in apostolic times, the names “episcopos” and “presbyters” designated, under two different aspects, the same people exercising the same ministry. As an exegetical theologian, Jerome believed he could deduce that the real distinction between episcopal and presbyteral functions was later, and therefore that the mono-episcopate of his time was not of divine institution, and therefore not substantially different from the presbyterate. What we know today, thanks to the Councils of Trent and Vatican II, to be dogmatically and therefore

⁵⁷ Cf. Enrico Cattaneo, *Les ministères dans l'Église ancienne* (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 2017), 81–91.

⁵⁸ Enrico Cattaneo, *Les ministères dans l'Église ancienne*, 82.

genuinely inaccurate. As an exegetical theologian, Thomas, faced with the same Pauline synonymy, takes into account the dogmatic truth, received in the tradition of the Church, that bishops are the successors of the Apostles, so that an uninterrupted lineage must link the episcopal order to the college of the Twelve, which cannot be the case for priests who, for their part, are linked to the Seventy-two disciples. This implies that the two orders have been truly distinct since their origin, by institution of Christ himself. Failing to understand how there could be no successors to the Apostles as long as the Apostles remained alive and continuing their ministry, Thomas, following John Chrysostom and Augustine, believes that Paul could only have been addressing local Churches in which bishops and presbyters were already distinguished *in re*, even if both names were indistinctly applied to them.⁵⁹ Exegetical subterfuge, to the detriment of a certain historical truth, but for the benefit of a dogmatic truth that Jerome had failed to honor.

Thomas Aquinas was the first scholastic theologian to attempt to preserve and rehabilitate the divine institution of the episcopate, without however succeeding in placing it at the summit of the sacrament of Holy Orders. This would take many more centuries.

Abbreviations

- BA – Bibliothèque augustinienne. Œuvres de Saint Augustin (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer).
CCSL – Corpus Christianorum. Series latina (Tournai: Brepols)
Leo. – Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia, jussu Leonis XIII P. M. Edita
PG – Patrologiae Cursus completus. Series Graeca (Paris: Migne)
PL – Patrologiae Cursus completus. Series Latina (Paris: Migne)

Bibliography

Andrieu, Michel. “La carrière ecclésiastique des papes et les documents liturgiques du moyen âge.” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 21, no. 3–4 (May–October 1947): 90–120.

⁵⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the First Epistle to Timothy*, III, 1, no. 87, ed. J.-E. Stroobant de Saint-Eloy (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 2020), 138 [translation slightly modified]: “Since, according to Denys, there are three orders, namely that of the bishops who preside, that of the priests who illuminate, and that of the deacons who purify, why does <the Apostle> not mention the priests? *Ans*: Priests are included with bishops: so there is indeed a distinction between these orders as to reality (*quantum ad rem*), but not as to names (*quantum ad nomina*); because ‘presbyter’ means ‘elder’ and ‘episcopus’ ‘superintendent’ (*superintendens*). That’s why priests and bishops were indifferently called bishops and priests.”

- Bonino, Serge-Thomas. “La place du Pape dans l’Église.” *Revue thomiste* 86, no. 3 (1986): 392–422.
- Bouëssé, Humbert. “Épiscopat et sacerdoce.” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 28, nos. 3 and 4 (1954): 240–57 and 368–91.
- Cattaneo, Enrico. *Les ministères dans l’Église ancienne*. Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 2017.
- Dahan, Gilbert. “Thomas d’Aquin, exégète des Pastorales et de Philémon.” In Introduction à Thomas d’Aquin, *Commentaires des épîtres à Timothée I et II, à Tite et à Philémon*, ed. Jean-Eric Stroobant de Saint-Eloy, 15–51 (34–37). Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 2020.
- Gy, Pierre-Marie. “Évolution de saint Thomas sur la théologie du sacrement de l’ordre.” *Revue thomiste* 99, no. 1 (1999): 181–89.
- Lécuyer, Joseph. “Aux origines de la théologie thomiste de l’épiscopat.” *Gregorianum* 35, no. 1 (January 1954): 56–89.
- Lécuyer, Joseph. “Les étapes de l’enseignement thomiste sur l’épiscopat.” *Revue thomiste* 57, no. 1 (January–March 1957): 29–52.
- Lécuyer, Joseph. “Appendice II. Renseignements techniques. A. Notes doctrinales.” In Thomas d’Aquin, *Somme théologique*. Suppl.: Questions 34–40, *L’Ordre*, 199–233. Paris–Tournai–Rome: Desclée & Cie, 1968.
- Sirilla, Michael G. *The Ideal Bishop: Aquinas's Commentaries on the Pastoral Epistles*. Thomistic Ressourcement Series, 8. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2017.
- Zuckerman, Charles. “Aquinas’ Conception of the Papal Primacy in Ecclesiastical Government.” *Archives d’histoire littéraire et doctrinale du Moyen Age* 40 (1973): 97–134.