

TRANSFORMING THE CHURCH ISN'T FINISHED YET

P.J. Cullinane

INTRODUCTION

In his Encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis set his hopes, dreams and expectations for the Church squarely within the Gospel. He said, for example:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for the Church’s own self-preservation. (27)

His way of saying this has the ring of an invitation. I suggest he was inviting reflection on how the Church might do what he dreamed of. This paper suggests but *one way* of making this kind of transformation, but it is one that would impact on other areas of Church life, including some that are waiting for clarification.

GREATER DIVERSITY WITHIN THE CHURCH’S ORDAINED MINISTRIES?

Research into the historic roles of deaconesses is based on the premise that what the Church has already done the Church can do. But historical enquiry opens up other, wider possibilities as well - including, as this paper suggests, the possibility of greater diversity within the ordained ministries of the Church.

A greater variety of ministries existed in the early Church, before they merged with the ministries of bishop, presbyter and deacon. Priesthood, in its present form, “represents the combination or distillation of several distinct roles and special ministries in the New Testament Church”; R.E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop*, (Chapman, 1970), p. 20. Of course, other charisms and prophetic ministries and movements have always existed alongside the ordained ministries, and continue to inspire and nurture the Church – not least of all the Religious Orders, and now the new ecclesial movements. The contribution of Religious Orders to various ministries in the realms of health care and education is incalculable. But the focus of this paper is ordained ministry.

It is Catholic belief that a ministry authorized to speak and act in Christ’s name has its origins in Christ’s historical intentions. But its structure and concrete forms were determined by the Church, during the apostolic period and continuing until late in the second century. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church of those times shaped its ministries to meet its needs. Still under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, what the post-apostolic Church could do then, it can do now. Being faithful to the Tradition involves more than just receiving what the early Church did; it involves *doing* what the early Church did, which includes shaping its ministries to meet the needs of its mission.

Greater diversity of ministries within the early Church is not, *per se*, sufficient reason for greater diversity in today’s Church. But there are other good pastoral reasons pertinent to our own times. I do

not think our current ordained ministries are adequate for meeting the needs they are meant to meet, even with the support of various lay ministries. I am referring to the ordained ministries themselves, not just the question of *how* ordained ministries should be carried out. There is much we could say about the *how*, including the need for truly “collaborative ministry” between ordained and lay. Many lay people have been exemplary in taking opportunities for pastoral, spiritual and liturgical formation, and carrying out various ministries. Indeed, many are involved in providing that formation.

In this context I would want to acknowledge the generous work of lay men and women who have provided parish leadership in accordance with canon 517/2.¹ Sometimes the amalgamation of parishes is necessary. But, where possible, applying canon 517/2 is a better option. When a parish retains its own identity, it more easily sees itself as the centre of various apostolates and ministries, rather than becoming just a “Mass centre”, as can happen when it is amalgamated with other parishes. (I think, too, the greater involvement of lay people can inspire healthy vocations to the ordained ministry, just as the sight of stressed priests trying to manage what were previously several parishes can be off-putting.) I would encourage bishops not to be timid about applying the provisions of canon 517/2; I have seen parishes come alive in ways they had not been under the leadership of some of their priests. There are ways of “clustering” parishes for mutual support that stop short of “amalgamating” them.

I am not advocating more forms of lay ministry because we must not obscure the fact that the laity carry out the mission of the Church, and grow in holiness, by being the yeast in the dough of secular reality and culture, (cf *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n 898). They do not need to be in any ministry for this. The Church’s mission is not reducible to its ministries, ordained or lay. And its mission is the responsibility of all the baptized – “co-responsibility”.

By advocating greater diversity within the ordained ministries, I do not mean to imply that ordained ministries are reducible to their functions; all ministries are first of all a matter of representation, in the sense of giving voice and visibility to what the Risen Christ is doing through them. All ministry is to the people, but in the service of Christ.

Having made the above clarifications, I now ask whether the Church’s universal episcopate should consider **re-distributing the ‘powers’ currently enshrined within the ministries of episcopacy, presbyterate and diaconate into a wider variety of ministries**. This does not involve any repudiation of Holy Orders or any of its threefold ordained ministries. ‘Powers’ presently distributed among the existing ordained ministries would live on, but in a wider configuration.

And the fullness of authority vested in the college of bishops (cum et sub Petro) would also live on. But the lesser participations in their teaching, sanctifying and governing roles would be re-distributed among ordained ministries - old and new.

¹ If the diocesan bishop should decide that due to a dearth of priests a participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon or some other person who is not a priest or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest endowed with the powers and faculties of a pastor to supervise the pastoral care. (Canon 517/2). One who is not ordained can be deputed to preach, to baptize and to assist at marriages.

THE CHURCH HAS BEEN WAITING

Perhaps the potential for greater diversity is illustrated by ways the Church's pastoral practices have needed to adapt in the meantime. For example, in the Pacific Islands of Oceania there has existed for many years a recognized ministry of *katekita*. It combines the roles of catechists, liturgical leaders and deacons. (The only reason why they have not been ordained is because they are married. In some places, the Holy Communion they distribute has had to be transported in small boats from other islands.)

Similarly, adaptation to today's circumstances has resulted in lay men and women becoming chaplains, or members of chaplaincy teams, in our hospitals, prisons, secondary colleges and tertiary institutions. We have all heard the occasional laments of some of these lay chaplains that they could have done so much more if they had been able to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation, or the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. They were available at certain *kairos* moments when a priest could not be; or in places where priests are not usually present. (Having those 'powers' would also help to distinguish them from counsellors and social workers.)

The development of greater diversity in the Church's ordained ministries would need to allow for differences arising from inculturation. This suggests the need for Bishops' Conferences to take more responsibility. What is needed on some continents might be different from what is needed in others, and I have already referred to the development of the (non-ordained) ministry of *katekita* in Oceania.

Naturally, this far-reaching proposal should also involve discussion with the Churches of the East. Such dialogue would be mutually enriching, but given the different situations we experience in the West, the outcome of dialogue should not ultimately depend on East and West being able to move at the same pace; (there is already disparity with some of the Eastern Churches on the matter of ordaining women to the diaconate, and some other sacramental practices). Perhaps the core proposal (greater diversity within ordained ministries), together with several related matters (e.g. the role of Bishops' Conferences, steps towards Christian unity, participation in governance and its relationship to Holy Orders, participation by women, inculturation, etc) would be sufficient agenda for a brief, focused General Council, prepared for at regional or provincial Synods.

LISTENING

While the proposal outlined in this article is far-reaching, it is not alien to Catholic ecclesiology, or even to comments that others have made. It is interesting to juxtapose Pope Francis' dream with the comments of others:

Pope Francis:

I dream a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for the Church's own self-preservation. (E.G.27)

Perhaps more explicitly, Hans Urs von Balthasar:

... (the) Church will suffer the loss of its shape as it undergoes a death, and all the more so, the more purely it lives from its source and is consequently less concerned with preserving its shape. In fact, it will not concern itself with affirming its shape but with promoting the world's salvation; as for the shape in which God will raise it from its death to serve the world, it will entrust (that) to the Holy Spirit. (The Three Forms of Hope, in *Truth is Symphonic*, 190-91).

This can require “much more diversified structures”; hence the International Theological Commission:

The supreme law is ‘that the gospel be announced’. The concrete criteria for determining the forms of the ministry at a particular moment in the life of the Church or in a given country are dictated by that law....

It is urgent to create much more diversified structures of the Church's pastoral action as regards both its ministries and its members, if the Church is to be faithful to its missionary and apostolic vocation. The Church must recognize the importance of the diversity of the charisms which manifest themselves in it, and establish a structure of pastoral service which will ensure the mobility and availability which it needs in order to be present with its signs of grace in a pluralistic world.” *The Priestly Ministry* (St Paul's Press, 1971, pp 99-100)

The issue is *pastoral, not doctrinal*; E. Schillebeeckx:

... even an episcopal or presbyteral structure of the leadership of the Church is not dogmatically inviolate, although the collegial unity of all the ‘shepherds’ of the Church, with the office-bearer who has the function of Peter in their midst, is. It is therefore possible to divide and regulate all the powers of those who are now called bishops, priests and deacons differently...

The threefold division of the one office, with the familiar demarcation of their special ministries and powers is, from the dogmatic point of view, subject to change and restructuring, within the fundamental college of those bearing office in the Church with the one who has the function of Peter among them. Whether or not they will have to be re-adapted in the future to the modern situation, and to what extent they may have to be adapted is a question of pastoral policy in the Church. (E. Schillebeeckx, *The Catholic Understanding of Office in the Church*, in *Theological Studies*, 1969, p.570.)

THE ECCLESIAL CONTEXT

When Schillebeeckx wrote that, we were less than ten years out from the Second Vatican Council. The pastoral advantages of re-configuring ordained ministries would have been less evident then. Besides, other post-conciliar needs would have seemed more obvious and more urgent, and could be set in motion without any change to the framework of Holy Orders. For example: after centuries of perceiving the Church primarily in terms of ordained ministries and Religious Life, we needed to get used to perceiving the Church primarily in terms of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist; Catholic involvement in the work for Christian unity was still at an early stage, and not ready for steps that are more likely to suggest themselves now; working out the implications of religious freedom, and of inter-faith relations, implementing episcopal collegiality, and liturgical renewal, and assuaging the fears of those who would find these difficult, would all take time.

Nevertheless, the Church has not stood still. Nor has it considered itself exempt from the need for apostolic “boldness”. Post- conciliar developments spanning half a century have created a new ecclesial

context, with its potential for wider perspectives and new insights, in accordance with the Catholic understanding of “Tradition” and the development of doctrine; (Divine Revelation, 8).

This whole discussion is premised on the fact

- that the primary repository of what the apostles ‘handed on’ is the whole body of the baptized faithful;
- that this body will always produce the ministries it needs for its nurture, and that it has a right to be adequately ministered to;
- that empowerment for ordained ministry is from God, through ordination;
- that within this body the fullness of teaching, sanctifying and governing authority resides in the college of bishops; and
- that lesser participations in their ministry is within the authority of the college of bishops to determine, having regard to the way our present threefold structure continued to develop after the apostolic era.

These premises are a rich and broad foundation on which to base our thinking, our dreaming and bold action.

In addition to helping to meet some existing pastoral needs, the development of greater pluriformity within ordained ministries could help to clarify several other questions that are still waiting to be resolved, some of which seem to have reached an impasse. Sometimes even answers that must be accepted as correct within our current structures and perspectives do not seem to fully satisfy. The questions keep on coming back. And there are questions whose lack of resolution has negative consequences for the Church. Examples include:

- debated questions about participation in governance and its relationship to Holy Orders;
- questions around ordained roles for women;
- the on-going and harmful distraction of clericalism;
- the integration of the ordained ministries of other Christian churches in a re-united Church;
- present tendencies to clericalize the laity, and to secularize the clergy;
- inequalities, and perceived inequalities, that are difficult to offset within the present framework of ordained ministries;
- the co-existence of married and celibate priests; etc.

Discussion on some of these issues, even over many years, has not brought them any closer to resolution. Is this because there are potential answers that simply do not fit within the thought-patterns we are familiar with, and so lie outside our expectations?

A WIDER NET AND DEEPER WATERS

The re-configuration being suggested here needs to be much more than just a re-shuffle of present-day problems and the creation of new pecking orders. To obviate that, our thinking about the Church itself needs to be more influenced by gospel images. How the Church is perceived influences how ministries are perceived. E.g. if the Church is perceived fundamentally as the community of Jesus’ disciples, then those who minister within it will see themselves primarily as disciples of Christ and co-disciples with one another. Ministerial relationships do not change those relationships, but should presuppose them, and build on them.

Ultimately, institutional reforms of any kind depend for their effectiveness on deep personal renewal. This applies to all the baptized, but it has *a fortiori* implications for those whose ministry is primarily a ministry of the word, and who need to be able to point – by the very manner of their lives – to the mysteries they preach. This presupposes that they find themselves in genuine awe of the mysteries of creation and redemption; or mystics, as Karl Rahner understood mysticism - “a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence.” Anything less will not resonate with people whose hearts are made for the transcendent. Ways of being ‘church’ that seem to be formalities, and religious practices that seem to want to ‘manage’ God, or put God in our debt, or put limits on God’s presence and mercy, do not point to the transcendent! Walking away from such “religion” will seem no big deal. Is this what Rahner meant when he said “The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all”? (*Theological Investigations*, vol. XX, p. 149.) Ordained ministers, especially, need to make present what Jesus made present, and now makes present through them. The re-configuration of ordained ministry would give wider scope for this.