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MISSION AND MINISTRY IN THE WAKE OF VATICAN II

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Abstract:

The term ministry has dominated much ecclesiological discourse post-Vatican II. Yet it is not clear that this dominance has its origins in the document of the Council. This paper argues for a clearer distinction between mission and ministry in the Church and for a fuller realisation of the significance of mission, which can be lost in the hegemony of ministry. It argues that the most significant aspect of lay participation in the life of the Church is not in ministry, but in their participation in the mission of the Church. This is supported by reference to the documents of Vatican II and other Church statements.

The 1960's witnessed a number of landmark events. The most obvious for our present conference was the Second Vatican Council. However two other events of significance for the Catholic world were the publication of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* [1] and *Sacramentum Mundi* [2], two major multi-volume multi-authored works which could tell us all we needed to know about our Catholic beliefs and heritage. It is instructive then to consider the entries in these two works on ministry and mission.

On ministry, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* has the telling heading, "Ministry, Protestant". There is simply no recognition of the use of the term in a Catholic setting. *Sacramentum Mundi* is even more concise – it has no entry on ministry at all. In the decade leading up to their final publications, the editors of these major works felt absolutely no need to include any entry on ministry in a Catholic context. This stands in some contrast to our present situation where one contemporary work, *Church: A Spirit Communion* by Michael Lawler and Thomas Shanahan, will declare, "Ministry is not something the Church-community does; it is something it is. Christ's Church is essentially ministerial". [3]

On mission we can at least find some positive material. *Sacramentum Mundi* does not have an entry on mission per se, but on Missions, which includes a section on "Church

and Mission". This describes "the missionary act [as] essentially ... the expansion of the Church among men, beyond its present boundaries". The context is clearly that of mission *ad gentes*. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* does have an entry on mission, which is described as primarily "spiritual and supernatural ... to procure the glory of God through the eternal salvation of all men". Nonetheless there is a "secondary and social mission" which consists of collaborating "with civic groups in laying the foundations for society". Significantly neither work mentions in their entry the symbol so central to the mission of Jesus, that of the Kingdom of God.

Clearly much has changed in the Catholic world since the publication of these two works. Much of the change can be located in the documents of Vatican II, but to some extent these words took on a life of their own, sometimes moving along trajectories found in those documents, and sometimes driven by other cultural and social forces.

The aim of this paper is to explore some of this story, of the shifts in terms and their meanings, and how and why some of these shifts may have come about. In the end it will be a plea for a greater control of meaning in our ecclesial discourse, a recognition of distinction and the validity of these distinctions, and of a diversity of roles and functions in the life of the Church.

THE HEGEMONY OF MINISTRY

Probably one of the most influential books in identifying, justifying and formalising the major shift that has occurred in the use of the term ministry has been Thomas O'Meara's *Theology of Ministry* which appeared in 1983. In that work O'Meara begins his opening page with the assertion:

Ministry is a horizon in the life of the Christian community. A woman, a man is baptized not into an audience or a club but into a community ... which is essentially and unavoidably ministerial. Churches are clusters of people with a world to serve. [4]

O'Meara goes on to note the "explosion" of ministry which occurred following Vatican II. He acknowledges that the word has been viewed as a "Protestant" word, but now "It is *de rigueur* for everyone to be in the ministry". [5] O'Meara is himself aware of the difficulties when later he comes to define ministry: "When everything is ministry, after a short-term exuberance nothing is ministry". [6] He takes care therefore to define ministry in a way which is neither too narrow nor too broad as:

Public activity of a baptized follower of Jesus Christ flowing from the Spirit's charism and an individual personality on behalf of a Christian community to witness to, serve and realize the kingdom of God. [7]

It is clear that for O'Meara ministry is grounded in baptism and is the responsibility of all Christians.

I would like to describe this position as one of the *hegemony of ministry*. In it the term ministry has come to absorb and include a variety of functions and roles in the life of the Church. Ministry becomes the defining characteristic both of the life of the Church – Christ's Church is essentially ministerial – and of the individual believer – all are called to be ministers in some sense through their baptism.

I would like to contrast it with the following definition drawn from an article by John Linnan, "Ministry Since Vatican II" in which he states simply:

Ministry describes primarily an *ad intra* activity directed towards the community of believers. It is distinguished from mission, the *raison d'être* of the church, which is the *ad extra* work of the church in the world and for the world. [8]

Here we see two distinct terms, ministry and mission, the first specified in terms of “building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:11-12), the second in terms of the Church’s engagement with the world. It is the latter which is described as the *raison d’être* of the Church, its essential purpose. While one may quibble with the spatial qualifications – what is “inside” and what is “outside” – the clear point is made that these are two distinct functions and as such deserve distinct designations.

WHERE DOES VATICAN II STAND?



The question naturally arises as to which of these two positions is reflected in the documents of Vatican II. While O’Meara acknowledges the impact of Vatican II sociologically and proposes that “ecclesial changes suggested and made at Vatican II prompted theologians to retrieve the theology of fullness in the ministry” [9], in three crucial chapters, Chap 1, 6 and 7, where he is not presenting historical material, but theological reflections on the nature of ministry, he does not refer to the documents of Vatican II once. The reasons for this are clear. If we turn to the indices of the two major collections of Vatican II documents, by Abbott [10] and Flannery [11], the entry on ministry reads, “Ministers, See Clergy; priests, etc.”. Further in the five-volume multi-author *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* edited by Herbert Vorgrimler, [12] only one volume has an index entry on ministry. Volume II has many entries on ministry, almost always in

connection with ordained ministry. The only exception is a reference to the three-fold office of the laity as priest, prophet and king, which though it is indexed under ministry actually refers to the lay apostolate and mission – the term ministry is not actually used. [13] If the source of the shift to a focus on ministry is the result of the documents of Vatican II, then it was something these various sources missed.

On the other hand the documents often speak of mission, both in the theological sense and in a more generic sense of function. It speaks of the mission of the Church in terms of “proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and God” (LG n.5). It speaks in a more generic sense of the mission of bishops and priests received in their ordination (e. g. PO n.1). Further it speaks of the mission of the laity:

The term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world. What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature. ... But the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. (LG n.31)

The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* speaks in similar terms of the mission of the laity, linking it to the Kingdom and the secular realm. Significantly this decree on the laity never directly links the terms laity and ministry. Ministry is always spoken of in terms of the ordained, though it acknowledges, “the ministry of the Word and the sacraments, entrusted in a special way to the clergy, wherein the laity also have their very important roles to fulfil” (AA, n.6).

At least on this cursory glance the evidence would seem to suggest that in fact O’Meara’s position is not grounded in a reading of the Vatican II documents, which tend to favour more the position outlined by Linnan. It is true that mission is not exclusively spoken of as *ad extra*, though one could read the references to the mission of the ordained in a more generic sense of function. In fact I think that one could make a case for the following, not only in terms of the Vatican II documents, but also many of the documents such

as *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Redemptoris Missio* and *Christefidelis Laici*, which have arisen since that time:

* The term ministry is used almost exclusively of those tasks which are designated as building up the body of Christ, in line with Eph 4:11-12: "And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ". These are primarily the functions of the ordained, but not exclusively. Lay persons may partake of them under the direction of their pastors.

* The term ministry is not used of the Church as a whole. Rather the task of the Church as a whole is designated as mission. That mission is spoken of in terms of working for, or building up the Kingdom of which is not to be simply equated with the Church.

* While the use of ministry in relation to the laity is rare, the use of the term mission is relatively common, though sometimes it is referred to as apostolate. This mission extends beyond the boundaries of the Church itself and encompasses the task of realising the Kingdom of God in the world as a whole, including but not exclusive to the Church. Indeed Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* identified the arena of the lay mission as "the vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics, as well as the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media" as well as the more domestic areas of "human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents, professional work and suffering". (n.70)

WHY DID THE HEGEMONY OF MINISTRY ARISE?



Given the evidence above one may ask, how it is that the hegemony of ministry arose as a key descriptor of the Church and the life of the individual Christian? I do not intend to repeat the excellent work of John Collins in his books *Diakonia* and *Are All Christians Ministers?* [14] Collins has amply illustrated the so-called "Copernican revolution" with regard to ministry and its roots in the entry on *diakonia* in the Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. [15] It is clear that this misguided entry had a

profound impact on subsequent theological writings on ministry, and continues to do so. Its influence has also been evident in the WCC document on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and to a lesser extent in some official Catholic documents. I find Collin's linguistic argument compelling, however I would like to broaden the discussion to take into account other possible influences which have assisted in the term ministry becoming dominant in our ecclesial discussions. In fact I would like to identify three such factors.

The shortage of vocations

The first and most obvious factor has been the collapse of vocations since Vatican II. Now it can hardly be claimed that this collapse was the intent of the bishops at the Council; nor can they be held responsible for it. It was and remains a complex sociological as well as religious phenomena. Typically a parish in the 50s and 60s had a parish priest with one or perhaps two

relatively young curates, together with a community of religious women and possibly a community of brothers. These provided the working base for the life of the parish. Forty years on, this scene has vanished. Now we might have one aging parish priest, a couple of pastoral associates, often religious sisters, and perhaps a few religious women and men associated with a local school, also getting older and perhaps in semi-retirement. On the other hand the demands made on those involved in parish ministry have not diminished, if anything they may have increased.

In light of this gap, it has been important for the laity to take up responsibility for the running of the community's life. Many parishes have established parish pastoral councils; they involve laity as special ministers of the Eucharist, in music ministry, catechesis, visitation, sacramental preparation and so on. Without the involvement of the laity in these tasks many parishes would simply be a shell. However I would make three comments:

1. Most of these activities are works *ad intra*. As such I believe they can properly be designated as ministerial activities involved in building up the body of Christ. Less successful have been attempts at "ministries of social justice". These have tended to the fringes of parish life, perhaps given a bit of space in the parish bulletin. Here I would argue that social justice is not a ministry, but is a constitutive element in the mission of the Church. I shall return to this observation later in my paper.

2. Further I would like to suggest that the theology of ministry that we find in books such as those of O'Meara are largely responsive to the shifting practicalities of church life. The practical necessity of involving laity in the ministries of the Church has evoked a theoretical, theological justification, that is, "all Christians are ministers". Significantly both O'Meara [\[16\]](#)

and Linnan [\[17\]](#) note the impact of falling vocations to ordained ministry and religious life as a key factor in the "explosion" of ministries in the life of the Church. To give this movement dignity beyond simply "helping father", a theological justification was necessary.

3. In the rush to involve the laity in ministries in the life of the Church, how often have we heard the warning of John Paul II, when he spoke of the temptation for the laity, "of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world." (*Christifideles Laici* n. 13). These words of warning are a reminder that the key role of the laity is in the transformation of the world, not in intra-ecclesial ministry. But it is a warning we little hear.

The prestige of ministry

The second factor which I think has been influential in the rising hegemony of ministry has been the prestige in which ordained ministry has been held within the Church community. It is clear that for several hundred years prior to Vatican II the office of ordained ministry has held religious, cultural and social prestige. The priest was a man set apart from the rest, living out an ideal of the Christian life. He was closer to God, indeed he was *in persona Christi*. Ordained ministry was an entry into the sphere of the sacred, from which the ordinary laity were excluded. Priesthood endowed the priest with a sacred power, a numinosity, an other-worldly glow, which was beyond the reach of mere laity. This view of ministry was the product of several factors, not least the separation of grace and nature that occurred in post-Tridentine scholasticism.

Given the prestige with which ministry was held, it was, I think natural that when theologians sought to re-establish the proper dignity of the laity, post-Vatican II, that they did so by modelling it on that of ordained ministry. If ordained ministry was thought to represent the ideal of Christian life, then post-Vatican II it was appropriate for the laity to be viewed as capable of sharing that ideal. Here I would make two comments:

1. While laudable in its intent, this attempt to give dignity to the laity represents a failure to esteem the proper role of the laity precisely in their “secular” character. It represents a failure to properly esteem the world-transforming mission of the laity. It only succeeds in creating two classes of citizens in the Church, those who work in lay ministries and those who don’t show the right level of commitment to their parish.
2. This failure reflects the fact that it essentially operates out of the grace-nature separation that characterised the older theology of ministry. While it expands the “sphere” of grace to include those laity involved in ministry, it keeps the basic construct in place. It is this construct that requires deconstruction, perhaps a movement from spheres of grace and nature to dimensions of grace and nature, allowing grace to break out of its constricting sphere and become a dimension of our ordinary lives.

The conception of the mission of the Church

The third factor which I would suggest has been influential in the rising hegemony of ministry has been the overall failure of the Church and her theologians to provide a workable conception of the larger mission of the Church.

The roots of this problem can be found in the Middle Ages. There the Church had a workable conception of its basic mission, the Christianisation of culture and society. Christian art, Christian philosophy, Christian laws and Christian rulers were the order of the day. This conception had its own theological roots in the neo-Platonic heritage of Augustine, which had scant regard for the reality of the material order. Indeed it could only be made real by the supernaturalising power of grace. The seeds of an alternative account were laid by Aquinas, whose Aristotelian philosophy sought to establish the relative autonomy of the natural order. Still the later scholastic separation of grace and nature left us with two alternatives. Either grace absorbed nature in the mode of Christendom; or grace was excluded from the realm of the natural order as in Enlightenment thinking, leading to the exclusion of religion from the public world of culture and politics.

Since that time the Church and its theologians have found great difficulty in formulating a theological account of the natural order of culture and politics which does not fall into one or other of these alternatives. [\[18\]](#) Significantly Vatican II asserted the relative autonomy of the secular order and so accepted that the Christendom model was no longer workable. However the theological task of giving an account of how grace impinges on the secular order while respecting its autonomy remains to be done. Until this is done we have no clear conception of the larger mission of the Church in relation to society, which is predominantly the realm of the laity. In face of this difficulty it is far easier to seek refuge in the intra-ecclesial task of ministry than to tackle the more difficult and conceptually nebulous arena of mission. Hence my comments about the marginalised place of so-called “ministries of social justice” in many parishes. These activities actually pertain to the mission of the Church. Still the goal of that mission, in terms of its theological rationale, often remains unclear even to those who participate in it.

Certainly we have conceptualised mission beyond the confines of mission *ad gentes*. And we have conceptualised it in its broadest terms. To quote John Paul II:

Through the Gospel message, the Church offers a force for liberation which promotes development precisely because it leads to conversion of heart and way of thinking, fosters the recognition of each person’s dignity, encourages solidarity, commitment and service of one’s neighbour, and gives everyone a place in God’s plan, which is the building of his Kingdom of peace, justice, beginning already in this life. (*Redemptoris missio*, n.59)

But how to do this in a way which preserves the relative autonomy of the secular order, which gives due recognition and esteem to the laity engaged in this process, remains to be achieved.

CONCLUSION

Joseph Komonchak has commented that given the fact that over 99% of the Church is lay, whatever the purpose of the Church is it must largely involve the laity. [\[19\]](#) Far from ministry being the central task of the Church, it is mission which defines its purpose and this is largely the responsibility of the laity. Indeed one could mount a case that ministry, in particular ordained ministry is a restriction which limits an individual's ability to engage in mission, precisely for the sake of the larger mission.

In fact we have a rich vocabulary to describe the tasks and responsibility of the Christian community: the ministries which build up the body of Christ; the world transforming mission seeking to build the kingdom of God; the vocation of parents in raising their children. None of these excludes or overrides the others; each has its place in the scheme of things; each is to be esteemed. Perhaps it is time to break the hegemony of ministry as the one way in which to conceive of the life of the Church and its members.

Footnotes:

[\[1\]](#) *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967-79).

[\[2\]](#) Karl Rahner (ed), *Sacramentum Mundi* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968-70).

[\[3\]](#) Michael Lawler and Thomas Shanahan, *Church: A Spirited Communion* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 54.

[\[4\]](#) Thomas O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 3.

[\[5\]](#) O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, 4.

[\[6\]](#) O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, 134.

[\[7\]](#) O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, 142.

[\[8\]](#) John E. Linnan, "Ministry since Vatican II: a time of change and growth" *New Theology Review* 3 (1990), 34.

[\[9\]](#) O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, 196.

[\[10\]](#) Walter Abbott (ed), *The Documents of Vatican II* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966).

[\[11\]](#) Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987).

[\[12\]](#) Herbert Vorgrimler (ed.) *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967-1969).

[\[13\]](#) Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 2, 235.

[\[14\]](#) John N. Collins, *Diakonia: re-interpreting the ancient resources* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1990); *Are all Christians ministers?* (Newtown/Melbourne: E. J. Dwyer/David Lovell, 1992).

[\[15\]](#) Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976).

[\[16\]](#) O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, 5.

[\[17\]](#) Linnan, "Ministry since Vatican II", 37.

[\[18\]](#) I do however believe that a solid basis for an alternative can be found in the work of Robert Doran, in particular his *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990). Doran builds on the foundational writings of Bernard Lonergan.

[\[19\]](#) Cf Joseph Komonchak, "Christians must make a difference", *The Tablet*, 28/09/2002.

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