Priesthood has rich history

Second in a series of monthly columns inspired by the Year for Priests.

The Catholic Church in her Catechism teaches, “Among the Christian faithful by divine institution there exist in the Church sacred ministers, who are also called clerics.” (#934). The exact meaning of priestly titles and offices in this divine institution, however, would develop over time. In the documents of the early church there are scattered references to priestly ministry, although the word “priest” was rarely used. In this period there was no clear distinction between what we would recognize today as priest and bishop. The ministry of this bishop/priest was understood as essential to the life of the faithful, guaranteed by its being handed down through the ceremony of ordination. During this period the leadership of each local Christian community was in the hands of one Bishop aided and advised by a body of priests.

By the 4th century, priesthood was understood in the church as something distinct from the rest of the baptized faithful. Priests were supported by community offerings; wore distinctive clothing and hairstyles (tonsure); and eventually became exempt from government obligations like taxes and military service. The rapid spread of Christianity (the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 313, and Christianity became the Roman state religion in 391) called for a clearer distinction between bishops and priests. As the Christian community grew, the bishop became more remotely responsible for multiple communities scattered around a city, its suburbs, and its surrounding rural areas. To each of these communities the bishop began to delegate priests as his representatives; this is the ancestor of modern-day dioceses and parishes. The local priest began to assume many of the functions previously reserved to the bishop: liturgical presiding, sacramental administration, regular preaching and teaching, and the reconciliation of sinners.

During the Middle Ages, priests began to be defined as those who exercised sacred power, “sacra potestas,” in local communities: remove original sin in Baptism; change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist; absolve

sins in confession; open the gates of everlasting life through extreme unction. The great scholastic theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas and Blessed John Duns Scotus codified this church teaching concerning priesthood in their writings.

In response to the 16th century reformers' teaching on the universal priesthood of the baptized and a more functional and less divine church, the Council of Trent (1545-63) reaffirmed traditional Catholic teaching on the necessary divine institution of an ordained priesthood with sacramental power inherent to it. Trent furthermore affirmed an ecclesiastical "mission statement" – the supreme law of the church is the care of souls – to which priests were particularly dedicated in their ministry. In order to foster the virtues, skills, and knowledge necessary for this mission, Trent established the seminary system as a training ground for future priests.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) reaffirmed Trent's teaching on the priesthood, clarifying that the episcopacy is the fullness of priesthood; that priesthood is exercised in a communion of relationships; that priestly ministry corresponds to the three-fold ministry of Christ of teaching, sanctifying and leading; and that priestly spirituality is based upon configuration to Christ the priest.

Baltimore native Father Timothy Kulbicki, OFM Conv., is dean of the School of Theology and associate professor of Church History at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Roland Park.