
David N. Power

EVOLUTION OF THE PRIESTHOOD

Adapting to Pastoral Needs

A changing priesthood has generated an interesting story about an unnamed parish in an unnamed country and the people's desire for good preaching. They sent their resident priest away for a year's study of the Scriptures, at their own expense, claiming that with the bishop's understanding they themselves could manage Sunday liturgies, baptisms, marriages, and funerals for the year. In the long term, however, they wanted a priest who could give them better guidance in the reading of God's word.

The story contrasts nicely with legislation, a thousand years old, that allowed a man to be ordained a priest, provided he knew enough Latin to read the Mass and could give a passable explanation of the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed.

Some things, of course, do not change. It is the nature of the things that the priest is busy about, and the way in which the Mass holds center place, that have changed.

Keeping the parish school going, serving the sodalities in the parish, conducting the novenas, hearing confessions were among the things that kept him busy in the fifties. Offering the sacrifice of the Mass day by day put him, however, in a holy space, from where he mediated things that the people could not touch and that justified his presence among them, however mediocre his preaching.

In the eighties, the priest is more likely to spend his time with Bible study groups, with marriage prepara-

tion encounters, with the parish social action committee, and with groups that are trying to address such issues as drug addiction, the needs of the homeless, and neighborhood crime. The Mass serves to focus all of this in another way, a way that gets the people involved in its preparation and celebration and that leaves less tolerance for bad preaching.

Consecrated or Ordained?

The language of the Second Vatican Council changed our way of speaking of the rite of making bishops from consecration to ordination. This reflected a more pastoral and less sacral conception of the office, and gave importance in the ordination rite to the laying on of hands over the anointing of the head. This is paralleled in priestly ordination by the accentuating of the laying on of hands over the anointing of the candidate's hands. The mission of ordination to the full ministry of service to the church does not allow for the isolation of the Mass as a sacred act that stands of itself. As an act celebrated with and for the people, the Eucharist is the heart of a more complex ministry. The removal of some of the aura of the holy from the office and person of the priest probably has something to do with the decrease in priestly vocations. It also goes with the increase of those who sense the responsibility for ministry and mission that runs through the whole body of the faithful. The problem is not how to restore the aura of the holy to the priest, but how to combine the provision of ordained ministers with the collegial sense of responsibility that fosters other types of ministry and a more complete involvement of all the baptized in the life of the parish, as well as beyond the parish.

Ritual and Ministry

There are those who think that the greatest change in the relation between priest and people came about through the retention of Latin as liturgical language

Reverend David N. Power, O.M.I., is professor of systematic theology and liturgy at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. This article is reprinted from the April 1988 issue of *The Furrow* and is reprinted with permission.



when it was no longer the vernacular of the people. This was in sharp contrast with its original adoption for the precise reason that it, rather than Greek, was the spoken language of Rome. While a common language brings people together, the notion of language barrier bespeaks a real separation of life worlds. When the liturgy became a ritual that could be heard but not understood, it readily suggested a separate world into which the people could enter only through the mediation of one of the language's practitioners. The notion of a priestly office confided with distinctive sacred duties certainly did not arise with this, but it was greatly encouraged by the language barrier. The removal of the language barrier deprives the ritual of much of its force. If the force is to be recovered, it can only be through a better handling of the word by the celebrant. The movement of the ritual has to change accordingly, no longer suggesting the existence of a sacred space in which sacred acts are performed, but drawing attention to the holiness of God in the midst of a people who eat and drink at a common table around which they gather. In some respects, this is a less attractive and less comfortable holiness, one more easily tarnished because it is so inclusive and draws no spatial lines of separation between the holy and the ordinary. It is, however, if acknowledged, more evangelically powerful and more transformative of life.

A Providential Change

It is providential that this change in a sense of the holy, affecting the ministry of priests, should come about now. Europe and North America are no longer Christian cultures, in which church belonging is as natural as breathing air. A church and its priest at the center of a town or neighborhood could at one time symbolize the drawing power of the common recognition of God's name and mercy. Nowadays, the draw of the holy can come only through the testimony of those who gear their participation in society's concerns to the recognition and establishment of a divine justice. The retention

of the divine name in the sanctuary hinders the establishment of divine justice in the town square and marketplace. Where the edicts of priests do not rule, the testimony of God's people may well prevail. They will not be wont to give it, however, unless the rituals of water and table allow them a full and responsible participation.

As we now watch the laity claim a greater role in the celebration of the sacraments, or witness the growing phenomenon of Sunday services celebrated without a priest, it is ironic to recall that priests themselves began to preside at Eucharist only in response to a need for an increased number of celebrants. The fact that even to this day the ordination rite speaks of presbyters rather than of priests is a reminder of this.

In early church order, the bishop was the one to preside at Eucharist, according to the principle of one faith, one assembly, one baptism, one Eucharist, one bishop. It was he too who taught the word. Presbyters were his companions and advisers, who shared responsibility with him for church governance, and surrounded him at the celebration of the Eucharist, while deacons looked to the needs of the poor, the administration of church goods, and order in the assembly. It was when there were more communities than the bishop could serve in this way, that presbyters were sent to them for Sunday Eucharist, or that residents in villages and rural areas were ordained as presbyters, specifically to provide sacramental needs. In other words, when communities outnumbered the possibilities of ordinary eucharistic ministers (namely, bishops), a strategy was adopted that would provide regular eucharistic celebrations through the extension of the ministry of presbyters. In time, an ordination rite developed for presbyters that gave prominence to their eucharistic and sacramental ministry.

It took a longer time to recognize teaching as a regular

part of a priest's ministry. For many centuries, in many places, priests were not allowed to do more than read homilies provided by bishops. These were not necessarily the homilies of the local bishop, but could be taken from collections of sermons by great preachers such as Augustine, John Chrysostom, Gregory the Great, or Pope Saint Leo. Catechesis often preceded liturgical preaching as a normal priestly responsibility. Such catechesis would comprise explanations of the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments or the seven capital sins. Explanation of the Scriptures remained the province of the bishop, or by way of exception that of gifted laypersons and priests who gained a certain universal recognition.

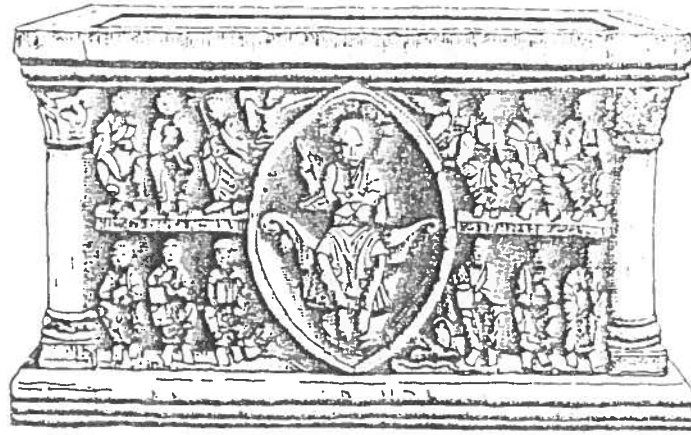
Throughout the centuries, the ministry of priests or presbyters has been tailored to provide what was needed among the Christian people to keep faith, moral life, and sacrament alive. However, since certain conditions of life, such as celibacy, and at times even membership in a community of priests, were deemed essential to good ministry, it has not been easy to multiply the number of ordained ministers in proportion to the number of parish communities needing ministers. Consequently, other measures have been adopted to provide catechetical and sacramental needs.

On the southern continents, in younger Christianities, catechists have kept village or station communities going, while priests visited them as often as possible for sacramental ministry. In more recent decades, priests have been less frenetic about rushing from station to station on Sundays to say Mass in as many localities as possible, since catechists and other local ministers have begun to conduct Sunday eucharistic services, as well as to provide for baptisms, marriages, and funerals. Since parts of North America and Europe have begun to experience a lack of resident parish clergy, the Sunday and liturgical pattern of life has begun to resemble

that of younger Christianities. The relocation of the holy in the believing community and its action, rather than in the priestly act performed in its own sacred space, contributes to the possibilities of this kind of provision. If and when ordination policies change, as they have changed before, to allow all communities a fuller sacramental life, this will be done in a different climate, where the convergence of the ministry of all the baptized with priestly ministry is better appreciated.

In the meantime, the existing configuration of things is changing the demands on priests and the perception of their ministry. It is taking on more of an episcopal quality, with the expectation of better teaching and preaching, and with the requirement that priests encourage, supervise, and coordinate the growth of ministries among all church members. A good knowledge of Scripture and doctrine, and good communication skills, both built on a foundation of faith in the church as the body of Christ and the dwelling place of the Spirit, are more and more essential to effective priestly ministry. Since the ministerial consciousness of the laity is much related to their awareness of being a people who bring God's presence and justice to society as a whole, it is next to impossible for a priest to function in the church today without having himself a strong sense of social justice and of the ministry of the church to the reign of God in the world. The preaching of the word and the coordination of ministries cannot be unrelated to this mission.

Knowledge of the Scriptures, theological education, communication and leadership skills, or the ability to promote justice, are by no means exclusive to the ordained. The priest may well find himself less



equipped in each and all of these areas than some parishioners, but since bishop and presbyter are placed by ordination at the center of church life, they have to be able to bring these skills together into a single service of building up the church. Thus there is more talk nowadays of the collegiate quality of ordained ministry, or of teamwork among priests. Apart from the fact that if priests cannot work together they can hardly serve church unity, this emphasis on team ministry reflects the differentiation of skills and responsibilities within a diocesan or national presbyterium, allowing for a divergent but convergent distribution of roles among priests.

Sacramental Ministry

The one thing that remains distinctive of ordained ministry, and that places the ordained at the center of church life in a presidential and unifying role, is sacramental ministry. The church is always united as one in the sacraments of Christ and draws its life from communion with Christ in the mysteries celebrated. Whatever else bishops or priests are ordained for, ordination to liturgical presidency is what gives unity to all of their work and service. While the original presbyterate centered more around the liturgical ministry of the bishop, ever since presbyters began to be ordained specifically for sacrament, this provides the center point of their role in the church, as it is the center point in the ministry of the bishop. The relation of church to society, however, and the nature of the relationship between ordained and baptized in the church, points to different ways in which this sacramental ministry has been or needs to be exercised.

*of person - who
 Obedt = Bishop
 Given = full*

Baptism, Eucharist, and penance have always served to identify the nature of the church as the body of Christ. It is the nature of the church's relation to society and culture that explains historical differences in the

sense of its self-identity and in the pattern of its sacramental ministrations.

In his time, Saint Thomas Aquinas emphasized the power of the priest to act in the person of Christ in celebrating the Mass and in administering penance. His was a time when all human society was deemed to be ordered in Christian faith and through Christian values, in such a way as to mirror a divinely constituted order. Christ was at the center of this ordered reality, and his restoration of an original order disturbed by sin provided the pattern for human life in all its relationships, as well as for sacramental participation. For Aquinas, however, even more important was the ministry of the priest in confecting the sacrament of unity, in celebrating the sacrifice in which Christ's passion was commemorated, and in reordering what was disturbed by sin through the sacrament of penance.

The model for the ordering of society was the reordering of sinful humanity by Christ through his sacrifice and the satisfaction for sin, which it rendered to an offended Father. Through the Mass, celebrated by the priest, satisfaction continued to be offered in an act of homage, and through penance, those who by sin had cut themselves off from the life of Christ's body were reintroduced to it by absolution, so that their acts of penance could be taken up into Christ's own satisfaction and gain value therefrom.

Growing practice exploited these theological insights in ways that Aquinas himself might not have countenanced in all respects, but that remain intelligible when seen in their relation to a Christian cultural matrix. The multiple offerings of the Mass for the living and the dead united the faithful on earth, in purgatory, and in heaven. A priest who heard confessions knew the penitent and could explore on the occasion of an annual confession whether or not she or he had been infected by heresies that drew people away from the

While recent church teaching insists on the difference between order and baptism, it continually speaks of priestly ministry as a service to the priesthood of the baptized. Priestly service empowers the baptized to discover the presence of Christ in their lives, to imitate him, and to testify to the reign of God in the midst of human doings.

true faith and from the body of Christ. A testing of faith, and a service of unity in faith thus accompanied the conversion of morals and the ingrafting into that satisfaction of Christ that restored divine justice and order, in the dispositions of divine mercy, and in the abundance of Christ's love. Within such a vision, a celebration of Mass or the baptism of a child or the hearing of a confession were, in those days, very public acts. They contributed to the maintenance of a public order established on the basis of a common acknowledgment of Christ's name and a common conviction of the abundance of his redemption. If to us now there seems something limited or fallible in these perceptions, we are surely aware that this qualification is both invitation and caution to us in our own fallible efforts to embrace a mission to the redemption of the whole human order.

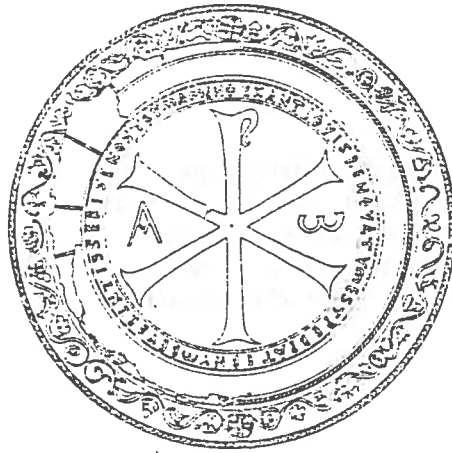
The medieval period of church life is one that continues to exercise a fascination for the Catholic mind, but we can escape this fascination somewhat by considering the place of church and priestly ministry at an earlier period when Christian faith was not the center of cultural life. A Saint Ignatius of Antioch or a Saint Cyprian could well see martyrdom as the principal service of a Christian to the divine claim on the world. A bishop's ministry could well be exercised from captivity or underground, and the capacity of the church to gather for sacrament curtailed on account of this peril. Penance was for those who tainted the body of the church, at times by their fear in failing to give public profession of faith. Penitents underwent long periods of conversion before being admitted again to the Communion table, which was the nourishment of the faithful and of martyrs. Bishops and priests were much engaged in the preparation of catechumens who would be strong enough in faith to join a community that witnessed to Christ's claims against pagan ones, and in

the accompaniment of penitents who sought reconciliation with the church. The community's witness to the world and community sacrament were reciprocal to each other, and priestly ministry clearly served both.

Today's Sacramental Ministry

These reflections highlight the symbolic and cultural aspects of sacrament and ministry. Christ's grace is bestowed and honor is rendered to God in sacrament, as faith teaches us. However, in the celebration of worship, word, prayer, and symbol allow people to see how grace gives them their Christian identity in such a way as to be able to develop appropriate attitudes to broader social issues. Today we face the crucial question about the place of the Christian churches in society. If the Christian community is not coterminous with society, how does it find its place as God's people in the world? Since this is a question of faith, it finds particularly sharp expression in the celebration of sacraments, and in the whole discipline and order of worship.

In inviting people to sacrament, in preparing them for it, and in presiding over its celebration, priests have to guide an expression of faith in sacrament which engenders an expression of faith in family and social life. All of the changes that have affected the life and mission of the church in recent decades come together in Mass and sacrament. Those who gather are more conscious of themselves as a body united in the Spirit and through the service of many ministries. They are also increasingly conscious of the fact that as a body they minister to God's presence and action in the world, and that this needs to be nourished through word and sacrament. While preaching and presiding, priests must surely be aware that attitudes to moral values and social issues will be educated and



*Divergence
Convergence*

developed in the hearing of God's word and through a deepened understanding of the meaning of the sacramental rites and symbols through which Christ is present in the body of the faithful.

to the relation between priest and baptized as lived on a daily basis and manifested in sacrament. While recent church teaching insists on the difference between order and baptism, it continually speaks of priestly ministry as a service to the priesthood of the baptized. Priestly service empowers the baptized to discover the presence of Christ in their lives, to imitate him, and to testify to the reign of God in the midst of human doings. *

Presider's; ST. QT. (heart): Lit. Presidency

In short, today a priest will be able to give unity to all the activity of a community, and to the changing sense of the church's relation to society, if he is able to foster the awareness that the whole life of the church has its focus in the assembly of faith, where Christ and Spirit gather the faithful into one. None of the other activities that a priest now engages in will bear much fruit if the sacramental assembly is not a place where the Christian people can deepen their sense of being God's people, and their sense of the mission which they have as such a people in the society to which they belong. While a priest meets many other challenges, the one that remains at the heart of his ministry is celebrating well.

Sacramental celebration is the action of a community of people who live their faith through the way in which they take their personal, family, and social responsibilities. They congregate out of a desire for God and a desire for a greater human good. The desire awakens to the memory that is preached and celebrated; it is formed and directed in its effort by this memory. It connects with the *agape* of the saving water and the Communion table, and becomes the heart of a common testimony and apostolate.

The power of good celebration has been greatly enhanced by the recovery of the scriptural word, especially of the Gospels, for Mass and sacrament. It is the Christ whom the church remembers, into whom we are baptized, and around whose table we eat and drink of the gift of his Body and Blood. Since the liturgical cycle allows the priest to concentrate, with the community, on the individual Gospels, it offers him the possibility of recapturing the power and the faith of those presentations. This ecclesial memory is the antidote to the danger of an otherwise abstract sacramental celebration of Christ's mysteries.

Many priests may feel that they have already achieved a lot when they have found decent readers and musicians to enliven the Sunday Mass, and have convinced some parishioners to undertake preparation for marriage and for the baptism of their children. A vision of a priestly ministry in the midst of a priestly people and of a sacramental celebration rooted in an apostolic community can, however, stir a priest's imagination and give orientation to his interaction with people. This can be particularly effective in those situations where some are looking for ways to address the more compelling issues of modern life, where lives are being threatened and ruined. The priest cannot be expected to find answers to such problems by himself, but if he cannot speak well of God and of Christ, the people might well ask him to immerse himself further in the reading of the Scriptures and in prayer, while still keeping his heart attuned to human sufferings and to human joy.

Memory is not rooted only in a text but is inspired by life and its concerns. The memory of Christ's ministry, death, and resurrection converges with the Christian community's quest for life and with the testimony that it gives in the Spirit. Thus we come back, full circle,