Rethinking Ministry

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Every religion, and every Christian denomination, has religious leaders, and these take the leading roles at its rituals. Thus we talk about 'priests' in various religions, and even in a religion like Islam where the term has no strict meaning, we still speak about 'Moslem clerics.' Moreover, ritual requires expertise, and the amount of expertise required is usually a direct function of the length the group's remembered tradition: these experts, nowadays usually formally trained, are its liturgical ministers. Thus a presbyter in an Eastern Orthodox church needs to know about a complex ritual harboring elements that have grown up over a period of perhaps 1700 years. Even the leader of a contemporary western evangelical church, while eschewing any inherently sacral status, still claims special expertise as a biblical teacher. Such expertise is then seen as the empirical basis for ministry (either parallel with or apart from some notion of authorization such as 'ordination'), and then those experts 'minister to' the other church-members, by either carrying out the rituals, leading the group in its liturgies, or acting as its teachers during worship.

In each case there is a binary model at work: a sole minister or small ministry-group which acts, leads and preaches, speaks, teaches on one side, and opposite them a much larger group which attends, listens, and receives ministry. We see this model in a nutshell in the phrase: 'the clergy administer the sacraments.' This model fits well beside other expert service providers in society (e.g. medics providing healthcare to the rest of the community or accountants providing financial services), and, therefore, full-time 'ministers of religion' are aligned by society, and often by themselves, with those other experts. In society many tasks are carried out by a specialist cadre (e.g. politics or policing) which acts with deputed authority. Society needs a 'chap-

laincy' service, which justifies clergy and their liturgical ministry. This kind of justification for ministry is now rarely proposed by Christians when living in multicultural situations, but was widely used when they imagined their societies as homogeneously Christian, and it is still far more influential both among those who reject the Church and those who pine for lost era of church-centrality than is often recognized.

Gospel Vision and Church Structures

The memories of the first disciples of Jesus present a stark contrast to this view of the clergy's social role and to such highly structured notions of ministry. Jesus was not a Levite, his ministry barely engaged with the formal religious expert systems, and when those structures are recalled (e.g. Lk 10:31 and 32; Jn 4:21), they are the objects of criticism or presented as transient. Moreover, while Jesus was presented as appointing messengers or preachers (apostles) there is no suggestion that these were thought of as liturgical ministers.

While leaders emerged in the various early churches (with a variety of names: e.g. 'elders' (*presbuteroi*) or 'overseer-servants' (*episkopoi kai diakonoi*) which was originally a double-name for a single person, but which later on would divide into two ranks: 'bishop' and 'deacon'), it took generations for those patterns to be harmonized between communities and then systematized into authority structures. There is no suggestion in the first-century documents that leadership at the two key community events, baptism and eucharist, was restricted in any way or the preserve of those who were community leaders, much less a specially authorized group. The link between (a) leadership of the community and (b) presidency at the eucharistic meal (a linkage that would drive much later thinking on ministry and even today is a major source of Christian division) would not be forged

until the third century, and only later again would 'the history of its institution' by Jesus be constructed.

The remembered teaching upon leadership in the community stressed radical equality among church members, for example in this story: 'Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all' (Mk 10:44). This vision of equality is also found in the third 'do this' story in the gospels (after those relating to baptism and the eucharist) in Jn 13:3-15 where the relationship of leaders in the community is modelled on that of washing the diners' feet by Jesus (a task normally done by a female slave). Significantly, this action, despite the injunction in Jn 13:15, did not develop into a regular community practice! The followers of Jesus were to be (in two early second-century documents) a 'priestly people' (1 Pet 2:9: 'a priestly kingdom,' *basileion hierateuma*) where all shared by baptism in Christ who was uniquely their priest (*hiereus*) (Heb 2:17).

This tension between the empirical need for organization within groups, coupled with the fact that power tends to concentrate and to be seen as a sacral faculty—a development facilitated by using a combination of Old Testament models and terminology and cultural assumptions taken from Greco-Roman culture: e.g. '*pontifex*' or '*ordo*'), on the one hand, and the memory of what distinguishes the new priestly people in Christ where ministry was both more embracing (the whole community is the minister) and less structured (each can potentially take on any service for the others) can be seen as underlying all the later disputes about ministry and priesthood. Those disputes, which still continue for many Christians, were made all the more intractable by the conviction on each side, in each dispute, that an explicit answer could be derived from their authoritative foundational sources!

It has long been an illusion of the various Christian denominations that a study of history—and particularly the first couple of centuries or the texts from those times they held to

belong to the New Testament Canon—could provide either a blueprint, such as 'the three-fold structure of order': bishop, presbyter, deacon, or a conclusive answer to issues arising in later situations, e.g. what 'power' can be seen as coming from Christ to the priest, at the time of the Reformation; or whether a woman can preside at the Eucharist, today. This quest falls victim to the anachronism inherent in all appeals to a perfect original moment, when all was revealed (at least *in nuce*). It also assumes that ministry as it later developed was not itself the outcome of multiple, often conflicting, forces in the particular societies, as well as adaptations by Christians to well-known inherited religious structures.

 So, for example, the clerical system, located in liturgical ministry for much of Christian history, originally had to do with the political needs of the church as a public body within the Roman Empire; and as that imperial society had highly organized priesthoods, so people took it for granted that similar groups would exist in the Church. Likewise, the monastic elements that became linked with liturgical ministry can be seen as a result of the place of monasticism as the ideal of holiness in late antiquity; while the notion of 'hierarchy' (i.e. that sacred power descends through intermediaries from higher to lower levels of reality: such that the holier leader [the 'hierarch'] offers sacrifice 'on behalf of' or performs liturgy *for the others* as an effect of his special election and superior powers) can be seen as the result of fitting Christian theology within a Neoplatonic world view within a rigidly-layered social environment.

 Every specific ministry is a particular variation of the ministry of all the baptized, and in baptism there is a radical equality, 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female' (Gal 3:28). To say that particular ministries are not potentially open to every baptized person shows a defective theology of baptism, by which all ministry is brought into being. Likewise, to demand 'signs' of particular divine election (e.g. being able to speak in tongues or handle snakes) as indications of suitability for ministry flies in the face of the in-

carnational dispensation seen in baptism. Again, regulations that restrict ministry to particular states of life (e.g. celibacy as a condition for the presbyterate in the Roman Catholic church or for the episcopate in the Orthodox churches) show undue concern with the status of certain ministries and imply that baptism rather than founding a 'new creation' in which no such distinctions exist. Similarly, the notion that women, as such, can be excluded from ministry on the basis of some pragmatic historical appeal (e.g. 'Jesus did not ordain women!'), fails to take account of the fundamental role of baptism. The slogan 'if you cannot ordain 'em, you shouldn't baptize 'em' may seem crude, but it does capture the fundamental insight that baptismal incorporation into the risen Christ is the source of all liturgical ministry.

Though professional Christian 'ministers' will be commonly perceived as the 'religious service experts' and seen as yet another variant of the religious phenomenon of 'priests' (a word designating sacred functionaries in most world religions—and studied as such in religious studies), this is not a good starting point for their own self-understanding.

Language plays us false here. The Old Testament '*kohen*' (which we render by the word 'priest') performed special tasks—as a matter of divine appointment—on behalf of the rest of Israel. This was rendered in the Septuagint by the word *hiereus*—a word commonly used for pagan temple officials—and then, later, into Latin by *sacerdos,* a generic word covering all the various special temple 'priesthoods' such as *flamenes* and *pontifices*. The early Christians did not use these word for their leaders: *hiereus* or *sacerdos* belonged to Jesus alone in the heavenly temple. Christian leaders were designated *by their relation to the community*: as the ones who oversaw, led, or served it. Later, the language of *hiereus* and *sacerdos* was absorbed and became the basis of Christians' perceptions of their presbyters. So our word 'priest' is etymologically from the word '*presbyter*,' but conceptually it relates to the sacerdotal functions. One consequence of this is that those so designated think of them-

selves as 'ministers of God'—they perform a service to Him—but it is the community in Christ that is the minister of God, and specific individual functionaries, such as presbyters, are ministers to the community.

Another consequence of Christian officials taking over a sacerdotal self-understanding was they explained their work (by parallel with Old Testament *kohenim*) in terms of its distinctiveness from that of the rest of the baptized, or as did pagan priesthoods (*sacerdotia*) as being specialists acting on behalf of ordinary people. Once this had occurred they had to ask what made them different and what special religious quality did they have which others did not possess: the answer came with the notion of a power 'to consecrate,' and then this power (itself the subject of rhetorical inflation) became the basis of 'ontological difference' between them and 'ordinary Christians,' or between their 'ordained priesthood' and a nebulous, and often ignored, 'common priesthood.'

Matching Skills and Roles

One of the thorniest questions that beset discussions, particularly between denominations, about ministry concerns the issue of authorization. This usually presents as a discussion about 'ordination' within a sacerdotal model of 'priesthood' such as we have just examined. In such a model the priest must be thought of in terms of some specific 'power' and since this, unlike that of the Levites, does not come with birth, it must come from a specific act of empowerment: 'ordination.' Ordination, in turn, comes to be seen as an act of 'making something.' In such a situation a person is either 'the thing made,' or not. So discussions between churches either ignore the issue (which renders the discussion little more than polite window dressing) or search to validate each other's 'orders' (which becomes a matter of arcane history and black/white answers). Such starting points only promote deadlock.

A far better approach is to note that all groups need, at least, some formal organization, while Christians must also work with one another in communities (they claim to be called to love one another), and, then, to treat each such community as a basic church. Next, enquire if the ministry structures are adequate to helping them to pray together, to receive teaching that promotes understanding and discipleship, to keep them together as a group, to answer specific needs a group might have (e.g. poor, old, young families), and ensure that the ministers do not behave in an abusive way (it is easy for 'religious authorities' to take advantage of the trust given them). Whoever fulfils these needs and functions should be seen as 'the ministers' of that community, and respected as such by other churches and groups of ministers. The differences in the styles and structures can be considered subsequently as part of the varied tapestry of the work of the Spirit and historical circumstances—and they can learn from one another which elements from the others' visions of ministry they might import—and which of their own they need to change or drop!

Most specific expressions of ministry to the community require some level of skill and this, given the way humans develop, will be the result of ability, experience, and training. Many churches are not far beyond the older position whereby if one passed an academic course in theology or was deemed 'fit for orders,' then training in liturgical ministry was but a practical afterthought. And in traditional societies where 'going to church' was part of the week, few cared whether or not a minister had any sensitivity to leading people in liturgy. However, an adequate view of liturgy, and the nature of contemporary Christian belonging, requires far more awareness of the skills needed for this ministry.

Thus someone presiding at the eucharist needs to have the skills of a host at a great celebratory meal; and if that is a task that fills them with dread (note the number who fear such roles at weddings, for example), then that person should not be called on to preside and give voice to the

community. Likewise, someone who dislikes public speaking or lacks aptitude as a teacher will find preaching difficult—and this cannot be remedied by training in 'communication skills.' A basic ministerial skill in most communities today is the ability to lead spontaneous prayer—which needs great sensitivity and some of the art of the poet. By contrast, those who are good communicators are often poor listeners, and so they will not be so good in ministries of reconciliation. And while we can all benefit from growing in sensitivity for those who are suffering, a ministry of healing will fit best with someone with 'a bedside manner.' We should see the Spirit empowering each community with the variety of skills it needs, and then aligning each individual's skill to the necessary tasks as the work of ecclesial vocation. After such alignment, formal training (always valuable given the haphazard way humans absorb information) is a case of organizing and drawing out charisms latent in the individual as a member of the community. So rituals like ordination should be seen as actualizing and recognizing gifts already within the church from the work of the Spirit, rather than the conferring of 'powers' extrinsic to the person.

Moreover, liturgical ministry is not a matter of holes and pegs. Rather, it is a community recognizing its needs in Christ, and of individuals deploying, creatively, their range of gifts, insights, and skills (a mix unique to each person) in the service of their church. Each liturgical ministry should actualise that person's distinctive contribution to a unique moment in Christian history. Liturgical ministry is an art as much as a skill or a 'vocation.'

The standard one-size-fits-all model of the cleric who in virtue of 'ordination' carries out every ministry cannot be justified either theologically (for it ignores the Spirit's workings in an actual church) nor practically as no individual can be presumed to have that skill-range or be able to deploy such adaptability on a daily basis.

Churches grow, and often become vast international organizations with consequent management needs. Down the cen-

turies it has been assumed that those chosen for their skill in liturgical ministry would automatically have management ability (at least at local levels), and that those with the widest administrative duties would be the most senior liturgical ministers. In those churches with highly structured line-management, it is often the case that the leaders, usually bishops 'with the power of jurisdiction,' are also expected to be able to take the lead in liturgy—and this is not a problem if liturgy is seen just as a derivative of 'the power of order.' However, experience often shows that such managers are not those who can either teach adequately or lead worship effectively; and the converse also holds: a good academic or a sensitive pastor of a small community may turn out to be a useless bishop. A deeper consciousness of such problems leads to reconsideration of the whole set of interlocking structures covered by the term 'church ministry.' There is only one, merely logical, certainty: the future will not be like the past; and when a present seeks to recede into its past, it is untrue to its own moment.