

AN EXPERIENCE OF PRIESTHOOD IN TWO CONTINENTS

By RAFAEL ESTEBAN

IN THE THIRTY-ONE YEARS that I have been a priest, the Church has changed in ways which have affected both my identity and my understanding of priestly formation, first in the African context, and later in Europe. Here I will try to offer some thoughts on diversity in ordained ministry based on the few lessons learned from the experience of training in two continents. This reflection has taken its final shape in Jerusalem in the week before Holy Week. Jerusalem is without doubt a place where one feels in all its pain the struggle of life attempting to break through; Christian ministry is part of that struggle.

The African experience

I lived in the North of Ghana from 1969 to 1976. I combined a period spent among the Dagombas with work in the regional seminary which served the three northern Ghanaian dioceses. My time there coincided with a progressive deterioration of the socio-economic conditions of the country. We tried to adapt and survive. Only later, back in Europe, would I be able to develop the tools needed to understand the reality of Africa then and later, and the challenge that it continues to pose to the self-understanding of the Church.

I had arrived in Ghana after four years of study in Rome where I had witnessed the end of the Council. It was a heady time. I drank with avidity the 'gospel' of personal freedom. I thought that I was a 'liberated' person. Today I realize that I was in crisis – I had gone from one extreme to the other, from one excess to its opposite. The tension which that crisis produced did not prevent me from trying to do my 'job' of training future priests to the best of my ability. The problem was that below the surface of my new-found espoused 'modernity' there remained a deeply rooted conservative model of the Church and of priestly ministry. So for eight years I did what I had been trained to do in a pre-Vatican II context – form church administrators who would then belong to a clerical class with a monopoly of church government, of the teaching of the faith, and of the administration of the sacraments.

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I had my doubts about the validity of that model of ministry, but I kept those doubts to myself because I lacked a better model.

The uniformity of the Catholic priesthood

The prevalent church model greatly valued a unity which was consistently translated into uniformity. For generations, priests in Africa and Europe had been formed with the same methods, in similar institutions and by the same people. It followed that any differences between ordained ministry in Africa and other places were due not to a different formation strategy, but to accidents of climate and geography and to instinctive adaptation to local cultures and circumstances. Elements of local cultures can be blended uncritically into the fabric of the Church by a process of acculturation. This phenomenon can give the Church a local colour, but very often creates added ambiguity. To give but one example, a hierarchical understanding of ordination to the priesthood as conferring power over people finds fertile soil in African societies with strong hierarchical structures. In these circumstances there is a danger that any understanding of ministry as service will be reduced to the level of pious sentiment.

Transactional leadership: the attraction of Scylla

It is worth reiterating the understanding of Church and ministry prevalent at the time of Vatican II because it continues to influence in different degrees the behaviour of priests all over the world. It is a clerical model which sees priests as formed to function as leaders in a Church which is God's given instrument of salvation in an evil world. Salvation descends from a transcendent God who sends Jesus Christ to found the Church in which a group of chosen men is consecrated to administer the means of that salvation; these means are the body of doctrine that sets out the right path to salvation, and the sacraments that enable the faithful to remain faithfully in that path. Organizationally the Church is represented by a pyramid with an active clerical class at the top and a passive mass of individuals who receive the salvation administered to them. Evangelization and sanctification can only happen within the confines of the Church. That is why it is necessary to implant the Church everywhere to make salvation available to all.

In order to achieve these aims the Church is structured around a very definite set of values: unity, continuity, fidelity to tradition, the primacy of authority and the group, the certainty of truth, the God-given nature of the Church. In order to ensure the maintenance of those values the Church manifests a preoccupation with control. Absolute fidelity to

tradition is necessary to lead the faithful to salvation. The consequence is that priests are educated as *transactional leaders*¹ who know the rules and the official teaching of the Church and are empowered by ordination to apply them in preaching and the administration of the sacraments. Transactional leaders are committed to maintain the group identity, which means that they work to preserve continuity in the face of change.

The values of this 'conservative' model and its main concerns represent 'hard' (masculine) characteristics. This value system offers stability, certainty and security. But it is unbalanced and one-sided, and its emphasis on unchangeability leads easily to excesses which can be compared to the dangers of the legendary rock of Scylla: traditionalism, institutionalism, legalism, clericalism, authoritarianism, conformism, hierarchical individualism, uniformity, dogmatism, exclusivism, other-worldliness. The identification of the Church exclusively with her divine side leads to an ecclesiological monophysitism which locks the Church into a chronic suspicion of change and an intolerance of dissent. To belong to this Church demands total conformity and uncritical acceptance of its doctrine and of its rules, and thus blind and unquestioning obedience. But because of its authoritarian nature, the Church itself risks becoming blind to its 'schismogenetic' tendency.² Since any form of doubt and dissent is regarded as threatening the cohesion of the group, doubters and dissenters risk being coerced into the role of schismatics.

From Scylla to Charybdis

Vatican II happened not in order to neutralize a threat from without but because of a widespread recognition of the need to purify the church from the 'dia-bolic' within.³ As I have mentioned, a widespread first reaction to the Council was a tendency to create a radical break with the past. Intent on purifying the Church, we became iconoclasts. With the dirty bath water, we threw out the baby and the bathtub. Many of us went from the excesses of the conservatives to the excesses of the progressives, from Scylla the 'rock' to Charybdis the 'whirlpool' – revolution, anti-ritualism, anti-institutionalism, militant dissent, anarchic individualism, anti-intellectualism, relativism, activism. From a one-sided divine Church, we sought to become a one-sided human Church; we lurched from ecclesiological Monophysitism to ecclesiological Arianism.

After the Council a dam burst which threatened to raze to the ground the church edifice. Many sadly drowned in the vortex of change. Many

others were mercifully kept afloat and survived long enough to be able to reassess their comprehension of Vatican II. But change in any form produces deep anxiety in the majority of people, a majority who also have a very deeply seated need of uncertainty avoidance.⁴ Not surprisingly, there were many who, scared to death, rushed to shore up the old conservative church edifice and safeguard the security which went with it – not merely the security of a certain present, but also the sure hope of eternal salvation.

The consequences of all this are with us now, and have profound implications for ordained ministry everywhere. The Catholic Church is faced with a painful polarization between the promoters of change and those who see in change a mortal threat to the Christian identity. But there must be a way to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis, between the ‘rock’ of conservatism and restoration and the ‘whirlpool’ of anarchism. It is clear that the Council did not want to replace one set of excesses by another. In fact, I am now convinced that it is that balance, that synergy,⁵ that in-between, which Vatican II really intended us to seek.

The Church as human communities faced with dilemmas

In 1977 I came to England for a year of study. At the end of that year, sickness prevented me from going back to Ghana. In 1980 I was asked to direct an African Information Centre in Madrid which I did until 1986. That experience challenged me to rethink the reality of mission and ministry in the context of poverty and of the imposition of cultural colonialism. It is then that I started to discover what was really demanded by Vatican II – nothing less than a shift from a hierarchical and clerical Church to a model of the Church as community brought together by the Spirit, where everybody is gifted to come together as a sign of the transforming dynamic of the kingdom brought to the world by the death and resurrection of Christ.

What Vatican II did was to try to neutralize the dia-bolic, or divisive, excesses of the Church by balancing its set of masculine values with another, parallel set of feminine values. Vatican II did not want us to abandon any of the Church’s traditional set of values, only their excesses. In order to neutralize those excesses Vatican II began to rediscover a complementary set of values long ignored and neglected: it is a set of ‘soft’, fluid and feminine values and attitudes: change and becoming, the attraction of the future with its challenge to dream and anticipate, the richness of freedom, spontaneity and creativity with its capacity for liberating dissent, the uniqueness of individuality and its

diversity, the dense world of feeling and incommunicable subjectivity, the reality of the human with its shadows and its earthiness, the ability to give up control, to go with the flow and to nurture life and community.

Vatican II did not intend the polarization of groups, and the polarization of values which it unfolded needs to be kept in creative synergy by the action of Jesus' Spirit and its main fruit, *agape*. The challenge of Vatican II, then, is to learn to nurture the communities which try to manage the complex dilemmas⁶ created by this polarization. The fundamental ministry of the Christian community is to offer the gospel to the world, but it is only by demonstrating a capacity to keep opposite poles in creative unity, and hence to create synergy, that the Christian community can claim the capacity to heal the world at large.

Ordained ministry has to be understood in relation to that fundamental ministry of the community to the world, and it becomes one essential aspect of all the ministries needed by the communities in order to become and to remain symbols and instruments of the kingdom's reconciling potential. To do this as ordained ministers we need to convert from an either/or, dia-bolic mindset to a both/and, symbolic one; we need to learn to manage dilemmas, to move from being transactional leaders to exercising transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership: managing dilemmas

In 1987 I came back from Spain to the Missionary Institute, London, where priests are trained in a very different context from the one I experienced in Ghana. The Missionary Institute is a place where seven missionary societies collaborate with others to form men and women, religious and lay for a variety of ministries needed by Christian communities all around the world. Progressively it dawned on us that what is needed is transformational leadership. *Transformational leaders* do not merely apply the rules, they add to this the ability to adapt the rules to the demands of changing environments. This happens in the context of helping their communities to manage value dilemmas. Christian communities face the challenging task of managing in a synergistic way a very complex set of apparently competing values: continuity and change, past and future, authority and freedom, society and the individual, unity and diversity, reason and feeling, the divine and the human. Each of these dilemmas is in turn an umbrella for a whole subset of dilemmas covering all the different facets of the life of the community and of its members. The challenge is to navigate very carefully between Scylla and Charybdis, between the 'rock' and the

'whirlpool', by allowing the two values at the 'horns' of the dilemma to work together and enhance each other.

The difficulties we face in thinking and working in this way are rooted in the fact that we have been conditioned to think of good and evil as different 'things', when on reflection we realize that good and evil have often the same components, but those components can combine in virtuous or vicious circles.⁷ Taking as an example the dilemma between authority and freedom, we see that authority and freedom are neither good or bad *per se*. Authority is good when it is exercised in such a way that it enhances freedom and bad when it inhibits it – freedom is good when it respects the 'responsibility hierarchy' of the group and bad when it tends to bypass or negate it. Competing values create synergy when they work together in virtuous circles, but that synergy is never static – it has to be constantly reworked in the context of changing needs. I have summarized the argument in a diagram which proposes in a central column the vision of a synergistic church which manages dilemmas and avoids the one-sided temptations of right and left. Unfortunately there is no space in this article to do more than suggest the outlines of that vision.

Priesthood, synergy and diffusion of ministries

I am aware of how threatening this call to transformational ministry can be for priests who are locked into the clerical trap. They feel that they have to add a very complex task for which they do not feel trained to an already impossible accumulation of jobs. But the answer lies in the notion of community: the communitarian model of the Church demands a radical diffusion of ministries in the community and a rethinking of the specific role of the ordained ministry based on the principle of subsidiarity.

Synergy is essentially a communitarian task because each person's sensitivity is necessarily biased towards one of the poles of the dilemma. Synergy can only be achieved by the co-operation of persons with different and complementary sensitivities. In fact, the more different the sensitivities are, the greater the synergy. The resolution of the community's dilemmas demands, therefore, the co-operation of the members of the community and the freeing of their gifts for that purpose. To that end the community needs to own the symbolic system which enables them to create synergy and the rituals which energize that symbolic system and keep the community together. For a Christian community its symbolic system takes shape in the gospel which keeps the tension towards the kingdom of justice, peace and love. Because it

DILEMMAS - POLARIZATION - SYNERGY				
either/or		both/and		either/or
monologue the 'diabolic' 'the house divided'	the feminine	dialogue the 'symbolic' 'the house united'	the masculine	monologue the 'diabolic' 'the house divided'
Charybdis the 'whirlpool'	'water'	'the earthen jar'	'earth'	Scylla the 'rock'
excesses	values	SYNERGY	values	excesses
revolution rupture anti-ritualism	change (becoming)	adaptation (inculturation) reading the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel continuous conversion	continuity (being)	traditionalism restorationism rubricism
anti-institutionalism	the future anticipating dream	the present (now) eternity as the eternal now ritual	the past remembering memory	institutionalism
anarchy chaos radical dissent	freedom (decentralization) (enabling) (autonomy) (dissent)	collaborating with a responsibility hierarchy 'collegiality' subsidiarity	authority (centralization) (constraining) (heteronomy) (loyalty)	clericalism authoritarianism legalism control
anarchic individualism 'meism'/ 'personal fulfilment' I/it	individual	personalizing intimacy in community I/Thou	society	hierarchical individualism depersonalizing conformity I/it
schism	diversity (particular) (differentiating)	communion unity in diversity	unity (universal) (integrating)	uniformity
anti-intellectualism scepticism relativism	feeling (ignorance) (subjectivity)	faith as process inclusivism myth	reason (knowledge) (objectivity)	dogmatism 'eternal theology' exclusivism
activism secularism worldliness (Arianism)	human (immanence) (action)	Incarnation (Chalcedon) 'contemplative in action'	divine (transcendence) (contemplation)	spiritualism fideism other-worldliness (Monophysitism)
'progressive'		communication community	'conservative'	
power-games		nurturing powerlessness service/diakonia		power-games

Note: The aim of this diagram is to help the reader map his/her experience of the changes which happened as a consequence of Vatican II. What is needed is to add to the two-dimensional presentation the dimensions of time and space. Hopefully it can help as much to map the experience of individual persons as the experience of communities. The middle column describes the ideal characteristics of a community which would have learned to resolve the dilemmas in a synergistic way, avoiding the excesses of the extremes.

is the community that has to own the gospel and offer it to all, the separation which clericalism makes between 'brain' and 'hands' is no longer meaningful, and the clerical monopoly of ministries is radically undermined.

Ordained ministry has still an essential place in this model because there are fundamental realities for the life of a Christian community which have to be assured at all costs: the gospel as the common vision, the rituals as the community enablers, the continuous flow of communication (communion) among all the members of the community. But the ordained ministry is not the monopolizer of those essential elements – it is their guarantor. The ordained minister guarantees that the gospel is preached and the rituals are celebrated and oversees the communication network kept alive by the continuous co-operation of the members of the community. These members share among themselves the ministries needed to nurture the community for the service of the reconciliation of the world.

Training transformational leaders

We can see therefore the challenge which we face in a place like the Missionary Institute where we train together men and women who come from forty different countries in order to train for a whole variety of ministries, including the ordained ministry. We would be wrong if we continued to form transactional leaders apparently fitted with an answer to every possible question and a ready-made solution for every conceivable problem. This would be to impose an unacceptable universalism lacking respect for the diversity in ministry needed in order to offer the gospel to the incredible human richness and variety of our world.

The place where people are trained is actually very secondary. The important thing is to train adults everywhere with participative and collaborative training methods, in a mixed setting (genders, ages, cultures, seminarians, religious men and women, lay persons) and in dynamic contact with society.

Our challenge is to form transformational leaders who are aware of their cultural variety and gifts, who are capable of integrating the masculine and feminine sides of their personality and adapting the style of their leadership to the changing circumstances and different cultures where their ministry will be exercised. Transformational leaders need a passion for the kingdom of justice, peace and love, a sensitivity to changing circumstances, the capacity to discern (in co-operation with others) resolutions to the emerging dilemmas that their communities

face, and communication skills in order to provide unity of purpose to all the initiatives of the community.⁸

This applies to all ministries. But as to who should be called to be ordained and to guarantee the essential functions of the Christian community, I hope that one day soon we shall be free enough from the male bias to chose synergetic, creative and nurturing persons without regard for gender. In the meantime, let 'earth' and 'water' avoid becoming 'rock' and 'whirlpool', and let the masculine and the feminine in us all combine to form that brittle 'earthen jar' capable of preserving the treasure of God's reconciling and healing love at the service of a world which thirsts for life.

NOTES

¹ The main inspiration for the methodology of this article comes from the work of Charles Hampden-Turner from whom I have borrowed the notions of transactional and transformational leadership, the notion of managing dilemmas, and the use of the mythology of Scylla and Charybdis. In fact this whole article is an application of the insights of C. Hampden-Turner to the Catholic Church. I have used mainly two of Hampden-Turner's works: *Corporate culture* (London: Piatkus, 1994) and *Charting the corporate mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

² The link between authoritarianism and schismogenesis was explored by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson; see Charles Hampden-Turner, *Charting the corporate mind*, pp 18–20.

³ For an understanding of the use of 'diabolic' and 'symbolic' see Rafael Esteban, 'Evangelization, culture and spirituality' in *The Way* vol 34, no 4 (October 1994), pp 273–282.

⁴ For the notion of uncertainty avoidance and its link to institutionalism and legalism, see Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and organizations* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1991), pp 109–138.

⁵ 'The word synergy is from the Greek *syn-ergo*, "work with", and refers to the extent that different values held within a culture 'work well' with each other', in Charles Hampden-Turner, *Corporate culture*, p 16.

⁶ '*Di-lemma* is from Greek meaning "two propositions" . . . These seemingly "opposed" propositions are converging upon us simultaneously. If we give exclusive attention to either one in the pair, the other is likely to impale us', in Charles Hampden-Turner, *Charting the corporate mind*, p 9.

⁷ For the notion of virtuous and vicious circles, see Charles Hampden-Turner, *Corporate culture*, pp 28–33.

⁸ We should heed very carefully the warning of Geert Hofstede concerning the training for intercultural communication: 'People with unduly inflated egos, a low personal tolerance for uncertainty, a history of emotional instability, or known racist or extreme left- or right-wing political sympathies should be considered bad risks for training which, after all, assumes people's ability to distance themselves from their own cherished beliefs.' Hofstede, *ibid.*, p 231.