

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

MINISTRY AND ORDINATION, I

THE ROMAN Catholic Church enters the 1980s in the grip of a virtual revolution in the area of ministry. As recently as twenty years ago, few theological topics were more easily handled. Ministry was the work, mainly sacramental, by which the hierarchy, with the help of the lower ranks of the clergy, carried out the mission it had received from Jesus Christ by virtue of ordination. As early as the 'fifties and 'sixties there were occasional questions raised about what role, if any, the laity were called upon to play in the mission and/or ministry of the Church. However, despite the notable efforts of theologians like Yves Congar¹ and Hans Küng² to highlight the universal christian vocation to ministry implied by baptismal participation in the priesthood of Christ, the prevailing understanding of ministry in the roman communion was that it was the preserve of the clergy,³ who might, under certain circumstances, delegate tasks to the laity. This understanding was epitomized in the definition of 'Catholic action' still current in the 'fifties and 'sixties: 'The participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy'.⁴ The relation between mission/ministry and ordination was unambiguous: ordination both conferred ecclesial mission and empowered for ministry. Ordination was the unique legitimization of ministerial initiative. As we shall see, it is the simultaneous explicit challenging and implicit acceptance of this unambiguous relationship between ministry and ordination which is at the root of the theoretical and practical ministerial *malaise* that characterizes the contemporary Church.

The characteristic expressions of the ministerial revolution are numerous and the relationships among them complex. The drastic decline in numbers of candidates for ordination, the thirty thousand and more ordained who were 'laicized' during the pontificate of Paul VI, the 'identity crisis' and/or protective reactionism of those who have not left, the extension of the ministry of non-ordained religious into every conceivable area of human need and suffering, the steady and growing pressure for the ordination of women, the increasing demand of lay people for decision-making roles in parish and diocesan affairs, the protest against mandatory celibacy of the ordained, the

¹ Y. Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (London, 1957).

² H. Küng, *The Church* (New York, 1967), esp. pp 363-87, on 'The Priesthood of all believers'.

³ For an excellent overview of the immediate pre-conciliar literature on the subject of ministry, see B. J. Cooke, *Ministry to Word and Sacraments* (Philadelphia, 1976), esp. pp 1-30.

⁴ Cf Pope Pius XII, 'Allocution to Italian Catholic Action' (4 September 1940), *AAS* 32 (1940), p 362.

question of the ordination of homosexuals, the decline of the geographical parish, are among the more visible developments. Less visible, but vitally important, are such developments as the abandonment of Church affiliation by a growing number of intelligent, educated, but completely disillusioned women, the increasing recourse of small groups to liturgical celebrations without the presence of an ordained minister, the quiet, or not so quiet, establishment by lay persons of ministries to those whom the institutional Church has marginalized (for example, the homosexual community, the divorced and re-married, the professional prostitutes), the discrete, but increasing, sacramental ministry by the 'laicized', widespread intercommunion at the grassroots level, and so on.

To some people, especially those of institutional leanings, this explosion of ministerial innovations looks like total chaos. To others, it represents the dawn of a new day in the Church. For everyone it is a challenge to understanding and discernment. Which of these developments is cause and which effect? What are the criteria for distinguishing legitimate and lasting developments from ephemeral and anarchic outbursts? What is the appropriate role of culture, tradition, pastoral needs, human liberty, theology, and official discipline in determining the shape of ecclesial ministry? Obviously, two short articles cannot hope to offer an adequate answer to these questions. What I will attempt to do in the following pages is to discuss the *theological source* of the current developments in the area of *mission and ministry*, and some of the implications of these developments for traditional *ordained ministry* in general. In a subsequent article I will discuss in more detail the current debate *over the ordination of women*, because this issue focuses most clearly the biblical, theological, spiritual, pastoral, psychological and cultural factors of the question of ministry in the contemporary Church.

I

The relationships among theological developments are intricate and the attempt to assign causal or chronological priority to one in relation to another is usually a chicken-and-egg enterprise of dubious value. The rise of what we call 'contemporary theology' goes back at least to the early nineteenth century, when a wave of biblical, theological and liturgical renewal swept over the continent. Karl Barth's great commentary on Romans⁵ and his ensuing controversy with Rudolf Bultmann, the Catholic Modernist crisis and the liturgical development in Germany, were among the effective signs of the dawning of a new age. The unspeakable sufferings of the World Wars, culminating in the first nuclear bomb-attack in human history, contributed a deep religious urgency to theological renewal in the post-war years, and radically changed the context in which the theology of the late twentieth

⁵ K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. C. Hoskyns (London/Oxford/New York, 1968).

century would evolve. All this ferment was operative in the theological developments of Vatican II. But I think that we can conveniently, and relatively accurately, locate the explicit beginnings of the ministerial revolution in the Roman Catholic Church in the ecclesiology articulated (although not created) by the Second Vatican Council.

Richard McBrien is undoubtedly correct in referring to the ecclesiology of Vatican II as 'A Study in Ambivalence'.⁶ However, despite considerable slipping and sliding among theologies old and new, the Council did elaborate a theology of the Church which was, in certain ways, revolutionary. As many theologians have remarked, the very organization of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), is a significant indication of a new understanding. And the fact that the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), and the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), were promulgated at all is equally significant. The question of the Church, its nature, composition, and mission, was the central concern of Vatican II; and it is from the resulting renewed ecclesiology that the ministerial revolution has sprung. Three aspects of Vatican II's ecclesiology are especially important in this regard: its presentation of the Church first and foremost as *mystery* rather than institution; its insistence that the Church is basically *community*, the People of God, rather than hierarchy; its concern with the Church as mission rather than as haven of the 'saved'.

The Church as mystery

The first chapter of *Lumen Gentium* has for its English title 'The Mystery of the Church'. 'Mystery' here, of course, does not designate that which is difficult to understand, but rather a reality whose fulness of being exceeds our efforts to exhaust its meaning by our finite categories. It denotes the Church, not as a perfect society, nor as an institution, but as a divine gift to humanity, as a 'sacrament or sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all [human] kind'.⁷ The Council did not, of course, invent this definition of the Church. It goes back to the New Testament (cf Eph 5, 32), and has a far richer history in patristic sources than the more pedestrian ecclesiology with which most inter-conciliar Catholics were familiar. However, the Council's presentation of the Church as mystery brought into the consciousness of ordinary Christians a dimension of the Church which had been practically ignored in catechesis and preaching since the Council of Trent. The immense excitement generated among theologians and laity alike by the appearance of Hans Küng's *The Church*, published two years after the Council (1967), and the influence of the less dramatic but perhaps

⁶ R. P. McBrien, *Church: The Continuing Quest* (New York, 1970). The cited expression is part of the title of chapter 2.

⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 1. Citations from conciliar documents will be from *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. M. Abbott (New York, 1966). In so far as possible I will emend the sexist language of the translation.

equally important volumes by Richard McBrien, *Church: The Continuing Quest* (1970), and Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (1974), demonstrated the widespread readiness of Roman Catholics to think of the Church in less institutional terms.

It is difficult to pinpoint the precise effects of this change of consciousness in regard to the Church. It manifests itself in many ways, from an acerbic anti-institutionalism to a loyal but unrelenting constructive criticism of ecclesiastical personnel, policy, and procedures, to an enthusiastic renewal of ecumenical effort and a confident experimentation with new forms of ecclesial organization at the local level. The least we can say is that greater emphasis on the Church as mystery has fostered and accelerated a relativization and demystification of office in the Church, from papacy to pastorate. As established offices became less 'numinous' in the consciousness of the ordinary Christian, many people began to talk of sharing in ministries, creation of new ministries, extension of ordination to hitherto unthinkable candidates (for example, married people, women, 'gays').

Thinking of the Church primarily as mystery rather than as institution leads not only to a relativizing of institutional structures but also to a certain 'authenticity-testing' of inherited certainties about membership and ministry. Catholic Christians began to wonder, for example, if the differences between themselves and other Christians who are committed to the same Christ were as real or as significant as they had been taught to believe. The spontaneous tendency of twentieth-century Catholics to relate positively to non-Catholic neighbours and friends was fostered by the exhortation to common prayer and search for unity in *Unitatis Redintegratio* (4-5) which reversed long-standing prohibitions against ecumenical discussions and especially against common worship.⁸

Ecumenical activity has led, with remarkable speed, to the question of inter-communion, which immediately involves us in the question of mutual recognition of ministries. It is both exciting and frustrating to realize the depth and breadth of agreement between Roman Catholics on the one hand, and their Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran dialogue partners on the other in regard to the validity of each others' ordinations.⁹ It is exciting because mutual recognition of ministries was agreed to be theologically possible by all parties in these bilateral conferences. It is frustrating because Rome, and to some extent the authorities in other communions, has consistently refused to act on these possibilities.

But despite the lethargy, timidity, and/or excessive caution in high places,

⁸ An excellent summary of the Council's reversal of ecumenical practice, and its results, is L. Swidler's article, 'The Eucharist in Ecumenical Perspective', which concludes the special issue of *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 13 (Spring 1976): 'The Eucharist in Ecumenical Dialogue'. See pp 142-54.

⁹ For appropriate documentation see Swidler, 'The Eucharist in Ecumenical Perspective', pp 147-48.

the experiences of ecumenical dialogue and of shared worship are leading many active Catholics to a much less 'numinous' (not to say magical) view of ordination than has been common since Trent. Many ordinary Catholics have come to a practical recognition that ordination is better understood as designation for ecclesial function than as a passing on of sacred 'powers'. The theoretical support for such a view is increasing steadily.¹⁰

The demystification and relativizing of offices in the Church, as well as the expansion of the concept of valid ordination to include ministry in other denominations, are certainly not the only results of attending to the mystery rather than to the institutional dimensions of the Church. But they are very important for any understanding of the ministerial revolution taking place in the post-conciliar Church. As long as the Church was understood primarily (if not exclusively) as an institution dispensing salvation through sacramental channels by the properly ordained officials, no real modification of Church ministry was imaginable or desirable. But once the Church came to be understood as the sacrament of union between God and humanity, it became much easier to imagine an enrichment of the forms of mediation of that mysterious union, to desire diversification of mediation within the Roman Communion, and inclusion of the mediations established in other Christian Communions. What is breaking down is the unquestioned monolithic conception of ministry as the (largely cultic) ministrations of the ordained to the unordained, within the institutional confines of the Church. What is emerging is a sense that ministry is any and every effort of believers to mediate God's love in Christ to each other and to the whole of humanity. It is precisely these two realizations, namely that ministry is the work of all believers, and that the object of ministry is all humanity, which have 'exploded' the pre-conciliar notion of ministry into the much more complex reality with which we are faced today.

The Church as community

The second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* is entitled 'The People of God', and presents the Church as essentially a community of those who, through Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation, share in the identity of Christ who is prophet, priest and king (cf 10-12). Chapter four, on the laity, insists with unusual clarity not only on the unity of this community (32), but on the fundamental natural and spiritual *equality* of all the members of the Church: 'all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ'. Both *Lumen*

¹⁰ See for example the interesting position paper by D. Ashbeck, 'The Ordained Ministerial Presbyterate: A Position Paper', *Schola* 1 (1978), pp 61-78 and the bibliography given therein. Several volumes of *Concilium*, notably 34, 63, 74 and 80, have been devoted to a revision of ordination in terms of designation for service rather than in terms of conferral of sacred power, and of ministry in terms of rendering service rather than exercising power.

Gentium, 33 and the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 3) stress the fact that the laity *participate directly in the mission of the Church* by virtue of baptism. This is a major departure from the earlier position that lay apostolic activity (which we today would call ministry) is simply a participation in the mission of the hierarchy.¹¹ The Council's position is that 'by its very nature the Christian vocation is also a vocation to the apostolate' (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2), that 'this apostolate . . . pertains to absolutely every Christian' (*Lumen Gentium*, 33). 'The laity derive the right and duty with respect to the apostolate from their union with Christ their Head. Incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through baptism, and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself' (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 3).

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of this aspect of conciliar ecclesiology for the revision of ministry. Not only are *all* Christians called to ministry, but all are *equally* called to ministry; and the ministry of one member of the Church (that is, the unordained) *is not derived* from the ministry of another member (that is, the ordained). Notwithstanding its insistence on the hierarchical structure of the Church (cf *Lumen Gentium*, ch. 3) and the 'essential difference' between the common and hierarchial priesthoods (*Lumen Gentium*, 10), the Council's ecclesiology definitively undermined the clerical monopoly of ministry, virtually absolute in the Roman communion until Vatican II.¹²

The practical implications of this 'new' theology of ministry as originating in baptism rather than in ordination are too numerous and complex even to list. Let us, however, indicate a few of the more significant ones. The most obvious perhaps, is the claim of women to a baptismal right to have their vocation to ordained ministry tested equally with that of men. If it is true that all the baptized are fundamentally equal in the Church, and that 'there is in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex'; and if all Christians are equally called to ministry by virtue of baptism (*Lumen Gentium*, 32), then the exclusion of women Christians from any role in the Church for which they are qualified (an exclusion which was accepted without question for centuries) appears theologically illegitimate.

A second implication is that many lay people have felt called to full-time ministry in the local church, and have undertaken such ministries without

¹¹ An effort is made in *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (20) to suggest that the earlier definition applied only to those lay apostolate groups known as 'Catholic Action' or having the same structure as these groups. However, the real import of the section on the laity in *Lumen Gentium*, as well as the opening paragraphs of *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, is that the apostolate of the laity derives not from the hierarchy but from baptism.

¹² A good history of the gradual monopolizing of ministry by the ordained is available in Cooke, *Ministry to Word and Sacraments*, pp 1-30, and in U. T. Holmes, *The future shape of Ministry* (New York, 1971), chs 1-5.

hierarchical invitation or permission. They wish both to be reimbursed for this ministry as are the ordained and the religious, and to carry out their ministries not in subjection to the ordained but in collegial inter-dependence with them. Although Vatican II ecclesiology abolishes *de jure* the notion that the ministry of the laity derives from or is dependent upon the ordained, the *de facto* political, sociological, and economic pattern in local churches is, for the most part, still that of the 'divine right monarchy'. A full-scale re-examination of the nature and function of authority in the Church, and of its relationship to jurisdiction is clearly necessary¹³ in order to ground an orderly exercise of ministry within a totally ministerial Church composed of equal Christians.

A third implication lies in the area of the complex relationship between ministry, sacraments, and ordination, which will be discussed in greater detail in the sequel to this article. At this point, however, we can at least draw attention to the agonizing practical problems arising from the fact that the sacraments, especially Reconciliation, Eucharist, and the Anointing of the Sick, belong intrinsically within processes initiated and accompanied in more and more cases by non-ordained ministers. The frustration of these ministers at being unable to mediate God's forgiveness sacramentally to a dying person whom they have accompanied throughout a painful illness, or to a young person whose confidence they have gained by long months of patient listening, or to a troubled retreatant; at being unable to celebrate Eucharist with the people they have prepared for this sacrament, or to whom they minister on a day-to-day basis in a religious community, to mention but a few instances, is profoundly disturbing. The deeper a person's involvement in ministry, the more frequently and certainly that ministry will lead naturally to sacramental expression. This situation is raising several theological questions: for example, should ordination be extended to all these ministers; is such a thing as a time-limited or function-limited ordination conceivable; is the requirement of an ordained minister for the valid celebration of these sacraments absolute?

The ecclesiology of Vatican II, in stressing the fact that every baptized Christian is called to ministry, has provided the theoretical underpinning for a development of ministries in the Church that was and is sorely needed, but for which the institutional structure was not prepared. Furthermore, this has been so deeply intertwined with official theology that changing it to accommodate a new ministerial consciousness and behaviour is raising a whole new set of theological questions in the area of ecclesiology, sacramental

¹³ This re-examination is well under way. J. L. McKenzie's *Authority in the Church* (Garden City, 1966), K. Rahner's *The shape of the Church to come* (New York, 1974), A. Lemaine's *Ministry in the Church* (London, 1977), 'The Church and the Laity' in H. Küng's *Signposts for the Future* (Garden City, 1977), and Cooke's *Ministry to Word and Sacraments* (part IV) are among the numerous recent efforts of theologians to clarify the function of authority in the ministry of the Church.

theology, and liturgy. Many consider such a process long overdue, and rejoice in the impetus that ministerial praxis is providing for theoretical development.

The Church as Mission

The third element of Vatican II ecclesiology which has profoundly affected the theory and practice of ministry in the Church is its insistence on the Church as essentially missionary. The Church does not simply 'have' a mission: it *is* mission. 'Being sent' to the world, to humanity, is of the very essence of the Church, as it was of the very identity of Christ. The mission which the Church constitutes is not exclusively or even primarily to bring all people into the ecclesiastical institution. Rather, it is to be the sign, instrument, and herald of the ongoing process by which history is becoming the Kingdom of God.¹⁴ The Kingdom of God is understood in this context, not as a name for the Church either as institution or event, but as the continuing saving activity of God in the lives of human beings. As McBrien puts it, 'The Kingdom of God is a matter of the world becoming human, of the realization of the fellowship of man [*sic*] under the sovereignty of God'.¹⁵

The Council opened not with a message to Catholics, but with a 'Message to Humanity' which begins: 'We take great pleasure in sending to all [people] and nations a message concerning the well-being, love, and peace which was brought into the world by Christ Jesus, the Son of the Living God, and entrusted to the Church'. *Lumen Gentium* likewise begins with a statement of the Council's desire 'to shed on all [people] that radiance of his which brightens the countenance of the Church'. However, it is in *Gaudium et Spes* especially that the Council voiced its deepest conviction that 'the news of salvation is meant for every [person], and that the Church is therefore 'linked with [human] kind and its history'. In this document, addressed 'not only to the sons [and daughters] of the Church and to all who invoke the name of Christ, but to the whole of humanity' (2), the Council expressed the solidarity of Christians with all people, and the Church's responsibility to share in humanity's task of humanizing the world.

This expression of solidarity with all people, regardless of their religious convictions, in the task of humanizing the world, rang down the curtain on four centuries of world-denying antagonism and religious imperialism on the part of the Church and raised it again on a new drama in which a chastened remnant, a diaspora Church, would begin to play a servant role in a history of autonomous persons and institutions. The Church of *Gaudium et Spes* is fully aware that, as servant, it brings great gifts to the common human enterprise. But it is equally aware that it is not the only bearer of gifts, that its gifts must be offered, not imposed, and that they must be offered by people who participate fully and sincerely in the common task.

¹⁴ Cf McBrien, *Church: The continuing quest*, p 68.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 12-13.

The implications of this new missionary stance for ministry in the Church have been earth-shaking. Perhaps the most evident is the rapid re-location of ministry, both ordained and unordained. The direction of the re-location has been away from the Church institutions (which once served the marginalized Catholics in non-Catholic Societies such as the United States) to the streets and the societal *loci* of humanizing efforts (law, business, professions, social justice activism, politics); away from public sacramental ministry to the 'saved', to personal and social ministry to the unchurched and the alienated. The Good News is to be preached to the poor, the prisoner, the oppressed. These people are seldom in church on Sunday morning. They do not usually come to us; we must go to them.

This re-location of ministry has not been painless, nor are all its implications yet evident. Clearly, many religiously motivated young men and women who might have been expected to enter seminary or novitiate twenty years ago are choosing to remain and to minister as lay people rather than to enter a state of life in which they would be primarily involved in 'church' ministries. Numerous ordained and religious have exchanged the clerical or vowed state for a life and ministry 'in the world'. Many who have not changed their state of life are living in situations of ongoing tension with their ecclesiastical superiors, because their ministerial choices are not 'traditional' or 'institutional' or 'corporate'. Groups of Christians, clerical, religious, and lay, are instituting ministries to people whom the institutional Church has marginalized: the divorced and remarried, homosexuals, people 'living in sin' in various ways. And these ministries are not attempts to 'convert' the 'sinners', but simply to accompany these people with love, to be companions in search and suffering, witnessing to the infinite caring of God manifested in Jesus.

A second important implication of the conciliar conception of mission is the emergence of 'social justice ministries'. These ministries have in common a passionate commitment to changing the unjust social structures, the institutions, which systematically oppress people. They are committed to abolishing war, the arms race, sexism, agism, poverty, and to fostering just legislation, equitable distribution of the world's goods, the protection of the environment, just government, international peace. These ministries are not 'church' operations. These ministers work with all people of goodwill who pursue the same goals. Not only does this lead to a good deal of ideological sharing which to say the least is ambiguous, but often to the painful situation of Catholic ministers coming into open conflict with the unjust structures of their own parish, diocese, or the universal Church. The situation is particularly exacerbated when the social justice minister is ordained or a religious.

Prior to Vatican II, such situations would have been extremely rare because ministry was largely restricted to ordained and religious, and their ministries were virtually all institutional. Now we must face the theological questions of the implications of the obedience undertaken by ordination and religious vows for conscience decisions in the area of justice. Are 'official'

ministers to be 'court prophets' who say only what the institution wants to hear? Do human rights to speak freely, assemble, protest, publish without prior censorship, criticize publicly, cease when one enters the Church's official ministry? On the other hand, are religious institutions, parishes, schools, congregations, dioceses, morally or legally liable for the illegal activities of their members committed to the cause of justice? None of these questions yet has a clear or satisfying answer. But we can rejoice that they are serious questions, worthy of a Church which knows that it belongs not in a gilded sanctuary 'saving the saved', but in the suffering world sharing 'the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1).

Conclusion

The question of ministry is one of the most complex theoretical and practical issues in the contemporary Church. In the space of two decades we have seen a change from a conception and practice of ministry as the strictly clerical, institutional service of an infinitesimal élite to a largely passive Church membership, to a conception of a totally ministerial Church striving through the active involvement of all its members to let the mystery of the Church, its already and future participation in the Kingdom of God, become Good News for all people everywhere. This sudden and profound change has had shattering effects on the Church as institution, on its official public ministry, on the relationships of its members among themselves, on its relationship with other churches and with civil society. Much of the most creative theological work being done in the Church today, in the fields of ecclesiology, spirituality, systematic theology, church history and scripture has been occasioned by the pressing need to understand this ministerial revolution and to articulate its foundations and implications. A new ministry is emerging as expression of a renewed Church in hopes for a new world. This writer is of the opinion that the hope is well worth the struggle involved.

Sandra M. Schneiders I.H.M.