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«Bishops & Priests Are Truly Gods on Earth»: John of Kronstadt's Theology of the Orthodox Priesthood

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Abstract

Challenges caused by secularization, ideological pluralism and the transformation of religious institutions in the modern world have raised the question of what role the Christian priesthood plays in a changing society. The focus of this study is the Orthodox priesthood in Russia in the context of its historical development and theological conception. The article analyzes the position of the parish clergy, which, despite its theoretically exalted and sacred status in the Russian Empire, remained socially vulnerable and dependent on both the state and the community of believers. Particular attention is paid to St. John of Kronstadt, whose ministry became a model for a new type of pastoral care. This combined ascetic strictness, Eucharistic revival, and deep involvement in the lives of the laity. An analysis of Fr. John's diaries reveals the following: in contrast to the Western tradition, where the crisis of the priesthood is often associated with its excessive sacralization and separation from the laity, in Russian Orthodoxy the response to the challenges of modernity was the sacralization of both the clergy and the entire parish community. This author suggests that, under the circumstances of revolution and persecution, the ideal of the ascetic priest and spiritual father contributed to the formation of stable church communities, which remains relevant in the context of contemporary discussions on the place of religion in the secular world.

Keywords: lay theology; priesthood; pastoral care; St. John of Kronstadt; anticlericalism; Russian Orthodox Church; Synodal period



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1. Introduction

Rapid social changes are characteristic of the modern world. As a result, we are witnessing the transformation of traditional social institutions. This fully applies to religious institutions, which changed significantly in the 20th century and still continue to face many challenges. One of these challenges is the search for ways to exist in the conditions of ideological relativism, pluralism, the privatization of religious life, and the democratization of society. It is quite natural that the priesthood should be subjected to the most tangible pressure, since it is priests who are most extensively confronted in their pastoral work with changes in society, reflected in the quality and quantity of their parishioners. Changes in pastoral situation determine new expectations and requirements for priests, but not all priests are ready to change in order to please the world, given that the latter is moving away from traditional Christianity. Unsurprisingly perhaps, in the second half of the 20th century, the priesthood became one of the dominant issues in Western theology; its theological and historical foundations, functions, and position in the modern world were the subject of ardent debate. “The question of understanding the priestly ministry has become a ‘neuralgic point’ of the post-conciliar Church,” as Cardinal Walter Kasper

put it (Kasper 1969, p. 164). Indeed, in the Catholic Church, the problem of church offices, above all the priesthood, still causes great controversy (Neuner 1995, p. 178; Hernoga 1997, p. 11). It should be noted that most works on this issue are characterized by a specific set of assessments: the priest is almost always viewed through the concept of “crisis.” For example, Stefan Knobloch’s textbook of practical theology begins with a large section on “The plight of pastoral activity” (Knobloch 1996). “The crisis in church ministries cannot be overlooked,” says Peter Hünemann at the very beginning of his book on the subject (Pesch et al. 1971, p. 7). Walter Kasper says that his interest in pastoral theology can be explained by “increasingly aggravated biblical-theological and historical-dogmatic uncertainty, which has made it impossible to answer key questions on the theology of church ministries, which has in its turn cast doubt on forms of priestly service” (Kasper 1978, p. 85).

A large number of published works on systematic, dogmatic and biblical research often refer to the problems of parish practice that priests face or may face. The existence of these problems is also the subject of sociological surveys. Paul M. Zulehner has described the state of the contemporary Catholic clergy as “modernization stress” (Modernisierungsstress). In 2001, he published the results of a large-scale survey of Catholic priests from 16 dioceses in various European countries, carried out within the framework of the “Priester 2000” project. After analyzing almost 3000 questionnaires from priests and seminarians, he proposed a typology of the clergy, based primarily on the attitudes of clergymen towards the modern world. The study showed that many priests feel a conflict between contemporary culture and the Gospel, between the life of modern people and the position of the Catholic Church (Zulehner 2001, pp. 17–52). By resolving this conflict for themselves, priests identify their place in relation to the Church and the world. Such self-determination forms the priest’s vision of himself, his self-awareness, the style and type of his service. In addition, the priest determines for himself what are the most important and immutable aspects of priestly ministry, and what is secondary and adaptable. Hence, it is possible to talk of different theologies of the priesthood.

One of the criteria of Zulehner’s typology of the clergy is its sacred status, determined by the special connection of the priest with Christ and his special position within the Church. Priests whom the author classifies as “timeless clerics” (“zeitlose Kleriker”) base their self-awareness on a Christological dimension, i.e., the idea that the priest represents Christ as the Head of the Church and that the priest’s activity is always preceded by the anticipatory action of God in Christ. The adjective “timeless” was chosen because priests of this type see themselves first and foremost as servants by vocation of Christ, Who is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). They do not try to adapt to the changing views and needs of parishioners. According to Zulehner, this type of self-awareness greatly determines the relationship between priests and laypeople in the community: the “timeless” priest has complete authority over his flock, does not allow democratic tendencies to develop, and above all hinders the active participation of the laity in the life of the community. It should be taken into account that a desire to involve the laity as much as possible in parish affairs is often linked in literature on the subject with the survival of the Catholic Church in democratic countries. Therefore, a quasi “monarchical” vision of priestly authority, based on the priest’s sacred status, is viewed highly negatively today. The priest has a deep understanding of his sacred connection with Christ, and this protects him from many of the risks posed by modernity. However, many people see such views as a form of discrimination against the laity, so the question of the position of the clergy and laity in relationship to Christ is particularly acute today.

The priesthood is understood differently in different Christian denominations, and one important component of confessional theologies of the priesthood are the specific features

of the conception of the priest that determine his position in relation to Christ and the laity. Protestant denominations completely reject the priesthood as a sacrament, emphasizing the concept of a universal priesthood, based on 1 Peter 2:9, where the boundary between the clergy and the laity is almost completely erased. In traditional Catholic teaching, holy orders are understood as *repraesentatio Christi sacerdotis*, according to which, upon ordination, the priest receives the grace to act *in persona Christi*. Obligatory celibacy, the indelible character of the order (*character indelebilis*), as well as closeness to monastic spirituality, determined the conception of the Catholic priest as *persona sacra* and, accordingly, his special position in the community. Where the Orthodox priesthood is concerned, many authors consider it to be the most sacralized of all the Christian denominations (Gavrilyuk 2012, p. 489; Špidlik 1971, pp. 565–66), and even to have magical features. Thus, when characterizing the Orthodox priesthood, the evangelical “Theologische Realenzyklopädie” mentions the attribution by the Orthodox even to priestly vestments with grace-giving power (without, however, citing a source) (TRE 1977–2004, p. 391). Schüssler Fiorenza states: “In the East, the great danger for the priest is that he will not live up to the holiness of the divine service that he performs, which reunites heaven and earth. The priest must be the holiest Christian, so that he can serve accompanied by an angelic choir” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1972, p. 19). In theological literature, such epithets used in relation to any cleric today are almost always subject to harsh criticism, since they are associated with the diminution of the role of the laity in the Church through the ontological division of the clergy and laity into Christians of “different kinds,” into “spiritual” and “non-spiritual” (Neuner and Zulehner 2013, p. 126). Before Catholic theology in the West was reformed by the Second Vatican Council, scholars sometimes spoke of the unity of the Orthodox East and the Catholic West in their assessment of the priesthood, which was perceived as the participation of man in the divine reality of Christ the High Priest and in the ministry of the angels (Tyciak 1971, pp. 289–90). Among the Russian saints, the most developed theology of the priesthood belongs to Fr. John of Kronstadt (1829–1909), who was canonized and has become widely known throughout the world. In this article, we will attempt to analyze his views in the context of the history of the Orthodox priesthood in Russia. This analysis will principally draw upon the personal diaries of St. John of Kronstadt, which were already widely disseminated during the author’s own life. The study’s methodology employs a dual approach: a historical-contextual analysis of the position of the clergy in the Russian Empire, juxtaposed with a comparative examination of how priestly ministry was theologically understood in both the Orthodox and Catholic traditions during the age of modernity.

2. The Priest in the Russian Empire: A Persona Sacra?

First of all, it should be said that, despite the exalted position which the theological tradition of the East assigns to the priest, in the Russian Empire neither the position of the parish clergy, nor the theological understanding of priestly ministry, nor the perception of the priesthood in society allows us to identify tendencies towards sacralization.

As G. Freeze has convincingly shown, beginning in Ancient Rus, the Russian clergy acquired the features of Old Testament “Levitism”: the clergy were singled out as a separate class. At the same time, they had to live the life of the people and sustain piety among the people.¹ This situation was based on a system of theological views according to which Rus identified itself with the New Jerusalem and projected the realities of sacred history onto itself (Khondzinsky 2015, pp. 166–67). The reforms of Peter I, who sought to regulate all aspects of life in Russian society in order to turn it into a well-functioning mechanism, led to the formation of upper and lower classes, while, according to P. Khondzinsky, a simple parish priest remained with the lower class, sharing all its burdens (ibid.). During this period, the inheritance of the class affiliation of the clergy was finally consolidated, and

the prerequisites for the creation of a parish system were formed: the idea of assigning parishioners to specific churches arose, and parish priests were prohibited from performing sacraments and rites for members of another parish.

The stereotype that parish priests became mere petty officials dressed in cassocks as a result of Peter I's reforms has long been dispelled (Freeze 1985, p. 91; Kizenko 2021). However, it cannot be denied that, in the 18th and 19th centuries, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, the state attempted to endow priests with secular functions and thereby obtain practical benefits for society from them, which was a pan-European trend at the time. At the beginning of the synodal period, the state required priests first and foremost to teach the people, which is clearly evident from the "Spiritual Regulations" of 1721 (Prokopovich 1830, pp. 314–46). At the same time, priests had to keep registers of births and regularly report on the state of affairs to the Holy Synod. Using priests, the state attempted to monitor the observance of norms of pious behavior by their subjects, with the focus being weekly preparation for communion ("fasting"), confession, and communion. These practices were an important marker of religious life and visibly united Russian society, though it was divided into classes. Under such conditions, providing for fasting and confession became the main focus of pastoral ministry. In all other aspects, the priest fully shared the daily life of his flock (Łukaszewicz 2019, p. 270). Well-known contemporary memoirs survive describing the working day of a simple village priestly family. For instance, Professor Sadov, the son of a village priest, wrote in his memoirs that, as early as the mid-19th century, "my father cultivated his share of the land from the common parish allotment with his own hands," and "physical labor sometimes reduced my father to extreme fatigue" (Sadov 2010, pp. 91–92). Given that many clergymen, unlike government officials, did not enjoy any significant state benefits from their position, priests often remained completely dependent on their parishioners financially, which had a detrimental effect on their social status.

It should also be noted that parish priests were in a very difficult and vulnerable position in relation to the diocesan authorities. Of course, in Ancient Rus, according to S. Smirnov, "monasticism was a respected, privileged, well-off and comparatively bookish class," while "the parish clergy was a taxable class, without rights, crushed by need and barely literate" (Smirnov 1913, p. 72). However, at the beginning of the Synodal period, the discord between the privileged monastic and taxable parish clergy worsened even more. This occurred as a result of the establishment of spiritual consistories, which were the apparatus of the ruling bishops and were made up predominantly of representatives of the black (monastic) clergy. This reform led to a situation for priests that Znamensky characterizes as "pathetic humiliation and a lack of administrative rights" (Znamensky 1880, p. 613; Malyshev 2019, p. 137). With an excess of candidates for clerical positions, the diocesan authorities had no reason to value personnel, which resulted in various abuses. For offenses, priests were subjected to corporal punishment, which was only abolished by the decree of 1767, "so that through this they would not lose the respect of society and the flock befitting them according to their pastoral character" (Complete Code of laws of the Russian empire 1885–1916, p. 12909). The very wording of this law makes it clear how low the authority of parish priests must sometimes have been in the eyes of parishioners, which naturally affected the style of their pastoral service (Freeze 1977, pp. 72–73; Znamensky 1880, p. 613).

In the 19th century, the situation of the parish clergy did not change for the better, despite significant efforts aimed at raising the level of spiritual education and material support for priests. Numerous problems experienced by the white clergy were covered in detail in church-social journalism (Malyshev 2019, pp. 137–94; Łukaszewicz 2019, pp. 273–302). For the most part, priests continued to live below the poverty line. Because of this, from

the second half of the 19th century, parish clergy increasingly began to express radical and liberal sentiments, which reached their peak during the era of the first and second Russian revolutions. Theological seminaries were hotbeds of freethinking, and they later produced many prominent revolutionaries. After the great reforms, the idea that the greatest possible realization of divine justice on earth was the primary task of the Church gained enormous influence. Hence, many believed that the main duty of a priest was an active pastoral position (Freeze 1988, pp. 115–35; Scarborough 2022). At the same time, such a view of pastoral activity was radically opposed to any sacralization, “otherworldliness,” “supernaturality,” etc. It may be asserted that, in the second half of the 19th century, and especially at the turn of the century, during the “pastoral turn,” Russian society formulated a clear demand: a priest should be a shepherd and a public figure, rather than a performer of divine services and rituals.

During the modernization of the late 19th century, the conditions under which pastoral service was carried out changed significantly. As a result of the Great Reforms, the legal status and social position of the clergy changed, opportunities for social service were expanded, and class boundaries were finally erased: service in holy orders became accessible to people from different social strata. On the other hand, there was a mass exodus from the clergy itself—first and foremost, this meant the outflow of children of the clergy to secular educational institutions (Stefanovich 2002, p. 273; Manchester 2011). This period is also commonly referred to as a time of awakening of self-awareness among the parish clergy. According to Gregory Freeze, the liberal reforms “created a new spirit in the lower clergy, more independent and self-assertive, quite different from the submissiveness and inertia of the pre-reform clergy” (Freeze 1983, p. 389). At the same time, the new opportunities that opened up could not for the most part be realized because of the church crisis that was brewing in Russia by the end of the 19th century (ibid., p. 119).

3. The Parish Priest: A Saint?

The sacred status of a priest may be held to have its basis in the practice of confession, where spiritual authority is exercised to the fullest extent. However, even in this sphere, right up until the very end of the 19th century, we find no grounds for such an assumption. First of all, the widespread practice of having confession and communion once a year was not enough to create such a status. In addition, in the Synodal era, the spiritual authority of a priest had very clear boundaries. Unlike confessors in schismatic denominations, Orthodox priests never had authoritarian or despotic power over their spiritual children, but only moral influence. In the 18th century, St. Demetrius of Rostov (Dimitry 1839, p. 22) pointed this out, and, in the 19th century, St. Philaret of Moscow (Philaret 1888, p. 313) wrote about it directly. In the conditions of a strictly regulated parish system, lay people confessed almost exclusively to their parish priest, so the free choice of a spiritual father within the framework of “penitential families,” which, as S. Smirnov believed, existed in Ancient Rus’ (Smirnov 1913), was practically impossible during the Synodal period. The basic meaning of the concept of “spiritual father” was “a confessing priest”. Expectations from a spiritual father in this traditional, functional meaning practically excluded obedience or power relations and were limited to the performance of confession, moral example, and the power of persuasion, while practically no personal informal relations were implied at all.

On the other hand, the confessor as an active participant in public and church life gradually acquired new significance in the 19th century. First of all, the concept of “spiritual father,” directly identified with the confessor, changed in the context of the increasing dissemination of ancient ascetic literature at that time. The image of the spiritual mentor from the “Philokalia” provided the basis for the formation of new expectations of the

parish confessor—the confessing priest—throughout the 19th century. With the spread of ascetic discourse, requirements for a certain asceticism gradually began to apply to the parish confessor. These requirements related to the monastic tradition of spiritual guidance, obedience and the revelation of thoughts (Lutko 2024, p. 213). This aspect appears to be highly significant and characteristic of the specific nature of Russian religious life. As Scott M. Kenworthy notes, “the revival of traditional contemplative monasticism” was a phenomenon specific to Russia in contrast to Europe: “monasticism reshaped the Russian Orthodox Church and contributed to the popularity and vitality of Russian Orthodoxy up to the Revolution of 1917” (Kenworthy 2010, p. 3). Discourse on asceticism (Michelson 2017), presupposing the penetration of what were originally monastic practices into the sphere of secular life, gained a large amount of currency in the 19th century, largely thanks to the elders of Optina Pustyn. The Optina elders, on the one hand, emphasized the importance of confession as such, for which the personal qualities of the spiritual father do not play a primary role (Optina Elders 2011, pp. 315, 349–50, 520–21, 524–25; Ambrose 2012, pp. 115, 638, 663). On the other hand, Elder Ambrose believed that “the revelation of thoughts to a spiritual father both by monks and other people constitutes an essential part of the Sacrament of Penance” (Ambrose 2012, pp. 666–67). St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov), a disciple of Elder Lev of Optina, argued that parish priests, who are called—following the example of monastic elders—to be teachers of spiritual life, must completely distance themselves from any material interests and concentrate entirely on their struggle with human passions (Ignatius 2014, pp. 397–400). St. Theophan the Recluse goes even further: he directly calls the parish confessor (Theophan 2007a, pp. 226–27, 351; 2008c, pp. 389–91) the most suitable person to fulfil the role of “elder” (Theophan 2008a, pp. 158, 506; 2008b, p. 71), since his main task is not so much to perform the sacraments as to prepare a person to receive grace through them (Theophan 2005, p. 506). According to Theophan, the laity must “submit to their leader, a priest appointed by God” (Theophan 2010, pp. 553–54). Those who desire salvation must seek “a skilled spiritual father” (Theophan 2008b, p. 269); according to Theophan, such people have always been, are, and always will also exist outside monastery walls: “in the matter of prayer of the mind one needs a guide; where can a layman find one? There, in the world—and among spiritual fathers” (ibid.; Theophan 2006, p. 315; 2007b, pp. 482–83).

These trends, though not everywhere and not with the same intensity, led to a gradual change in church practice. A striking example is the experience of urban spiritual fathers in the late 19th–early 20th centuries (Sventsitsky 2008; Yachmenik and Lyutko 2023, pp. 58–77). The difference between a secular city and a village, where Orthodox traditions were part of everyday life, had been evident since the era of Peter the Great’s reforms, but it became most obvious at the end of the 19th century. This situation could be overcome only by radically changing the nature of pastoral service. With the increase in the social differentiation of the population, and the autonomization and individualization of the life of city dwellers (Mironov 2014), priests emerged who could not limit themselves to maintaining Orthodox church life by retaining the status of “Russian Levites” (Freeze 1977). In these new conditions, the priest had to be active, take the initiative in caring for parishioners, and carry out mission work among the unchurched urban population. It was during this period in particular that individual parish priests began to insist on the inadequacy of yearly confession and communion, which had long been the norm for most Russian people. Pastors in large cities, such as Archpriest Valentin Amfiteatrov, Archpriest Valentin Sventsitsky and others, called on parishioners to practice frequent confession and communion, and the rector of the Maroseyskaya community, St. Alexei Mechev, worked to establish a “monastery in the world,” i.e., a community based on common worship, regular detailed confession and obedience to a spiritual father (Khondzinsky 2012, pp. 117–24). One may assert that, in

the second half of the 19th century, with the gradual transition in Russia from a traditional society to a modern one, the phenomenon of “parish eldership” emerged. A new type of urban priest began to appear—a pastor and spiritual father. Large urban communities were created where people lived in the mainstream of the Eucharistic and liturgical revival. The focus was on the personal spiritual and ascetic struggle of each individual pastor. This shifted the emphasis to the moral aspect of pastoral care, which became the leitmotif of Russian pastoral studies at the turn of the century. It is significant that, even in textbooks on pastoral theology, ascetics began to be understood as an essential component of pastoral ministry only after the reform of 1910–1911, specifically in the lecture courses of Feodor (Pozdeevsky) and Veniamin (Fedchenkov) (Sukhova 2009, pp. 40–41).

Given the historical context, the ministry of this new type of urban priest was undoubtedly an innovation and an exception to the rule. However, according to the outstanding Russian pastoral theologian Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky), this experience began to be regarded as the norm to which every clergyman should strive (Khrapovitsky 1935, p. 223). Most probably, Anthony had in mind a very specific archetype here, which for many years established a new theological benchmark for many generations of Russian priests. The entire rethinking of parish life in Russia was largely based on the experience of the ministry of St. John of Kronstadt. This is clearly evidenced by one of the speeches at the All-Russian Local Council made several years after the death of Fr. John: “We, the laity, have been reproached here for not loving our pastors! But what kind of pastors are these?! Draw even a weak likeness of such a pastor as Fr. John of Kronstadt; give us such shepherds, and you, I dare to assure you, will without any help from us recognize the injustice of accusing us of not loving our shepherds” (Documents of the Holy Council 1917–1918, p. 166). Here, as in many other cases, it is significant that the charismatic and unique ministry of John of Kronstadt is presented as a desirable norm for the entire Russian priesthood as a whole. The closer history approached 1917, the more clearly people realized the need to create communities based on the principles of Eucharistic revival that St. John had created in his all-Russian ministry—a ministry that transcended community. Indeed, at the level of understanding their pastoral ministry, many priests recognized their connection with Fr. John as a tradition (Arseny 1995, pp. 16, 25–26, 62). For example, after the revolution, Archpriest Valentin Svetsitsky directly linked new trends in parish life with the achievements of Fr. John: “what was a personal issue for Fr. John has now become a Church-wide issue” (Svetsitsky 2008, p. 568). In other words, the pastoral ministry of Fr. John of Kronstadt, with all its charisma and individuality, significantly determined the development of Orthodox pastoral ministry. According to Nadezhda Kitsenko, it was John of Kronstadt who put “the focus of the church life of the laity on the figure of the parish priest” (Kizenko 2006, p. 111).

4. The Conception of a Priest for St. John of Kronstadt

Researchers of the Post-Emancipation period of Russia have repeatedly noted that at this time “members of the married clergy abandoned their traditional dismissal of monastic spirituality,” and it was in the person of Fr. John of Kronstadt that they saw the one who “introduced monastic spirituality into [his] pastoral activities” (Paert 2010, p. 105). In fact, a priest, according to John of Kronstadt, is, first of all, an ascetic, a spiritual warrior (John 2007–2012, vol. 6. pp. 55, 123; *ibid.* vol. 7. p. 105; *ibid.* vol. 16. pp. 229–30; *ibid.* vol. 17. pp. 288–89). However, priestly asceticism has a special character, differing from monastic asceticism. A priest, unlike a monk, is wholly immersed in the life of the world, wholly occupied with divine service and pastoral care of his parishioners, which, as Father John believed, is not associated with excessive feats of fasting and prayer. The basis of pastoral asceticism is, above all, service of the Liturgy and frequent communion. The reverent preparation and celebration of the Sacrament presupposes that “a passionate man

cannot be a servant at the altar” (ibid. vol. 2. p. 291; ibid. vol. 5. p. 32): a priest is forced to constantly struggle with his passions and strive to bring fallen human nature into line with the incomparable heights of the Christian priesthood (ibid., p. 166). John of Kronstadt also believes that the priest, as a servant of Christ, has a special relationship with Him. The priest is “a friend of God, a constant doer of His will” (ibid. vol. 3. p. 297) and a continuer of His ministry. As “the representative on earth of the Fount of peace and silence,” (ibid. vol. 2. p. 271) as “the image of Jesus Christ,” (ibid.), the priest “must always carry in his heart peace and a constant state of prayer [...] in order to be always ready to pray, which is the quality of a priest par excellence” (ibid.; ibid. vol. 6. p. 158, vol. 16. p. 301). Any sin and indulgence to himself hinders unity with God, because He “despises the slightest inclination of the heart to sin.” (ibid. vol. 3. pp. 297–98).

This theological understanding places the priest in a particular position in the Church, whereby he becomes the Church’s instrument of salvation. The Church “has invested (the priest) with the grace of the priesthood, so that he may draw near to the throne of God, as one of her faithful, as the friend of God, whom she has honored, upon whom she has bestowed such great spiritual gifts and privileges, whom she has crowned with glory and honor as the bridegroom of the Church, as the servant of Christ the King, of God the Savior, and as the pastor of souls!” (ibid. vol. 16. pp. 324–25). However, despite these lofty epithets, Fr. John emphasizes that the priest, along with everyone else—from the king to the meanest pauper—is a child of the Church (ibid.; [John 1993–1994](#), vol. 2. p. 276). This constitutes a fundamental definition of priestly identity, a very important component of which in St. John’s work is the ability to juxtapose holy orders and the personality of its bearer ([John 2007–2012](#), vol. 9. p. 117). To explain this opposition, Fr. John uses a simile involving the body and clothes: “Just as clothes hug and wrap around a person from all sides and cover all his body parts [...], so the grace of God embraces the soul and body of a priest, like clothes, from all sides, healing and hiding his infirmities and filling in him whatever is lacking [...]. The grace of the Spirit invisibly clothes him, giving him the strength and power to perform his exalted service, of which otherwise only Angels would appear capable.” (ibid., vol. 4. p. 389). This should be expressed in a rejection of his “carnal” will (ibid. vol. 3. p. 49), in a “humble state of mind and heart” (ibid., p. 76) as regards divine services and sacred rites, since they are a treasure of grace and wisdom, over which the priest himself has no power. The bearer of this dignity (a sinful man) enjoys the mercies of God and the gifts of grace communicated through the sacraments on an equal basis with others (ibid., p. 322). A feeling of detachment from his ministry also proceeds from a constant awareness that he and the teaching and pastoring communicated through him are borrowed from the pastorship of Christ, who is “the only Shepherd, [...] the only Teacher and Leader of the faith.” (ibid., pp. 426–27). Therefore, the priest must not appropriate pastoral and spiritual authority to himself; he must constantly remember that he is “a priest [...] of Christ, that is, a priest in His name and appointed by Him.” (ibid.). Thus, according to the diary of John of Kronstadt, the priest finds himself in a state of uncertainty. On the one hand, he is the bearer of a holy order, one which is accessible only to a saint. It is clear that no candidate can be worthy of possessing this order. As a result, the priest faces an obviously impossible task which, without due humility, can lead to a severe internal conflict. On the other hand, his attitude to the sanctity of the order must, in a certain sense, be detached and cannot allow possession “for personal use.” The priesthood belongs entirely to Christ, Who invisibly acts through the priest, so that the priest, by virtue of his ministry, is in close communication and cooperation with Christ, and it is this (and not the ontological status of the cleric) that requires a special spiritual feat from him.

At the same time, according to John of Kronstadt, likeness to Christ should also be expressed in the priest's conviction that he is the "image" (ibid. vol. 4. p. 199; ibid. vol. 10. p. 319) and "instrument" (ibid. vol. 7. p. 251) of Jesus Christ and that through the ministry of the priest Christ continues to act visibly on earth: "Christ is not on earth visibly, but we are His vicars. . .; what He Himself would do visibly if He were on earth, we do in His non-being on earth. He has given all His authority to us priests. So listen to us as you would listen to Christ Himself, God of gods and Lord of kings [Daniel 2, 47] If you do not listen to us, He will judge you at the Judgment as if you had not listened to Him" (ibid. vol. 3. pp. 266–67). As a result, it is not the priest himself who is worthy of reverence and veneration but Christ, who "Himself teaches through all priests, who are only instruments." (ibid. vol. 4. p. 292; ibid. vol. 9. p. 51). Before Christ acting through a priest, all Christians are equal, not excluding those in holy orders.

The conception of the priest in the writings of Father John of Kronstadt may justly be characterized as a sacralization of the priesthood. Indeed, John frequently speaks of the priest as "an awesome mediator between the God of righteousness and sinful man." (ibid. vol. 15. pp. 235–36). He calls priests "the doorkeepers of the Kingdom of Heaven," (ibid. vol. 14. p. 89) who are given the power to "open and close it to human beings" (ibid.). "Priests will be witnesses before the Savior on the terrible day of judgment concerning sinners, whether they repented or did not repent of one sin or another, and they who were penitent will be forgiven" (ibid. vol. 12. pp. 63–64; ibid. vol. 13. p. 5), and "he who does not seek and does not want a priestly blessing is deprived of a blessing from God and will be subjected to the eternal real curse and wrath of God." (ibid., p. 6). Father John often uses forceful epithets to emphasize the special connection of the priest to Christ. He writes that the Lord has entrusted the entire universe to the prayer and intercession of priests (ibid. vol. 19. pp. 229–30). It is "because of their prayers, their pious, God-pleasing life that the world stands, human societies prosper; through them, the Lord sends down on people His manifold grace. All of them bear the image of Christ and continue His Divine work—the work of saving people; they are clothed in His dignity, they serve as priests with His priesthood, they are clothed in His spirit, they preach His word, they rule and govern by His power" (ibid. vol. 15. pp. 432–33; ibid. vol. 16. p. 214).

At the same time, we must take into account that veneration of Christ, according to John of Kronstadt, is manifested not only in respect for the dignity of the priesthood, but also, for example, in veneration of father, mother or tsar (ibid. vol. 10. p. 51). Also, his texts manifest a sacralization not only of the priesthood but of all pious Christians. Life according to the will of God (ibid. vol. 3. pp. 385–86) and frequent communion (ibid., pp. 316–17) make a priest (as well as any Christian) "a god on earth." In every Christian priest, St. John calls us to see Christ Himself (ibid. vol. 10. pp. 247, vol. 4. p. 203).

In addition, Father John states that, when performing the Sacraments, the priest should revere the layman as a member of the Body of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit (ibid. vol. 19. p. 101). What is more, he does not see any difference between lay people and priests on moral and soteriological levels: he denounces them all for negligence (starting with himself—ibid. vol. 14. pp. 23–24), and places all of them as equals before the Judgment of Christ: "The tsar, the prince, the count, the metropolitan, and all bishops, city governors, all military, secular and spiritual ranks, all common people, warriors and merchants—we will all stand equally before the Judgment of Christ, without distinction of ranks, titles and persons," "for there is no respect of persons with God" [Rom: 2,11] (ibid., p. 231). In other words, in the works of John of Kronstadt we find not only a description of the spiritual heights of the priesthood, but also the sacralization of parish life as a whole, so that the ascetic ideal of life extends not only to priests, but also to laypeople. An analysis of the diaries of Fr. John does not reveal any ontological differences between priests and

laypeople: both have access to the ideal of spiritual life, provided they live according to the will of God and participate frequently in the sacraments of the Church. Hence, the precedence of priests over laypeople may be qualified as functional or official: special spiritual requirements are imposed on clergymen on the basis that, due to their official duties, they attend services more often, pray more often, and receive communion. In the Synodal period, this significantly distinguished this manner of participating in church life from the manner that most laypeople adhered to.

5. Conclusions

To sum up, Father John of Kronstadt formulates a conception of the priest that implies both a close connection with Christ and a privileged status within the Church. At the same time, no ontological differences between a priest and the laity are to be found in the diaries of Fr. John: the cleric benefits from the gifts of grace of the priesthood to an equal degree to the laity, which allows us to speak not so much of the sacralization of the priesthood but of the sacralization of parish life. However, given the wide dissemination of the diaries, we may refer to a unique situation at the end of the Synodal period: for the first time, a text that was of personal origin—the diary of a parish priest—acquired public status. It was declared a universal source of priestly spirituality and almost immediately after the death of the author was introduced into the curriculum of theological seminaries. It is well-known that the deeply personal experience of John of Kronstadt influenced a large number of priests, which played a special role in the era of revolution and the persecution of religion in Russia. Alexei Mechev and a number of other city priests of the pre-revolutionary era began to build the life of their parishes according to the model of a “penitential” or “penitential-liturgical” family. As Yachmenik has shown, they, unlike John of Kronstadt, combined Eucharistic service and everyday pastoral activity, calling this way of parish life “a monastery in the world” (Sventsitsky 2008; Mechev 2009, p. 321; Fudel 2001, p. 82). Important substantive features of this concept were participation in the Eucharist, respect for the church’s charter, obedience to a spiritual father, and internal renunciation of the world, which was becoming increasingly hostile to the Church (Yachmenik 2024, pp. 51–69). With the intensification of persecution, the arrest of priests, and state pressure on the parishes that remained, in addition to these spiritual relations between the pastor and the community, the connection between the members of the community, which was realized in common worship and service to each other, acquired great importance. The history of Russian pastoral care after Fr. John of Kronstadt shows that the response of the new martyrs to the catastrophic persecution was not the sacralization of the clergy but the formation of a sacralized Christian community, freely united around its pastor-martyr. It may be asserted that, in the new conditions of the Soviet state, an original pastoral model of the Church began to form, where the Church was conceived as a mysterious union of Christians, formed through the “spiritual and grace-filled connections” of believers to a spiritual father and with each other (Ermilov 2018, pp. 28–47; Ermilov and Paromov 2019, pp. 11–56). This model turned out to be the least vulnerable in the era of social changes and has not lost its relevance in the modern conditions of ideological pluralism and the crisis of church institutions.

6. Discussion: Sacralization and Crisis

Various hypotheses have been put forward to explain the crisis in which the Christian priesthood found itself in the 20th century. Modern authors often refer to the overly sacred, “non-worldly,” monastic image of the clergyman (Greshake 2005, p. 35) that has developed in the Christian West, which creates a rift between the clergy and laity, as one of the causes of the crisis. For example, according to Edward Schillebeeckx, the isolation of the clergy into something “incapable of living” and its reduction to no more

than a component of the sacraments may be considered a distinctive trait of the medieval priest (Schillebeeckx 1985, p. 238). The origins of this conception are to be found in the anti-Protestant controversy, in particular in the works of representatives of the so-called “French School” and in the documents of the counter-reformation Council of Trent (Wehnert 2016, p. 10). The idea of the “non-worldliness” of the priesthood plays a special role here: the conception of the clergyman is determined by Old Testament decrees on the Levitical priesthood, monastic tradition, and his function as a performer of religious rituals. An “otherworldly” priest was supposed to have as little contact with the laity as possible, limiting this communication to the celebration of the sacraments, and being “a reader of the Mass without further pastoral obligations” (Schillebeeckx 1985, p. 239). The ritual character of the priesthood and its separation from the world made celibacy the only acceptable form of life for a cleric. The theological basis of this conception of the priest was the sacred “power of sacrifice,” that is, the power to celebrate the Eucharist, which makes the priest an intermediary between God and the faithful (ibid., pp. 238–39). At the beginning of the 16th century, Josse van Clichtove (1472–1543) formulated the idea of a special priestly spirituality. The “grace of the priestly office” was postulated as the basis for this special spirituality. Particular emphasis was placed on the fact that the priesthood is not a position (German: *Amt*) but a state (German: *Stand*). This word usage in German-speaking milieus is especially significant, since it was Luther who first began actively to use the word *Amt* “position” in relation to the priest, emphasizing the functional nature of this role (Benedikt 2010, p. 81). The Council of Trent (1545–1563) was convened in just such an atmosphere. In academic literature, this council is often stated to be an important moment in the process of clericalization, and the single event that most determined the conception of the Catholic priest until the Second Vatican Council. In reacting to the Reformation, which had rejected the priesthood, the Council of Trent tried to emphasize the sacramental nature of ordination and the bestowal of grace through it. 20th century authors connect this situation to the fact that the laity were deprived of the right to vote. In the words of Hans Küng, clerics and laity became “church-political opponents”: the ordinand left the realm of the profane forever and was consecrated to God (Küng 1967, p. 220; Zirker 1976, p. 76). This understanding of the priesthood became firmly entrenched in the West as a result of the decision to establish a system of diocesan seminaries. Post-conciliar literature devoted to the history of Catholic seminaries portrays the priest more and more as a member of an Order who sees his vocation exclusively in liturgical service, and who lives above all according to monastic spirituality. This conception was consolidated and developed in the Roman Catechism of 1566. The discussion on the priesthood in the Catechism begins with the heading: “There is nothing on earth more exalted than the priesthood” and continues as follows: “The faithful then are to be made acquainted with the exalted dignity and excellence of this sacrament in its highest degree, which is the priesthood. Priests and bishops are, as it were, the interpreters and heralds of God, commissioned in his name to teach mankind the law of God, and the precepts of a Christian life—they are the representatives of God upon earth. Impossible, therefore, to conceive a more exalted dignity, or functions more sacred. Justly, therefore, are they called not only angels, but gods, holding, as they do, the place and power and authority of God on earth.” (The Catechism of the Council of Trent 1833, p. 212). The Catechism is the clearest example of the evolution of Tridentine definitions; however, its conception of the priest develops in the same vein in official documents and statements of the popes until the middle of the 20th century.

Following an analysis of these sources, some authors even go so far as to talk of the formation of a special clerical culture based on the idea of a priest as a *persona sacra* (Wehnert 2016). One representative of the French school writes: “The priest acts as an intermediary between God and human beings, receives the dignity of a sovereign judge

over the whole world, partakes in the name of Christ and His ministry as the Savior of the world, and many other of Christ's excellences." (see Schillebeeckx 1985, p. 244). In the 17th century, priests often said in sermons that ordination makes them "Christ the Lord," so that it is no longer Christ who acts through the priest, but the priest becomes Christ Himself during the Eucharist. Moreover, in some sermons a conception was to be found of a priest who had "surpassed" God: "Oh, the incomprehensible humility of the Almighty, who submitted Himself to man! Oh, the unspeakable height of the priest. . . to whose three- or four-words God Himself will obey!" (Dürr 2000, p. 103).

In attempting to explain the crisis of the priesthood, the dramatization of all these ideas can itself be interpreted as a rhetorical tool for the formation of a new conception of the priesthood that would be suitable for the modern world.

The situation in the East was historically quite different. Although there is good reason to talk of the sacralization of the priesthood in the East, obligatory celibacy was never prescribed in the Orthodox Church. There was no division into a church culture for the clergy and a profane culture for the laity; there was no need to defend the sacramental nature of ordination. Lastly, the seminary system has not existed in the Orthodox Church for very long, even in its monastic variant. Hans Küng himself states that in the East things never got as far as anti-clericalism, which has been gaining strength in the West since the Middle Ages (Küng 1967, p. 510).

The exalted epithets Father John uses to achieve this allow us to draw a parallel with the Catholic tradition of "sacralization" of the priesthood, which has been subjected to severe criticism from the second half of the 20th century onwards. However, in contrast to the Catholic tradition, Father John emphasizes the need for the priest to differentiate between the holy orders with which he is invested and his own personality. The priest must remember that he, along with the laity, enjoys the gifts of grace communicated through the sacraments he performs, since the gifts of the priesthood are borrowed through the priesthood of Christ.

A comparison of the Catholic and Orthodox versions of the "sacralization of the priesthood" reveals, above all, a fundamentally different reaction to the modernization of society in East and West. In response to secularization and the crisis of traditional religious institutions, in the Catholic Church we see powerful anti-clerical discourse calling for the democratization of church life, the desacralization of the hierarchy and the blurring of distinctions between clergy and laity. In the Orthodox Church, on the contrary, the conception of a saintly priest may be observed—an ascetic, a spiritual warrior, an elder who, possessing special gifts of grace and a special connection with Christ, at the same time becomes a "god on earth" (like any Christian) through life according to the will of God and frequent communion.

Moreover, despite the significant similarities between the Western and Eastern traditions, an analysis of the legacy of St. John of Kronstadt allows us to understand the significant differences in priestly spirituality. The dominance of the white (married) clergy, the equality of priests and laity from the point of view of asceticism, the involvement of the clergy in the everyday life of the population, the holistic nature of Orthodox life—all this has excluded the "sacralization" of the priesthood in the Western sense from Russian Orthodoxy. Orthodox pastoral theology, which finds its high expression in the writings of John of Kronstadt, calls for the "sacralization" of parish life, for a more rigorous spiritual life of all the members of the community as a family of priests and laity.

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Note

- ¹ This follows from many sources and has become a commonplace in literature. Thus, Gregory Freeze’s key monograph on the Russian clergy of the 18th century is called *The Russian Levites* (Freeze 1977).

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