

TOWARDS A RENEWED PRESBYTERATE¹

The Catholic Church is an episcopal church and not a congregational nor a presbyterian church. Yet recent developments in the forms which ministry takes within our Church call into question many of our previous assumptions about ordination and about ministry. The previously established pattern of ministries is breaking down and the future appears uncertain.² Clericalism is being more widely recognised and understood and seen as inimical to Christian growth.

The distinction between the clergy and the unordained is less clear than it used to be. Lay persons, often women, now do many things previously done only by the ordained, such as taking Holy Communion to the sick and presiding at funerals.

In fact the laity are doing more than was the case in the 1950s before the Second Vatican Council. They now read in church, visit the sick and newcomers to a parish, teach catechism and prepare people for first communion, confirmation and marriage. Some of these ministries are officially recognised by a simple ceremony of commissioning either by the bishop or his delegate, the parish priest.

The clergy are less certain of their role than in the past, partly as a result of these changes.³ The exceptions are usually to be found among those recently ordained, who have rejected the insights of the Second Vatican Council and seek to restore the attitudes and practices of the 1950s and earlier. Indeed, the very decrease in the numbers of men coming forward for

¹ A version of this paper appeared in the Scottish monthly *Open House* (October 2004).

² See John Boyle, 'The Vocations Crisis . . . The Emperor's Clothes' *Open House No 138*, June 2004, pp 6f, and Joseph Fitzpatrick, 'Who – or what – are Priests?' *Open House No 140*, August 2004, pp 6-8. These two excellent articles outline the theological basis and existential analysis for the proposals in this paper.

³ Cardinal Basil Hume spoke of the 'Continuing uncertainty over the character of Christian priesthood' in his Foreword to Michael Richards, *A People of Priests – the Ministry of the Catholic Church*, (DLT 1995). Canon Richards' brief but profoundly theological work is the ultimate inspiration for this current paper.

ordination has had its effect on what tasks, formerly the preserve of the ordained, are now seen as suitable for appropriately talented and trained members of the unordained.

Although the writer is an Englishman, his contacts with Catholics in other European countries and the USA suggest that these are widespread trends. Many in the Church believe that these developments in ministry mean that the secular priesthood must and will change, perhaps even disappear as we know it⁴. In seeking to discern what is going to replace it, we might predict the following among characteristics of a range of Christian ministries in the not too distant future, of which some are currently ordained ministries:

1. All ordained, commissioned and appointed ministers must ultimately depend on the bishop for their authority to act.
2. Following the principle of subsidiarity, the authority of the bishop will be enhanced and recognised in practical terms by the Holy See, giving him a greater discretion in structuring the ministries and forms of ordination required in his diocese. The manner of the appointment of bishops needs a thorough study and new systems. The experiences of sister churches, such as the Episcopal and the Presbyterian, need to be examined and lessons learnt from them.
3. Collaborative ministry, involving accountability of those exercising power and full shared decision-making will be seen as essential for parishes.⁵ We live in liberal democracies and the monarchical model is no longer acceptable to people in developed societies in the third millennium.⁶ New ways have to be developed for us

⁴ See Rafael Esteban, *The Future of the Ministerial Priesthood*, (Catholics for a Changing Church, London, 2000). Mgr Paul Hypher *The Tablet* (14 August 2004) also shows that radical changes are inevitable if the Church is to be true to its own teachings.

⁵ The 1983 Code of Canon Law provides at nos 536 and 537 for an over-riding clerical veto by the parish priest. This can no longer be defended in the modern world and is not theologically necessary since the bishop retains full authority in a diocese and any good shepherd would wish to consult and be accountable.

⁶ See Kenneth Wilson, *Power in the Church*, (Catholics for a Changing Church London, 2003). A Methodist minister and academic, he writes dispassionately about the structures of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

to affirm apostolic authority so that account is taken of 'liberal democracy' rather than continued insistence on a model that reflects more the methods of Henry VIII or of the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

4. Celibacy will no longer be mandatory for the ordained, but where it is willingly embraced, this will be done in a formal public ceremony like the exchange of marriage vows and the taking of vows of religious life.
5. All ministries, including the ordained, will be open to women as well as men.⁷
6. Ministries will be distributed strictly according to the ability, experience and competence of the candidates. No longer will an ordained man or woman be *assumed* to have the competences of an accountant, an employer, a social worker, a preacher, a manager *and* a committee chairman for example.
7. Sacramental ministry will no longer be tied to canonical jurisdiction at parish level. Jurisdiction is essentially a function of the bishop; all those serving under the bishop's oversight are *servants* of the community.
8. Ministers will not be *required* to live in presbyteries, separate from the people they serve, but new style mixed residential communities will be formed as needed.
9. Clericalism will be dismantled, involving the abolition of distinctive dress for the ordained, of higher status, and of an idiosyncratic lifestyle which separates them from those they serve.
10. There will be formal recognition of many more ministries by the bishop or his delegate by commissioning ceremonies, following interviews and formal appointment.
11. Ministries will be either full or part time, paid or unpaid, permanent or temporary, irrespective of whether a minister is ordained by the bishop or simply appointed and commissioned.

⁷ John Wijngaards has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt not only that women were ordained to the priesthood and diaconate in the early church, but that there is no acceptable reason why they should be excluded from these ministries today. See his *Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church and No Women in Holy Orders?*

12. The bishop then will ordain many more candidates than in the past, but for limited and clearly defined ministries, such as to preside at the eucharist for a specified local community. Candidates will be mature, experienced adults over 30 years old and not young adults in their 20s.
13. There will be new forms of education and training for ministry, where candidates are not cloistered away from those they hope to serve. Training will include residential and non-residential courses, part-time and full-time courses, evening courses, weekend courses, distance learning, and specialist post-graduate courses. A first degree or similar professional training will be expected for some ministries, but not all. Six years full time study will be required of no candidate.⁸

The question of which ministries require ordination by the bishop rather than appointment and commissioning is surely a matter which should be dictated by circumstances (rather than recent precedent) and in the light of the practice of the early Church and good theology⁹.

In the Catholic Church, the role of the bishop is central, for it is our communion with him that makes us Catholics – provided he in turn is in communion with the Bishop of Rome. Just as modern developments in the papacy (that is nineteenth and twentieth century developments) have led to an increase in the power of the papacy and its bureaucracy that some consider undesirable¹⁰, so have these developments led to a diminution of the status and prerogatives of the diocesan bishop. Whatever the teaching of Vatican II on the office of bishop¹¹, this is

⁸ See Michael Winter, *Training for Future Priests*, (Catholics for a Changing Church London, 2003). He writes as a former seminary professor and university lecturer.

⁹ As Paul Hypher has pointed out ('The Priest as Spiritual Batman', *The Tablet*, 14 Aug 2004, p 18) 'There is only one priesthood, the Priesthood of Christ, shared with the whole Church, ordained and lay.' For this reason the list that follows has no one ministry labelled as 'priest'. The ministry of the presbyterate (or 'ministerial priesthood') will of course be found, but shared by many in ministry and no longer the preserve of just one person.

¹⁰ See fn 11 below on the early Roman Church and its collective leadership and consequent late adoption by that diocese of monarchical episcopacy, for example.

¹¹ 'Nor are they to be regarded as vicars of the Roman Pontiff' *Lumen Gentium* 27 in Austin Flannery (ed) *Vatican Council II* (Dominican Publications, Dublin, 1996) p 38.

in practice denied by Rome, which requires him to be rather a delegate of the Holy See¹² than an apostle in his own right. It is to be hoped that the Holy See can be persuaded to reduce its tight control over bishops. If the coming papacy does not address this issue, one which many bishops all over the world now feel to be urgent, then it is possible that some bishops with the support of their people and many of their clergy might be emboldened to take on the full responsibilities that their role as successors of the apostles entitle them to.

The concept of subsidiarity, that decisions should be taken at the lowest level possible, requires that the status and power of the diocesan bishop be raised from the present subservient position. This means that Catholics recognise their bishop as the one who ultimately authorises ministry, especially ecclesiastical ministry, in the diocese. Nevertheless, bearing ultimate responsibility is not incompatible with some measure of delegated decision-taking, consensus-building and wide consultation. Some bishops have dioceses so large that this sort of responsibility is impractical. We need dioceses sufficiently small for a bishop to be a true pastor to all the people, avoiding the creating of mini-bishops with their own fiefdoms.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that ecclesiastical ministries are provided for the purpose of enabling the People of God to perform their priestly ministry to the world. Many parishioners can see their paid secular employment as providing them with opportunities for ministry, service and mission, to those formally outside the Church. This should be recognised as the central ministry of the Church and hence kept at the centre of all other ministries and all Church policies and practices.

¹² In 1829, the papacy directly appointed only some 24 diocesan bishops out of a total of 646 in the Latin Church. See Garrett Sweeney, "The 'wound in the right foot' unhealed?" in Adrian Hastings (ed) *Bishops and Writers: aspects of the evolution of modern English Catholicism* (Anthony Clark, Wheathampstead, 1977) p 218. To be a Catholic bishop one must be confirmed by Rome, but that is not the same as being directly appointed, as is effectively the case today. Bishops still have to apply to Rome for faculties to act as a bishop, even when they have been ordained – ordination to the episcopate is insufficient it appears.

We list below a number of ministries which are experienced in the Church today. Clearly small parishes would not have all of these. They are of course not listed in order of importance, simply reflecting our existing structures:

- Chair of a parish pastoral council (ministry of leadership and consensus building)
- Members of a parish pastoral council (managerial ministry)
- Chairs of parish pastoral council sub-committees [RCIA, Child Protection, Liturgy, SVP etc] (executive ministries)
- Delegates of the bishop authorised to commission other ministers (ministry of delegated jurisdiction)
- Those authorised by the bishop to preside at the eucharist (sacramental ministry)
- Those authorised by the bishop to reconcile and hear confessions (sacramental ministry)
- Those authorised by the bishop to anoint the sick (sacramental ministry)
- Those authorised by the bishop to baptise (sacramental ministry)
- Those authorised by the bishop to solemnize marriages (ritual ministry)
- Those authorised by the bishop to confirm (sacramental ministry)
- Presiders at funerals and burials (ritual ministry)
- Leaders of the public Prayer of the Church (ritual ministry)
- Pastoral visitors, listeners
- Counsellors [to adolescents, the engaged, the bereaved, those returning to the sacraments etc]
- Social workers
- Administrative and secretarial assistants
- Accountants and book-keepers
- Leaders of retreats, discussion groups and study days
- Spiritual directors

- Homilists and writers [for parish newsletters, magazines etc] (theological, teaching and prophetic ministry)
- Catechists and teachers
- Liturgists, musicians, cantors, choir members
- Youth leaders
- Masters of ceremonies and altar servers
- Greeters at mass
- Befrienders of new parishioners
- Maintainers of property, handymen, gardeners etc

Ordination by the bishop is probably best reserved to those appointed to exercise a *sacramental* ministry. This is in accordance with our tradition; the sacraments are acts of the Church and for this reason require apostolic, that is episcopal, authority. It is likely that a parish would have a dozen or more of these sacramental ministers, and most of them would be part-time and unpaid. It seems sensible that an appropriate sub-committee of the parish pastoral council would present such candidates to the bishop for approval. This extension of ordination will require a re-thinking of the non-biblical distinction between the clergy and the rest of the baptised. The Greek word *laos* means People (of God) and that clearly includes the ordained. It will also require new names and terms for office holders, one would hope without use of the term “Father” (except perhaps for the bishop), as this title was discouraged by our Lord himself (Luke 22: 25-27).

However it would seem desirable that those carrying out the more important ministries of *oversight and teaching*, in addition to the sacramental ones, would also be formally commissioned or ordained by the bishop: these would then be seen as the Elders of a parish

as in New Testament times, exercising a collective leadership under episcopal oversight.¹³ Such would probably include the important officers of the parish pastoral council, the homilists, those delegated to commission local ministers and RCIA leaders. These elders would form a sub-committee of the parish pastoral council, having day-to-day executive responsibility for the management of the parish, being accountable to both the bishop and the parish pastoral council.

The shape of the future ministerial priesthood is becoming clearer:

- The ordained will live a simple life style, mindful of the poor and the marginalised
- They will see themselves as servants of the people, ministers among many other ministers, not decision-takers or rulers.
- They will lack any particular status or privilege linked solely to their ministry.
- They will be educated, normally with three years higher education or professional training.
- They will be very committed, and include married and single people, those in secular employment and those seeking such employment as well as the retired.
- They will be over 30.
- They will be accountable both to those they serve and to the bishop.

Where and with whom they live, how they dress and whether they are paid by their parish or not would vary according to local and personal circumstances. They would no longer see themselves as clerics enjoying jurisdiction without accountability to those they serve but as members of a team of servants with collective responsibility.

¹³ 1 Tim 3: 1-7, Titus 1: 5-9. Eamon Duffy has demonstrated that the early Church at Rome had a collective leadership, a college of elders exercising *episcopo* rather than bishops. See his *The Papacy: Myth and Reality*, (Catholics for a Changing Church London, 2000) and fuller *Saints and Sinners: a History of the Popes* (Yale University Press, 1997).