

MINISTRY, MUDDLE AND MYSTERY

Reflections on Ordination and Service from a Lay Perspective

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I CAN REMEMBER FEELING EXCITED and enabled by the increasing use of the word 'ministry' to describe the various kinds of lay activity that we see flourishing in and enriching our parishes; we have music ministries, ministries of reading, eucharistic ministry, cleaning and care ministries, and, increasingly, more or less recognized ministries of teaching and leadership among lay people.

It occurs to me that whilst I am busy exercising my own music ministry during the Eucharist, my husband is making this possible by his care of our three small children. I might be tempted to call his participation here a kind of 'ministry to children', a 'parenting ministry'; but not only would the idea irritate him, it also gives rise in me to a certain dis-ease, a questioning of my own motives, which somehow is behind much of the difficulty that we presently have in talking about lay service in the Church. Does calling a rather arduous task, that I would not wish to do myself, 'ministry', let me off the hook in some way? Maybe it eases my conscience by convincing me that this task is, in fact, one of empowerment and privilege; perhaps 'ministry' is a term to make the one burdened feel better about their burden. Dustmen can be refuse collectors or sanitation engineers, and the change in naming can make a difference whilst the task remains the same; but such rewording can be manipulative and self-deceitful, as well as ennobling.

Perhaps the time has come for us to question critically the use of our language of ministry, not so as to abandon it, but rather so as to have a clearer idea of the purpose it is serving. It is true that the notion of real ministry remains empowering and helpful, especially to lay people attempting to establish and celebrate particular ways of living in and contributing to the Church; indeed, it is pretty much an indispensable term. However, it also seems to me that there is a valid and useful way of properly treating *all* lay activity as 'ministry', which nonetheless raises substantial questions. These questions concern not only the role of lay people themselves, but also the ways in which the working and

spiritual relationships exist (and might exist) between lay people and their ordained pastors. In using the language and concepts of ministry loosely across the whole range of church life and offices, we are creating, out of the order and apparent clarity of hierarchy, something of a *muddle*. It may be a fruitful and necessary muddle, the sort of muddle that represents the truth of mystery, and rightly undermines our human need for certainty, clarity and security. It may also, and at the same time, be the kind of muddle that just confuses us, leaving us unable to see effectively what is really going on and how we are to move forward.

It is this question of ministry and muddle that I want to examine here. There is, I think, a general awareness that the increase of various kinds of lay 'ministry' and the decrease in the numbers of men being ordained to the priesthood are giving rise to various kinds of questioning of identity. These are the matters that I have been aware of ever since I can remember thinking about the Church, and about them a good deal has been written and spoken. What is needed more and more is a recognition of the 'inter-identity' of ordained and lay as life-styles of service, a clearer articulation of the *sameness and difference* of these ways of following our common call to holiness:

The baptised, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood . . . Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are none the less ordered one to another; each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ.¹

This often referred to, traditional sense of the one priesthood of Christ as the context for all our Christian service, ordained or not, is the fundamental subject for our reflection here.

A tale of two ministries

Working in lay formation, and developing something of a theology of 'lay ministry', 'collaboration' and the rest, I have frequently found myself struggling to describe that group of laity who exercise particular kinds of recognizable Church ministries of leadership: as catechists or pastoral assistants, for example. My instinct to refer to them as a sociological 'élite' has led me into a good deal of controversy based on a misunderstanding of how this term is to be used.² Consequently I find myself referring more and more to the idea of 'public ministry', by which I mean those activities carried out in a community which are

recognized by and expressed within that community as a whole, in a more or less public or 'official' way.

In what follows I want to describe two possible journeys into public ministry in the Church, the first being that of a lay person, and the second being a journey that involves ordination at one point along the way. Reflection on these hypothetical stories can illustrate for us something of that sameness and difference in Christ which is our concern, and so help us to shed some light on the question of how lay and ordained living might relate.

In the first instance, let us imagine a lay woman, committed and active in her faith and in the community, with particular gifts of communication and administration. For years she may work at her job, bring up her family, take part in parish events, all the time exercising her various gifts and charisms, both within and outside the visible church community. Those who come into contact with her will, as a matter of course, be struck by her abilities and her living out of her faith; individuals may call on her for advice or help. Indeed, not only individual members of the parish, but also small groups may begin to draw on what gifts and increasing experience she has for carrying out different projects and so forth. Slowly, in this way, our imagined lay woman begins to be recognized by many within her faith community as a person gifted with charisms which she is happy and eager to use for the upbuilding of that community.

As time goes on, it may be that the parish priest, recognizing the value of this gifted person in his congregation (presumably alongside others with similar or different gifts), approaches her to take on some parish-wide task or project; it might even be recognized that some kind of training or formation might be beneficial as a way of further enabling and giving confidence to this woman, whose informal 'ministry' is already widely recognized. As this more publicly recognized work develops it may also appear opportune to give a name to the job done by this lay person – 'pastoral worker', 'lay pastor' or whatever. Some form of contractual agreement may be entered into, which may or may not involve remuneration, but which, in any case, makes clear the formal nature of the tasks assigned to the lay minister in response to the needs of the parish.

The danger of telling such a hypothetical story so briefly is that it all appears too clear and straightforward. I give no account here of what might occur with a change of parish priest, or a shift in family or personal circumstances, changes which at any stage in the story can have a dramatic effect. However, even given the weaknesses that will

be apparent in the telling of this tale of lay ministry, it still remains a useful model with which to compare the equally hypothetical tale of ordained ministry which follows.

We imagine here a young lay man, of commitment and active faith, participating in the life of his own faith community, with gifts of humour and energetic charity. He gives freely of his time and talents in the parish whilst working at his job and enjoying a full social life. People both within the parish and in the wider community recognize something of his qualities and, naturally enough, begin to call on him when certain types of work need to be done. It may be that, even at this stage, there are whispers concerning the possibility of this person's having a future in the ordained priesthood. Increasingly his various charisms are recognized and he is called upon by both individuals and groups to take up various responsibilities. His parish priest, too, may make some specific request of him, thereby underlining the process of discernment that has already begun within the congregation itself.

In all this there will arise, at some point, and probably at several points, the question of the possibility of ordination, and, along with it, questions of celibacy and life-style. There are complex and personally specific questions about which it would be difficult for a lay woman such as myself to speculate. However, the point is that somewhere in these reflections the person himself might come to the decision to approach the diocese, or a religious community, with the intention of further exploring his suitability for ordained ministry.

Once this personal decision is made, the nature and perception of the man's ministry becomes more public, more scrutinized and more definable – in the eyes of others, if not always in the candidate's own thinking. If he is accepted into a seminary for training that may culminate in ordination, our imagined seminarian moves away from his parish community into a predominantly male and, in principle, celibate community where the notion of ordained priesthood, understandably, is all-pervading.

The journey into ordained ministry through seminary is not, of course, straightforward and clear cut: just as for the lay person finding their way into a more public and acknowledged area of pastoral work, so too for the seminarian there are any number of unpredictable eventualities that might occur with dramatic consequences. However, our hypothetical journey here is into ordained ministry. The seminary period of study, formation, pastoral work and personal development ultimately leads, in this case, to ordination. The newly ordained minister is then sent into parish service in his diocese, probably to a

parish which may well not be known to him personally and in which he is himself unknown.

Comparing the tales

These little sketches of ways into public ministry are only that – sketches; nonetheless, they serve to illustrate some important aspects of sameness and difference in relating lay and ordained ministries.

The first and surely fundamental point which arises in comparing the tales is the basic *similarity*, the common roots of these ministries. In both cases the dynamic of emerging ministry is set up as a kind of interplay between the charismatic community and the gifted individual (and, it must be noted, all in the community are in some way gifted). In each tale we begin with the same basic things: a baptized person seeking to use whatever gifts he or she has for the service of their community as a part of their own response to our universal vocation – to be holy. The significance of this common root cannot be over-emphasized: in it we have a practical, socially experienced witness to something of that mystery which is that Christ's own office as Priest, Prophet and Sovereign is unerringly and universally communicated to the whole Church, through the various workings of the Holy Spirit.

For all this sameness, there are also clear differences that deserve our attention. One manifestation of the *difference* must lie in the perceptions of the community, in which hints about the possibility of ordination may properly arise, even before the future ordinand himself has considered it. It would seem to me significant here that such communal wonderings are triggered not only by the manifest giftedness of the individual but also and at the same time by his maleness and singleness. This is, of course, inevitable whilst we as a Church continue only to ordain celibate men (at least, in the main). However, it is important to make these other, social triggers explicit as they can lead to a certain confusion in the community's discernment. That is to say, it *could* be the very fact of a person's being male and single which precipitates speculation, even where his gifted and ministerial activity within the community was slight. This particularity of the journey into ordination, which focuses on the gender and life-style presently required for ordained ministry, brings us also to what we might consider the heart of the difference: the individual's opportunity to apply for training to the priesthood.

In the case where the young man's application is accepted, we can see a real divergence of paths between our imagined ministers. We note the way in which the seminarian's community changes in some significant ways: his becomes a community of study, training and scrutiny

where he is one of a number of men working out their vocations within a predominantly male and celibate ethos. For him, recognition and nurture of gifts is coming from different places than for the lay minister. She is living and working in her local community, not always with the time, opportunity or finance to study or reflect on her ministry, let alone to train especially for it.

Furthermore, the recognition of ministry is not only communicated from different groups for the ordinand and for the lay woman: the recognition which each receives carries with it a different function and significance in the church, and a different status, at least by implication. Ordination is more than simply a recognition of gifts and suitability for parish leadership; it has universal standing as an *authorization* for ministry wherever the priest may be sent. Recognition of the lay person's ministry is usually confined to the level of her parish or deanery, although wider acceptance of her work may also come about. However, this recognition is not so much on the basis of institutional authority but has rather more to do with personal 'expertise',³ or charisma.

Practically, this difference in recognition has a number of consequences. Firstly, that authority conferred by the institutional Church is exercised under the direction of the bishop, while the lay person has the opportunity, in some senses, to act with greater flexibility. However, it follows from this that the institutional Church accepts a certain long-term responsibility with regard to its ordained ministers – their ministry, future employment, use of gifts – which it does not generally accept with regard to its lay workers. In simple terms, this means that, for the lay person, a change of parish priest, a move into a new area, or the contract (and the money) running out, can radically change the opportunities for the exercise of her gifts. There is a good deal of excitement in being free-lance for the Lord but it also has its attendant risks in a limited and unpredictable market.

All this means, at the end of our stories, that the ordained priest can be sent to a parish in which he is a stranger on the assumption that he will be taken on trust by the parishioners. His ordained status means that an appropriate position will always be handed to him (usually with some consultation, these days), in a situation where he will meet defined needs within the community to which he has been appointed. For the lay person this is rarely, if ever, the case.

Reflections

I have tried to state all this as plainly as possible, and have determined to comment as little as I can on the relative merits and

demerits of the sameness and differences. We all, I suspect, have feelings about these two journeys, feelings which might usefully be explored in all sorts of ways, but this is not the place to do it. I simply point out here that both journeys have their limitations, neither is free from either strengths or weaknesses in the formation it gives and the ministry that it culminates in. It seems to me that there can be no perfect process of formation or of ministry in our pilgrim Church.

However, we do need to reflect further on the sameness and difference if we are to contribute anything of any substance in meeting the pastoral needs which are the focus of our various attempts at 'collaborative ministry' and the like. For me such reflections must begin in the one ministry which is Christ's own, and in the one vocation, which is to holiness.⁴ So much that has been written about ministry, laity, priesthood and the Church has drawn attention to difference, discrimination and imbalances of power, and often with good reason; but the reason for our concern with all this can only fully be comprehended when we recognize our commonality, our sameness *en Christo*. From the perspective of our being in Christ, all ministry and giftedness is rooted in the community of the baptized, the community of the Holy Spirit. (And so they are fundamentally, and first of all, *lay*: of 'the people' or *laos*.)

Our real problems arise with expressing this one ministry of Christ in the diversity of human life which is the Church and the parish; and, in the main, our unease with the way things are between ordained and non-ordained members of the Church stems from our sense that the essential oneness in Christ is not being fully lived out. The strangely reassuring fact is that it will never be fully lived out as long as we are this pre-eschaton, pilgrim people; but this does not absolve us from doing our best to make sense of, or make a reality of, the mystery that we believe. Such is the 'now and not yet' of Christian living.

Given that this is the fundamental and spiritual nature of the difficulties that arise for us, both pastorally and theologically, when we try to relate ordained and non-ordained in the Church, it might be helpful to return to those differences identified above, and explore ways of reflecting in them something of that sameness in Christ. It would seem to me not only possible, but desirable, to do what can be done to follow the thread of commonality through lay and ordained ministries, so as to develop further structures and symbols which speak more eloquently of the unity of being Christ's Body. It is my conviction that, in doing this, not only might we help various practices of 'collaborative ministry', but also we might begin to nurture more coherent and open relationships between all lay people and their ordained pastors.

It is important to state that such developments as I have in mind would not require a loss of sacramental powers, nor an inappropriate 'clericalization' of laity; and, whatever practical advantages (or disadvantages) might attend the ordination of women and the parish employment of married ordained men, these changes should not be the sole or most immediate focus in our search for ways forward. There are a number of slight but powerfully effective steps that might be taken to renew our patterns of ministry, and so the patterns of relationship, within the Church.

For example, the area of *formation for ministry* appears ripe for change, especially in offering lay people a fuller theological background such as that given to seminarians. My own experience of team ministry brought home to me the importance of a proper consistency of training across lay and ordained boundaries; all too often highly motivated and gifted laity have their ministries and their relationships with clergy colleagues undermined by a lack in basic theological education and study. Increasingly, lay people are seeking out and finding excellent opportunities for attending to this problem, but I suspect that such courses and opportunities that are available will only gain ground when and if the church community as a whole supports them, culturally and financially, as we have supported training for ordination. It is routine and largely unquestioned that parishes up and down the country should be asked to collect money for funds to pay for the training of future clergy; but as increasing numbers of lay people take up positions of responsibility in our parishes perhaps we need to be looking at how to gain similar support for lay formation.

Such support as I have just mentioned is only partly about finance. What is every bit as important is the cultural support of such training, a kind of communal acceptance of this work of formation, for which financial support is one symbol. As church communities, we know something about our responsibilities to our ordained ministers; but maybe this lesson has been learnt at the expense of an awareness of a wider responsibility to the Church as a whole, and in particular to the Church of the future. Hoping and praying for more suitable men to come forward for seminary training is surely only one proper response to the crisis in ministry that many of our local communities face. There is also an important spiritual task – a kind of examination of conscience, both personally and with regard to our parishes, as to how far we enable, encourage or frustrate more imaginative initiatives in the area of ministerial possibilities. (Are we willing to explore non-sacramental, lay-led liturgies? Do our parish councils/forums provide a

real ministerial help in developing parish life? How do I, personally, respond to lay leadership, and why? How important is gender in all this?)

The subject of formation is not simply to be treated in terms of a need for lay formation. It is clear from our tales of ministry that the way in which formation for ordination is carried out in this country tends to accentuate *difference* rather than similarity. Indeed, the man's leaving his local community in order to take up a place at seminary appears to me a pivotal point of change which separates the two stories both practically and theologically. The lay experience of formation 'on the job', fitted in alongside family and parish commitments, has its problems and limitations, as well as its hard-earned blessings and fruitfulness. Something similar, I am sure, could be said about seminary formation, in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of training in a more controlled, removed environment. I suggest that one clear way forward in tackling the problems of 'the difference' which handicaps so much in church relationships, would be to develop further a collaborative sense and practice of formation, in which the wealth of experience in both lay and ordinand training would be brought together, for mutual criticism and benefit.⁵

The separateness of training and formation adds weight to the sense that ordination sets a person apart from (rather than for) a community. Ordination represents, among other things, a *difference in the way of authorization*, as I mentioned earlier. This difference emphasizes acutely and, I suggest, unnecessarily, the difference between lay and ordained ministries both symbolically and practically. One response to this would be to explore ways in which deaneries and, more especially, dioceses, might begin to recognize and name lay ministries. Such a naming goes beyond contracts and employment, to the point where a lay person is acknowledged as a minister by the church, a person upon whom the community has some claim and for whom we have a responsibility. This would not be any kind of ordination in a sacramental sense, and carries with it no sacramental powers or jurisdiction; it is simply a broadening of a local practice, the owning of what, as a matter of experience, is actually going on in our church.

There are, of course, a number of other ways of exploring the possibilities for celebrating more clearly the oneness of ministry in Christ across the structures of ordination and lay life. Here I have only had space enough to hint at some ways forward which seem to me possible and constructive. Ultimately, if we are to see any changes in this area, this sort of reflection has to go on throughout the Church, with ideas being newly articulated, challenged, and set to work.

A theological postscript

In all this I have had at the back of my mind an image of ministry which I have tracked down to an article by Karl Rahner. Many of us are familiar with the not uncontroversial idea of Rahner's that there are 'anonymous Christians' present throughout our society, living 'in Christ' whilst seeing themselves as Hindus or agnostics or whatever. A parallel, but I think more helpful, idea is to be found in one of Rahner's articles on the permanent diaconate in which he examines the post-conciliar restoration of that office.⁶ One of his arguments here is that the ministry of the diaconate has always gone on, even at times when the Church did not properly recognize it; the ministry is present in the Church as powerfully as ever, in an 'anonymous' form:

... we are not really concerned with introducing any new office, but only with the restoration of the sacramental conferring of an office which basically already exists though in an anonymous way ... A sacramental transmission of office ... can make the faithful more aware of the significance of the office itself, and can increase the attraction, propagation, and appreciation of the office itself for and among the faithful.⁷

There is, I think, in this Rahnerian sense of ministry and ordination, a theology which can usefully be reflected on in today's Church. Above all it is a theology which recognizes the hiddenness of so much of the work of grace that takes place in our communities, and yet which is able to relate this anonymity to the named and more visible expression of ministry, and in particular to the ordained ministry. Our task together as Church must surely be to venture into new and Spirit-led ways of making this pattern and unity of ministry an ever more celebrated and acknowledged part of parish and diocesan life and structures. Perhaps then our increasing use of the term 'ministry' would lose some of its questionable nature, and gain a real sense of integrity and actuality. It would become rooted in a Church whose ministry *is* muddled, but muddled for the very good reason that at its heart is the great mystery of the priesthood, prophecy and sovereignty of Christ.

NOTES

¹ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* no 12.

² Some of the reactions to an earlier paper published in *New Blackfriars* alerted me especially to the dangers here, as well as the general discomfort that all of us lay women and men feel at the suggestion that we are part of any kind of élite – a discomfort which increases when we begin to

feel that this is, indeed, the case! It might be helpful to note here that my use of the term 'lay élite' is not to be understood to carry with it any particular judgement on the phenomenon described; it is simply a sociological observation describing a group which, whilst pretty much recognizable, is extremely difficult to define.

³ We may note that within social science understandings of how power works within communities various distinctions are made between different types of power. Two such types are authority (power conferred by the organization), and expertise (power by virtue of proven skills or gifts). Of course, these are not mutually exclusive!

⁴ The affirmation of the common call to holiness, together with a renewed emphasis on the fundamental nature of baptism, is one of the great gifts of the Second Vatican Council to the contemporary Church. Chapter V of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, sets this out with particular clarity.

⁵ In many places, conversations and experiments along these lines are going on. Personally I am a bit nervous about the *ad hoc* nature of many of them, with their reliance on particular people, and their lack of a commonly recognized theological basis. There is also a danger that the structured and well-recognized traditions of seminary training might all too easily dominate some of the important insights gained in lay training.

⁶ 'The theology of the restoration of the diaconate', *Theological investigations* V, pp 268–314.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 284–5.