

RENEWAL OF MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

Whenever there is talk about the renewal of the ministry in the Roman Catholic Church, the objective of that renewal as a rule appears to be the abolition of mandatory celibacy for priests and the admittance of women to the priesthood. Once the admission requirements for the ministry have been changed, so people think, all will be better. But the renewal of the ministry will be about much more than that and will have to focus on quite different objectives.

In the first place it will be a question of finding a way where religion can once again contribute to justice and where the message of religion — credible both in word and in deed - can once again be preached to the world. One of the most important tasks will be to expel from the Church of Christ all ambition for power and all abuse of power. The message of the Gospel doesn't link up any more with the opinion of the people of the 21st century. We have to look after a contemporary spirituality, connected with the main issue for justice and peace. We have, like Jesus did, to put in the middle that people who have no place in our world.

Also in the time of Saint Francis of Assisi was many abuse of the power of the Pope, the cardinals and the monks. The convents were very rich and had many poor as tenant farmers. Saint Francis would reform the Church but he would not be a priest. In his letter to all the religious he said: Brother Francis, your servant and subordinate, wants to make subservient to you all. Also for his brothers he doesn't want to be the boss, but a minister. He is against all use of power, because Jesus Christ wanted to be a Servant. Francis denounced the affluence in Rome and in the churches with sharp words. If he lived in our time, he would also denounce all the splendour and circumstance in the Vatican and the abuse of power. Saint Francis would be one of us. Woe betide the religious who is high placed by others and refused by his own will to go down.

“Do not call anybody on earth your father, for you have only one father, your Father in heaven” (Mathew, 23, 9). In the Christian churches, therefore, no one should put himself above the other or rule over the other. Jesus of Nazareth said:

“You know that the rulers of the world abuse their power and suppress their people. With you it must not be like that. Who among you is the highest in rank must serve the others and whoever wants to be first must be a servant to the others. For the son of man has not come to be served but to serve and to render his life as ransom money for many” (Mathew 20, 25 — 28).

In the gospel message, therefore, the emphasis is not on power, but on service. If there must be ministers — perhaps it would be better to speak of “pastors in the role of travelling companions”: men and women who are travelling through the desert of our time - they will have to be servants, equal to those they are travelling with, no less and no more. Pastoral care has to be a service to others. The task of a pastor is to take care that the other person is not frightened off and that no outside compulsion interferes with the mutual contact. In this contact the pastor, together with his or her discussion partner, does his best to be inspired by the gospel. In the centre of the gospel we find the message of liberation and Jesus Christ as the liberator. Here we find the image of the good Shepherd, the pastor bonus from which pastoral care derives its name. According to the catholic catechism priests at their ordination are made to share in the power and grace which Christ gave to the apostles and they are sanctified to be the shepherds of their faithful. The emphasis is on power and leadership and identification with the good Shepherd. This interpretation is diametrically opposed to a relationship free from compulsion. It puts emphasis on power and leadership and the dependence of the discussion companion. The presumption to be the representative of the Lord really interferes with a pastoral relationship. Use of power is altogether wrong. The gospel of liberation is about the liberating presence of the Lord. In Mathew 25 one reads about the faithful who are serving the Lord in the sick, the poor and the people in prison. The Lord himself is the poor person, the sick person and the prisoner. Not the shepherd, the generous donor, the philanthropist. The Lord himself is suffering, unseen and unrecognized. This leads to a different way of exercising the office of pastor, a way in which the pastor is not in advance the one who knows all the answers, but the one who is searching for the truth. The pastor knows that he lives from the word he still has to hear, he knows that his ministry is to listen. In the course of the centuries, and even till today, church leaders have abused their position of power and stepped into the shoes of God himself. From that position they talked fear into people by threatening with hell and damnation, where sexual morality in particular got much attention. Their power was based on that sort of threats. The message of the Christian churches will only be trustworthy when it is based on love for man and human dignity, as it is passed on to us in the Bible, and when it is focused on the realization of God's kingdom of peace and justice. If we want to renew the ministry we will have to be more and more directed by the message of the Bible and by the person of the man Jesus Christ who knew that the living God carried him in his hands. Not Canon Law or , but biblical spirituality must therefore be the basic principle of the ministry. The Bible teaches us, both in the Old Testament and in the gospels, a message of liberation.

In the Old Testament we read how Moses was told to lead the Israelites from slavery in Egypt through the desert to a new land, a land of milk and honey. What strikes us most in the story about the calling of Moses is

that God reveals His name: "I shall be there". And when the people of Israel, once they have arrived in their new land, in their turn start suppressing one another, we see the prophets calling them to do justice. They denounce the wrong-doings of the mighty and make a stand for the poor and the marginalised. (Amos 8, 4 and following). In the Gospel we hear how Jesus stood up for the poor and the suppressed because "they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark, 6, 34).

He travelled with his people and in word and deed served the well-being of those who were neglected by the community. He made a stand for widows, for the sick and for sinners. He worked for a decent existence for all. And he never forgot to reflect on his call to be man with all men.

Inspired by this spirituality pastors, in the role of travelling companions, are called to inspire their fellow men to strive after a new world where justice is the keyword. Being a travelling companion means giving pastoral care in the sense of being present for and with one's fellow men in the spirit of the living God and that of Jesus of Nazareth. This in order to work for a world as the Living God meant it to be. And in the spirit of the prophets they will have to call their travelling companions to walk the road of justice with regard to strangers and the marginalised. In this it is necessary to reflect again and again, together with one's travelling companions, on one's vocation. To be a pastor, in the meaning of travelling companion, one does not require an ordination. Jesus of Nazareth wasn't a priest and has not instituted the priesthood. He did know, however, that he was sent by the Living God. His disciples have never been priests either, but Jesus sent them out as sheep among wolves. "Do not take gold or silver or copper money in your purse, do not carry a travelling bag, do not take along extra clothes, sandals or a walking stick, for a labourer is worth that he is paid for his labour" (Mathew 10, 9-10). A pastor does not need an ordination. However, he does need a mission, not from a superior who checks out whether he is orthodox in the faith, but from the community that is calling him or her to be a travelling companion, someone with the necessary formation. This sending could and should be confirmed by the community. And both bishops and popes should be elected in a democratic way, so as to know that they are sent out by God's travelling people. The bond between Christians will then take shape through the faith in the Living God and in Him whom we believe to have been pre eminently sent to us by God. In this mutual relationship one can then, in His memory, share bread and wine together, without anybody being excluded or set apart. For it is not the pope, the bishop or a priest who invites us to the table of the Lord, but it is the Lord himself and it is the local community who invites us in His name. In order not to be judged himself, nobody passes judgement on another person whether he or she is worthy or complies with the admission requirements for participating in the meal. This breaking of the bread and drinking of the wine as one community will be a source of inspiration to bring about a new heaven and a new earth.

Renewal of the ministry in the Church of Christ goes much further and is much more than an extension of the admission requirements. To be a pastor one has to have a relationship with people that is free from compulsion. This relationship should determine the very life of the church. How could pastors have this relationship without compulsion when they themselves are living under strain and compulsion? When they feel obliged to keep their life partners in the dark? When they do not feel free to disagree with the truths the church is proclaiming? Pastors and faithful will have to make this compulsion debatable. In order to protect ourselves, in order to be good pastors who learn how to care for others by taking care of ourselves.

It will therefore be our task to work for renewal, or even better to work for a reassessment of the Church, back to the sources so that the Church will again be the people of God on its way. The Church will have to rid herself from all compulsion and rigidity with regard to ministry and dogmas. It should be beneath her dignity to follow her Lord weighed down by compulsion and strain. It is the task of the national movements for renewing of the ministry in the church to call the members of the church to work on a reassessment of the Church. And the national movements have to publish about the abuse of power in the Roman Catholic Church. To conclude: the church should go the way of Saint Francis, she should embrace trust and servitude as her principles and learn from all those who go on their way full of trust.

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