

MINISTRIES OF WORD AND EUCHARIST

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THE CONSTITUTION on the Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council took note of the variety of ministries that are necessary to a proper and communal celebration of the liturgy, mentioning in particular the role of servers, readers, commentators and members of the choir.¹ In this annotation, the principle of a diversity of ministries is more important than the specific mention of some in particular. It has only been in the wake of the Council, with more attention being given to the communal celebration of the liturgy and the revision of rites, that it has become clearer what ministries are in fact necessary or expedient. It is also in the wake of the Council that the link between ministering in the daily life of the Church and ministering in the liturgy has emerged, because of greater attention to the development of communities of interaction among the baptized.

In 1972, Pope Paul VI issued a *motu proprio*, in which he established or instituted the specific ministries of acolyte and reader.² In doing so, it was his intention to give canonical form to a greater participation of the laity in the Church's ministry. He appealed to the norms of the conciliar document, as well as to the ancient tradition of the Church, whereby 'certain ministries were established . . . for the purpose of suitably giving worship to God and for offering service to the people of God according to their needs'.³ Here the pope had in mind both liturgical and charitable ministries, since the service or *diakonia* of the body of the faithful and the service or *diakonia* of worship had been linked together since New Testament times. As expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians, it is impossible to take worthy part at the table of the Lord if one has no concern for the common table or material needs of the members of the Church. However, in the *motu proprio* it was to two specifically liturgical ministries, of word and eucharist, that Pope Paul gave canonical status and due legislation. The *motu proprio* was followed up by a liturgical order for the installation of ministers, prepared by the Congregation for Divine Worship.⁴

In early 1973 the Congregation for Sacraments issued an instruction entitled *Immensae caritatis*, on facilitating sacramental eucharistic communion in particular circumstances.⁵ One section of this document dealt with what have come to be known as extraordinary or special ministers of the eucharist. The Congregation recognized that lay persons have an appropriate ministry to exercise in bringing the body of the Lord to their fellow members, when this cannot be properly assured by priests and deacons. One of the document's main concerns was to assure that the sick have the opportunity for regular communion.

There are some notable differences between the establishment of special ministries by Paul VI and the provisions for extraordinary ministers by the Congregation for Sacraments. In the first place the pope had in mind a permanent office confided to designated persons and ministries of word and eucharist which would be their proper office, whereas the provisions of *Immensae caritatis* have to do with extraordinary circumstances in which laity fill the gap left by scarcity or absence of ordained ministers. In the second place, Pope Paul provided for offices that could be given only to men and not to women, whereas extraordinary ministers can be of either sex.

Common experience in our parishes or religious communities shows that there is some divergence between the provisions made in these documents and actual practice. It is rare to find a parish wherein officially designated acolytes or readers have been installed. By a fairly liberal interpretation of the role of extraordinary ministers, both men and women take frequent part in the distribution of communion in parish churches and other places of worship, and somewhat less frequently in bringing communion to the sick. The role of reader is still more widely distributed, simply by making out a roster of readers and without any special designation. In neither case, of course, is the ministry really that which Paul VI had in mind when he called for the institution of the offices of acolyte and reader, since the holders of these offices were to have responsibilities which exceed the mere performance of a liturgical act. The acolyte was to assume a responsibility for all matters pertaining to worship in a community, particularly to eucharistic worship. Some episcopal commentaries on the setting up of the office chose to underline the care for the sick that goes with a traditional understanding of the acolyte's ministry, since

'the medicine of immortality' which is the Lord's Body can be brought to the sick only by one who has care for bodily and spiritual health. The reader was to be not merely one with a fine voice, but somebody well versed in the scriptures who would be able to explain their meaning and teach other members of the congregation.

It is clear that Pope Paul drew attention to important ministries that belong quite properly to the baptized. It also seems, however, that the provisions of the *motu proprio* turned out to be flawed legislation and have had little impact. It seems important both to understand the nature of the flaw and to take note of the concerns that continue to need attention in any future development of the ministry of the baptized.

The major drawback in the provisions made for these two offices was that they seemed too restrictive and could easily be interpreted as a new clericalization of lay ministry. First of all, while the role of the acolyte had to do with the eucharist, an important part of this ministry, namely distributing communion and bringing communion to the sick, continued to be seen as the work of substituting for the priest.⁶ In other words, the norms gave rise to the anomaly of an ordinary, (i.e. by virtue of office) extraordinary minister. In the second place, the two offices were restricted to men. This was to ignore the significant role played by women in teaching and in the care of the sick, and in all the important liturgical ministries, such as preparation, teaching scriptures and doctrine, preparing candidates for sacraments, singing, the playing of musical instruments and the like. These are ministries that fall under the description of the two offices envisaged. In the third place, and this is the most fundamental restriction, the *motu proprio* asked for a special designation and liturgical installation to what appear to be normal ministries of the baptized, which do indeed require preparation and care to be exercised properly but hardly the institution of special offices. The very setting up of special offices, in other words, seemed to contradict the principle enunciated in the Constitution on the Liturgy to which Pope Paul made appeal, namely that active and conscious participation in worship which goes with being a baptized member of the Church.⁷ In keeping with this principle, it would seem to be charism and training that set people apart for these responsibilities, not a special liturgical and canonical installation.

The restrictions here noted go along with a rather sanguine reading of a given period of liturgical history. This reading is given in the first paragraph of *Ministeria quaedam*:

Even in the most ancient times certain ministries were established by the Church for the purpose of suitably giving worship to God and for offering service to the people of God according to their needs. By these ministries, duties of a liturgical and charitable nature, deemed suitable to varying circumstances, were entrusted to the performance of the faithful. The conferring of these functions often took place by a special rite, in which, after God's blessing had been implored, a Christian was established in a special class or rank for the fulfilment of some ecclesiastical function.⁸

The period of history which the Pope has here in mind is the period of what are referred to as *church orders*. These documents, belonging to the fourth and fifth centuries, set down the procedures governing church life and in particular church worship.⁹ In them we find the appearance of offices such as those of subdeacon, reader, acolyte, psalmist, deaconess, and the like, as well as the classification of some persons as virgins and widows. These then constitute what were known as the orders of the Church, still often mentioned in contemporary liturgical prayer (for example on Good Friday). Actually, far from being witness to a public recognition of the role of the baptized in the liturgy, these measures represent an effort at a greater control over the liturgy and church life on the part of bishops and the clergy, and are restrictive provisions, making a due appointment to office necessary for the exercise of liturgical ministry. The *church orders* in question also make mention in places of charismatic ministries, such as those of the teacher or the healer, but such persons do not enjoy the status in the community of the officially appointed ministers. In other words, the period of history to which they belong is one in which office rather than charism constituted the basis for one's role in the life of the Church, especially in its liturgy and in the preparation of the faithful for the liturgy.

This semi-clericalization of liturgical ministry did not, however, immediately carry the consequence of eliminating certain tasks from the orbit of the ordinary faithful. Thus for some centuries, even after such special offices appeared, people continued to bring communion home with them, either for their own personal use during the week or for the sick members of their household.

Likewise, such ministries as those of teacher and sponsor of catechumens remained the ordinary responsibility of suitably prepared members of the community. It was perhaps, however, inevitable that any institution of special office affecting liturgical participation did lead to the gradual absorption of all ministries and mutual ministrations by the higher and lesser clergy. Consequently, historical evidence seemed to disfavour rather than favour the special offices of acolyte and reader that Pope Paul wanted to institute.

The concern, then, for the future of ministry in the Church is how to take account of the important interests of the *motu proprio*, even though the two special offices, or other offices eventually envisaged by the document,¹⁰ do not seem likely to find a prominent place in the life of parishes or other church communities. The answer to this concern would seem to lie in an enlargement of the responsibilities for word and worship shared by all the members of the community, and in the attention that has to be given to the special preparation of some if they are to be adequately fulfilled.

Shared responsibility for God's word and shared responsibility for the Lord's table are in fact intrinsic to basic christian spirituality. When we read the letter of Paul to the Corinthians, we see how he expected Christians to instruct and edify one another through the use of charisms of word, and how he expected them to make mutual charity an integral part of eating and drinking together the body and blood of the Lord. Communities today need to grow in this sense of mutual responsibility for the growth of church life and mission through word and sacrament.

Several of the documents of the Second Vatican Council linked the teaching role of the laity with their baptismal consecration. Called to participate in the prophetic role of Christ, they are endowed with the word and with gifts of the Spirit that enable them to enlighten one another and to transmit the faith to others. Those who pursue special skills in the knowledge of the word and in teaching do not aspire to a part in the role of the ordained ministry, but are acting in keeping with the fundamental call of the Christian that comes with baptism. The general responsibility of the faithful and the special task of those laity who teach are also recognized in the new Code of Canon Law.¹¹

A number of things have occurred in the life of the Church since the Second Vatican Council which make it clearer how the common sharing in God's word and in mutual edification have

links with the celebration of the liturgy. For example, where there is an adult catechumenate the role of sponsor takes on new dimensions. From being the rather honorific stand-in connected with infant baptism, it becomes a duty towards the candidate which involves helping her or him to know the scriptures better, to reflect upon them and upon church teaching, and to learn to pray. Several times in the course of the catechumenate the sponsor is invited to take part with the candidate in celebrations of the word and to minister to the candidate with the imposition of the sign of the cross. Parents, too, who present their children for baptism, first communion, or confirmation become mindful of the part that they have to play in preparing them for those sacraments, and in celebrating them with them. In a number of parishes catechetical programmes are arranged in such a way that the parents share with the professionally trained teachers in imparting a living knowledge of the faith to their children, and in bringing them to a fuller participation in the Church's liturgy. All of this is but an engagement in the basic responsibilities of the baptized Christian and should not be seen as a work of supererogation.

One context in which a number of people come to a sharper sense of what it means to have received the gift of the word in baptism and mutually to edify one another in the faith, is the small group eucharist. When a parish has developed a pastoral strategy of complementing the Sunday eucharist with occasional celebrations for groups (whether in a neighbourhood or on the basis of some common avocation), the people involved have to take direct responsibility for its preparation, including the choice of readings, songs and prayers. In the course of the celebration those present often have the opportunity to express their reflections on the scriptures and to invite all to some kind of prayer with them. In this kind of experience people come to a more intimate sense of their own particular gifts of the Spirit, as well as to a sense of being built up together on the foundation of God's word. In English-speaking countries we are not very familiar with the phenomenon of basic Christian communities, but we know at least from hearsay that it is this sharing in the scriptures and in a listening to God speaking in their lives that gives them their strength and impetus. If people are never called upon in a context of common prayer actively to receive the word of God and to share actively its reception, it is difficult for them to come to an energetic awareness that this is a gift given to the disciples of

Christ and that from baptism they have a call to transmit it to others.

As has been seen, a general ministry to good liturgy and a specific task of bringing the Lord's body to the sick were associated with Pope Paul's intention of restoring the office of acolyte. It was also remarked that a flaw in this aspiration lay in the fact that rather than being a special ministry, this is a common ministry of all the faithful. Some of the implications of this are worth exploring.

The implications of ministry to the sick, and the place of sacrament within this ministry, are spelled out in the newly revised rites for the pastoral care of the sick. The booklet in which these are found is not simply a manual for the priest, but it is a prayer-book which could well belong in every catholic home. Not only does it give the rites for the sacrament of anointing and for the celebration of viaticum, but it provides for other occasions of prayer with and for the sick, and for communion to the sick in ordinary circumstances. It has a very helpful lectionary of readings from the scriptures pertinent to the ministry to the sick, readings and prayers which can be used in homes, among friends, and by those laity who visit sick people as an act of special apostolate.

The introduction to this ritual recalls the privileged position that the ill have in a christian community, and the general tenor of the Church's healing ministry:

If one member suffers in the body of Christ, which is the Church, all the members suffer with her/him (1 Cor 12,26). For this reason, kindness shown toward the sick and works of charity and mutual help for the relief of every kind of human want should be held in special honour. Every scientific effort to prolong life and every act of heartfelt love for the sick may be considered a preparation for the gospel and a participation in Christ's healing ministry.¹²

The text goes on to say that all the baptized share in this ministry by fighting against sickness, by showing love and care to the sick, and by celebrating the sacraments with them. The ritual itself indicates that within this celebration are understood celebrations of the word, where two or three (or perhaps a family or circle of friends) share at a sick bed in the reading of God's word and in prayer. The ritual provides ample material for such prayer.

It is within this context of care for the physical and psychological needs of the ill, and of a general readiness to pray with them as their condition allows, that communion to the sick has its place.

In other words it is not an isolated act, to be performed by a minister whose only appearance at the sick bed is with the sacrament. In those parishes where some of the faithful have been given the responsibility of bringing communion to those detained by illness or old age at home or in hospital and other places of care, these persons have to precede visits with the sacrament by other visits, not only to the sick persons themselves but also to their families or immediate associates. It is imperative that the sick and the elderly should not feel that they are isolated, or that others place them as it were on the fringes of life, but that their continuing place in the christian household be affirmed. Parish programmes for the care of the sick need to have this in mind, and to create the context in which the bringing of communion to the sick is a community act, inserted within the environment of general community concern and ministry. Ideally, where the atmosphere in the home and in the parish has been built up, the bringing of the Lord's body to the sick and elderly is a ministry to be confided to the members of their own family. There is something very evocative in a calling forth at the end of the sunday eucharist of those who have sick members of their family at home, so that the christian community in the person of the priest may confide to them the sacrament which they are to bring back with them for this suffering member of the Body.

Of course the healing ministry of the Church also reminds us of the special skills in counselling and advising that some members of the community may have by nature or by special training. This includes help not only to the sick themselves, but also to their families and friends, who have to cope with the situation and to build up proper attitudes towards the sick and the elderly. This is indeed a special ministry, but it goes with the baptismal calling and the special gifts that prepare for it, and is not to be thought of as the domain of the ordained alone.

Besides this care of the sick, or the healing ministry that is an integral part of every parish, the attention to lay ministries evoked by *Ministeria quaedam* reminds us of what it means to be able to lead a group of Christians in prayer. Those of us who belong to an older generation well remember the family rosary and its trimmings, or the gathering together in the parish church of the members of sodalities, led in common prayer by their prefects. These were types of common prayer shared among themselves by the laity, for which some disaffection was generated by the after-

math of the Council and other intrusions of contemporary life. They may be unsuited in form to the present time, but they are reminders that leading others in prayer was never taken to be an exclusively priestly prerogative. Occasionally one meets distressed groups of parishioners who have been told by their priests that they have no right to gather together for a reading of the scriptures and for common prayer. This, of course, makes no sense and one can take it for granted that the same priests who forbid such gatherings would not intervene if they heard of people coming together to pray the rosary. It is the idea of people reading the bible that frightens them, whereas this ought to be the most natural thing in the world for those called to the christian faith to do. Rather than seeing it as unusual or even harmful, parish programmes ought to have a place for enabling members to put together good common prayer services and to develop the habits and propensities to lead other fellow Christians in prayer, whether at home in families, in circles of friends and neighbours, or in special study groups or ministry groups. Far from leaving this kind of thing to some few, it ought to be our aim to develop it as widely as possible, so that christian people may lead a fuller christian communion together, based on God's word and on common prayer in Christ's Spirit.

In brief, then, one can say that what was brought to the Church's attention by the documents on the special ministries of reader and acolyte has to do, not with the responsibilities of an appointed few, but with the general responsibilities of all adult Christians in the ministry of God's word, in the ministry to the sick, and in the ministry of common prayer. They call to mind what needs to be developed in parishes and other communities if all are to be mindful of these ministries and of their own gifts, and if some are to be prepared for those tasks which need special gifts and training. At the same time, however, if some things require training, as, for example in a better knowledge of the scriptures, in the ability to counsel the sick and their relatives, in leading in prayer, this does not mean passing outside the realm of the ministry of the baptized. It is simply a reminder that 'there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one' (1 Cor 12,4-6).

NOTES

¹ Vatican Council II: *Constitution on the liturgy*, no 29.

² Paul VI: *Ministeria quaedam*, english translation in *The rites of the catholic church as revised by the decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and published by the authority of Pope Paul VI*, volume two (New York, Pueblo, 1980), p 6-11.

³ *Ibid.*, p 6.

⁴ *The rites* pp 12-22.

⁵ Sacred Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Immensae caritatis*, english translation in Austin Flannery (ed.): *Vatican Council II: the conciliar and post conciliar documents* (New York, Costello, 1975), pp 225-232.

⁶ *Ministeria quaedam*, no. 6, p 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 6.

⁹ I have presented this history in *Gifts that differ: lay ministries established and unestablished* (New York, Pueblo, 1980).

¹⁰ *Ministeria quaedam*, pp 7f: 'Besides the offices common to the latin Church, there is nothing to prevent conferences of bishops from requesting others of the Apostolic See, if they judge the establishment of such offices in their region to be necessary or useful because of special reasons. To these belong, for example, the offices of porter, exorcist and catechist, as well as other offices to be conferred on those who are dedicated to works of charity, where this service has not been given to deacons'.

¹¹ Cf Book II, *The People of God*, Title II, especially Canons 225 no 1, 229.

¹² *The rites of the catholic Church*, vol 1 (New York, Pueblo, 1976), Rites of anointing and pastoral care of the sick, Introduction no 32, p 589.