

Mission, Ministries and co-responsibility

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The front line of the Church's work is the Christian people whose lives are leavened in the dough of all the ordinary circumstances of ordinary life. The purpose of ministries within the Church is to provide nurture and formation for that mission. It is the mission that matters.

Part I Ministries

For some years we have all been aware of a growing gap between the number of parishes and the number of priests available to serve in them. This reality serves as a wake-up call, but it is not the basis for greater lay involvement. That involvement has its roots in Baptism and the very nature of the Church. Through Baptism we are all united to the priestly and prophetic mission of Christ. This is the basis for our shared responsibility for what the Church is and what it does:

“Co-responsibility requires a change in mentality, particularly with regard to the role of the laity in the Church, who should be considered not as “collaborators” with the clergy, but as persons truly “co-responsible” for the being and the activity of the Church...” (Pope Benedict XVI, 10 August 2012).

This is more than just a matter of management, or meeting an emergency. It, too, is rooted in Baptism and the nature of the Church. So why does this require a “change in mentality” if it already belongs to the nature of the Church? History gives the answer. During the first four centuries of the Church, lay people had roles in the liturgy, preached, had a say in the election of bishops and nomination of priests; contributed to the framing of church laws and customs, prepared matters for, and participated in church councils, administered church properties, etc.

Then, after the conversion of the emperor Constantine and the mass conversions that followed, responsibility shifted one-sidedly into the hands of the clergy. And following the barbarian invasions, responsibility for public order also fell to them. Over following centuries, society came to see priesthood as a profession, with social privilege. During earlier centuries it had been a point of honour for ministers of the Church to live and look like everyone else.

Perception changed also within the Church. This is perhaps symbolized by the altar being pushed back to the apse of the church, where liturgy became mainly a clerical affair with diminishing involvement of the laity. Scholarship and better understanding of the early Church would eventually return the liturgy to the whole body of the faithful, and restore roles of pastoral care and administration to lay women and men.

Most see our own day as a time of privileged opportunity for renewal. It is challenging because it involves the need for more personal responsibility and moving away from the forms of tutelage and guardianship that shaped Church practices right up till the time of Pope Pius XII. Others feel safer clinging to that recent past, often misunderstanding the meaning of “Tradition”.

Part II Mission

In Christ, God became immersed in human life; showed us how to live it, destined us to its fullness, and sent the Holy Spirit to draw us into what Christ did for us. That is God's purpose, and the Church can have no other - “Humanity is the route the Church must take” (Pope John Paul II).

How we do this comes down to how we “do” love. There is a loving that does not go deep enough to transform society. It works at the level of what seems fair and reasonable and deserving. This is what governments are properly concerned with. Society must do better, and the Church’s mission is to be the leaven in society. It deals with a deeper kind of loving – love that is not limited to what seems fair and reasonable and deserved.

As Church, we are uniquely placed to do this because in the Person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus we see love that is unconditional, undeserved, and unstinting. When we love as we have been loved, our love becomes a circuit breaker - precisely because it is not calculating and limited to what seems fair and reasonable and deserved. Running through family life, civic life, industrial, commercial and political life, this kind of love “changes everything”. It brings about a way of living – of being human – that is true to what God made us for.

But, note, it starts with seeing God’s love for us – contemplative seeing! Christians have the least excuse for not recognizing the intrinsic link between contemplation and working for social justice because in celebrating Eucharist they move from contemplating God’s extraordinary love for us to receiving and becoming the body broken for others and the blood (life) poured out for others.

This is how faith makes a decisive difference to all of human life, while fully respecting the rightful autonomy of everything that is properly secular. In the midst of life God is drawing us towards the fulfilment of our own deepest yearnings, and wonderfully more, involving God’s purpose for the whole of creation.

On that understanding of “the route the Church must take”, we come to know what ministries are needed to nurture us for that mission, and what kind of formation is needed for those ministries.

Part III Formation

To be involved in the processes of making our lives more truly human is a wonderful mission. So what kind of formation is needed for ministries that serve that mission?

Writing about the formation needed for priests, Pope John Paul II said it needs to be “human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral”, and went on to say that continuing formation was a matter of a priest’s faithfulness to his ministry, of love for the people, and in the proper sense a matter of justice, given the people’s rights (Pastores Dabo Vobis, 70).

Commenting on some of the characteristics of human formation, the Congregation for the Clergy explicitly singled out the specific contribution of women, “not only for the seminarians’ personal life but also with a view to their future pastoral activity” (Ratio Fundamentalis, 95). The Congregation’s reference was to Pope John Paul’s emphasis on “what it means to speak of the ‘genius of women’, not only in order to be able to see in this phrase a specific part of God’s plan which needs to be accepted and appreciated, but also in order to let this genius be more fully expressed in the life of society as a whole, as well as in the life of the Church; (Letter to Women, 1995, 10).

In our country, women have been carrying out significant roles at both Holy Cross Seminary and Good Shepherd College for some years. What still needs to be developed, however, are ways of allowing parishioners generally to play a bigger part both in seminarians’ formation and in the discernment of their vocation. Those who will live with the results of formation, for better or for worse, should have a say in that formation and the selection of candidates.

Programmes for the formation of lay women and men for parish ministries already exist, and I leave it to others to comment on them. My concern here is with a very specific feature needed in Church leadership – both lay and ordained. It is needed all the more because general education in our country has been gradually reduced to learning mainly practical skills. Skills, both human/relational and technological properly belong within education, but not more so than the deeper aspects of what it means to be human. Even when we know how to do the things necessary for successful living, we still need to know what ultimately gives meaning to it all.

Knowing that one's life has a purpose can make the difference between surviving, or not surviving, life's toughest times. The will to live needs a reason to live. The need I am pointing to is the need for leaders who are "in the service of meaning" (Ratcliffe). This is what it means in practice to be ministers of God's word. Knowing how much we mean to God is the most important thing we can know about ourselves, and truly life-giving.

Within a culture that has become superficial, reductionist and utilitarian, one of the ways we are in the service of meaning is by knowing how to identify flaws within that culture, especially where important aspects of daily life are devalued by becoming disconnected from what gives them their meaning, or at least their full meaning. Formation will be incomplete unless it is formation "in the service of meaning".

Part IV Where to start?

I referred to the increasing gap between the number of our parishes and the number of priests. Simply combining parishes, whether for the sake of having a parish priest in every parish, or out of due concern for future financial resourcing, does not resolve the problem because ultimately everything depends on pastoral effectiveness and enlivening.

An alternative to combining parishes is available where Church law allows for the pastoral care of parishes to be entrusted to lay people, with a priest appointed to provide general supervision (canon 517/2), usually from another parish. We already experience the insufficiency of suitable priests which is what justifies recourse to this canon. Of course, where this happens, priests are still required for sacramental ministry. It is possible that some priests might even prefer that kind of role, leaving management of the parish to a team of qualified lay women and men. Lay leadership of parishes requires proper formation – of parish and leaders - and proper remuneration.

Yet another starting point for renewal can be found in the experience of small base communities pioneered by the Church in some countries in South America and Asia. Of course, we cannot simply transfer other local churches' experience to our situation. But we, too, can establish smaller communities within parishes, where leadership can be shared by teams and on a voluntary basis. Such gatherings would be lay-led, and need no official authorization. They can happen already, and develop in home-spun ways.

The Christian Base Communities in South American countries grew out of lay people coming together to pray and reflect on the scriptures and on their life situations, using the Catholic Action principle: "see, judge, act". Their aim was a more just society and more truly human life for everyone – "the route the Church must take". If this were happening in our own country, we could ask the kind of questions they asked: what are the causes of poverty in our country, and what can we do about those causes? Indeed, this is an appropriate level at which to analyse whatever flaws in our culture leave us less able to deal with the epic issues of our time – those that degrade human life, human dignity, human rights, and the planet itself.

Addressing those issues – through the lenses of divine revelation - is itself a way of participating in the mission of the Church. It is a good place to start because it is already do-able; it can be inclusive of those who feel unable to participate in other aspects of the Church's life; it does not need clerical leadership or control, but makes room for ordained priesthood to present itself as a supporting ministry; it can model shared leadership, and lead to whatever forms of ministry might need to come next.

It is also a way of being Church that is "synodal", i.e. being "on the road together". The larger gatherings that we call "Synods" presuppose the experience of walking and working together before we are ready for the decisions we gather to make at Synods. It also gives scope and opportunity for the participation of many who will not be at the Synods.

Part V What More?

Pope Francis has rightly said: "the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures" all need to be channelled for what best serves the Church's mission of evangelising the world"; (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, n.27).

To act on that would could make big differences. Yet, even these changes are 'small change' compared with where the Church has already been, and can yet go. Bigger changes rightly need wider consultation. And synodality is pointless if it isn't about the road ahead and exploring what might yet be.

Ministry that is authorized to speak and act in Christ's name has its origin in Christ's historical intentions. But its structure and concrete forms were determined by the Church during the apostolic period and after, continuing until late in the second century. What the Church gave shape to after the apostolic period, it can give different shape to now. Being faithful to the Tradition involves more than just receiving what the early Church did; it involves *doing* what the early Church did: it shaped its ministries to meet the needs of its mission.

So long as the fullness of ordained responsibility remains intact – as in the college of bishops with and under the bishop of Rome – lesser participations in ordained ministry can be redistributed. The 'powers' presently distributed within the three ministries of bishop, presbyter and deacon would live on but enshrined within a wider variety of ordained ministries. This would open up significant new pastoral opportunities, and incorporate a wider range of charisms into ordained ministry.

Whatever about that, fifty years ago, the International Theological Commission said "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 Priestly Ministry*, pp 99,100).