

# Priestly ministry at the service of ecclesial communion

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The future of the mission of the Church and Christian communities will come about through a development of a missionary consciousness that involves all of those who are baptized.

"Pastoral leadership, in the sense of specific ministries, is now in the hands of the laity, religious men and women, and priests. The tension between the clergy and the laity is gradually giving way to a collaboration which bears witness to the communion of persons in the Church."<sup>1</sup>

Such was Msgr. Bernard Hubert's address to the Holy Father in the name of the bishops of Québec, during the *ad limina* visit in May 1993. His account reflects *the new ministerial practices*<sup>2</sup> that are increasingly on the rise in the various dioceses. It is worth remarking that these new practices do not intend to establish a temporary substitute leadership while awaiting an increase of vocations to the priesthood. They carry out an understanding of the Church-communion which attempts to inte-

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<sup>1</sup>"The Visit of the bishops of Québec to Rome, Monseigneur Bernard Hubert's address to Pope John Paul II," in *l'Église de Montréal*, 27 May 1993, 520.

<sup>2</sup>The Committee of Ministers of the Bishops' Assembly of Québec, *Les nouvelles pratiques ministérielles* (Fides, 1993).

grate the various ministries in the service of the common mission.

As legitimate as it may be, this understanding has its limits and dangers. To be persuaded of these dangers, it is enough to cast a glance at *Risquer l'avenir*<sup>3</sup> [Risking the Future], which pictures the future of Christian communities almost by making an abstraction of the specific role of the priests. A new leadership of pastoral agents will thus take over for the aging clergy. Some would no doubt wish to turn the page and bid farewell to the clericalism that has characterized the Church's development in our country. But do we not risk compromising the future if we do not give the priestly ministry its due place?

It goes without saying that such an evolution in the understanding of the ministry does not occur without shocks and bruises. The priests in the field experience it vividly. Many, even among those most open to collaboration with the laity in pastoral matters, live the readjustments of ministerial responsibilities only painfully. Confronting the vagueness of certain situations, they experience frustrations and begin to ask questions about their identity. Especially when they happen to be displaced by "lay pastors" whose spiritual formation does not compare with theological competence, and who threaten to replace the old clericalism with another of equally shabby quality.

Even if we understand that the urgency of the needs often requires the improvisation of solutions, it is important to reflect upon this unfolding evolution and to bring a theological perspective to it in order better to understand the specificity of an ordained ministry that stands within an entirely ministerial Church. A committee of formation directors from the Grand Séminaire of Québec presented a reflection of high quality on the *ministerial priesthood today*.<sup>4</sup> In it, we find a good diagnosis of our current situation and the desire to open an ecclesial debate over the place of the ordained ministry in our local communities. Their invitation to dialogue warrants a continuation of the reflection on the identity of *ordained ministers in a Church-communion*.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>*Risquer l'avenir*, The Research Committee of the bishops' Assembly of Québec on local Christian communities (Fides, 1992).

<sup>4</sup>*Le ministère presbytéral aujourd'hui*, "Des responsables de formation s'interrogent," Grand Séminaire de Québec. Special issue of *Pastorale Québec*, May 1992, 31.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. *Les ministres ordonnés dans une Eglise-communion*, Theological Note of the Branch of Doctrinal Studies of the Conference of the Bishops of France, *La Documentation catholique*, 2 May 1993, no. 2071.

### 1) The priestly ministry in question

The profound changes that have marked Québec in the past thirty years have put into question not only the priestly ministry but also most of the values that support the strict interrelation between the Church and society. The massive pressure of a democratic and pluralistic culture has shaken the too-exclusive clerical authority of a past age and has broken up Christian communities. The symbolic figure of the priest has almost ceased to play a key role in gathering the community together. The figure has been attacked and partially destroyed, but has not been replaced. Many have the impression that it is not the improvisation of a lay pastoral leadership that will effect the change. Such a leadership may serve provisionally to seal the gaps, but will it succeed in galvanizing the troops? Don't communities risk being set adrift, becoming endangered species?

In order to attain an accurate assessment of what is at stake in the progressive disappearance of the clergy, we must come to see that the calling into question of the priestly ministry is a symptom of a much more profound crisis for the community of faith. The authors of *Risquer l'Avenir* are aware of this, and that is why they have resolutely placed their emphasis on adult education in the faith. We can have our doubts about their approaches to a solution insofar as these approaches neglect the essential role of priests, but we can only agree with the idea of a more vigorous adult education in the faith within delimited groups who will become bearers of the Word in the service of a society lacking in hope.

The profound changes that are transforming the face of the Church of Québec must be understood and appreciated on the basis of the total context of modernity. The contemporary crisis of faith and culture is a crisis of humanity itself, a spiritual crisis that reaches into the deepest foundations of the Christian identity. Those who have been called the masters of suspicion, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, have torn to pieces a certain image of God as paternalistic and oppressive. Man has emerged from this revolution emancipated, but amputated of his transcendental dimension and having lost his fundamental dignity. That is why the erosion of values continues in its course and gives rise more and more to a depressive society, no longer capable of offering ideals to the youth. The suicide of so many young people is no doubt the most dramatic expression of this problem.

The impact of modernity has provoked in the recesses of conscience not only a weakening of values but in particular a crisis of paternity and filiation. A culture that is egalitarian and hostile to differences has disrupted familial relations and has made any feeling of dependence unbearable. The principal challenge that modernity poses to Christianity is that of the opposition between the autonomy of conscience and the authority of Revelation. A prodigious duel is now underway between a freedom of autonomy, which is the legacy of modernity, and a freedom of communion, which the grace of Christ has introduced into the world. The Church, a community of faith and salvation, lives the drama of this confrontation. She must fulfill her mission by integrating the legitimate aspirations of modern man into a renewed vision of Christian freedom.

It is within this context of spiritual and cultural crisis that the urgency of a new evangelization incites pastors to invent new means, to promote a new language, and to awaken a new vigor in the proclamation of the faith. Following John Paul II, the bishops of Québec are quite aware of the urgency of such an evangelization and of the means necessary to promote it. From the human perspective, the survival of the communities and the institution depends on a new, shared pastoral leadership, centered on an authentic man-woman partnership, which is necessary as much from the point of view of the surrounding culture as from the point of view of the concrete needs of the Church.

The search for new leadership in this sense includes both preserving certain acquisitions and dispelling certain ambiguities. On the one hand, the participation of the laity in evangelization and the pastoral mission is not a temporary need but belongs to the witness of the faith commanded by baptism and confirmation. On the other hand, the discussion over lay participation in pastoral leadership carries ambiguities. In effect, to the extent that this participation is presented as a "promotion" of the laity, we risk losing sight of the proper mission of the laity played out at the heart of the world, in the spheres of work, family, economy, communication, and politics. The laity have no need to become clericalized in order to be appreciated. To see their promotion in pastoral roles is a final residue of clericalism.

Wherever developments are set into place without a concern for the confusion of roles between the clergy and lay, conflicts occur which affect the relations between priests and pastoral agents. The result is a loss of enthusiasm on both sides,

to say nothing of the resignations of those who grow weary of being recognized in theory and neglected in practice. When, for example, in parish activities, non-ordained ministers assume the primary responsibility for a Christian community and fulfill almost the same functions as the priests, the question eventually arises with force: Is it necessary to have priests? Is it not possible to organize communities without them? What is their unique contribution that makes them indispensable?

## 2) *The ordained ministry in the Church-communion*

If the priest has lost his traditional leadership in our society, it is certainly due in part to the emancipation of the conscience rising in the wake of the influence of modernity. This influence has entailed a vertiginous decline in a sense of belonging to the Church-institution which those baptized ought to have. But all of the Church's problems do not depend only on cultural changes. We must recognize that the calling into question of the ordained ministry is also due to certain inadequate theological models.

The Tradition issuing from the Council of Trent has privileged the "sacerdotal" model of the priest, which placed emphasis on the dimension of worship. In restoring the baptismal priesthood to value, the Second Vatican Council has resituated and in a certain sense relativized the priestly ministry. While, before, priests alone were priests and everything came through them, we have now become more aware that all those baptized are priests, prophets, and kings and that the ordained ministers are the servants of this common priesthood. The "sacerdotal" model of the priest, which placed him at the summit of the pyramid, has yielded to the "ministerial" model which places him more clearly within and at the service of the community.

The priestly model of the Second Vatican Council rests on the idea of a formation of priests into "Christ the Priest in order to render them able to act in the name of Christ the Head in person" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* [=PO], 2).<sup>6</sup> This profound vision, which is taken up and developed in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, might also lend itself to abusive interpretations. If a pneumatology is lacking, this model can reinforce an "authoritarian" style

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Rémi Parent, *Prêtres et évêques, le service de la présidence ecclésiale* (Ed. Paulines-Cerf, 1992), 141ff., 186ff.

of pastoral leadership which would leave little room for other charisms. This is why we are presently seeking to reintegrate this model into an ecclesiology of communion.

The new model of pastoral leadership, which has been emerging the past few years under the pressure of a theology of ministries, possesses certain ambiguities itself. Understood along the lines of chairmanship, it emphasizes the function of animating the community through a duly mandated responsible. The pastor, whether a man or a woman, becomes the one who presides over a community, independently of his or her sacramental identity. In this line of interpretation, the risk is that we will lose the sacramental sense of the presence of the priest, and dilute the specificity of the ordained ministry with a general theory of ministries.

These different models contain lacunae that can be filled, I believe, by taking up the model of Vatican II and situating it more explicitly within the trinitarian framework of its ecclesiology of communion.<sup>7</sup> It is only on the basis of the trinitarian Mystery that the mission of the priest within the encompassing mission of the Church becomes meaningful and fruitful. We must now dwell on this point in order to propose a trinitarian model of integration of the priestly ministry within the Church which is entirely ministerial.

a) *The Church-communion: Sacramentum trinitatis*

The ecclesiology of communion that presided at the renewal of ministries and ecumenism is condensed in two key texts from the Second Vatican Council: "The Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men" (LG, 1); "This is the sacred mystery of the unity of the Church, in Christ and through Christ, with the Holy Spirit energizing its various functions. The highest exemplar and source of this mystery is the unity, in the Trinity of Persons, of one God, the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit" (*Decree on Ecumenism*, 2).

The Church is a sacrament of the intimate union of humanity with God. Her profound unity arises from the presence of the Trinity in her bosom, which acts through the divine missions of Christ and the Spirit. The Church is not a society constructed upon the model of human societies; she is a Commu-

nion, at once divine and human, whose vital principle is the presence of the divine Persons that dwell within her and guide her from within.

Against this backdrop of the Church as sacrament of the Trinity, the mission of the ecclesial communion appears as a participation and in some sense an actualization of the divine missions of the Word and the Spirit. Through the different ecclesial ministries of education, sanctification, government, and charity, the Father continues to send his Son and his Spirit into the world in order to bring about salvation. Priests are not the only ones who extend Christ's mission. But they play a specific role here, even while the whole Body participates in the mission of the Head in the activity of the Spirit.

If the Church is the manifestation of trinitarian communion for the salvation of the world, it follows that the trinitarian relations must be reflected in the exchanges that the ecclesial community lives out at the heart of its mission. The baptized and the ordained ministers participate, each in their own way, in these relations. Through baptism, one is introduced into the mystery of divine filiation. Through confirmation, one is inserted into the mission of the Spirit. If this is so, would it not be true that the sacrament of Holy Orders is a particular sign of the divine paternity that is given to the Church in Jesus Christ? Does not the fundamental distinction that this sacrament establishes between the clergy and lay refer back to a properly theological foundation? This is the hypothesis I offer for reflection, drawing upon *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV).

b) *The Priest, sacrament of Christ the Head*

"The priestly identity—as the synod Fathers wrote—like all Christian identity, takes its source in the Most Holy Trinity" (PDV, 12). "It has its ultimate source in the love of the Father" (18) who sends his Son, arrayed with his authority, to gather into a unity the scattered children of God. Through their sacramental consecration, priests participate "in the authority with which Jesus Christ, through his Spirit, guides the Church" (PDV, 21).

"Priests are ministers of Christ the Head for the sake of building and strengthening his entire Body, the Church, as co-operators in the episcopal Order" (PO, 12). But what does it mean to say "ministers of Christ the Head"? What does this expression mean, which seeks to specify the proper charism of

<sup>7</sup>Cf. P. Drilling, *Trinity and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

bishops and priests?<sup>8</sup> John Paul II's apostolic exhortation speaks of the priest's participation in "Christ's own mission," and underscores the fact that, by virtue of his ordination, the priest is situated such that he *stands before the Church*, as the "sign of the absolute priority and the gratuity of grace, which is given to the Church through the resurrected Christ" (PDV, 16).

This is true, and requires the attention of anyone who would attempt to characterize the specificity of the ordained minister in a Church-communion. But it seems to me that there exists the possibility of further specification in drawing out the trinitarian logic of the Church-communion: "The Church, a 'people reunited in the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,' carries with her the mystery of the Father who, without being called or sent by anyone (cf., Rom 11:33-35), calls the whole world to sanctify his name and to fulfill his will" (PDV, 35). In the sacramental economy of the divine missions, the sign of the Origin, the sacrament of the Head, the reference to the Principle without principle, in short, the sign of the fontal Otherness of the Father cannot be lacking in the event of the trinitarian gift: here, I believe, lies the ultimate meaning of the ordained ministry.

In coming to the world, Christ baptizes his disciples in the Spirit of his filiation. He thus communicates to them a participation in his eternal priesthood, in his mediation of the Spirit whom he receives from the Father. But Christ reveals much more than his divine filiation. As the one sent by the Father, he represents the Father, he incarnates in a certain sense the Father's supreme authority; his pastoral mission invests him with the ministry of representing the Father in his state of being the incarnate Word. That is what one might call his originating priestly being, in order to distinguish it from his filiation as such, which one might designate as his originated priestly being.<sup>9</sup>

That is why we can interpret the participation of the ordained ministry in Christ the Head as a sacramental relationship with him who is the Head of the Son, with him who sends the Son and hands over his authority to him. Holy Orders

<sup>8</sup>The deacon is ordained to signify sacramentally Christ the servant. For this reason, the deacon warrants a separate treatment, which lies beyond the limits of our present topic.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Louis-Paul Gauvreau, p.s.s., "Lecture sacerdotale du ministère," in *Prêtres, pour quelle mission?* (Bellarmin, 1989), 170ff.

would thus be the sacrament of Christ the Shepherd insofar as he is the originating priest, that is, the sign of the One who sends him: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). The priest's ministry thus actualizes the ministry of Christ insofar as he represents the authority of the Father who causes the growth of the sons and daughters of God. We recall in passing that the word "authority" does not indicate a relationship of domination, which is actually a perversion of authority; "*au-toritas*" comes from *augere*, which means to increase growth.

With such a theological background, we can specify the essential difference, which is not merely difference of degree, between baptismal priesthood and the ordained ministry. The ordained ministry no longer monopolizes the figure of Christ the Head as if it belonged to the ordained ministry alone. Whoever is baptised, by virtue of baptism, is also conformed to Christ the Head and represents Christ, in his own way, in the world. He too can exercise an authentic Christian leadership *in the name of Jesus*.<sup>10</sup> The essential difference proceeds from the sacramental relationship to the mystery of the Father, which belongs to what we have called the originating priesthood of Christ. This specificity gives the ordained ministry its proper place in the ecclesial communion at the service of the other ministers, in dependence on the Spirit of the Father and the Son who harmonizes all of the ecclesial ministries.

Such a vision may seem to implicate the divine persons too much in the contingencies of human history and the fluctuations of ministries. Is it not enough to know that the Spirit has been given to us and that he allows us a great margin of freedom to organize the various ministries? Do we not risk shutting off an unforeseeable evolution because of an a priori considerations? Will we not end up, in this sense, preserving despite everything a certain predominance of the ordained ministry, who hold first rank by clinging to the Father?

The stakes may seem high, indeed, and even dangerous, considering the possibilities of the reception of such a perspective in a culture marked by a democratic spirit and the irreversible promotion of the woman. But the challenges that now confront us leave us no choice. If we wish to respond to the

<sup>10</sup>Henri Nouwen, *Au nom de Jésus, Réflexions sur le leadership chrétien* (Novalis, 1991).

demands of modern culture, we must draw creative intuitions from the center of the faith which will allow us, in depth, to reconcile the contrasting positions of ecclesialogists and pastoral practices.

### 3. A symphony of ministries

What is presently being sought is a new ecclesial leadership, that is, a new influence of the ecclesial communion on society. We are quite aware that the future of the mission of the Church and Christian communities will come about through a development of a missionary consciousness that involves all of those who are baptized. This is a fundamental acquisition which must be preserved at any price, but it must be preserved within a total respect for the difference and the complementarity between the clergy and laity.

That is why in the context in which the ecclesial mission of the laity is recognized, it has not seemed opportune to promote the laity by assimilating to it what specifies the ordained ministry, namely, the pastoral charism. In other words, it is better to characterize the priest by the title pastor, which is founded on a sacramental grace, and to promote the laity in its proper line of witnessing to and educating in the faith. It would be fitting, moreover, to recognize the contribution of the lay people mandated to animate the community perhaps by saying they are "entrusted with the community" [*chargé de communauté*] rather than calling them "lay pastors" or "community leaders" [*responsables de communauté*], expressions that are more likely to lend themselves to confusion with the role of the ordained ministers.

These clarifications are not meant to check, but rather facilitate, the establishing of pastoral committees in which the communion of ministers is presided over by an ordained minister. Such committees make visible the mystery of the Trinity at work in the harmonious practice of ministers in communion. They presuppose a clear distinction between respective roles and a respect for the differences of every order as well as human and charismatic complementarities.

What is most fundamental in the present situation of our secularized culture is the revitalization of baptismal faith. This implies, for priests and laity, a new awareness that we are all the humble ministers and instruments of a Mystery that transcends us but seeks, by means of us, to communicate itself to the

world. This means for everyone an understanding of a fundamental, and not only occasional, priest-lay partnership in the exercise of the mission of evangelization that is the Church's obligation. The spirit of rivalry surrounding the *pastoral* leadership must be overcome on all sides, and we must learn to think and act in terms of a hierarchical communion called for in the ecclesiology of Vatican II.

This should give rise to a new *ecclesial* leadership, a true "symphony of ministries" in the image of the trinitarian engagement in history. Such a *communitarian* leadership requires from each and every person an attitude of service and not a will to power, in order that, in the unity and diversity of the charisms, the Church may bear witness to the Love that founds her and animates her for the life of the world.

In the midst of the urgent situations that stand before us, we cannot forget the mystery that dwells in the Church and guides her future. The perspective offered here has sought to recall this mystery. It is perhaps fitting to conclude with an apparently impertinent question: Does our Church, in seeking pastoral leadership, allow sufficient space for the contemplation of the one thing necessary and for the pastoral care of consecrated vocations? It is possible to challenge the future on a solid foundation without a diligent cultivation of a marian attitude of contemplative availability [*disponibilité*] and without engaging a profound theological reflection on the stakes of the present hour?

The emergence of new priestly vocations for a Church-communion comes at such a cost. And so, too, does the hope for the world that awaits the coming of the Kingdom of God.\*—Translated by David Louis Schindler, Jr. □

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