

# FUTURE CHOICES

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**I**BEGIN THIS ESSAY with two presuppositions: first, that ordained ministry does have a future; and, second, that the shape of ordained ministry in the future will not be radically discontinuous from forms that are currently familiar.

As to the first, I realize there are many who call this future into question. The *de facto* shrinkage of the presbyteral work-force and the rise in number of lay men and lay women to fulfil ministries once reserved to priests does urge the questions. I do feel, however, that to doubt the future of ordained ministry betrays an ignorance of its nature, of the nature of ordination itself, and of the demand for ordination which certain ministries within the Church impose. Ordination arises in the Church because of the Church's ministry. It cannot be reduced in the Church's life, much less disappear from it, as long as the Church continues to require and fulfil ministries that are essential to it.

As for the second, my guide is *Sacrosanctum concilium* which says of all liturgical change, ' . . . there must be no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them; care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing' (SC 23). While the phrase 'grow organically' may defy precise definition, it at least precludes, it would seem, any radical and unforeseen newness.

But there is a deeper reason for this second premise which comes from the nature of ritual and the structure of symbolic forms. Both ritual and symbol carry within themselves a richness of meaning and value which itself governs their shape and deployment. The evolution of both tends to be a conservative project. There seems to be in it a deep human wisdom that forbids radical alteration.

I am asked to explore here theological issues relating to the future of ordained ministry. Fortunately, it does not fall to theology to determine that future. Theology cannot say what should or should not be. It can only explore issues that play a part, and perhaps speculate a bit on what might be. It remains for the living Church to choose the shapes of its ministry.

There are many theological issues which have a bearing on the future of ordained ministry. Here I can examine only five: the nature of church order; the meaning of ordination; the triple division of orders

into bishop, presbyter and deacon; the relation between the ordained and the baptized; and the demand for ordination which certain ministries impose.

### *The nature of church order*

A fundamental issue that concerns ordained ministry in any age is the theological nature of church order, which here I take to mean the organization of the church community, its established structures of authority and the distribution of ministries among its members. By its very nature as a human community, the Church needs such order. Order may be established through election or appointment, with or without elaborate ritual actions. It may even be guided by norms established at the Church's beginning. In itself, however, there is nothing theological about church order.

Before church order can be considered a theological issue in regard to the future of ordained ministry, the extent to which it is a theological reality must be established. Even where the Church asserts its origin in an act of God, it should not take as immediately evident that its inner structures are rooted in the same divine initiative.

There are several ways in which church order can be, and has been, invested with theological meaning and purpose. The first, which is called upon by both Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and also, to a different end, by the World Council of Churches in its *Baptism, eucharist and ministry* (1982), is the argument from tradition. If God, through the Spirit, is the author of the Church and its constant guide throughout history, long-standing and unbroken patterns of behaviour and teaching surely carry with them something of divine will and action.

The second, common among the Reformation Churches and called upon by Rome in a very specific way, is the argument from Scripture. The broad approach finds in Jesus' life and ministry, and in the Apostolic church, normative patterns for the Church of all times; normative because revealed in Jesus' life and in the Spirit's action at the foundation of the Church. The Roman Catholic use of Scripture comes to focus on Jesus' mandate at the Supper, 'Do this as my memorial', not only as the institution of eucharist but as the foundation of ordained priesthood.

A third way is illustrated in *Lumen gentium*, Vatican II's constitution on the Church. Here the accent is on Jesus as the embodiment of mystery, and on the Church as the continuance through time of that same saving mystery. Christ is present in the Church which is in the

form of a sacrament, 'a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all people' (LG 1). The church is a 'saved people', elected by God, summoned together by Christ, enlivened by the Spirit, and called to a holiness of life that itself bears witness to God's power within it. This same image of the Church finds expression in *Sacrosanctum concilium*: 'Christ always associates the Church with himself in this great work (the liturgy) in which God is perfectly glorified and men and women are sanctified' (SC 7). The 'association with Christ' and 'election by God' find expression in liturgical assembly in those whose ministry it is to gather the church and lead its sacramental worship.

The theological foundation of church order according to Vatican II is found in its sacramental nature. The people of God are hierarchically gathered, where the role of 'hierarchy' is not merely organizational or for the sake of good order. The *hiericus* or priest who gathers is Jesus Christ himself. Where human ministers serve the gathering, they do as *sacramenta* of Jesus Christ. 'In the person of the bishops, then, to whom priests render assistance, the Lord Jesus Christ, supreme high priest, is present in the midst of the faithful' (LG 21). All structures of church order are dependent on, and must be faithful to, this foundation presence of Christ in the Church.

The argument from tradition has strong theological merit. The Church proclaims the incarnation of God in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth, and sees itself as an ongoing incarnation of Christ. It is quite consistent theologically to see in the historical forms of the Church something essential to divine initiative and action. The question is not whether divine action can be divorced from historical forms, but rather what conclusions the Church may draw from God's involvement in such historical forms. It may well be true that the perdurance over centuries of particular ministerial forms does grant them normative status for the Church. It may also be true that such normative status of God's action in the past could preclude like action in the present and the future. The more sound theological conclusion drawn from tradition would be the conviction that God's designs for the Church are manifest in the ongoing life of the Church, whether it receives as adequate the forms of ministry passed on through tradition or judges that new forms of ministry are needed to serve in their stead.

The argument from Scripture is even less conclusive. There is very little correspondence between the church orders of the New Testament era and the order that evolved afterward. The foundation paradigm of apostolic ministry is the Twelve, drawn from the twelve tribes of Israel

united under one God. With Paul's claim to apostolicity, this foundational paradigm was set aside. In much the same way, the Jerusalem church order, modelled most probably after Moses and the Seventy Elders, did not pass over into Gentile Christianity. The Pauline corpus is at best ambiguous. One looks in vain to the New Testament for anything resembling the contemporary diocese, episcopate, presbyterate or diaconate. The more focused concern of Catholic theology is equally problematic. The view that ordination to the priesthood was established co-extensively with the institution of the eucharist is a midrash on the biblical witness, and most likely not possible before the fourth century.

Arguments from both tradition and Scripture can only offer a restrictive voice in imagining the future of ordained ministry, claiming what must be and what cannot change. In contrast, the argument represented in the Vatican II documents provides a more open and promising theological stance. Their focus on the sacramentality of the Church can uphold the theological nature of church order without demanding any particular form for that church order. The theological nature of church order is grounded in the mystery of Christ present within it.

Historical forms of both liturgy and church order bring the mystery of Christ to expression. The adequacy of the forms is governed by the mystery they seek to express. Many forms of liturgy and church order would distort the mystery, or only inadequately present it. Yet, in theory at least, there could be a variety of forms that would be true to the mystery of Christ. This mystery does not require a particular church order, nor will any particular church order exhaust its truth.

Which theological vision of church order shall the Church embrace, the more open or the more restrictive? Theology cannot decide the issue. But the future of ordained ministry will be significantly different, depending on which vision the Church chooses to follow.

### *The meaning of ordination*

There are two general issues with regard to the meaning of ordination that inevitably affect the future of ordained ministry: the nature of ordination as a liturgical act and the relationship between ordination and the actual exercise of associated ministries.

How we understand ordination determines our understanding of its outcome. Consider some potential or actual models. Where the Church sees ordination as 'empowerment', it will regard its ordained ministers as empowered people, set apart from the rest of the Church to provide

benefits for the Church. Where it holds ordination to be appointment to office, the ordained will be office-holders, assigned to carry out the tasks of that office. Were the Church to consider ordination a recognition of gifts, the ordained would be gift-bearers, using their gifts for the good of the Church.

Where shall we look to understand the meaning of ordination? Where but the act of ordination itself. The rite of ordination is a prime theological locus. No interpretation of the act can be sustained if the rite itself does not present it, and especially if the rite contradicts it.

It was possible for centuries to hold ordination to be an act of empowerment because the rite explicitly presented itself as such. 'Receive the power to proclaim the Gospel', the bishop said to the deacon; and to the priest, 'Receive the power to offer sacrifice'. Removal of empowerment language from the reformed ordination rites, and a shift away from these secondary elements to the primary symbol of the laying on of hands and prayer of consecration, make it very difficult to sustain this 'empowerment' interpretation. Likewise appointment to office. It is there, to be sure, but in a position that is quite secondary, and the rites are ambiguous as to the nature of the offices involved. As for ordination as recognition of gifts, it simply is not in the rites at all. Quite the opposite. What is recognized is the faithfulness of God and the boldness of a Church that dares to call upon it.

The rite of ordination is first and foremost a liturgical act of the Church. It is presided over by the bishop, but the bishop is not the sole agent in its enactment. 'Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations belonging to the Church . . . the holy people united and ordered under their bishops' (SC 26). The bishop-presider presents to the assembled church the icon of Christ in our midst, the *persona Christi*. But the primary icon of Christ that determines the nature of this presidential ministry is Christ in the midst of the Church associating the Church with himself.

This primary christological image is crucial to understand properly both the ministry of the bishop and the act of ordination. It is not Jesus at the Supper giving mandate and authorization to his apostles. It is rather Jesus, with the Church, calling upon Abba for the consecrating Spirit to come upon those whom the Church presents. 'Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth' (Jn 17: 17-19). This icon of Christ at prayer defines what the Church is doing, and what the bishop-

presider is doing, in the act of ordination. The assembled Church is Christ's own body; its voice is Christ's own voice. With Christ, and in his name, the Church prays Jesus' own prayer of consecration upon his chosen apostles, and this for the sake of the mission to which they are appointed.

The prayers of consecration for bishop, presbyter and deacon all include a specific invocation of the Spirit. Its purpose in each is that those ordained will be faithful in the ministry that is assigned to them, be it governance, prayer and reconciliation, or the proclamation of the gospel. For the ordained, it is a guarantee that the Spirit will attend them in their ministry. For the whole Church it is likewise a guarantee that will allow us all to trust the ministries we assign to the ordained, and seek within those ministries not their human splendour or defect, but the faithful love and abiding presence of the living God.

That the act of ordination is a function of the ministries assigned to the ordained is clear from the text. 'Receive the Gospel of Christ whose herald you now are' (deacon); 'Receive the gifts from the people to be offered to God' (presbyter); 'Receive the Gospel and preach the word of God with unfailing patience and sound teaching; take this staff as a sign of your pastoral office; keep watch over the whole flock' (bishop). But what is the nature of that assignment? What is the relationship between ordination and the exercise of ministries assigned?

It is here that the meaning of ordination is most germane. If ordination is empowerment, it would clearly require that no one undertake these ministries until ordained to do so. But if the model shifts from empowerment to prayer, the temporal priority of ordination becomes less certain. Good order most probably would require that ordination take place as the candidates enter the ministries they are assigned. But it does become possible to imagine what the empowerment model would not allow, namely, extraordinary circumstances where the ministries would be exercised prior to ordination. God's faithful presence may be guaranteed by the rite, but is not dependent on it.

If indeed it becomes possible for the Church to separate the temporal relationship between the ministries of the ordained and ordination itself from the theological relationship between them, many things happening in the contemporary church, out of need or purely by circumstance, will gain theological import. The deacons and lay men and women who are serving as pastors and leaders of prayer in parishes without priests, and who at times may be called upon to exercise ministries not currently allowed to them, may be seen to be far more significant as a

movement of God in the Church than as simply a practical solution to a practical need. A useful biblical text in this regard is Acts 10:47, where the Spirit descended upon those to whom Peter spoke, leading Peter to observe: 'Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' In the contemporary Church, might this insight of Peter be brought to bear on ordination as well? The answer to this question will surely influence the future shape of ordained ministry.

*The three 'ranks' of the ordained*

Before the contemporary reform, the sacrament of orders was clearly focused on the presbyter or priest. Elevation to the episcopacy was 'consecration', not 'ordination', and was said to add nothing to priesthood, only an increase of jurisdiction in its exercise. The four minor orders and the sub-diaconate were preliminary to the sacrament, and it was questioned whether the deacon was included in the sacrament or not. In current Latin church order, with the sub-diaconate suppressed and the four minor orders transformed into the two ministries of reader and acolyte, the sacrament unambiguously includes within its scope bishop, presbyter and deacon, with the 'fullness of priesthood' located in the bishop. Presbyters, who form a 'college', are 'co-workers' with the bishop; the deacon assists the bishop and the priests 'in the ministry of word and sacrament'.

The ordination rites present a relatively clear structure for ordained ministry, a division according to rank and according to ministry assigned. The bishop is shepherd and pastor of the local church. The presbyters, as co-workers with the bishop, carry this pastoral office into the various assemblies that constitute the local church and thus embody for their parish communities the same ministry that the bishop provides to the diocese. The fullness of the church at prayer is presented when 'the bishop presides with the college of presbyters and the ministers, and with the people taking full and active part' (General Instruction of the *Roman Missal*, 74). When the presbyter presides, it is 'in place of the bishop'.

The nature and role of the deacon in this triptych is ambiguous. Explanatory notes insist that the deacon is not ordained to priesthood, but to service (e.g. *LG* 29), though the exact nature of this service is not defined. The ordination rite appoints the deacon to the ministry of the gospel, and in liturgical assembly it is in the deacon's charge to proclaim the gospel reading. Yet deacons are also assigned to preside in their own right at certain liturgical acts of the Church, for example,

baptism, marriage and Christian burial. This is somewhat of a *novum* in the history of the Church, where deacons have been liturgical or administrative assistants, but never presiders. Presumably, though it is nowhere explicitly stated, when deacons do preside it is in place of the bishop as well.

While it is never adequate to understand any of the orders in terms of what one can or cannot do, the extension of the presidency of liturgical assembly to the deacon, albeit on a limited scale, does challenge the sharp distinction between priest (bishop and presbyter) and deacon. There is ground to wonder if the contemporary deacon is not more akin to a co-worker with bishop and priest than to the diaconate as tradition has known it. Explanatory notes notwithstanding, with the presidency of liturgical assembly common to all three orders, bishops presiding at all the church's liturgical acts, presbyters presiding at most, and deacons presiding at some, it becomes less unthinkable for the bishop simply to extend, where the need arises, the range of presidential assignment. I strongly suspect that this 'restored' diaconate has yet to find its full and proper place in the Church.

What is curious here is that all three ranks or orders present the tradition of *episkope*, or pastoral office, and its varied embodiment for and within a local church. The *diakonia*, or tradition of service, is not well represented, even in the rite that ordains deacons. The actual *diakonia* of the Church is carried out by ministers to the sick, by teachers of the young and the uncatechized, by those who provide food and shelter for the poor and the homeless, and by many others who embody the tradition of service to others. It is carried out by an increasingly large body of women and men who are hired, appointed, or who volunteer for the task. It is there in the background of all three orders, but not in the foreground of any of them.

The vision of the rites invites us to ask where the real *episkope* might be, and to name those who embody it as co-workers in the pastoral office of bishop. It invites us to ask where the true *presbyterium* might be, and, in analogy with the college of bishops united to the Bishop of Rome, to see the *presbyterium* of the diocese, not so much as the body of 'ordained priests', but as the college of pastors united with the local bishop, and perhaps even to see the *presbyterium* of a local parish as the pastoral team, those 'ordained' and those not. And the vision of the rites invites us to ask where the true *diakonia* might be, and, since most of these true 'deacons' are not among the ranks of the ordained, whether some rite of ordination might be brought forth appropriate to the truth they represent.



There are anomalies that come to the surface when actual patterns of church life are examined through the lens of the rites of ordination. There is, for example, no specific mention of auxiliary bishops. The primary auxiliaries to the bishop are the presbyters. There is no distinction drawn between priests who are pastors and priests who are pastoral assistants. The rites propose deacons as pastoral assistants. Nor is there any notice given to the men and women who, without the benefit of ordination, are assigned to serve as 'pastoral administrators' where priests are unavailable, or who form with pastor and perhaps other presbyters as well what has come to be known as the pastoral team.

It is possible to imagine a variety of ways to address these anomalies and bring the Church's order into harmony with the rituals that establish it. Such address, however, may prove to be only theoretical, with no actual claim on the Church's life or self-understanding. It is equally possible to refrain from imagining and to let the anomalies stand. But the anomalies themselves will take their toll. When a priest can confirm someone who is eight years old but not someone who is five, when a deacon can preside at a wedding or Christian burial, but not at the mass that should be their proper context, when a woman religious or lay man or woman can serve on equal terms with priests on a parish team, but never take their turn leading the community at its prayer or preaching the biblical word, and when bishops are ordained to assume administrative posts in a diocesan office with little or no pastoral connection with the flock they are ordained to shepherd, there are bound to be some strains on the actual life of the Church. How the Church receives and responds to those strains will very much affect the future shape of ordained ministry.

#### *Relation between the ordained and baptized*

Crucial to any evolution of ordained ministry in the Church is a proper understanding of the relationship between the ordained and baptized. The essential question here is how each of these shall be defined. The classic tradition, which distinguishes the two, speaks of a difference 'in kind as well as in degree'. This tradition, however, adds the note that they are 'nonetheless ordered to one another; each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ' (e.g. *LG* 10).

While there is a danger in so minimizing the distinction that ordained priesthood gets levelled out into that of the baptized, which is alien to Catholic faith and tradition, the greater danger is to neglect their mutual ordering and their mutual rooting in the one priesthood of

Christ. This second neglect gives rise to independent definitions: ordained priesthood in terms of apostolic successions, sacramental powers and the commission to act *in persona Christi*; priesthood of the baptized in terms of membership in the Church, participation in the sacraments and the universal call to holiness. These are important elements of these distinctive manifestations of Christ's priesthood, but, if their unity in the priesthood of Christ is forgotten, they will be allowed to develop away from each other rather than as mutually ordered one to the other.

The priesthood of the ordained and the priesthood of the baptized both find their proper expression and their mutual relationship in the liturgy, which is itself an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. Every liturgical celebration is 'an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body, the Church' (SC 7). In the midst of the assembly and in its liturgical action, the ordained presider presents Christ the Priest and his priestly activity *modo sacramenti*. The presider's actions are carefully crafted according to the mystery of Christ which the liturgy expresses. This icon of Christ the Priest is presented to the assembly, not for instruction or edification, but that they might see and touch and feel and hear what their own priesthood is about. It is for this reason that the liturgy mandates for the assembly the simple word *amen*, the word by which they surrender themselves to, and so become, the mystery that is set out before them. In turn, the assembly which the presider gathers and whose collective prayer the presider leads is the Body of Christ the Priest, assembled once again to be forged more deeply into his Body. The *persona Christi* whom the ordained priest presents is not a textbook creation nor an image born in the presider's own prayer. It is a living *persona* presented by the assembly itself.

This is the mutual ordering of the two modes of Christ's priesthood. The priesthood of the ordained defines the priesthood of the baptized, and the priesthood of the baptized defines the priesthood of the ordained. They cannot develop apart from one another without harm being done to both.

In itself, this mutual self-definition does not offer any specific clues as to the future of ordained ministry. It does ground my initial premise that ordained ministry does indeed have a future and inevitably so. But more than that, it establishes two parameters which must guide any evolution of ordained ministry into the future. The first is the priesthood of Christ *as the Church understands it in any given age*. This priesthood of Christ is a mystery which the Church will never fully grasp, but which continues to reveal itself as the Church moves through

history. Understandings from the past can serve the Church in its task, but they cannot exonerate the living Church from pursuing and being pursued by the mystery anew. The meaning of priesthood for both the baptized and the ordained can never be closed to further discovery. The second parameter is the agency of the Church in 'calling forth' ministry from the ordained. If indeed it is the vocation of the Church ever to become the Body of Christ, surely the yearnings of the Church to become Christ's Body are a powerful voice through which Christ's priesthood makes itself known. It is not by chance that the bishop is urged to 'listen to the people'. Ordained ministry will not evolve into its proper future if either of these parameters is abandoned.

### *Ministries that require ordination*

This last point can be made with relative dispatch, since it is the flip-side of the meaning of ordination. The empowerment model closely aligned the ministries of presiding and proclamation, reconciliation and governance with the laying on of hands and the prayer of consecration. The adage applied: 'No one can give what one has not received'. Does the alignment still hold when the model of ordination shifts to invocation and prayer?

There are many ministries in the Church which depend for their success on the abilities of the persons providing them. That these persons should be blessed and prayed for goes without saying. But this is not the range of ministries for which ordination has been deemed necessary. The latter is rather that smaller set of ministries which, on the one hand, promise more than the abilities of the ones providing them, and, on the other hand, are trusted to succeed even where those abilities may fail. Proclamation of the word promises the living word of God. Governance of the Church promises guidance of the Holy Spirit. Reconciliation promises the person of Christ to heal wounds and forgive sins. Presidency at the liturgy, especially the eucharist, promises that it is Christ who leads us in his own worship of Abba and his own saving work for humanity. The human abilities of the minister can serve all of this, and that is both the hope and the desire of the Church in assigning these ministries. But what the Church has discovered in its own actual life, and what it continues to proclaim as an element of its faith, is that human limitation and failure does not render these ministries empty and void.

The liturgical act of ordination first of all celebrates this faith which the Church has come to know and proclaim. The sign of ordination is that human ministry is embraced by the mystery of God as God's own

work. The discovery that ‘when scripture is proclaimed in church it is Christ who speaks’; that human ministry does communicate the forgiveness of God; that in the person of the bishop or priest the summons of Christ into his own prayer is effectively given and carried out; that in the human governance of the Church God’s Spirit is made manifest . . . all this calls forth a liturgical enactment to celebrate and proclaim it. This same liturgical enactment in turn offers promise that what has been discovered is not in the form of accident, but in the form of revelation, covenant, grace, guarantee. Enactment of ordination grounds the trust which the Church exhibits when it receives a human word as the word of God, human forgiveness as the forgiveness of God, human leadership as the leadership of Christ and human governance as imbued with God’s guiding Spirit.

The question is badly put if it is in the form of ‘Can one preside, preach, reconcile or govern without ordination?’ It is from the doing that ordination arose. Better put is the question, ‘Dare one preside, preach, reconcile or govern without this solemn enactment of the Church’s faith and hope?’ And even better, ‘Dare we listen to a preacher, follow the lead of a presider, attend to the acts of governance or seek healing for our brokenness unless this solemn prayer of the Church be enacted to warrant our trust?’

The implication here for the future of ordained ministry is not simply that it will continue because it must. The implication is that the locus of ordained ministry will continue to be those human ministries where we discover the action of God within our human enactments of it, and discover it as revelation, covenant, grace and guarantee to which in turn we entrust ourselves. Ordained ministry must contain the *sacramentum* which the ordination itself both celebrates and effectively proclaims. A second implication, whatever the actual forms the ministry may take, is that, now as in the beginning, the truth of ordination arises from the truth of ministry and only then can the truth of ministry come to rest on the truth of ordination.

### *Conclusion*

There is no particular conclusion that can draw these remarks to closure. As I said at the outset, theology cannot determine the future of ordained ministry for the Church. There are, to be sure, ethical considerations that must come into play, but these are not the preserve of theology as such. What theology can do, and what I hope I have done here, is explore a bit what theologically ‘might be’ should the Church desire to choose it. In the future, as in the past, the shape of ordained ministry belongs to the Church to choose.