

# TOWARDS A CHURCH OF SERVICE

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SOCIOLOGISTS have noted a shift from a paternal form of authority to a more fraternal form. The 'father' has set the pattern for a long time, but now much of his prestige has been eroded; the heavy-handed paterfamilias has gone – or remains and creates havoc. The trappings of authority – the robes and the rest – no longer command immediate or automatic respect, and statesmen, prudently recognizing this truth, wear sober suits. Authority, to survive, has to present its credentials, to justify itself; and it has at least to claim to serve.

At this point, the reader might already begin to suspect the worst. This introduction could lead straight into a diatribe on such threadbare themes as the decline of authority or, at the other extreme, into a plea for a democratic Church. Neither course will be followed here. One of the most important things the Council did was to inaugurate, or renew, a theological method, and invite christians to discern the 'signs of the times'. Before rushing in to interpret a particular modern trend, one needs to examine it closely and enquire whether christians have something to learn from it. For example, the declaration on religious liberty begins in this way: 'A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man'.<sup>1</sup> From one point of view, that looks like the understatement of the century. From another, it could be strongly challenged. But its interest lies in the recognition of a value which the Church certainly upholds, but which she did not invent and of which she has no monopoly. The implications of such a position are far-reaching. It implies that theology is not only about things as they are, but about things as they happen. And among the things which, with many setbacks, have been happening is a growth in the sense of the dignity of the human person and, not unconnected with it, a change in the pattern of authority relationships. The Church comes to

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<sup>1</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*, 1.

the modern world to learn as well as to teach.

But she does come to teach. From the start, the Council was placed under the sign of Christ, the light of the nations, and his light is no feeble candle. What the Church brings to the world is simply deep faith in the divine plan for mankind. This is both a stupendous claim and an extremely modest one. It is a stupendous claim because it provides the ultimate answer to the riddle of human existence, without, of course, diminishing its mystery. But it is a modest claim in that the recognition of the divine plan and a life of faith lived in correspondence to it, are not presented as a pat solution to every immediate human problem. The unshakeable confidence of faith leaves untouched many intractable human problems, and the Council stressed the need for competence, the dangers of incompetence and the illusion of omnicompetence: 'Let not the layman imagine that his pastors are experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission'.<sup>1</sup>

Modesty and a sense of limits, however, do not lead to abdication. The Church offers the world the message of Christ which is a message of hope in his resurrection and the power of his Spirit poured out in the hearts of the faithful. But it is a permanent temptation of christians to present christian hope as a sort of private consolation, a reason or putting up with an unjust or unpleasant state of things. The technical name for this evasion of immediate tasks in the name of a future hope is alienation, and the Council reacted as vigorously as possible against this temptation. When we proclaim christian hope, we have always to remember that we do not hope for ourselves alone or even for the Church. Christian hope is a hope which reaches out to embrace all men. And so, one of the problems of the Council was how to jolt christians out of their complacency, how to turn passive christians into active ones and how to direct them to the service of their fellow men.

But it is only possible to serve all men if one has learned to serve the brethren; and the Council's first task was to re-learn from christian sources that authority in the Church exists for service and thus, perhaps without intending to directly, to reflect the changing structure of authority mentioned earlier.

The opening passage of chapter III of the dogmatic constitution on the Church states the purpose of authority in the Church:

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

So that the people of God might have tending and continual growth, Christ the Lord established in his Church different ministries. They are aimed at the good of the whole body. The ministers, invested with sacred power, are at the service of their brethren; for all who belong to the people of God and enjoy in consequence the real dignity of christians, are to arrive at salvation by uniting to the same end freely yet in order.<sup>1</sup>

The first sentence recalls the New Testament theme of Christ as good shepherd (. . . *ad populum Dei pascendum semperque augendum*), the 'pattern of authority in the flock'.<sup>2</sup> Many object instinctively to the whole complex of associations involved in the metaphor of the sheep and the shepherd. But set in its Old Testament background in which the Lord is the shepherd of Israel who will personally care for his flock,<sup>3</sup> the image takes on a new relevance. The shepherd is concerned about the good of his sheep. He can only do this if he knows them by name. There is no impersonality here, no abstract treatment of the numbered anonymous masses. All ministries in the Church are pastoral ministries. and though the immensity of the Church's visible organization and the claim of efficiency can get in the way, there is no substitute for personal relationship of pastor to people. As Augustine wrote of Ambrose who, he says, received him *episcopally*, 'I began to love him first of all not as the teacher of the truth – because I had despaired of finding such in your Church – but as a man who was kindly disposed to me'.<sup>4</sup> One of the most striking things about the authority of Christ is that it is a personalized authority. Jesus accepts the title of Lord and Master, but far from allowing himself to be imprisoned in this social role he overflows the role and can say: 'I call you servants no longer; a servant does not know what his master is about. I have called you friends, because I have disclosed to you everything I have learned from my father'.<sup>5</sup>

*Lumen Gentium* and the decrees on bishops and priests all take Christ the good Shepherd as their starting point. The justification for applying the style of authority of Christ the good shepherd to the pastors of the Church is not simply that Christ sets an example, but that there is a transfer of attributes from the good shepherd to those who are to be shepherds of the flock in the Church. The most striking evidence is of course Peter's confession of love.<sup>6</sup> It is not the

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Confessions*, V, 13, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Cf 1 Pet 5, 2-4.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 15, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Ezek 34.

<sup>6</sup> Jn 21, 15-17.

only evidence. In St Luke, the parable of the lost sheep is told in answer to the charge of dining with sinners; the subject is evidently Jesus himself.<sup>1</sup> But in Matthew the same parable is told in the context of a discourse on how the elders of the Church should behave towards the weak and fallible.<sup>2</sup> The transfer of attributes has already happened in the New Testament.

None of this, it might be said, has ever been in doubt, theoretically. But there has been a temptation to distort the shepherd imagery and lay the stress unscripturally on the inertness of the sheep and the interfering zeal of the shepherd who will rope them and bell them 'by hook or by crook'. A whole chapter could be written on the temptations of authority in the Church which spring among other things from a misreading of the image. There certainly was a triumphalistic concept of authority in the Church which used the language of service while borrowing some of its methods from contemporary secular princes; and the fact that the popes were simultaneously spiritual leaders and temporal sovereigns of the papal states did not help. And this was reflected on the local level by a paternalistic concept of authority possible only so long as the myth of clerical intellectual superiority was plausible. *Lumen Gentium* recognizes that the Church is 'at once holy and in need of cleansing' (and the English translation conceals the echo of Luther in the phrase *sancta simul et purificanda*), so we need be neither surprised nor shocked. But now the whole Church has the task of continually aligning faith and doctrine, making deeds correspond to teaching.

The rediscovered concept of authority in the Church does not simply depend on a metaphor, even if the metaphor is ontological. The unity of the Church is founded first of all in the inward action of the holy Spirit: 'This people's unity was not to be brought about naturally but in the Spirit'.<sup>3</sup> The Church is neither like a club nor like a party. The Spirit in the Church fulfils an analogous function to that he fulfils in the inner life of the Trinity: that of joining and uniting. The primacy of the Spirit, so strongly asserted in the constitution on the Church, means that the sort of unity found in the Church is a unique form, that of communion. Then one can and must go on to speak of the structural organization of the Church, of the different hierarchical ministries in the Church, but all these depend on the 'gifts of service': 'With the help of Christ's gifts, we have his strength to offer each other services which help towards

<sup>1</sup> Cf Lk 15, 1-7.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 18, 12-14.

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

salvation'.<sup>1</sup> Here one can begin to glimpse what the phrase 'freely yet in order' means. The 'Spirit poured out in our hearts' is the one that impels us to unite with each other. Bishops give expression to this unity and are defined as those who are responsible for the service of the community, *ministerium communitatis*, which means not only that they are there for its good, but that, through their preaching of the gospel and their celebration of the eucharist, they bring the community into existence.<sup>2</sup> Priests are analogously described: their share of authority 'consists in gathering together the household of God as a brotherhood in a single spirit, and bringing it through Christ in the Spirit to the Father'.<sup>3</sup> A christian community is a hierarchized fraternity, and hence 'the laity have Christ for their brother; for though he is Lord of all, he did not come to have service done to him, but to serve'.<sup>4</sup>

The difficulty lies not so much in the theology as in the practice. Even so, it is important to get the theology straight, and *Lumen Gentium* contains important hints, worked out in more detail in later documents, on the 'machinery' for realizing the principles of communion and fraternity. One obvious point, which represents the overcoming of generations of clericalism and its mirror-image of anti-clericalism, is the interdependence of pastors and people:

The very distinction the Lord has made between the sacred ministers and the rest of God's people involves a connection, since pastors and the rest of the faithful are tied together by their common obligation; the Church's pastors must follow the example of the Lord and render service to each other and to the rest of the faithful; the faithful have to be ready to offer their associated effort to the pastors and teachers.<sup>5</sup>

The thrice-repeated phrase, 'the rest of the faithful', is awkward, but it is a reminder that the clergy themselves belong to the people of God. This interdependence will remain a mirage unless there is consultation, as the constitution recognizes: 'The laity have the right of making known to the sacred pastors their needs and desires with the confident liberty which suits them as children of God'.<sup>6</sup> In practice this means diocesan and parochial councils.

So far, we have been concerned about service within the Church, and this was in a sense a preliminary. The Council began its work with worship and with the self-definition involved in *Lumen Gentium*.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

But to stop at this point would be to travesty the Council, because so far one has said nothing about the people the Church is there to serve. One had to begin with the Church 'in herself' before moving on to the Church 'in the world', since the Church could serve the world only imperfectly as long as inessential accretions, the bric-a-brac of history, blocked the vision of what the Church is. One of the commonest reproaches (still heard) against the Church has been that of authoritarianism. The danger is always there, but it is a fallacy to assume that the concept of authority necessarily leads to authoritarianism. Authority can be subject to higher norms, while the authoritarian position devises its own norms out of self-interest or a desire for survival. The danger becomes an actual threat if the Church is degraded and reduced to an institution among others, and not seen as a communion of love and service. The self-renewal inaugurated by the Council began by a return to evangelical sources; but it is also a condition of dialogue with the modern world.

The pastoral constitution on the Church in the world of today is important for its content, which breaks new ground, and for its method, which is a constant effort to remain true to both the data of revelation and the experience of men. The criterion used at the start of Part II, 'in the light of the gospel and of human experience', is the guiding principle throughout. The Church sees herself as a community of believers in Christ, brought together by his holy Spirit, freely and hierarchically ordered in a visible society. This society has a mission and only one ambition: 'led by the holy Spirit, to carry on the work of Christ, who came into this world to witness to the truth – to save, not to judge, to serve, not to be served'.<sup>1</sup> But serving the world is not easy, and the world sometimes resents service. The Council's attitude excludes a number of false approaches. It excludes a supercilious holier-than-thou approach; for christians are not spectators of the world but are themselves involved as participants in its hopes and disappointments. It excludes what might be called the fire-extinguisher approach, moralizing from the outside without adequate knowledge of the problems involved. Positively, the first task is the search for common ground. To take one example: the aspiration towards peace is universal and there is increasing economic and cultural interdependence between states. Nationalism is seen as regressive. Speed of travel over long distances and improved means of communication have made the world

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 3.

seem a smaller place, and it does not seem absurd to speak with Teilhard de Chardin of a 'planetarian consciousness'. But so far it is given more in expectation than experience. 'While the world is vividly aware of its unity, of the dependence of men on each other, of the need of solidarity, it is torn apart by contending forces'.<sup>1</sup> The trends noted, signs of the times, all seem to bear a fatal flaw of ambiguity: 'The communication of ideas increases, but the words in which important ideas are expressed have very different meanings in different ideologies'.<sup>2</sup> To serve means to build on what is already there, to show how the 'message' is not something added from outside, but rather something which corresponds to existing aspirations and desires. Thus the Council was able to read in the holy Spirit the human aspiration towards peace an echo or an anticipation of the Church's teaching on the brotherhood of men. The aspiration towards peace is seen as an inchoate longing for what is given, in principle, in Christ. What looks merely like a trend, what way things are going, is seen in terms of the divine vocation: 'The Council proclaims man's high vocation, insists on a certain seed of divinity he carries within him; for this reason it offers the human race the Church's sincere co-operation in establishing that universal brotherhood which answers to such a vocation'.<sup>3</sup>

This may seem a rarified form of 'service'. And it only makes sense if the Church is a *credible* fraternity of believers. The gap between lofty assertions and indifferent practice is keenly felt by our pragmatic contemporaries. The Council itself was an exercise in fraternity, in which, in the end, the almost tangible sense of communion outweighed all the jockeying and behind-the-scenes lobbying. It produced a renewed sense of the international character of the Church, which found theological expression in the doctrine of collegiality and diplomatic expression in the Pope's visit to the United Nations, and his peace offensive around Christmas last year, which has been backed up by the setting up of a secretariat for world justice. The development of a new humanism, 'in which man is defined by his responsibilities to his fellow man and to history' is dispassionately noted by the Council;<sup>4</sup> and it seems to be considered not as a rival ideology to be combated but rather as an intimation of truths which christianity can satisfactorily ground and lead to their fulfilment. The momentous changes that are taking place in the world cannot be shrugged off as irrelevant to christian

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

living, since 'the Spirit of God, who with marvellous providence directs the course of history and renews the face of the earth, broods over this evolution. The ferment of the gospel rouses in men's hearts a demand for dignity that cannot be stifled'.<sup>1</sup> And later on in the same document, the correspondence between the aspirations of mankind and the Church's contribution as a thinking-model of unity is made explicit.<sup>2</sup>

It is time to descend from the stratosphere of internationalism, which is presented simply as one example of the Church in the world of today. The transition from the Church as a whole and its tasks to that of local churches and their tasks is made easier by one of the most important doctrines of the constitution on the Church: 'This Church of Christ is truly present, *vere adest*, in all lawful local congregations of the faithful . . . They are, for their own locality, the new people called by God, in the holy Spirit'.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the Church in Camden Town or in Harlem is not just *a* church, a convenient territorial division of the whole Church, but *the* Church for and in Camden Town and Harlem. And all that has previously been said about authority in the Church and the tasks of discerning the signs of the times applies to the faithful in these places. If the Church as a whole is the 'sacramental or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of unity for the whole human race',<sup>4</sup> then *this* Church will have the same characteristics and tasks and, in particular, will have to supply or supplement the sense of community in *these* places. This immediately means some sort of commitment to breaking down barriers which may exist (between races for example), or to ensuring that housing does not remain in the hands of unscrupulous profiteers, or that the aged and infirm are not abandoned to a lonely fate. This is in no sense a programme, for one cannot predict in advance the situation with which the local Church will be faced. Problems of a spacious but desolate new town are not those of an overcrowded slum. What is certain is that it is the local situation which has to be studied and discerned.

There are three features of this service of the community. First, it is disinterested. It is not simply a dodge to make people aware that the christian body exists and is not moribund; it may indeed make them aware of the fact, but that is a bonus, not a motive. The motive is stated in the constitution on the Church: 'The Church has a loving embrace for all who are afflicted by human weakness;

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

she goes further: in the poor and the suffering she recognizes the likeness of her founder, a poor man and a sufferer. She makes the relief of poverty her business, the service of Christ in them her aim'.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, service supposes competence. It is not a matter of setting up rival social services to those which already exist, but rather a matter of working with and within them and recognizing the new needs which have arisen. The more institutionalized and overburdened the social services are, the more slow they are to respond to fresh situations. Finally, the service the Church brings will require collaboration with other christians and with all who have the good of the human person at heart.

This is not the place to discuss the objection that we have here a 'watering down' of the christian gospel to social morality ('merely social morality' as the critics usually phrase it, oddly). The Council spoke plainly enough: 'They are wide of the mark who think that because we have here no abiding city but seek the city that is to come, they can neglect their duty on this earth; they forget that the faith increases the obligation to fulfil those duties in accordance with their vocation . . . The christian who neglects his temporal duties neglects his duties to his neighbour, neglects God and risks his eternal salvation'.<sup>2</sup> For too long we have thought in terms of individual salvation and individual morality, but the Church is a communion and the pattern of communion: and we fulfil ourselves as persons only in loving the brethren. This is the evidence of the truth of the paschal message: 'We for our part have crossed over from death to life; this we know, because we love our brothers'.<sup>3</sup> What is learned, through hearing and acting in the liturgy, overflows into the rest of life. The importance of the liturgy as the school of service cannot be overstressed, for it is that which constitutes the local Church.<sup>4</sup>

This article is called, modestly, Towards a Church of Service and the emphasis is on towards. Our task is to close the gap between the vision of conciliar theology and the empirical reality of our christian communities. The Church 'does not overlook the gulf between the message she brings and the human weakness of those to whom the gospel is entrusted'.<sup>5</sup> It is good not to overlook the gulf, better to strive to bridge it.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Jn 3, 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

<sup>2</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 26, citing St Ignatius of Antioch.