

A THEOLOGY OF MINISTRY

By JOHN A. COLEMAN

IN THE LAST several years there has been a proliferation of excellent books and articles proposing a fundamental theology of ministry. Those by Edward Schillebeeckx, Bernard Cooke and Thomas O'Meara are among the best.¹ Each of these authors insists that our thinking on ministry begin some place else, with a prior question. David Power, the Irish liturgist, puts this question well in his study, *Gifts that differ: lay ministries established and unestablished*. 'The most important question about ministries is the question about the existence and functioning of a Christian community as a whole'.²

In a similar way, Bernard Cooke argues that since the formation of community based on the gospel is the goal of every Christian ministry, our appropriate first question must be: 'To what kind of community is Christian ministry directed?'³ We can take as our first principle for a theology of ministry, then, that the ministerial community is prior to its ministers. Power pursues this insight. 'Ministeriality is a quality of the church community as a unit or a body before it is a predicate of any of its members'.⁴ The bishops of France caught this theme of the priority of the ministerial community in their 1973 pastoral document, *Tous responsables dans l'Eglise? Le ministère presbytéral dans l'Eglise toute entière ministérielle*. They insist that the whole Church is and ought to be ministerial!

Qualities of the Church such as apostolicity, mission, communion, sacramentality, service, discipleship, holiness, diversity and rootedness in the gift of the Spirit will determine and shape any theology of ministry. Thus Thomas O'Meara in his book, *Theology of ministry*, asserts that 'thinking about ministry is theology reflecting upon the Church'.⁵ Moreover, ministry, like the Church, for all its sociological, cultural and human determinants, is both mystery and grace. O'Meara helpfully reminds us that 'a fundamental theology of ministry is ultimately a theology of grace'.⁶ For 'the kingdom of God is the source, the milieu, the goal of ministry. The presence of God in our complex world enables ministry, gives

ministry its life and its freedom'.⁷ Ministry is a grace and gift of God's Spirit to the Church and the world. Following this insight that the Church exists for the world, David Power makes more precise his prior question about ministry: 'This is the really basic question about ecclesial ministry: how does a church community evangelize the human community and what shape do ministries take when this is its concern?'⁸

Ministry or ministries?

In this context of rooting our theology of ministry in the Church as the deacon and servant of the Spirit of Jesus, we would probably do well to recall the pauline reminder of the diversity of ministries (1 Cor 12, 1. 5-11). There is no 'ministry in general'! Instead, ministerial service, grounded in ordination, commission or charism, is always to some precise task or function of building up the Body of Christ. Recent historical and biblical studies of ministry have shown that the charisms of ministry are meant to be and have been plural. They do not exist uniquely or pre-eminently in any one ministry, not in priesthood nor even in episcopacy or the papacy. Every ministry in the Church is a limited gift and service within a wider body containing a rich variety of ministerial gifts. None contain nor exhaust the fulness of ministry. It is important, then, to speak of ministries in the plural to avoid the danger of identifying ministry with any one office or charism in the Church. This identification would be a species of reductionism of the *pleroma* of ministries the Spirit grants to the Church.

Indeed, as the bishops of Italy noted in a report at their general assembly held in 1974, *Evangelizzazione e sacramenti*, the nature of the Church as a communion is *better* realized through a rich variety of ministries. This variety of lay ministries, moreover, according to the italian bishops, gives greater embodiment to the sacramentality of the Church as the living Body of the risen Christ.

All ministries exist for the community as service, to build up the Body of Christ. Ministry consists, essentially, in leadership and special service roles in the community to further the gospel. Edward Schillebeeckx in his study, *Ministry: leadership in the community of Jesus Christ*, points out that 'in the New Testament the ministry did not form or develop from and around the eucharist but from the formation of the community'.⁹

Although the gifts of ministry are diverse, they are complementary and unified in the Spirit of Jesus. Their very diversity,

furthermore, demands that there always exist the indispensable ministry of overseeing the many ministries. Since all ministries exist for the community, 'for all its pluriformity, *the ministry in the church is essentially collegiality*, i.e. the solidarity of Christians equipped with different charismata of ministry'.¹⁰

Complementarity of ordained and non-ordained ministries

In this understanding of the whole Church as ministerial, ordained and non-ordained ministry should be viewed as complementary. There is a distinctiveness about ordained ministry but the most important distinction is not between the ordained and the laity. The truly important pairing is ministry and community. Probably no theologian has contributed more to a fundamental theology of lay ministry or to a theology of ordination than the french Dominican, Yves Congar. Fr Congar states in his book, *Ministères et communion ecclesiale*:

The Church is not built up merely by the acts of official ministers of the presbyterate but by many kinds of services, more or less stable or occasional, more or less spontaneous or recognized, some even consecrated by sacramental ordination. These services exist . . . They exist even if they are not called by their rightful name, ministries, nor have their true place and status in ecclesiology . . . Eventually one sees that the decisive pair is not '*priesthood-laity*' as I used in my book on the laity, but much more that of *ministries* or service and *community*.

We can say, in short, that Jesus instituted a structured community, a community holy, priestly, prophetic, missionary, apostolic with its centre, ministers, some freely raised up by the Spirit, others ordained by the imposition of hands.¹¹

Ministry defined

We are now ready for a definition of ministry. The definition provided by Thomas O'Meara is succinct and useful. 'Ministry is (1) doing something; (2) for the advent of the kingdom; (3) in public; (4) on behalf of a christian community; (5) which is a gift received in faith, baptism or ordination; and which is (6) an activity with its own limits and identity within a diversity of ministerial actions'.¹²

Ministry is *doing something*. It is not primarily a status or lifestyle. Nor is it essentially a sacred office. Christian ministry is an

action. Ministries are functional. They are a concrete service to the community in the power and name of the gospel. Throughout history the forms and functions of ministry show great variety. Indeed, as O'Meara notes, even the three forms of ordained ministry (episcopacy, presbyterate and diaconate) which have survived the storms of centuries have undergone many mutations. Historical evidence derived from New Testament sources and later periods makes it very difficult to establish an unchanging 'essence' for any ministry. Historical variability, mutations, and anomalies abound in the record.

Despite the pluriformity and historical mutation, Bernard Cooke in his ground-breaking book, *Ministry to word and sacraments*, helpfully distinguishes five generic functions in ministry: (1) ministry as formation of community, including leadership, prophecy, supervision, governing; (2) the ministry to God's word in its many forms of teaching, witness, spiritual guidance, preaching, theology; (3) ministry as service to the people of God and to human need, including both service to individuals in need as well as attention to oppressive structures which create human distress; (4) the christian ministry to God's judgment; (5) ministry to the Church's sacramentality.¹³

As these categories of Cooke make evident, the specialized something that various ministries do is always *for the advent of the kingdom*. O'Meara's third and fourth elements for a definition of ministry, 'in public' and 'on behalf of a christian community', remind us that not everything a Christian does is ministry. The term ministry has become too loosely used to refer to everything connected with the ordinary exercise of christian life. It is dangerous, however, to inflate the term. Our baptism is the essential opening to ministry. But ministry refers to a precise and special charism, service, commission, vocation or ordination as a way of living out and embodying our baptismal call. Hence, the public nature of ministry (to, for and from the Church) will often be signified by a special naming of the ministry and the designation of ministers will occur publicly by installation, ordination, commission or blessing. As O'Meara wisely reminds us, 'when all is ministry, ministry fades away'.¹⁴

Furthermore, ministry is a gift received in faith, baptism, charism or ordination. It is a call to be tested and is subject to judgment, to the multiple judgments of personal inclination, performance, the acceptance by the community and the concurring judgment of the

ministries of overseeing and co-ordinating leadership in the Church: pope, bishop and presbyter-pastor.

Finally, every ministry contains its own limits and identity within a diversity of ministerial actions. None contains ministry as a *pleroma*. None is the radical source of ministry since Christ and the Holy Spirit are that radical source. Nor is all ministry to be reduced to either ordination or office in the Church. Ordination refers to office (which is a permanent and stable ministry) but not every ministry is full-time, permanent or attached to office, commission or delegation. The Holy Spirit continually raises up new ministries. Indeed, our present context for a theology of ministry exhibits a notable expansion of ministry, an expansion both of the number of people ministering and of the range, number and type of specialized ministries. We have seen new specialized ministries to marriage, social justice, spiritual guidance, the sick, marginal and alienated Christians, an expansion of the broad ministries of healing and teaching. Neither decline nor shrinkage but an extraordinary explosion of ministry typifies the time in which we live.

I have mentioned that various recent studies of scripture and history witness to the evidence of a great variety, flux and mutation in forms and types of ministry. It is quite impossible to find, for example, in scripture one unchanging form of ministry. Thus, St Paul gives us varying lists of ministries in Romans 12, 4-8; 1 Corinthians 12, 4-12 and Ephesians 4, 11-14. In some places in the New Testament the list highlights the triad: apostle, prophet and teacher. In other places, the list stresses overseer (bishop?), elder (presbyter?) and deacon. As is well known, the office of deacon, so flourishing in the earlier Church, died out for centuries until it was revived after the Second Vatican Council.

Reflecting on this variety to be found within the canon of scripture and in the historical record, Edward Schillebeeckx has argued that, although ministry is of the essence of the Church in order 'to keep the community on apostolic lines', giving any specific form and function to ministry is largely a pastoral question to be determined by pastoral need, cultural context and historical discernment.¹⁵ Thus, the inclusion of women in prime ministries might be a scandal in some cultures. In others their exclusion may obscure the very message of the gospel. Schillebeeckx also insists that the real meaning of the phrase, 'divinely instituted', when it refers to ministry, means that the authority of the Church to define

its own church order, within the general guidelines of the gospel, is directly willed by God.

Ordained ministry in the Church

There are several settled benchmarks from scripture, tradition and experience for any renewed theology of orders in the contemporary Church. I have already noted that scripture scholars, both catholic and protestant, find it difficult to sort out, with certainty, the precise distinctions and inter-relations between apostles, prophets and teachers and bishops, pastors, elders and deacons in the early Church. Thus, for example, while the *Didache* ranks prophets and teachers above deacons and bishops, 'we can ask whether these terms always designate two distinct classes of persons or whether a distinction in function is primarily indicated'.¹⁶ In some early documents the functions of deacons and bishops seem conflated; in others, the presbyters seemed to be the ones who exercise a ruling function while the episcopacy represented those who preside at eucharist. It is difficult with complete clarity to divide the various orders.

Much of this fluidity and flexibility concerning the three ranks of ordination continued, even after the witness to the rise of a strong notion of the episcopate in certain parts of the Church as evidenced by the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, until almost the end of the third century. Toward the end of the third century, however, there emerged greater clarity about the threefold corporate ministry of bishops, presbyters and deacons. Perhaps the best summary judgment about the emergence and definition of these three distinct orders in the early Church is that of the Harvard church historian, George H. Williams, who sees the ranking and assigning of functions to the three orders as 'the constitutional solution to a pastoral problem'.¹⁷

We find in this fine phrase of Williams a first theological benchmark for any theology of ordained ministry. The gradual assigning of permanent functions to a given order derives from the Church's right to propose its own, revisable, constitutional solutions to the pastoral problem of guaranteeing a permanency, stability and public character to those ministries essential to the life and flourishing of the Church. The 'divine institution' or ordination, then, consists in the implied divine will for the Church to devise those constitutional, if revisable, orders necessary for the Church to guarantee the continuance of Christ's ministry. On its

part, the Church retains a certain freedom to experiment, learn from practical experience and renovate the forms of ordination which will guarantee the authentic teaching, ruling, sanctifying and pastoral tasks of the Church.

In this view, the purpose of ordination is to guarantee requisite *order* ('a constitutional solution') in the Church against chaos, instability or the threatened loss of essential pastoral functions. Increasingly, as a result of a decade-long series of bi-lateral ecumenical conversations about ministry and ordination in the Church, Williams's judgment represents an ecumenical consensus. The Churches are free, within very broad limits set by the gospel and tradition, to devise that form of polity and ordered ministry which perpetuates for new generations the apostolic witness in preaching, teaching, charity and ways of sanctifying life. God wills that the Churches be entitled to devise constitutional solutions for real pastoral problems. He wills the continuance of Christ's ministry in appropriate forms for each new age and culture.

Secondly, the key phrase in Williams's definition points to an essential connection between any constitutional provision and understanding of ordination and the permanent problems and tasks faced by the Church. Teaching, apostolic witness, evangelization, sacramental celebration of life, preaching the word of God and the works of charity have emerged, from New Testament times on, as essential pastoral tasks which demand a permanency, stability and public character for ministries such as episcopacy, presbyterate and diaconate. These three ministries are ordered ways to guarantee by constitution, i.e. by ordination, that there will be continued, focused attention to and responsibility for the permanent pastoral needs of the Church. It is not the case, of course, that only bishops, presbyters and deacons are responsible for these pastoral tasks. In a profound sense, everyone in the Church is responsible—gifted and called—to contribute to these pastoral tasks of teaching, apostolic witness, evangelization, charity, sacramental celebration of life and preaching of the word. But the constitutional enablement of the three permanent orders of episcopacy, presbyterate and diaconate provides at least a minimal guarantee that these essential pastoral functions in the Church will be stably and permanently provided.

The root in the word ordination, *ordo*, providing an ordered constitutional provision for the permanency, stability and public character of ministries essential to the life of the Church, is the first

benchmark for any theology of ordained ministry. Sacramentality is the second. Abiding church tradition has seen the three orders as more than mere functional specializations. Tradition speaks of these three orders as sacraments. First, the orders of episcopacy, presbyterate and diaconate are oriented toward a ministry to the sacramental life of the Church, to baptism, eucharist, the anointing of the sick, reconciliation. Moreover, they are *focused signs* of the teaching, ruling, preaching and sanctifying nature of the Church. Members of these orders are 'representative types', that is, signs of the Church's care to continue the work and ministry of Christ. They are living embodiments of the Church's sign value to the world. As 'representative types', they embody in persons and in collegial orders the fundamental sacramentality of the Church in its ministry to the world.

Note carefully that it is not the case that ordained ministers have some quality or power that is totally lacking to the non-ordained ministers or persons in the Church. Ordination versus non-ordination is not and never can be a zero-sum game. But the 'representative types' are embodiments, foci, visible signs of Christ's gift and commission to the whole Church. They represent, in focused form, the radical potentiality of every member of the Church. There is a priesthood of all believers and a call to all Christians, through baptism, to be holy, ministerial, evangelical, apostolic and caritative. There is also a special focused and sacramental ministry in 'representative types' who constitute membership in the three orders of ordination as the Church's constitutional guarantee of an essential minimum of ministry.

A third benchmark for a theology of ordained ministry would look to the collegial nature of each of the orders. It is not as lone individuals but profoundly as a collective *ordo*, as a *collegium* or college (itself part of the larger body of the Church) that bishops, presbyters and deacons represent the embodied and ordered intention of the Church to continue, at least minimally, the essential pastoral tasks of the people of God. These orders or colleges perform an essential function for stimulating, orchestrating and co-ordinating (the function of overseers) the other ministries in the Church.

Non-ordained ministry in the Church

As we have seen, every Christian may be called to a precise ministry in the Church. Some will be called to recognized offices

in the Church such as the two at present officially recognized as appropriately lay offices: acolyte and lector. It is worth recalling that when he promulgated the *motu proprio*, *Ministeria quaedam* in 1972, Pope Paul VI noted that 'besides the offices common to the latin Church, (i.e. ordained offices and lector and acolyte) there is nothing to prevent episcopal conferences from requesting others of the Apostolic See, if they judge the establishment of such offices in their region to be necessary or very useful'. Among such possible offices, the Pope explicitly mentioned catechists and the promotion of the works of charity.

At present only the offices of lector and acolyte represent formally and officially recognized lay offices in the Church. Unfortunately, women, for no discernible theological reason, are excluded from these offices. Nothing prevents national episcopacies from discerning the need for other permanent lay ministerial offices. Thus, for example, the german bishops have developed the three non-ordained roles of 'pastoral assistant' (devoted to teaching, catechesis and counselling), 'community assistant' (devoted to parish and liturgical work) and 'administrative assistant' (devoted to administering the parish). As yet these remain *ad hoc* functions and are not officially offices in the Church. In Africa the function of the catechist, and in Latin America those of the 'delegates of the word' and 'animators of the faith' have emerged as new functions which might become permanent and stable offices.

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences meeting in Hong Kong in 1977 drew up two lists of ministries. The first of these listings reads as follows:

Leadership roles in the christian communities are slowly emerging. Among the more important services and functions that are developing are community leaders, ministers of the eucharist, prayer leaders, catechist, treasurer, social worker, youth leader, educator, facilitator or harmonizer of differences, etc.

The other list—which in part overlaps the first—includes: evangelist, catechist, ministers for liturgy, ministry of family apostolate, ministry of healing, ministry of inter-religious dialogue, ministry of social concern, ministry for youth, ministry to workers, ministry for education, community builders, ministry of communication and ministry of pastoral-community leadership.¹⁸

Clearly, the Church in England, France or Kenya might draw up a very different list of specialized roles and ministries essential or useful to carry on, in another context, the permanent apostolic tasks of the Church. While the forms and types of ministry vary over time and in diverse cultures, Peter Chirico has argued in a recent article of *The Clergy Review* that 'the first and most important constant (in ministry) is that the purpose of all ministry is to facilitate the internalization of the enduring values of the christian tradition'.¹⁹

Each national Church, and perhaps each diocese within each Church, needs to ask precisely which specialized ministries will be useful or necessary to help it achieve that internalization (in attitude and deed) of the enduring values of the christian tradition. Then it must see to the selection, training and commissioning ('in public' and 'on behalf of the christian community') of adequate numbers of lectors, administrators, teachers, healers, social justice ministers etc. The general principle behind the emergence of new specialized ministries has been well stated by Chirico: 'When a recurring gospel need meets a corresponding skill and willingness to serve, a specialized ministry can emerge and be officially sanctioned by the Church'.²⁰

Chirico reminds us that there are few intrinsic limits to the ramification of specialized ministries. Indeed, 'due to the complexifications of life and the immense increase in knowledge, we can expect the number of specialized ministries in the Church to keep increasing'.²¹ But as he argues, whatever the range and number of specialized ministries,

One ministry must always exist no matter what the circumstances of time and place. This is the overseeing ministry, the ministry of leadership of the whole people of God in the process of becoming more deeply a christian community . . . This is a unifying ministry. It co-ordinates, facilitates, gives common direction and purpose to all other ministries and to the actions of the faithful.²²

Such a ministry flows from ordination. Chirico also insists, as does Schillebeeckx, that throughout christian history there has been an intimate inter-relationship between the role one exercises in life and the role one has in the liturgy. Hence, 'the leader of the local community's liturgy has been the leader of the local community's christian life'.²³ There are three anomalies in ministry: a presider

of the liturgy who does not have roots in some other ministerial leadership role in the local community; a clear leader of the ministerial life of the local community who cannot be ordained to preside in liturgy; and communities with clear local ministerial leadership which are denied the eucharist.

Conclusion

I have insisted that a theology of ministry is rooted in a theology of the Church and of grace, the charisms of the Spirit. In our own time, when many note a 'shortage' of clergy, we are seeing a veritable explosion of specialized—mostly lay—ministries. This is as it should be since the whole Church is ministerial. Ministry is neither a rare vocation nor a special office. Ministry belongs to Christ's promise of a new covenant. Traditionally, the office of overseer of ministries has been guaranteed by ordination. There could be other offices (permanent and stable) in the Church.

Although ministry flows from and is certified in the Church, it is destined to serve the entirety of humanity. All are baptized in the Church. Almost all are given special charisms. Many of these charisms will be public and on behalf of the christian community. There is no ministry in general. Although the ministry of overseer and co-ordinator/ animator of other specialized ministries occupies a pride of place among ministries, it is a limited and special ministry. As Paul exhorts us, 'Honour the various spiritual gifts . . . There are many different spiritual gifts but one and the same spirit . . . And all these gifts are the work of one and the same spirit' (1 Cor 12, 1-11), building up the Body of Christ.

NOTES

¹ Schillebeeckx, Edward: *Ministry: leadership in the community of Jesus Christ* (New York, Crossroad, 1982); Cooke, Bernard: *Ministry to word and sacraments* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1976); O'Meara, Thomas: *Theology of ministry* (New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1983).

² Power, David: *Gifts that differ: lay ministries established and unestablished* (New York, Puebla, 1980), p 29.

³ Cooke, *op. cit.*, p 36.

⁴ Power, *op. cit.*, p 106.

⁵ O'Meara, *op. cit.*, p 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 29.

⁸ Power, *op. cit.*, p 20.

⁹ Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, p 147.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 46. Italics mine.

¹¹ Congar, Yves: *Ministères et communion ecclesiale* (Paris, 1971), p 19. Italics mine.

¹² O'Meara, *op. cit.*, p 136.

¹³ Cf Cooke, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

¹⁴ O'Meara, *op. cit.*, p 159.

¹⁵ Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, p 18.

¹⁶ Knox, John: 'The ministry in the primitive Church', in Niebuhr, H. Richard, and Williams, Daniel Day, eds.: *The ministry in historical perspective* (New York, Harper Bros., 1956) p 53.

¹⁷ Williams, George: 'Ministry in the ante-nicene Church' in Niebuhr and Williams, eds., *op. cit.*, p 58.

¹⁸ As cited in Power, *op. cit.*, pp 20-21.

¹⁹ Chirico, Peter, S.S.: 'Pastoral ministry in a time of priest shortage', *The Clergy Review*, vol LXIX no 3, March 1984, p 81.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p 82.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p 84.

²² *Ibid.*, p 82.

²³ *Ibid.*, p 82.

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