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Priesthood and Ministry: Service and Leadership in Today's Church

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Priesthood and Ministry

Service and leadership in today's church

Today, one is frequently confronted with an understanding of priesthood quite different from the sacramental and hierarchical concept so long presupposed by Catholic theology.

The argument basically is this: Priesthood is not necessarily a sacramental gift; it is a particular ministry dependent on a charism or gift of the Spirit.

Since the essence of priesthood is to form and lead a community of faith, a genuine community could discern this gift in one of its members who has united and led them in a significant way.

Since this person had thus displayed the characteristics of the gift of priesthood, he or she should also be able to lead them in the Eucharist.

Basically correct

Whence comes such a concept of priesthood?

The argument is simplistic, to say the least. It fails to recognize that the role of community leadership, understood as an office already within the New Testament, must remain linked to the original apostolic ministry and to the wider Church. The ordained minister has been authorized by the Church to preach and minister sacramentally in its name.

In presiding over the community and its worship, the priest expresses the continuity with the tradition and with the communion of the Catholic Church.

The argument is basically correct, however, in seeing that the ministry of the priest, specifically his role as presider at the Eucharist, is rooted in his role as community leader. Though this ministry was not seen as explicitly sacerdotal until the early third century, the ministry of those who in the Catholic tradition are called priests should include both service and leadership.

What do these concepts of service and leadership mean for those who

are priests today?

Priests are ministers, and a minister is, first, a servant. To be a servant is to be without prestige or power; it is to be always available, at the disposal of others. Thus, to be a servant is to be vulnerable, and priests, especially in today's Church, are vulnerable in a number of ways.

First, many priests today are overworked. As the number of priests continues to decrease, the demands on those who are active and competent continue to increase. Priests in parish ministry are not only expected to be present to the innumerable groups and committees meeting in the parish community, but they are also called upon for more and more special liturgies for those groups, for sub-communities in the parish, and for other groups outside the parish.

Priests living in large communities are frequently asked for liturgical service by communities of religious women. They need to be especially sensitive to these requests at this particular time in the life of the Church, when many religious women are acutely aware that they are not able to provide their own celebrants because of the Church's understanding of the requirements for ordination.

Not all priests, of course, are overworked. Some have managed to preserve for themselves a considerable part of the gracious clerical lifestyle of the past. They are usually not to be found in those sleepy hours after the noon meal. To the caller the secretary will say that Father is "in conference."

Critical problem

Second, many priests today find themselves torn between a considerable number of lay people anxious for change and an official Church which seems to be concerned with restoring discipline and recentralizing authority. As the recent

document on the morale of priests prepared by the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry phrases it, priests are "caught in the middle."¹

Thus, many priests find themselves the target of considerable frustration, and at times their ministry, if not unwelcome, is at least resented.

The alienation felt by so many contemporary women is a critical problem. Many of them have experienced condescending or patronizing attitudes on the part of individual priests. They have their own personal stories of being ignored or taken advantage of; and they resent a Church in which decisions made by clerical males excludes them from full participation in ministry and priesthood.

Women whose experience in the Church has been painful are not infrequently resentful of the priest whose position at least seems to be based more on his sex than on his personal charism or competence.

Resentment understandable

Priests who dismiss the question of inclusive language as unimportant or "ideological," or who make no effort to enter into the experience of women need to reflect on what being a servant means, practically, in their lives.

The problem here is not just a male-female issue; it is also a clerical-lay issue. The Second Vatican Council described the Church as the People of God and recovered a sense for the multiplicity of the gifts or charisms.

Though it did not go so far as to speak of a multiplicity of ministries, ordained and unordained, its theology of the charismata as well as its stress on the importance of lay people in the Church and their own share in the threefold office of Christ, clearly is moving in that direction.

Today lay men as well as women

¹"Reflections on the Morale of Priests," *Origins* 18 (Jan. 12, 1989) p. 501.



are claiming their own share in the Church's ministry. They resent what has sometimes been referred to as a "Pac Man" theory of ministry, which gobbles up all the important functions within the community and subsumes them within the role of the ordained.

Their resentment is understandable when they feel that their own gifts cannot or will not be recognized or when they see themselves excluded from the decision-making processes of the Church.

For some, that resentment can easily be directed at priests who symbolize by their very presence the Church's clerical structure. Others are

anxious to support good priests, but they are not uncritical about those they meet.

Finally, priests are vulnerable because they find themselves powerless to realistically address the issues that most concern themselves and those they serve. The bishops' document on the morale of priests called attention to this in several ways.

Control lacking

It noted that some priests experience discouragement because the solutions to the problems of the shortage of priests are "precluded from discussion."²

In summarizing its profile of priests today it stated:

"Perhaps most significant of all, [priests] feel that they have little or no control over their lives and future, be it in terms of ministry, assignment, policy development, or Church direction."³

Being overworked, caught in the middle, and lacking the power to bring about change are not assets. They represent problems which ultimately must be addressed. The vulnerability they express, however, might be an asset.

If a priest today is not automatically given the honor and respect accorded to his office in the past, if his ministry is not always recognized, then he needs to become a minister or servant as never before. And the Church desperately needs this kind of servant leaders.

Jesus, through His life of loving service and death, brought about a new community of men and women with God. So, too, priesthood should be understood as the gift of forming and leading a community gathered in Jesus' name. Priesthood is a ministry of leadership through word, worship, and service.

Must be in touch

Here I would single out three critical dimensions of this task today.

First, the priest must be able to give word to the community's experience.

Second, the priest must be able to work collaboratively with others.

Third, the priest must also be able to challenge those in the community.

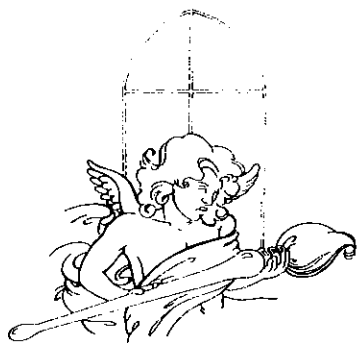
1. Giving Word to Experience.

To serve and preside over a community gathered for worship, fellowship, and service, a priest must be in

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²Ibid., p. 500.

³Ibid., p. 501.

A priest whose needs have always been provided, will not understand the struggle to support a family.

touch with the experience of the members of the community; he must be able to interpret that experience, to give it word and expression. Without this ability to give word to experience, to recognize how God is acting in the community's life and what God is saying to its members, preaching becomes empty rhetoric and liturgy mere ritual.

The most difficult part of preparing a homily is not developing a particular theme, but finding the connection between the Good News contained in the text and the experience of the community.

What are the concerns of the community members at this moment? What is on their minds? Where are they struggling?

A good homily is one that is able to articulate those struggles and concerns. A bad one does not; it addresses the preacher's agenda, like the priest who preaches self-righteously on abortion without ever having really been close to a woman who has had one. Or it remains on the level of abstraction, without ever getting down to the concrete.

Giving word to the experience of a community means being able to name the negative as well as the positive.

Recently I heard a homily, at a funeral Mass for someone who had taken his own life, which failed to deal directly with that simple tragedy which was very much on the minds of all those present.

Our preaching and our liturgies have to recognize and make room for the negative.⁴ Think of the power of those psalms of lamentation which have given word to the experience of so many over the centuries. It is precisely the tragedy and brokenness of our lives which opens for us the possibilities of God's transforming grace.

A priest isolated from the members

of his community cannot hope to give word to its experience. The image of the priest as a "man apart" is not very helpful today. A priest must be able to bring to the role of liturgical presidency the concerns of all those in the community; he must be able to give them expression.

A priest whose material needs have always been provided for, who has never had to support himself, will probably not understand those who struggle to support their families. If he has never confronted and been confronted by the experience of those who find themselves on the margins of the community, he will probably not be able to minister to them; he will not be able to give word to their experience.

Apt expression

Giving word to the experience of a community means more than a merely sacramental ministry. It includes articulating a vision of what Christian community means in a secularized world and a deeply divided Church. With so many in the Church split over sexual, social, and ecclesiological issues, a priest who would articulate such a vision must be able to live with considerable ambiguity, including an ambiguity about the forms the priesthood itself might take in the future.

2. Working Collaboratively With Others.

Just before the Second Vatican Council, Yves Congar described the prevailing Catholic monarchical ecclesiology in terms of the papal triple-crowned tiara. The tiara, which rises from a wide base to a single point at the top, "was an apt expression of the idea of pontifical monarchy and a quasi-pyramidal concept of the Church."⁵ The council replaced this

monarchical ecclesiology with a collegial one.

A collegial model of Church calls for a new understanding of ministry, not just in reference to the pope and the bishops, but for all those who exercise leadership and authority in the Church.

This is especially true for priests.

The times in which the priest was the most educated member of the American Catholic community are long past. Catholics in the United States are more present in the professions and more highly educated than any other group, except for the Jews. As Archbishop Rembert Weakland has frequently emphasized, their

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⁴See for example, Michael Downey, "Worship Between the Holocausts," *Theology Today* 43 (1986) pp. 75-87.

⁵Yves Congar, *Power and Poverty in the Church* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1962), pp. 125-126.

A priest who is not a person of prayer will not be able to call others to a prayerful life.

educational background and new social status poses new challenges to their priests and bishops.⁶

Sure to fail

To be effective leaders, priests must be able to work collaboratively with others, with professionally trained lay ministers, with religious women, and with the well-educated lay men and women who sit on parish councils and make up their various committees.

It is rare today to hear the story of a person no longer active in the Church because of a bad experience with a priest in confession. Not enough people go to confession today. But who has not heard the stories of those no longer active in the Church because of unhappy experiences with priests unable to work collaboratively with others?

A priest who is not able to share his authority, to listen to an honest difference of opinion, even to criticism, will be a failure. He must be able to relate to all the different groups within the community and to help them learn to respect each other. He must be able to work collaboratively, to welcome the competence of others, and to seek and build consensus.

3. Challenging the Community.

Finally, if a priest is to be not just a coworker but also a leader, he must be able to challenge others, both personally and communally. This prophetic role is rooted in the priest's responsibility for proclaiming the Word, but goes far beyond the task of preaching.

But again, a priest cannot challenge others simply on the basis of his office or authority. His words, if not deeply rooted in his own experience and in the integrity of his own life, will ring false.

⁶Rembert Weakland, "The Church in Worldly Affairs," *America* 156 (Oct. 18, 1986) pp. 201-216.

A priest who is not a person of prayer will not be able to call others to a prayerful life. If his own life is not nourished by prayer, deepened by contemplation, enriched by spiritual reading, he can hardly recommend these activities to others. Most parishioners instinctively recognize the difference between spirituality and rhetoric, between liturgical prayer and theater.

Similarly, a priest who has had no direct experience with the poor will not be able to challenge others in the area of social justice. The experience of those whose lives have been ruined by violence or even the threat of violence, who are without adequate food, decent housing, educational opportunity, who lack even personal privacy and a stable family life, will remain foreign to him.

Intrinsic training

An insertion experience which requires a significant amount of time living and working with the disadvantaged should be an intrinsic part of the training of candidates for the priesthood if challenging others to a concern for the poor is to be an important part of their ministry. Those who have not walked in the shoes of the poor will not be able to call others to their assistance.

Finally, a priest can hardly call others to ministry and service if he has no consciousness of being a servant himself. A priest who avoids the marginalized members of the community, those who are different from him, or those who resent him, cannot be a servant. A priest whose heart is not inclusive, who ministers only to the beautiful people, or to those like himself, who has no time for the lonely, the hurting, or the elderly, is transparent to those he seeks to serve.

The passing of the sacral concept of priesthood, with its clerical and even elitist connotations, should not be regretted. Let us not mourn its passing.

People very much want good priests today, but not priests who seek the ministry because of the prestige or status associated with it.

It may be true that an over-emphasis on priesthood as ministry fails to highlight what is specific to ordained ministry. All ministry is service for the building up of the community. For those whose ministry includes presiding at the eucharistic table, however, it is interesting to note that Jesus' understanding of himself as a servant for the sake of the reign of God came to expression historically at the Last Supper.⁷

The Christian community continued to gather after His death and resurrection, to break bread and share the cup in memory of His sacrifice. The one who watched over the community also presided at this table of remembrance. Because of this, as early as the beginning of the third century, the leader of the community was being referred to as a priest.⁸

⁷Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 303-304.

⁸Cf. Tertullian, *De baptismo*, 17; Hippolytus, *Apostolic Traditions*, 3:5.

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