

LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS

A Theological Look into the Future

Bernard Sesboüé

THOSE WITH PASTORAL RESPONSIBILITY in the Roman Catholic Church are faced with some complex problems at present. In the last decades, bishops have witnessed the progressive ageing of their clergy. They have managed to maintain the essential minimum of pastoral presence, but at the cost of prolonging active ministry to ages which would not be tolerated in other occupations. From now on, many elderly priests are not going to be replaced. At least humanly speaking, one cannot foresee any reversal of this tendency. The diminution in *quantity* is also taking us to a threshold where there will be a diminution in *quality*. The whole nature of pastoral relationships is changing; we are in the process of losing a particular sort of interaction and mutual nourishment that we have been used to until now.

Nevertheless, the Church cannot abandon its pastoral responsibility without denying its very self. For that reason, the bishops are sending a large number of lay people on a properly pastoral mission. These are known as 'Lay Ecclesial Ministers' (*animateurs pastoraux laïcs* in French). What are we to make, theologically, of this development, which is becoming more and more pronounced? This is the question I should like to consider, in the light of Vatican II's teaching and with an eye on the future.

Practice Contradicting Theory

What Vatican II accomplished forty years ago was, above all, a step forward in the theology of the Church, in ecclesiology. Its documents assigned a due place to the People of God. They rediscovered collegiality and the ecclesiology of *communio*. But they also stressed the hierarchical structure of the Church, beginning with the episcopacy.

The Way, 42/3 (July 2003), pp. 57-72

They insisted on the distinctive value of the ordained ministry. They often used words deriving from ‘pastor’—a pastor or shepherd situated essentially in relationship to the community.

On the ground, however, this ecclesiology is becoming more and more unreal. There are communities or parishes living permanently without priests, and organized in a way that more or less bypasses the Church’s fundamental structure. Now, Canon 517.2 of the 1983 *Code*

**Official
theologies of
the Church
are becoming
more and more
unreal**

does envisage that ‘owing to a dearth of priests, a participation in the exercise of the pastoral care’ can ‘be entrusted to a deacon or to some other person who is not a priest or to a community of persons’, with some priest in a supervisory role. Juridically, then, all is well. But what of the lived reality? This canon, which is meant to provide for the exceptional case, is at risk of describing the norm, at least in rural areas. In its own way, it is expressing a recognition that the Church no longer has the pastoral resources that official ecclesiology demands. This canon, indeed, is just one symptom of a whole series of ecclesiological anomalies.

Eucharistic Services

The central symbol for the first of these anomalies is the ‘Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest’, for which there is now an official Directory. In the short term, this innovation has had a positive effect: such celebrations have revived communities that had grown complacent with filling-station liturgy. But the celebration of the Eucharist is the lived symbolic expression of the whole mystery of the Church and its structure. If Eucharistic services without a priest become the long-term norm, there will, surely, be a contradiction between the structure which the Church says it has, and what the community is actually living. There is a risk that people’s whole understanding of the Church and the parish will change. The role of the ordained minister, symbolizing Christ’s initiative towards his Church, will no longer be a lived reality.

The Right of the Faithful to the Sacraments

A second anomaly centres on the right of the faithful to the sacraments, recognised in a quite interesting way by the *Code of Canon Law*:

The Christian faithful have the right to receive assistance from the sacred pastors out of the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the Word of God and the sacraments. (n. 213)

This section of the *Code* judiciously balances the rights and the duties of the faithful. But if one stresses their *duty to participate* at the Sunday Eucharist, surely one has to recognise their *right to be able to participate*. The tradition of the early Church was that every stable, sufficiently developed community normally had a right to the celebration of the Eucharist every Sunday. What the conditions implicit here amount to is obviously a matter of judgment according to social circumstances. Jewish tradition—which the early Church undoubtedly followed—reckoned that twelve families were necessary for a community to be formed. These days a bishop may talk about fifty households.

But then there is a right to go to confession. People lament that this sacrament has been abandoned; but they forget how difficult it is for many believers to find a priest. I can think of a young woman of eighteen who was baptized as an infant and taught her catechism, but who had never had a chance to go to confession. There are plenty of young people who have never had the chance to know a priest personally. There is a dangerous falling-off simply in the personal contact between priests and people.

And then let us take something which is not a sacrament, but which believers regard as an essential pastoral service: Christian burial. People are very sad and resentful if they cannot find a priest at a time of bereavement. Someone has wisely said that a Church that cannot bury its dead is a Church that is dying.

Word and Sacraments

A third anomaly arises in the relationship between the ministries of Word and sacrament. Vatican II re-established the primacy of the ministry of the Word for bishops and priests, starting from the gospel category of 'being sent on mission'. Much stress has been laid on how three realities belong together: Word, sacrament, and pastoral care (which includes governance). But what is actually happening? The Church is showing great generosity in delegating the ministry of the Word to lay people, and great reticence with regard to the ministry of the sacraments. What this means for the image of priesthood is easy to foresee. The priest will only operate, as far as many are concerned,



www.hermanleon.org

when the sacraments need to be celebrated—in other words for cultic functions in isolation from the others. Laity will look after what is the quite essential ministry of ‘preaching’; and in the end, the priest will become a sacramental magician. This kind of practice will lead to a definition of priesthood in terms of what gets left over, a definition couched in negative

terms and, as such, disastrous: *the role of the priest will be limited to what lay people cannot do under any circumstances*. This definition would be seriously unfaithful to Vatican II, and it provides absolutely no basis for healthy existence as a priest. But, sadly, it seems to be gaining ground.

Governance and Sacraments

A fourth anomaly occurs in the relationship between the ministries of pastoral care and governance, and those of the sacraments. In the early Church, the one who presided over the community was the one who presided at the Eucharist. Thomas Aquinas is still well aware of this link, although he formulates it the other way round: the person with power over the Eucharistic body of Christ also has power over his mystical body.

Sacraments are not just rites to be celebrated. They involve preparation, progress, pastoral relationships between specific people. The ecclesial process of preparing for baptism is already a part of baptism itself, and the same goes for the process of preparing for the sacrament of reconciliation. Similarly, the quality of the relationship between spouses, and therefore of the sacramental bond, is likely to depend a great deal on how the marriage is prepared. Thus, rite and preparation both belong essentially to the ordained ministry, to the being-for-the-Church proper to bishops, priests and deacons.

As things stand at present, however, pastoral relationships are going to involve principally the Lay Ecclesial Ministers. It is they who will decide whether or not it is appropriate to administer or refuse baptism, whether to give or refuse permission for marriage in church. We are getting to the point where the priest comes in at the request of

lay people, or even under their orders, and is unable to enter into meaningful pastoral relationships. Priests are unlikely to be able to handle this constructively. The problem lies not so much with the conflicts about power and influence that are only to be expected, but with a new kind of crisis of priestly identity. To put the point in classical terms: here surely the powers of order and jurisdiction are getting out of kilter. Vatican II said that jurisdiction arose from ordination, even if the application of that jurisdiction needed to be decided by the hierarchy. Surely the documents entrusting a mission to the Lay Ecclesial Ministers are giving them jurisdiction over believers at large *without* ordination.

Temporary Solutions Becoming Permanent

A fifth anomaly occurs when it comes to pastoral care. According to Church teaching and tradition, pastoral care, in the full sense, requires ordination; but it is now being exercised permanently by the non-ordained. If you look at the matter in these terms, it seems that the Church is being far too free in delegating the ministry of the Word and the pastoral care of souls. Or you can argue the point the other way round: if the Church has assured itself that lay people are properly trained theologically, and has made a discernment that their Christian life and their judgment are of sufficiently high quality for them to exercise satisfactorily a ministry that is truly pastoral, why does it refuse to ordain them?

Here the problem of celibacy raises its ugly head. I am one of those who esteem the vocation of the consecrated celibate within the Church, and I favour the maintenance of a priesthood living in celibacy. I am not one of those who are demanding reform on this point, and nor do I have any illusions about the ordination of married men resolving all the problems. Moreover, I am not asking this question because I am concerned about the priests; I am asking it because I am concerned about the good of the Church, just as Paul VI did at the 1971 Synod of bishops (which was against change by only a small minority: 107 to 87). Nevertheless, the question is being raised, and ever more urgently. We are in a better position to face it than we were in 1971, given the experience we have now had of married deacons, and of married convert priests. The matter deserves calm reflection, bearing in mind that priorities need to be set among the different pastoral responsibilities of the Church.

Lay Ministry of the Sacraments

Despite the Church's refusal to grant them a sacramental ministry in the full sense, Lay Ecclesial Ministers do become involved in administering the sacraments—not because they are trying to be in any way provocative or rebellious, but because they are carrying out their mission. And this amounts to a sixth anomaly.

There are cases where a lay person can act as a substitute minister. In case of necessity, a lay person can administer baptism; but, more significantly, canon law provides for an extraordinary form of marriage in the absence of a priest. Certainly the distribution of communion and presidency at Sunday Eucharistic Assemblies are Eucharistic ministries. The latter in particular is strongly symbolic: it involves being the person who convokes the Assembly and gathers it around the Word and the Eucharist.

Above all there are questions about penance or reconciliation. A religious woman who is a school chaplain, a lay man on the pastoral team in a hospital—these people receive confidences that can be compared to what happens in the confessional. Obviously neither gives absolution. The school chaplain might advise a student to approach a priest for confession, generally to no avail; the hospital chaplain cannot even do that if the sick person is bedridden. Nevertheless, in these situations the sinner is surrounded by ecclesial witnesses to the sign of freedom placed by Christ within the Church. These witnesses are involved in the cure of souls. They are helping people live out of the grace of reconciliation. Let us not forget that people perceive them as official representatives of the Church who have been sent to them.

According to Thomas Aquinas, the sacrament of reconciliation consists of four acts: three on the part of the penitent, one on the part of the Church. In the situations we are imagining here, the penitent is doing everything they need to do, including making their confession. Confessions made to Lay Ecclesial Ministers are far closer to the sacramental sign of absolution than the confessions that were made in medieval times to lay people, because they are addressed to a minister sent by the Church. There is nothing stopping this minister suggesting a penance. We are getting close to the medieval situation where monks made their confessions without absolution being given. This solid tradition allows us to say that lay chaplains are indeed exercising a

***Ecclesial
witnesses to
the sign
of freedom***

version of the sacrament of reconciliation. The actual sign is somehow defective, somehow impaired, certainly; but as far as the reality of grace is concerned, it is effective. Moreover, the great tradition of the Church has always preferred a defective form of the sacrament to the absence or dearth of the sacrament altogether. But is it really a good thing that the Church is getting used to having sacraments in defective, impaired forms?

Ecclesial Status

A seventh anomaly arises when considering the ecclesial status of these permanently engaged lay people, *qua* lay people. Vatican II named certain ministries founded on baptism and confirmation that required no formal investiture, and gave these a place of honour. But what we are dealing with here is different from that: here the bishop is *sending a person officially on a pastoral mission*.

The vocabulary employed in the formal documents in France is quite significant, despite its complexity and tentativeness. Here you find words like ‘pastoral responsibility’ or ‘ecclesial responsibility’, or other terms designating pastoral ministries in the strict sense of the word: the proclamation of the Word, the administration of some sacraments, the animation of the community in a way that implies a properly pastoral relationship with it. In French, we use the word *animateurs*—animators or soul-givers—to refer to people who bring the community to life and stand in the service of its communion and unity, the third responsibility of the ordained ministry. The word ‘permanent’ implies someone who has a role in the institution’s structure, who has a certain authority within it, and can act institutionally in its name. The term ‘chaplain’, used for those who minister in schools, universities and hospitals—though frequently one finds some institutional resistance to this—is glossed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘the priest, clergyman or minister of a chapel’. ‘Minister of a religious cult’ is the term under which civil administration gathers these ministries, and even pays them. ‘Sent’—a term dear to some lay ministers—ties us in to the *shalih*, the *apostolos*, richly resonant biblical words referring to mission. All these terms express how lay ministers are actually perceived. The vocabulary suggests an acknowledgment that these people are dealing with ministries of the Church.

The question then arises: are these lay people still really lay people? Who are they? There are echoes of a controversy provoked a

generation ago by an article of Karl Rahner.¹ Writing in preconiliar language, Rahner claimed that a person could belong to the hierarchy without being ordained. At that time there were legitimate differences of opinion as to whether working with Catholic Action amounted to pastoral collaboration with the hierarchy. In our own situation, hesitation is no longer a possibility. The ministry taken on by Lay Ecclesial Ministers cannot be grounded in baptism *alone*: it **Lay Ecclesial Ministers have been sent on mission** arises from their having been sent on mission. They may remain lay in the eyes of society at large, but they have a role in the structure of the Church that makes them something else. They have, *de facto*, become co-workers with the bishops, just like the priests. The question indeed arises as to how we are to avoid a new form of clericalism, in the bad sense. In general, these people who are permanently engaged strive to hold on to their identity as lay people, while still asking that they should be recognised for what they are by the Church. How are we meant to distinguish them from the permanent deacons, in regard to whom the Church's call takes a sacramental form?

Different Lay Apostolates

There is a possible conflict between two different kinds of apostolate which lay people might take on, and this constitutes an eighth anomaly. The Church that asks lay people for help with ministry is also still promoting the apostolate of those lay people whose tasks, along with participation in the life of the Christian community, consist of evangelizing all the different fields of activity that go to make up the temporal order. It encourages the various 'lay associations', and in particular—even if this is to use a rather old-fashioned language—the movements of Catholic Action. There is absolutely no intrinsic conflict between these two forms of ministry, neither as regards the Church's mission nor practically; the same people can invest themselves simultaneously in both. They are complementary, and the boundary between the two can seem almost imperceptible. However, we need to recognise how the two forms differ in nature, in orientation and in vocation. The spiritual stance taken up by a lay person who is

¹ 'Notes on the Lay Apostolate' (1956), in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2, translated by Karl-H. Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1963), pp. 319-352.

engaged in the world in order to bear witness to their faith in a particular field is not the same as that of another lay person who is entrusted by the bishop with a pastoral responsibility in the proper sense. And conflicts can arise once the same people are called upon from both sides. The Church needs to do some discerning so as to establish priorities. There is a complex question here, and we must avoid the temptation to meet the immediate need, and use up the apostolic reserves represented by the laity to answer merely pastoral needs, when they should be engaged in civil society at large, addressing both its positive energies and its contradictions.

Women's Ministry

There is a ninth and final anomaly about women's ministry. For most of these Lay Ecclesial Ministers are women. It would be a mistake not to acknowledge this simple fact in its own right. While the Roman Catholic Church is setting itself firmly against any version of women's ordination (at least to the priesthood), women are coming to exercise a pastoral ministry that may extend to presidency over the community. A woman may indeed preside over a Sunday Eucharist Service. Mentalities evolve fast. What we are talking about here has the potential to make the issue of women's ordination look very different.

A Historical Parallel

This series of anomalies can be compared, as a pattern of institutional functioning, with the anomalies that occurred during the crisis already mentioned regarding public penance in the sixth century: penance being avoided because it was too burdensome; penance happening once in a lifetime, but with believers asking for the possibility of repetition; penance being refused by bishops to young people, so that they would not lose their one remaining chance of salvation; second penance being allowed by the bolder bishops, contrary to Church discipline; a sacramental vacuum becoming the norm for many believers during their lives, with all the sacraments being delayed until the deathbed.

While all this was happening, the monks were offering monastic confession, responding to what the consciences of believers were looking for: secrecy, and the possibility of repetition. But they did not give absolution, which was reserved to the bishop. At one point, the bishops sought to re-establish the public penance that had formerly

been common. But they were forced to make a momentous concession, expressed in the principle, 'For public sin, public penance; for private sin, private penance'. After three centuries of 'defective' celebrations of penance, the priest could finally give absolution. The official institution came to match up with actual practice, not without undergoing an enormous change.

The Structures of Ministry: Returning to the Sources

How are we to get out of these current impasses, and to recognise the ecclesial identity of laity who are linked to a ministry that is pastoral in the proper sense? It will not do simply to think within the categories already fully established. In themselves, these categories are perfectly serviceable for thinking about ministry in the Church, but the ways in which they are currently used are too rigid. In particular, the structure of the relationship between one group, responsible for the apostolic ministry, and the community as a whole—a relationship that modern research can trace back to the New Testament—has gradually solidified into a distinction between clergy and laity.

Distinctions developed over time have become too rigid

The coupling—'one group/the community as a whole'—evokes above all a *relationship*. If you accept ordination, you are entering into a new relationship with the Church to provide a God-centred (or priestly) service to its life as a whole. There are some who are at the service of the others: their ministry is a being-for-others. Within this relationship, there are transitions from the community as a whole to the particular group: those ordained are always previously members of the Church. Moreover, at times, this relationship can provide space within which a third, renewing agency emerges, generating something original within the structure defined by the other two. The bi-polar relationship between 'one group' and 'the community as a whole' can—when it is functioning well—generate a third pole which needs to be received and accepted in its own right.

We need, then, to go back to the beginning, and to revisit how the mystery of the Church came to be, through Jesus' companionship with his disciples and through the developments that took place during the period of the apostles. We are obviously no longer living in the Church's founding period, but we can nevertheless learn from reliving



what Jesus did with those who were his own in the world in order to prepare them for being sent on mission.

When we do this, what emerges is that the institution arose out of a lived reality; it is the relationships enshrined in the Gospel which generated the institutional structures.

A Threefold Structure Emerging

From a bi-polar structure—the relationship between Jesus and the crowds whom he addressed—there emerged a third pole: the group of disciples both chosen by Jesus and freely electing to follow him. They emerged from the crowd and lived in companionship with Jesus. They began as people hearing his preaching; they then went through a process of growth that made them partners in his mission, and workers sent out to the harvest. After the initial, provisional sending of the 72, they were definitively sent out by the Risen One. They were with Jesus. There are, then, three elements in the structure: Jesus, the Twelve, and the crowd. It all emerges from what actually happens.

The process then renews itself in Acts 6:1-7, where Peter and the Eleven are now occupying the place of Jesus. At a moment of crisis between the Hellenists and the Hebraists, the structured community let a third element emerge by instituting the Seven. It chose men ‘full of the Spirit and of wisdom’ and known to be such in the community, to play a special role within it. Then, once again, this new existential reality led to a new institution: Stephen and Philip, who had been commissioned for service regarding food, soon gave themselves to the ministry of the Word.

The same process was repeated in the Pauline communities, between the group of Paul’s companions and local ministers (‘the household of Stephanas’—1 Corinthians 16:15-18). Initially there was

no official investiture: it was the lived relationship that these people had with Paul, the guarantor of their mission, which grounded their authority in the community. Only at a second stage, witnessed by the Pastoral Epistles and by Acts, does one see a role for the gesture of investiture: the laying on of hands. Much later, the role played by deacons in fourth- and fifth-century Rome illustrates the same dynamic in a slightly different way. The deacons do not become priests, but the bishops are often chosen from among them. They become a focus of creativity, with considerable influence on the Church's life.

Throughout the history of the Church, one sees the same phenomenon occurring in the emergence of consecrated life as a prophetic focus in the Church. For it would be an error to suppose that consecrated life has nothing to do with mission and ministries. The transitions and interactions between consecrated life and official ministry are always there. In the East, bishops were chosen more and more from among the monks; in the West, the initiatives undertaken by the mendicant orders (Dominicans and Franciscans) amount to the Church's response to problems arising at the time regarding the preaching of the Gospel. At a later period, Ignatius Loyola not only founded an order of apostles at the disposal of the Pope, but also gave the Church of his time an image of the apostolate in the 'reformed priest' that it needed. And this foundation served as a model for very many missionary congregations. One should also not forget the enormous ministerial significance of women's consecrated life, both in the past and in the present. It is important not to split apart the different elements in religious life, thinking of it as a composite of personal vocation with ministries, either presbyteral or lay, which in themselves are just like anyone else's. If we indulge in this kind of intellectual dismemberment, we are likely to lose what is original in consecrated life, both structurally and ecclesially.

Emergent Ministries in the Church

These historical data are not offered with the intention of calling into question the Church's ministerial structure. All they are doing is showing how a fundamental dynamic occurs within the bi-polar relationship of evangelization: how new poles of ministry are constantly generated that either remain permanently distinct, or become absorbed within the poles that gave rise to them—though in this case not without the original two having changed. Surely what we

are living through is a process of the same kind, linked to a major shift in how the Church functions in our world. *What is actually happening is providing an opportunity for Church renewal and for giving the Church the new ministerial focus that it needs.*

We are now encountering a phenomenon that cannot but be authentically and officially ecclesial, a reality of the Church in the fullest sense: male and female Christians are putting themselves forward to help the Church in its properly pastoral role, and are doing this on the strength of an official mandate from the bishop. They are offering themselves for this task out of Christian conviction, out of a desire to serve the Church and to give it a new ministerial form. And the offer is happening at a moment when the bishops are in need, because they are sadly lacking in priests, and the process of renewing the ordained ministry through the established practice of hierarchical ritual is no longer functioning well enough.

This coincidence of an offer and a request is something that the Spirit is saying to the Church. These people are usually not offering themselves for ordained ministry because they are already engaged with life's tasks and are married. Now, the Roman Catholic Church has decided, for its part, that it cannot ordain them because they are married, or because they are women. What, then, is to be said about their identity, and about how are they to be recognised? The answer to this question is difficult, because we lack the language for what is a new reality that we should not try to classify too quickly. We have not yet reached the point where we can begin to commission such people sacramentally; the time is not yet ripe, either for the people concerned or for the hierarchical Church. We are still in the phase simply of the existential reality. This is what we have to cope with and manage.

***A coincidence
spoken by
the Spirit
to the Church***

From Sacramental Persons to Sacramental Situations

Vatican II presented the Church as the great sacrament of salvation, set within the world as an effective sign. This overall sign is made up of a multitude of other signs, among which we find the ordained ministry. Yves Congar used to talk of 'sacrament-persons' as opposed to 'sacrament-things': bishops, priests and deacons were 'sacrament-persons'. This expresses the link between the personal and the institutional. The Church's minister is perceived as a 'sacrament-person' on two counts: the gospel quality of how they live, and their

being sent on mission through their ordination. The former of these is necessary but it is not sufficient. Given what they are and what they represent, ministers draw on something larger than themselves, and their relationship with believers in general soon becomes distinctive. When all goes well, one can talk of their being a 'special presence of Christ' among people.

**Forging original
forms of pastoral
relationship**

The first indications that we can draw from the pastoral ministry entrusted to laity show that these women and men are themselves recognised as 'sacrament-persons', even when it is quite clear that they are not ordained. Why? Because they are people sent by the Church, which they represent in those parishes or communities. They are in a position to forge original forms of pastoral relationship, and of openness to people's problems, in what we might call the internal forum. The reality becomes manifest in comments like, 'that's something I've never told anyone about before'. These new 'ministers' are mediating the initiative of Christ within the Church in a lived way. In their way, if they live an authentic and integrated apostolic life, they are a 'special presence of Christ'.

Some 'confessions' are made to a 'sacrament-person', who is witness to a forgiveness that is ecclesial and therefore divine, even if they cannot say the ritual formula of forgiveness. In such cases, it can be that the reality of grace is lived out more fully than when perfectly valid absolution is dispensed to a believer as a matter of routine.

Recognition and Identification

Becoming an apostle in this way is a complex process involving several sets of steps. The first set is personal: the lay people involved must be aware of the relationship in which they stand to the Church, and of the Gospel demands of the mission that they receive. In this context, we might use the word 'vocation'. This takes time: time for going through a process, time for a growth in their relationship on the ground with the clergy and the bishop. For the bishop has to know personally those whom he is preparing to send on mission, at least as well as he knows his seminarians.

A second set of steps is episcopal. On the bishop's part, more is involved than a commissioning letter or a commissioning liturgy; he must also recognise a new identity emerging from the responsibility which these new apostles share with him. The ecclesial identity of the

ministries that are taken on depends essentially on the quality of relationship established with the bishop.

A third element consists in how those who receive the ministry recognise it, as already mentioned—following the New Testament criterion of a ministry being judged by its fruits. Believers are quite capable of seeing the *meaning* of the ministry entrusted to lay ministers, over and beyond the actual tasks they do.

A study done in Paris by a lay hospital chaplain² analyzes in exemplary fashion the process by which this recognition comes about, and focuses especially on how people perceive the identity of the lay person who has been sent to them. This is a puzzling point that needs investigation. The expressions people used to address him are revealing: 'Father', 'Brother', sometimes 'son'. The mother of a family introduced him to her sister who was visiting with the words, 'here is my confessor'. The author recounts in detail the relationship that grew up between him and a patient, who had begun by calling him 'Father' as a joke. Then she had said, 'I shall call you, "Father", because this word links us'. The chaplain goes on to recount what happened towards the end of their encounters:

One day, when I was praying in a low voice near her, she opened her eyes, smiled, and said several times over 'Father'. Then, without any sense of transition, she went on, 'Our Father . . .', reciting the prayer very clearly.

In this case the lay chaplain functioned as a 'sacrament-person'. The term 'Father' that had been given him quite deliberately and repeatedly had come to mediate the woman's invocation of the Father. The chaplain had been sent to the woman, and had come to exercise a Christ-like mediating function for her. The absoluteness of God had manifested itself.

The final constituent is—or would be—the recognition of the lay ministry by the priests and by the Christian people as a whole. This will be the most difficult point. If the priests in a diocese perceive lay ministers as a threat to their own identity, things will not go well. For

² Jean-André Noual, François Marty and Edouard Pousset, *Lectures théologiques d'un ministère en aumônerie d'hôpital* (Paris: Médiasèvres, 1989).

this reason, the emergence of a new class of ministers must occur in companionship with the priests. Words will not be enough.

Not Enough or Too Much

The Western Church is undergoing a process of change, one that touches its sense of what constitutes its very identity. Its structure must remain faithful to itself, even when there are profound displacements occurring in the particular forms this structure takes. One sign of the fruitfulness of this structure is that it is calling forth a new form, a form which has much promise. We are still at the beginning of the process. We must recognise the need to manage this process simply as a lived reality, without trying to give it the institutional ratification that it may well merit in the future. It will be crucial that the transitions here are managed well.

In the longer term, when experiences of this kind will have taken on a clear form, the Church will be faced with a dilemma. It will see either that it has done too much or that it has not done enough. If real problems arise, it will no longer entrust pastoral ministries to people who are not ordained. If things go well, the Church will echo what Peter said when the Spirit fell surprisingly on the pagans: 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' (Acts 10.47). It will ask: 'Do we have the right *not* to ordain those whose ministry has clearly shown the fruitfulness that comes from the Spirit?' This is not going to happen through some kind of simple rehash of the present patterns of relationship between 'clergy' and 'laity'. It will only happen when this new phenomenon, these lay ministries, have renewed both the clergy and the Christian people as a whole. But that day is yet to come.³

Bernard Sesboüé SJ is an Emeritus Professor of Dogmatic Theology and Patrology at the *Centre Sèvres*, the Jesuit theology faculty in Paris. He has been a member of the Vatican's International Theological Commission, and has also been extensively involved in ecumenical activity.

³ This article was initially published in the French Jesuit review, *Études*; we are grateful for the Editors' permission to publish this translation.