

“CHARACTER AND “ONTOLOGICAL CHANGE” IN RELATION TO ORDINATION.

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Some theologians interpret “character” to mean simply that the sacrament cannot be repeated. Just as a baptized person is and remains a baptized person, and therefore cannot be re-baptized, so too with Confirmation and Ordination; these sacraments cannot be repeated. But this seems to say too little: un-repeatability is rather a consequence of “character”.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is an interpretation of “character” and “ontological change” that derives from pious exaggerations, especially during the 18th and 19th centuries, which attributed a higher status to the ordained person. This interpretation of “character” never entered the Church’s official teaching. Moreover, it is harmful: “a mythic theology of the priesthood which places it on a higher level of being than the rest of the faithful, a metaphysical clericalism, is responsible for barring the way to many reforms at the present time”. (P. Fransen; *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol 4, p 324). Once we know about this “metaphysical clericalism” it is easy to see where the worst manifestations of clericalism come from - e.g. non-accountability of priests and bishops to the lay faithful, and non-accountability of Church to society; the dis-allowing of appropriate forms of lay participation, etc.

In contrast to the above two interpretations, the most ancient understanding of “character” – in reference to ordination – is the ordination rite itself, which incorporates the ordinand into the order of deacons, or presbyters, or bishops. Ordination puts him there, and characterizes him as belonging to that order for its particular way of serving the Church’s mission.

Insofar as this indicates what the priest has become, it can be called “ontological”. But what he has become is *what he has become for others*. This is essentially a relational matter. *It is his relationship with the community of the Church that is now ontologically different.*

This is also the meaning of his being “set apart” – his person and his life have been dedicated to the Church’s mission in this specific way. (Second Vatican Council, Pres. Ord. n.3). But he is set apart “for”, not “from”. The same paragraph in Pres. Ord. is emphatic that being “set apart” does not mean apartness; like Christ he is to be immersed in the life of his people.

Saint Pope John Paul II emphasised that what one becomes through ordination “is in the realm of *function*, not of *dignity* or *holiness*”; (Christi Fideles Laici, n. 51; emphasis his). Pope Francis repeats this in *Evangelii Gaudium*, n 104). As far as status is concerned, there simply isn’t any higher status than what we become through Baptism. And what we become through Baptism is the same for all – hence our fundamental equality.

Our fundamental equality as sons and daughters of God is our greatest status. Distinctions of role within the community are real and important – but not of greater dignity or importance than what has happened to us through Baptism. Consequently, the manner of exercising ordained ministry has to respect that equality, and respect the charisms given to other members of the baptized faithful.¹

This is also why titles which suggest a higher dignity based on ordination belong more to clericalism than to theology. The same applies to dress that is intended to indicate higher rank or apartness.² These aberrations will diminish as Church renewal is based increasingly on the mind and example of Jesus.

What would motivate anyone to “restore these traditions” which contrast with Jesus’ way of being one with his people? Social scientists speak of how in times of change and insecurity some turn to externals which they associate with times of greater security. And Pope Francis rightly calls for charity towards those who are driven by personal problems. But in the context of church life, I think the tendency to “restoration” is a kind of push-back against a perceived lack of reverence and devotion, especially in the liturgy. The onus is restorationists to learn the difference between the kind of reverence appropriate in private prayer and the kind of reverence appropriate to a congregation acting as one body - fully, actively, and consciously participating, (S.C 3)³. And the onus is on the rest of us to show that this kind of engagement can be deeply moving and contemplative.

¹ When differences of opinion arise, respect for each other as persons requires transparency, willingness to learn, and sincere dialogue - not premature or unilateral decision.

² Some titles are mainly political; e.g. Pope Pius XI gave the title “Excellency” to bishops to square off with Mussolini who had given that title to mayors. Some regalia worn by church leaders was derived from the customs of the Renaissance courts. These are forms of worldliness that even the worldly courts have abandoned! Our need is for emblems that indicate distinctiveness without indicating separateness from other people.

³ This difference has implications for gestures, postures, furnishings and use of space, resulting from the four ways Christ acts in the liturgy - through the Sacrament, through the word, through the congregation, and through the ministry of the priest;. (S.C. 7.)