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THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

Introduction

At various times in the history of the Church, new thought and patterns of action develop which have far-reaching effects. Our own age has witnessed a variety of new thought and new direction in the life of the Church as a result of the Second Vatican Council.

Historians have told us that the ideas and theologies reflected in any of the Church's General Councils take time to germinate, develop, grow, and become mature. Among the various new directions to which the Second Vatican Council pointed was a consciousness that a definition of the Church would be centered on the fact that the Church is the People of God. Moreover, this Church was to exist, operate, and function within the world in which we live. The role of Church leadership would be expanded to become more aware of the ministerial charism of the laity who constitute the Church today. Though emphasizing the hierarchical structure of the Church with emphasis on the role of the Pope, bishops, priests and religious, the Second Vatican Council would challenge the institutional Church to become more conscious of its role and responsibility to call the Christian community to the experience of ministry.

"Ministry" as an idea and reality is at the heart of a revolution now going on within the Church. As an idea, "ministry" is being explored theologically, scripturally, historically so that a clear understanding may be had regarding the response of the Christian community to the challenges of Vatican II. As a reality, "ministry" has taken on a new and restored concrete form in the restoration of the permanent diaconate and the introduction of the lay ministries of acolyte and reader.

An exploration into a theology of ministry involves several factors. As the young Benedictine theologian, Rev. Nathan Mitchell points out in his article from WORSHIP Magazine, theological speculation about ministry cannot commit itself exclusively to the "what is now possible." If it does, then the "now possible" will become permanent and the Church and the Christian community will be deprived of new possibilities. Moreover, Fr. Mitchell points out the very important fact that **ORDINATION PRESUMES MINISTRY; MINISTRY DOES NOT DEMAND ORDINATION**. This simple statement has profound truth within its brief perspective. It expands the possibility of what ministry can be and it helps to clarify the significance and meaning of ordination itself. Finally, Fr. Mitchell emphasizes that ministerial roles in the Church have a symbolic dimension which demands that the ordained person be more in the community than simply a nice guy among nice guys. To smudge or obliterate the distinction of roles in the Christian community is self-defeating because it leaves everyone, ordained and non-ordained alike, in an amorphous, roleless condition. And without roles, people are quite literally nobody. Role maintenance is essential for the continuing life of Christian communities. Ministry is as ridiculous in a roleless church as marriage would be in a sexless society.

Consequently, in our exploration of a theology of ministry, we will recognize full well the role distinctions now present within the Church community in its hierarchical structure and request and cry out for clear definitions of new ministries which need to be identified and articulated. A bishop must be a bishop and fulfill that role; likewise, the priest must be priest and not assume what belongs to the role of the bishop; the deacon must be exactly that and nothing more or less; and so forth.

This lengthy introduction is necessary for an understand of a theology of ministry. Our approach to the question will involve three points followed by the consequences of the issued raised.

First, it is important to trace the history of the role of the Church in its exercise of ministry through the first centuries of the Church's existence. Secondly, it is important to become familiar once again with the texts within our Scriptural tradition which cry out for an awareness of ministry. Finally, it is worth considering three characteristics of ministry present within the early Christian community which have relationship to the present lived reality in the Church today. The consequences of this approach could well offer a challenge to clerical leadership in the Church today at the diocesan and parish level to identify and articulate new forms of ministries open to the Chirstian community.

AN HISTORICAL PASTORAL APPROACH

According to the Study Text issued by NCCB Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy entitled "Ministries in the Church," ministry in the New Testament and in the early Christian community is characterized by an "on-going development through creative tension between the spontaneous and charismatic on the one hand and the legislative and custodial on the other." The early Christian community as reflected in the New Testament was a growth process searching for flexible structure to meet the needs of the Church.

The NCCB document reminds its readers of two possible exaggerations to be avoided in reviewing ministry in the early Christian community: the first is that the New Testament is a unified document which presents a clear and fully developed picture of Church order and Church ministry; the other extreme, equally to be avoided is that the early Christian community because of its proximity to the Easter experience and animated by the promised Spirit, is completely unstructured.

Biblical scholars have been peeling away the layers of history culture, language and theology in the New Testament in order to better understand the experience of the early Christian community.

Some of the findings of the Biblical scholars as recorded in the NCCB document include:

- Jesu in the Gospels gave his disciples few instructions about how to organize the Christian community. I suspect, as an aside, Jesus had no concept of how in the minds of many contemporary Christians, our faith is related and judged by the number of meetings we attend.
- the first leaders of the Jerusalem community introduced flexible structure of ministry in order to serve the needs of all segments of the growing Church.
- the apostles recognized a flexible Church order was essential for guiding the Church in its ministry of reconciliation.
- the apostles recognized and encouraged the variety of spiritual gifts present with the body of the Church.
- It is clear that the earliest books of the New Testament present a rich diversity of ministries for laymen and laywomen, and some of these ministries were not formalized by the laying on of hands.
- only in later times of the New Testament era would the criteria for the apostolic office be formulated.

- finally, the document from the NCCB Bishops' Committee states: it is doubtful that a single ecclesiastical office remains today in the same form as the New Testament Churches employed it.

Later developments in ministry within the Church were to be influenced by a set of factors entirely different from those operative in the New Testament Church.

- the fading immediacy of the Easter experience
- the gradual realization that the second coming of Jesus was not at hand
- the numerical and geographical cultural growth of the Church
- civil organizational structures
- the response of the Church to persecution and religious freedom
- the general human tendency to institutionalize a charism and surround it with juridical norms and procedures.

These ministries in the early Christian community would be absorbed into the exclusive presbyteral or priestly ministry. A tremendous challenge would be offered to the Church in the 16th century as a result of the Reformation. The reformers offered the Church this opportunity to regain a balance between charism and office, spontaneity and structure, lay involvement and clerical control. According to the NCCB document, "the excesses of the reformers produced an inflexible stubbornness in the Church rather than creative tension."

Recent developments in theology point out that ministry is built on a premise of the work of the total Church being involved in the proclamation of the Gospel. All those who are baptized are called to exercise ministry, each in his or her own way and according to one's own call and gifts.

The NCCB document finally states that recent emphasis in theology, point out five main functions of ministry - teaching, preaching, celebrating, organizing and individual pastoral care which are no longer the exclusive domain of the ordained minister.

Throughout the centuries, there has been likewise a development in the way in which the Church exercised its ministry of continuing the work of the Lord. In the first centuries of the Church, the bishop took direct charge of all the faithful committed to his care. The bishop personally presided over all sacred functions. The Christian community over which the bishop would be leader would often be no larger than parishes in Chicago or its surrounding suburbs today. In fact, most likely the group was much smaller.

To assist the local bishop in his care of the community, members of the community itself exercised a ministry. A special associate to the bishop was the deacon as an ordained co-worker. But as the numbers of the faithful increased, the bishop shared his responsibility with others who would be able to celebrate Eucharist and administer the sacrament of penance. Consequently, with the increase in numbers, the ordained priest would also become more common, with the gradual disappearance of the diaconate as an independent ministry within the Church. The previous ministries of the laity gradually became stepping stones to, and were included in, the priesthood.

By the fourth century, the Christian community had grown to such an extent that definite relationships were established between the faithful in a definite locality and a priest who would be a pastor to them. The reality of dioceses with proper bishops became the reality, until the 16th century, the relationship between a priest as pastor with a definite group of the Christian community under his care became the universal experience.

Today, in reality, many pastors in large urban areas of our country have a position toward the faithful, at least as far as numbers are concerned, in the same way as the bishop did in the early Christian community. What is lacking, however, is the formal and recognized assistance of members of the laity exercising a ministry and sharing in the work of the Lord. Would it not be proper to consider the possibility and create the reality that this similarity calls for - for the local pastor to call forth others to ministry as he has been called forth by the Ordinary of the Diocese?

SCRIPTURE

In the Epistles to the Ephesians, Corinthians and Romans, there are countless texts which describe the work of the faithful who shared in the mission of Jesus and His Church. Within the faith community, there was a diversity of charisms which were gifts of one and the same Spirit. These gifts were to be expressed in a variety of ministries and services. These gifts were given by the Spirit to individuals not for their own good, but for the good of all.

1. There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit (1Cor. 12: 4)
2. there are all sorts of service to be done, but always to the same Lord; working in all sorts of different ways in different people, it is the same Lord working in all of them. (1 Cor. 12: 5,6,)
3. Our gifts differ according to the grace given us. If your gift is prophecy, then use it as your faith suggests; if administration, then use it for administration; if teaching, then use it for teaching. Let the preachers deliver sermons, the almsgivers give freely, the officials be diligent, and those who do works of mercy do them cheerfully. (Rom. 12: 6-9)
4. One may have the gift of preaching with wisdom given him by the Spirit; another may have the gift of preaching instruction given him by the same Spirit; and another the gift of faith given by the same Spirit; another again the gift of healing, through this one Spirit; one, the power of miracles; another, prophecy, another the gift of recognizing spirits, another the gift of tongues and another the ability to interpret them. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, who distributes different gifts to different people just as he chooses. (1 Cor. 12: 8-11)
5. Just as each of our bodies has several parts and each part has a separate function, so all of us, in union with Christ, form one body, and as parts of it we belong to each other. (Rom. 12: 4,5)
6. so that the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ. In this way we are all to come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fulness of Christ himself. (Eph. 4: 12-13)

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MINISTRY IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Among the characteristics of ministry found in these texts describing the experience of the early Christian community would be the following:

- a. All Christians are called to ministry by reason of baptism.
- b. There was a wide diversification of ministry
- c. Ministry involved public action

First, within the early Christian community there was the deep consciousness that every baptized believer had a call to ministry, some task, some action, some duty that must be done for the kingdom. Baptism was not an initiation into a frozen state of life, but rather a birth into an every more powerful dynamic life style. Naturally, there were levels of ministry within the community whereby the Apostle, bishop or deacon had a more public and professional role. But baptism itself gave the believer a mission of discipleship and servanthood.

Secondly, as is obvious, from the New Testament texts, there must be and can be many ministries. And finally, ministry involves not only an interior life lived in the Spirit, it involves public action.

The repercussions of these characteristics are obvious when translated into the world of today. Today, within the Church community, there is once again the beginning recognition of the ministry of every baptized believer in various forms and realizations. Liturgically and ecclesiastically, we have only a few publicly recognized ministries beyond the ministry of those called to the Sacrament of Holy Orders. However, the silent but powerful revolution in the Church today is the introduction of Christians, beyond clerics, into ministry, and, as a result, consequently, there is a grass-roots creation of new ministries. Should not the bishops, pastors and priests of today invest themselves in this revolution to call baptized members of the Church community into new forms of ministry which have definite expectations and perhaps limited time parameters?

Secondly, today once again there are countless avenues of services which offer a variety of possibilities for ministry. These expressions of service cannot be pre-determined, but must come out of the ongoing lived experience of the People of God. If one task has been given to the Church, it is "Preach the Gospel! Spread the Good News!" With this mandate as the ministry of the Church, the variety of ministries that are open to the Christian community in each parish boggles the mind.

Finally, new ministries must involve public action today. The work of the Christian community is not a work that emphasizes the interior life alone. The Incarnation of the Lord was the entrance of God into the world. This theology of Incarnation must be the theology on which ministry is based and lived, a theology that calls for the work of the Christian community in the world. This ministry takes on different shapes and forms depending on the need of a community - visitation of the sick, a concern for peace and justice, a reformation of the prison system, community organization and on and on and on.

CONSEQUENCES

The above statements lead to several consequences for the Church today, and especially for its bishops, priests and deacons. The challenge to the ordained cleric is to call others to ministry. But this cannot be done until we are able to IDENTIFY and ARTICULATE the ministries that need to be actualized within our diocese and parishes.

The NCCB document from the Ad Hoc Committee for Priestly Life and Ministry specifies the basic elements of priestly ministry as threefold:

1. to proclaim the Gospel
2. to preside over the sacraments and liturgy
3. to build up and serve the community which in turn serves the world.

Can the priest of today with limited help from other priests and with the ever increasing number of those who want to embrace the Christian message perform these functions or tasks of priestly ministry by himself? The answer seems to be a resounding "No!" The priest of today, the Church of today, the leadership of the Christian community must return to a greater and fuller awareness of the charism for ministry with a community, to activate that charism, to recognize it, to ritualize it - even for limited periods of time.

To identify and to articulate ministries within a community is the challenge. Once this is accomplished, then these ministries in turn can be recognized publicly and even ritualized. Once again, we become aware of the presupposition behind ministry and ordination. Ordination presumes ministry; ministry does NOT demand ordination. And perhaps the new additional role of the priest as minister will be to minister to the ministers whom he has called just as a bishop's ministry is to his priests, so a priest's ministry will include an ever increasing ministry to ministers.

We stand now at a crossroads in history as the Church has often done in the past. We could move slowly, carefully, and have pre-set solutions to problems which confront us. This path is well traveled and well known. But there is an alternate possibility - to take the less traveled road, to explore, to experiment, to venture forth in a new direction - a direction rooted in our tradition, rooted in a belief in our people, rooted in an adventure of the work of the Spirit. It is a less traveled road, but one well worth taking.

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