

Theology of Ministry

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1. *Theology of Faith*

Many years of listening-in, and of occasionally contributing, to inter-church discussions of ministry, and of sharing in the shipwreck of endeavours lasting from Lambeth 1920 to the collapse of church unity negotiations in England in 1980 on the rocks of 'ministry'—all this convinced me that light must come from a different quarter.

It came from fundamental theology in general, and in particular from the theology of revelation and faith. This is an area in which much work was done in the years after Vatican II's Constitution *De divina revelatione*, and in which I have long had an interest.¹ The gist of the matter, as is well known, is that Christian faith is not 'propositional' or having doctrine as its object ('the teaching of the Church'), but is a personal response to God's self-gift and disclosure in Christ.² In this perspective, 'beliefs' are varying expressions, more pictorial or more abstract, of how God is comprehended in the relationship he thus establishes (his act of revealing). From this it follows that all Christian doctrines, i.e. beliefs accepted by and taught in a Christian community, must in the last analysis be about Christ. And one then needs to distinguish 'faith-statements' from all more secondary statements of Christian experience and conviction depending on them, which may then be called 'value-statements'.

If this scheme of fundamental theology is then applied to the theology of ministry, it can at once be seen that the central elements to which Christian traditions cling, over which they negotiate in discussions on church unity and on which all such discussions have eventually come to grief, are in fact not faith-statements at all, but value-statements enshrining long and genuine experience of ministry, which are negotiable in a way that faith-statements cannot be. All such statements are theological in the broad sense, but only faith statements are strictly *theological* and admit of no compromise for the sake of Christian unity.

What engages our *faith* in the area of Christian ministry is that the risen Lord is encountered in the continually developing ministries of the Church, and exercises his own care and service of the Church through them. But the *varying forms* of Christian ministry in which he is encountered are historically and culturally conditioned, since his people

are a people in history. None of them is or can be necessary, absolute or of faith.

2. *Theology of ministries*

This enables one to state what is strictly a theology of ministry in a few very simple statements. These are not about particular and historically conditioned ministries but about Christian ministry as such, and attempt to set out what is essential about it, whatever forms it takes. I suggest the three which follow.

i *All ministries in the Church serve and mediate the continuing ministry of Christ the Lord.*

The risen Lord is present and active in his people's history by the power of his Spirit which he receives from the Father. *He* ministers in the Church, his body, *he* governs, *he* inspires, *he* binds in unity, *he* sends us out to build the kingdom. Josef Jungmann argued³ that the influx of Arians into Italy over centuries had forced the Western Church to react so strongly that in popular devotion Christ was pushed right up into heaven and became hardly human: even the doxology was changed from the pattern of 'We give glory in the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father' (maintained in the Eucharistic prayers) to the now familiar, 'Glory ... to the Son ... to the Spirit'. Only in such a climate, when the pauline and patristic doctrine of the body of Christ had become obscured, if not forgotten, could there be talk of ministers of the Church from the apostles onwards as 'taking the place' of Christ, as if he were an absent Lord who guided his church in history from afar, or had left a human organisation 'in his place'. No one takes his place. In a basic and profoundly important sense there are no vicars of Christ, no substitutes for him. For he is present and active himself. The bishop of the see of Rome is not, in this ultimate sense, a vicar even of Peter; rather is he a successor to the see of Peter and Paul, who in the great tradition of the Church (and in the liturgy) continue to preside over the see of Rome where they gave their final witness, and who have no personal successors.

In a broader sense all Christian ministers, and in the episcopal tradition all bishops in particular, are vicars of Christ, in that they mediate his presence and action. This is a characteristically Catholic and sacramental view of ministry: Christian ministers embody, crystallize, make visible and available, even guarantee to us, the continuing gift and service which Christ the Lord himself unceasingly exercises throughout his body the Church.

But of course, the human minister can never *perfectly* mediate the continuing presence and saving action of Christ, his lordship, his priesthood, his prophetic role, the inspiration of his Spirit. Only Christ

who is the Lord has power, has authority, is infallible, in any absolute sense. Embodied in the Christian ministry is not only the saving action of God, but also the great and varied inadequacies of the human servant: not only the Spirit but also the 'flesh'. Once again, it is only in the theological climate of an absent Lord and of a human ministry operating in his place that one could get the phenomenon of triumphalism, in which the Church under its leaders could be credited absolutely with such qualities as unity, holiness, catholicity, the possession of truth, power over men's lives.

ii *Christ gives gifts of his Spirit to all in his body*

The passages in 1 Corinthians about the *charismata* (gifts) were brought to life again by Cardinal Suenens at Vatican II. The Spirit gives different gifts to all in the community, gifts that are for service and not for self-improvement: indeed the lists in 1 Cor 12:8—10, 28b indicate events of Spirit-action rather than personal abilities. One needs to stress again the primacy of the Lord's presence and action. He does not give all his gifts to each, but *he* gives gifts to each. They are his action, as he embodies his action in ours, which never becomes wholly our own, at our disposal. The gifts never become the possession of anyone, however eminent, as powers to be passed on or to be withheld according to pleasure and due form. We should not talk of bishops 'having the power' as a possessed commodity to make other bishops or priests, 'having' power which they can transmit or not according to accepted rules; or of priests 'having the power' to celebrate the eucharist. Power is God's. A person chosen for responsibility is so chosen because he is thought to have the powers (qualities) to fulfil the responsibility. He then must have power to carry out his responsibilities, i.e. others must respect and comply with his decisions within the obedience of faith. It is the Lord who celebrates the eucharist in his body the Church.

Christ gives gifts to all in his body, and they are primarily for the health of the body and not for the advantage of the individual, though the two interlock. Paul repeatedly insists, since his primary concern is with the divisions at Corinth, that the gifts are for the 'upbuilding' and unity of the community (1 Cor 12:25; 14:3, 4, 5, 12, 26, 33): that is why he introduces the hymn to 'charity'.

iii *At any point in history there is only one theological absolute about patterns of ministry: the Church must so structure its ministries as best to fulfil the mission given it by Christ in the circumstances of here and of today.*

The Church was not founded to preserve itself or its past. It was founded to give God's salvation free to all in word and deed, and to establish Christ's kingship in the world. It was founded to be the vehicle and

manifestation of his self-gift (revelation), his lordship, his priesthood.

The statement also asserts a negative. The Church is not hung about with precedents, with traditions that have hardened into absolutes. It does not from its founding and history have to structure its ministries one way rather than another. It is free. It is bound only to seek and to implement the best means of fulfilling the purpose for which it is continually being sent into the world. If only we could believe that! How many sterile, futile, even puerile discussions would be undercut! But to free the Church and to let this theology of ministry operate one has to clear a lot of ground.

3. *Clearing the ground*

In the present state of New Testament scholarship, I take the position to be as follows. Jesus did not envisage the Church, and left no instructions to the Church, in his lifetime or afterwards, about structuring the Church's ministries. The Church was founded on the Easter and Pentecostal experiences, namely those of 'seeing the Lord' in the case of chosen witnesses, and on the experience of his presence and action in the case of other disciples, who interpreted their experience of the active Spirit of Christ by the witnesses to his resurrection.⁴ The disciples show no awareness of any such instructions and in any case, in expectation of an imminent Second Coming, would hardly be concerned with church structures. No one was in charge at Corinth when Paul wrote his many letters there to answer questions that had arisen. Various patterns of ministry ('service') emerge in the two or three generations attested by the New Testament. What is salient is that all at first shared in kingdom-building gifts, and that no one was concerned about organisation. At the Last Supper Jesus commissioned the Church (the Twelve) to celebrate his memorial (the idea that he then ordained his apostles as priests not appearing till the sixth century), and we have no evidence about who presided at the eucharist in the absence of an apostle. What is quite clear is that it is unimaginable that the baptised community, the body of Christ, should *not* be able to celebrate the mystery of the body of Christ, e.g. because of the absence of some appointed person. 'The twelve apostles', to use Luke's terminology, are missionaries, not bishops, and Peter, after playing the key role in the founding of the Jerusalem church, ceased to be a bishop and became an apostle. James the Lord's brother, apparently not one of the Twelve, headed the Jerusalem community on a sort of heredity principle. We do not know when mon-episcopacy started in Rome.

So one can say that, in a general way, Jesus' choice of followers headed by Peter set a pattern for future roles of responsibility, but that there is no direct descent from the actions of Jesus to the pattern that by

slow degrees became universal. We can say that the Lord through his Spirit founded a church-with-a-ministry: not a ministry commissioned to produce a church; nor a shapeless community which eventually delegated its powers to an official ministry.

In considering the historical development, a few points are of special note. Firstly, mon-episcopacy was firmly entrenched by the second century in Syria, and with the city-state organisation of the Roman Empire is likely to have spread with equal speed everywhere. Secondly, presbyters became second-order elders, while bishops began to be called 'priests' in the third century. In general, as Bernard Cooke has emphasised,⁵ the emergence of an official ministry began a process of absorption, probably owing to educational factors: clerical ministries soon absorbed lay ministries and bishops took over much responsibility from presbyters, even for preaching. Indeed, Petrine ministry in time went a long way towards absorbing episcopal responsibilities in the West. Thirdly, the growing awareness of the eucharist as sacrifice, and a certain switch of emphasis from Gospel to Eucharist, enabled the Jewish high-priesthood to act as a model in a way it could not do before, because Christ had brought an end to the Jewish priesthood by fulfilling it in himself; the eucharist requires a single president, not a group of presidents. Fourthly, the stratification of Roman society into *ordines*, with clearly defined political and social roles, certainly contributed to the 'orders' of clergy and to the emergence of a clerical class or caste within the Church, with priests 'above' laity, clergy over against people. There was Old Testament precedent, but had not Jesus abolished all that? Fifthly, it also seems highly probable that the prevailing neo-platonism of the early centuries, with its model of descending orders of beings, assisted the stratification and introduced the idea of sacred power given by God to the clergy and descending through their ranks to the people.

It is sometimes argued that the bishop-priest pattern's continuing unchallenged for centuries is a clear sign of the guidance of the Spirit and of the will of God for his Church: hence, that the pattern becomes normative, even if it cannot be traced directly back to Jesus and did not exist in the first generations. But one has to be careful of this argument. One cannot but be struck by the element of historical conditioning in the development of the Church's ministry. And such conditioning is entirely proper, because the Church is always both historical and the body of Christ: specific needs, specific cultural settings and assumptions, will give rise to particular patterns as the embodiment for that day and age of Christ's ministry in his Church. But this implies that in our day and age (and we are just as historically conditioned—there is no timeless model) other patterns may press for realization. To look at the matter from the side of God's action, one must similarly say that, if the Spirit guided the Church into those patterns there and then, the same Spirit can guide into

other patterns here and now. This is what the Reformers were saying in the sixteenth century. They wished to reform the ministry to make it truer to the Gospel and the Church's mission. They were naïve in trying to reform by restoring the New Testament pattern, both because there can be no putting the clock of history back, and because there is no New Testament pattern. The naïvety of the Catholic reply lay in asserting that the traditional pattern had been directly instituted by Jesus Christ.

Papacy, episcopacy and councils are always both the guidance of God and the product of history, which always includes the 'flesh' or sinful aspect of man's response to God. Their roles have continually changed in the past and will change in the future. What really matters in the ecumenical dialogue is not the theory of papacy or of episcopacy, but how they function in practice. The one imperative lying on the Church is so to structure its ministry as best to fulfil its mission.

The idea that 'holy power' (for the celebration of the eucharist and the forgiveness of sins) is vested in the clergy and is transmitted by ordination, has lost favour in Catholic theology. There is no evidence of such an idea in New Testament times, and it is tied up with the idea of a clerical caste, if not with neo-platonic patterns of thought. One must distinguish carefully between necessary church rules for the proper ordering of the Church's life and worship, and what the baptised community is, and is able to do. (The Council of Trent was careful not to rule out Jerome's opinion that priests could ordain, and that reserving ordination to bishops was a matter of church rule.) God's action is mediated and assured by church ministry but not confined to the 'official channels': they do not take his place. The baptised community is Christ's and must be able to celebrate the eucharist.

4. *Christian values*

A great number of Christian values have been discovered in the process of ordering the Church's ministries over many centuries, in different cultural settings, in different political and social circumstances. Different Christian traditions emphasize different values in the infinitely complex ways in which the inexhaustible riches of Christ's ministry and service are reflected in human response, response always situated in particular historical circumstances and conditioned by them. Statements of Christian value are, however, second-order statements arising from human experience and not simply the revelation or self-gift of God. They are not of faith.

In the course of this discussion I have slid away from using the word ministry for all God's gifts to his people, and have been using it only for the official or 'ordained' ministries; but that is because this is what happened to the word. Hence a word here about terminology might

prove helpful. In the New Testament all the gifts (*charismata*) of the Spirit to members of the Church are services, not given for perfecting the individual but for the health of the body. As the Church developed structures of responsibility, some gifts were incorporated into these structures and became 'office' without ceasing to be gifts. The Latin word *munus* hits off both aspects, gift and office. All the baptized are *christifideles* (those with faith in Christ) and have gifts. In the case of the ordained, their gifts have been incorporated into the structures of responsibility: they have become office without ceasing to be gifts, and without their bearers ceasing to be *christifideles*. Indeed, Vatican II gets into some difficulties with the concept of 'laity', who can only be defined by what they are not. So office has to be distinguished from gift, but ordained ministry is both. And so, to save words, it happens that in discussing a theology of ministry one is mainly talking about so-called ordained ministers, unless it is obvious from the context that the gifts, services, ministries of all are being considered.

All Churches have exercised direction and 'oversight' through a combination of episcopal persons and of synods, in varying proportions. The Churches which do not have bishops nevertheless have episcopal persons with wider responsibilities than other or more junior ministers, and one of their main duties is personal pastoral care of those other ministers. Traditional Reformed objections to episcopacy have been against prelacy rather than against episcopacy as such.

Episcopacy is associated with a eucharistic view of the Church as communion (*koinonia*) and has served through centuries to maintain the unity of the Church as a communion of communions. In the past, Protestants have tended to assert that apostolic succession lies in the faithful continuance of the Church in the faith, life and mission of the apostles, but without producing any clear criteria for such continuance. Catholics, concentrating on the criteria, have tended to reduce apostolic succession to episcopal pedigree. Today these approaches have come together, and the bishop, incorporated into the world-wide college of bishops, is seen as the effective sign of apostolic succession.⁶

Among bishops there are primates in any episcopal Church, and the papacy is not an isolated office. The papacy has in fact served to preserve unity in a world-wide Church, and to be an effective sign of the *ecclesia catholica* across different cultures which other Churches do not have to cope with; ARCIC sees a role for a universal primacy as serving the unity of the Church.

How the papacy best serves unity in any particular age is a variable historical factor, a matter of careful discernment of situations; not a matter of God-given constitutional rights and powers, but of God-given responsibilities. The only question is how the unitive power of Christ may best be mediated.

5. *Today's questions*

Today some confusion reigns. Priests 'for ever according to the order of Melchisedech' are laicised. The canonical action implies a theology—and a non-theology: that there is no permanent 'character' (the Greek word for a stamped impression on wax etc.) stamped somewhere on the ordinand (the soul?) which cannot be effaced. Only in the thirteenth century did the idea develop that ordination gives a character, impresses a permanent stamp, marking the priest for time and eternity as different (and being the reason why ordination cannot be repeated): this surely reflects the development of a caste system, even while it proclaims the 'holiness' of the priest and of what is entrusted to him. In scripture, people and things are holy because they are brought by the holy God into a special relationship with him, into his service: holy people, holy land, holy vessels, holy clothes, holy or sacred priests.

What comes through from all this as far as baptism and ordination are concerned are the ideas that they are permanent and that they are unrepeatable. There is no need to turn Augustine's metaphor into a peculiar metaphysics of substance and accident, in which a person's being is permanently qualified in baptism, confirmation, ordination (or marriage), by a mark or seal upon the soul. The irreversibility of history is surely sufficient. She or he *has* been baptized into the Christian community or ordained (appointed, commissioned) in it, and the fact cannot be scrubbed out. He and she *have* been married, have committed themselves to each other for life. Because baptism and marriage are what they are, they are not repeatable: you cannot join the same community or marry the same spouse twice. So, in respect of the irreversibility of the past, these sacraments do not differ from other events of past history. But baptism, marriage and ordination are not only past events for the community and for those in these states; they are also commitments (by parents and community in the case of infant baptism). They are first God's commitment to us, and then our commitment in response to God in each other; or God's permanent commitment to us being 'earthed' and taking historical form, being embodied or made incarnate, in special moments of our experience. That is why and how they are sacraments. Baptism-confirmation and marriage are by their nature commitments for life. It does not follow that ordination is or has to be, on the side of the individual or of the community. It is not of the nature of ordination to appoint anyone to responsibilities for life, or of the nature of offering oneself and one's gifts for 'office' to do so for life—indeed, quite the reverse. It is deeply important for the Church that many *should* commit themselves for life, but not a bit necessary that all should do so; and the community should not be wholly bound by such a commitment however well or ill it works out. This appears to be acknowledged by the fact that some who did so commit themselves are 'laicized' and absolved from

that commitment in order to engage, let it be added, in other commitments in the Church, other ministries. A bishop who has resigned does not have to 'still be' a bishop in some urgent metaphysical sense, but should obviously be treated as one if he wishes or if the community wishes.

Then there is confusion about *the 'ordained' and the 'lay'*. We can hear of 'lay ministers of the eucharist' (i.e. of Holy Communion—no more), both men and women. Because they are appointed to this office, and because office as function and responsibility (which equals 'authority') entails office as position and status, they are *ad hoc* not lay. To say they are 'commissioned', not 'ordained', is to play with words. Similarly there is alarm if occasionally in the Free Churches there is a 'lay' president of the eucharist. If he or she is appointed for that occasion, by the community or in a recognised process by ordinary ministers, then for that occasion he or she is not lay. Theory lags behind practice. In many parts of the world—basic communities are a good example—team ministries of men and women operate, both 'clerical' and 'lay'. The distinctions get blurred. The valuable, though not hard and fast, distinction is between those appointed to a service and those simply using their God-given gifts: this they will do well if they serve, rather than duplicate or disrupt, the more structured ministries of the community that exist already.

Then, whether *women should be priests* becomes the wrong question, both because some are ordained already, as has just been said, and because of its many assumptions: who could be more ordained than a nun? Both sides of the equation need loosening up: for 'priests' substitute a great variety of appointed ministers (some of whom are Carthusians); and for 'women' in the abstract substitute a great variety of women in a great variety of social and historical settings. It is not a timeless question: no question about the Church's ministry is. There is an increasing need to loosen up the pattern or structure of the Church's ministries and to erode or even forget the distinction between clerical and lay. Men or women could be appointed full-time or part-time to any ministry; they could be appointed for a particular place or a particular task, without any theoretically universal commissioning; they could be appointed for a limited term. Maybe it was hard to see this in the centuries in which western thought understood everything in terms of its timeless essence or nature. Now it is shouting itself from the Third World and from the General Synod of the Church of England.

However, one pastoral need pulls in the opposite direction from another. Whilst it would be desirable for the Church to exercise the maximum flexibility so as best to fulfil its mission here and today (and so not necessarily do 'there' what it does 'here'), yet over-rapid changes would leave many not knowing who or where they are, producing

identity crisis all round. People need recognizable symbols to establish their identity, and this is true of both the ordained and the lay. Inherited patterns of ordained ministry provide such symbols, and they make for stability and a sense of direction. However, they should not be allowed to be strait-jackets which hinder rather than foster the mediation of Christ's ministry in his Church. We cannot start all over again with a *tabula rasa*, but must start where we are. We have traditions, but are not bound by them; rather should we be instructed by them, as incorporating experienced values, and yet continually adapt them to meet present-day demands. It is a time of rapid change, so the pressure for adaptation is bound to be great. The faith statement that the Church must so structure its ministry as best to fulfil its mission is ideal, it is formal and abstract; its translation into practice will always be difficult; it is a divine imperative which we will never perfectly fulfil; it is a divine summons into the future, reminding us that the Gospel always challenges the Law; that the challenge to be fully a Christian is the challenge to be fully human, in the image of the New Man, Christ. It took God to be fully human, and that is what the doctrine of the incarnation is all about.

- 1 *Faith Seeks Understanding*, Sheed & Ward 1951 (suppressed!); *The Theology of Faith*, Mercier Press 1968; *Christian Truth*, Darton, Longman & Todd 1975; *Faith in Jesus Christ*, DLT 1980.
- 2 In my view the most satisfactory full-length treatment is by Gerald O' Collins SJ, in his *Foundations of Theology*, Loyola University Press Chicago 1971. The original inspiration came from the article by Pierre Rousselot SJ, 'Les Yeux de la Foi', *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, Vol 1, 1910, pp 241—259.
- 3 *Pastoral Liturgy*, New York and Challoner Publications 1962.
- 4 See *Faith in Jesus Christ*, note 1 above.
- 5 B. Cooke, *Ministry to Word and Sacraments*, Fortress Press Philadelphia 1976.
- 6 See the *Final Report* of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, CTS/SPCK 1982, p 37 n 16.

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