

# THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS MINISTRY

By LADISLAS ÖRSY

**T**HEOLOGICAL reflection on the future of consecrated apostolic life in the Church must first of all concern itself with a proper understanding of the development of structures in the Church, and with the acquisition of a mentality which is open to such developments. At first sight, structures do not reveal dynamic qualities: they appear rigid and inflexible, and, at best, useful points of reference in the ever-changing current of history. Closer examination, however, shows them to be a part of the same human history. Structures, too, betray movement: they develop and decay, no matter how rigid or permanent they may appear to be. They are all creations of man's mind, which consistently moves from one experience to another, through an increasingly complex pattern of understanding, from the present reality into new possibilities.

In focussing on the developing structures of ministry, we need a working definition of ministry: the service of the community above and beyond what is ordinarily expected from a member of the Church – service given and received in the context of public consecration, recognized by the lawful authority of and in the community. And we have in mind, particularly, the ministry of religious men and women who are not ordained priests, with the all-important proviso that the concrete realization of new ministeries must depend on the imagination and creative strengths of those who are genuinely seeking to find where their best contribution can be made to the Church and to God's people in general, including those who do not yet know Christ.

## *What is development?*

Any understanding of development involves two aspects: the development of the mind in the process of knowing, and the development of the content articulated through this process.

To understand development is not just a question of setting in order a certain number of ideas, and then drawing the right con-

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clusions. Concepts do not exist alone: they are part of a mental framework, a mental horizon. There is a mentality which finds it difficult to assimilate progress, and another which is naturally geared to progress. In recent years, the first has been called the 'classical' mentality, the second the 'historical' mentality. Unless we appreciate the difference between the two mentalities, much that has happened and is happening in modern theology cannot be adequately understood. A picture of the 'classical mentality' is the Parthenon in Athens, with its perfect proportions, standing there immutable under the blue greek sky for centuries – and, it would seem, forever. There is a perfection here, the incarnation of an ideal order in nature: one that could never be improved on without disturbing the proportions. In the same way, a person of the classical mentality believes that there is a perfection in nature, an ideal order in the hierarchy of values; and that this perfection and order *can be discovered* and known without distortion. Once it is discovered, man can possess it in its fulness: the mind and the heart of the searcher can come to rest. The same mentality exists behind such statements as: 'The constitutions of my congregation are the most perfect of all; were it not so, I would promptly join another one that revealed the perfection lacking in my own'. The contemplation of immutable beauty and harmony leads to practical attitudes and conclusions. The fundamental virtues, according to this mentality, are stability and fidelity. Once the ideal order is discovered, any substantial change can only be for the worse. It destroys order. There may be accidental changes; but these cannot bring substantial improvement. Hence the presumption is against change. Movement is looked at with suspicion. Structures once built must be loyally preserved.

The person of the 'historical mentality' builds his life and outlook on a different assumption. He believes that he himself is part of a great movement inadequately described as our history. Throughout our lives, we have no more than a small window on nature, on the hierarchy of values, like a person who is flying a plane and watching the earthly objects as they roll by. Obviously, information is pouring in through the small window, but it is only a small part of all that can be seen, grasped and assimilated. Our intelligence depends on this information and is naturally compelled to seek intelligibility in the facts and data which come flooding in. All the time, the mind is groping for fulness; it seeks more information, so that the understanding can increase. This is a process that never comes to a halt

and will never be complete as long as life itself lasts.

This historical outlook also gives birth to practical attitudes. Since the process of knowing is developing according to the information that pours into the mind, the development of understanding becomes a way of life. Change is not seen as imperfection. It can affect an earlier judgment either by reversing, correcting or enriching it beyond expectation. Ultimate perfection is not rejected; but man is seen as being on the road to it, with rest-points along the road. Stability and fidelity remain virtues in the way that a pilgrim must keep the goal of his journey steadily in his mind.

Both mentalities, the classical and the historical, are present and operative in the Church today. We all know the liberal who takes potshots at the Church, the bishops and the pope, and at the same time is compassionate, indulgent, and understanding with non-catholic communities and their leaders. Before the Council, the same person took pot-shots at protestants and jews and indiscriminately upheld catholic views. Such a one has not undergone conversion; he has simply exchanged one concept for another. As he was rigid in his earlier views, so he is inflexible in his present opinions. On the other hand, there are many who are struggling to move along with changes: who are slowly grasping the value of new liturgy, and the need for understanding other religions. They may never have heard the term 'historical mentality', but they have entered into the internal dynamics of change. They may be far behind the pioneers, but they are moving.

Any discussion of the two mentalities is fundamentally theological. For theology is simply reflection on the content of our faith with the help of a philosophical system. We can speak of the theology of St Augustine as the reflection on faith with the help of platonic philosophy, or the theology of St Thomas as reflection on faith with the help of aristotelian philosophy. Whether we like it or not, there is a philosophy behind theological language. It has been there ever since St John wrote his Prologue on the *Logos*, and it will be always there as long as man continues to reflect on nature.

At the root of the classical mentality is the philosophical assumption of *uncritical realism*, which assumes that there is an essence in all things. This essence, in the process of knowledge, is appropriated by the human mind so that an identity is forged between the thing known and the knower himself. Once the essence of a thing is known, there is little room for change. Only accidents can be added, and they do not matter much. Now, if these essences concern the truth

of faith, statements about them contain an ultimate quality. Once the truth is known, we cannot go much further. Once the essence of good order is known, we cannot improve on it.

The philosophical assumption behind the historical mentality is *critical realism*. This has its roots in the knowledge of external things, but it assumes that the information teaching us is no more than raw material which has to be ordered and understood by the mind: an understanding proportionate to the information available, and created through a mysterious, indefinable insight. That is to say, parallel with the dynamic process of the acquisition of information is a similar process of the creation of insights. These insights are not capricious; they do not spring from some nebulous material; they bring precise understanding into the mass of information. As new meanings are created, our knowledge progresses. It is a process that knows no end; yet, at every stage, it is tied to objective sources and resources and measured by the exigence of truth.

*Development: a process of liberation*

Liberation usually means to free the oppressed from all that holds him captive, so that he can employ his faculties for self-development and work for the common good. In this context, the focus of attention is on evil structures: it is assumed that, once these are dismantled, there will be freedom. At the same time, it is a fallacy of our times to consider structures in human society as autonomous and existing independently of man's mind; whereas every structure is a human creation – there can be no serious transformation of structures without the transformation of minds.

The struggle for liberation, whether in civil society or in the Church, is ultimately a struggle to free man's mind and heart from brutal animal instincts, from narrowness and selfishness, from intellectual prejudices and disordered attachments, and to lift him up to a level where reason can always ratify his judgments, and the attraction of the good, and of nothing else at all, governs his actions.

The process of liberation is a long one. Each person has a capacity to grow to the point at which his mind becomes aware of an infinite horizon beckoning him, and his heart begins to desire infinite goodness. During this growth, he must move upwards through several levels, beginning with that of the 'brute beast', which so often seems to predominate in the world around us.

Somewhat higher, but still low enough, is the level of narrow pragmatic common sense. A person or group sees what is good *for*

*them*, and works for that particular good. They impose their judgment on the community under the implicit assumption that whatever is good for themselves will be good for the large, universal community. Many vociferous people and pressure groups operate at this level. We must listen to them because they may be echoing genuine problems and grievances; but before taking any decision, their judgments must be integrated into a much broader picture.

On a higher level, individuals and groups may propose insights and hypotheses concerned with the common good. They have a wider horizon than the vocal and the selfish ones. They move at a critical level, where every judgment is tested carefully with penetrating questions, and every proposal for action is considered in all foreseeable consequences. Only at this level do we have a liberated person and a liberated community.

If there is confusion today in the Church, one of the reasons is that judgments about the state of things, and proposals for action about them, spring up at different levels. But there is no way of labelling these judgments and proposals, or of warning the faithful about their quality. Narrowly pragmatic statements have the right of citizenship side by side with enlightened critical assessments; hence the confusion. What would happen, for example, in a hospital, if everyone there were allowed to offer their suggestions about the correct treatment for a patient? Orderlies, nurses, medical students halfway through the course, interns with not much experience, would pool their judgment with that of top-flight specialists. Obviously *this* will never happen. Medical science is largely a liberated one. While it allows for the development of the person through study and experience, it gives final authority to a quality-approach to the problems of health and disease. The science of theology, however, is not fully liberated.

### *Ministry in the Church*

The ministry of the Church flows from the ministry of Christ; and is thus pre-eminently sacred. He came to make men aware of the ultimately sacred dimension of life, to give them strength to advance beyond their humanity, and to enter into God's own life. 'Sacred' is usually contrasted with 'secular', but the contrast is variously explained. For our purpose, a good definition of the sacred is the dimension of life that man cannot give to himself. 'Eternal life', 'sharing the divine nature': to give this was the ministry of Jesus; this is therefore the ministry of the Church, and of all who partake

in the life and actions of the Church. If the ministry of religious in the Church lacks this sacred dimension, an integral element in religious life is missing.

Now, let us return to our original question: what is ministry in the Church? Broadly speaking, ministry is sharing the sacred activity of the Church, which is the communication of the light of the gospel and the strength of God's grace to the whole human race throughout human history. More specifically, it is all the actions and activities directly related to the spiritual well-being of the christian community: a public communication of the light of the gospel and of the strength of grace. It is every participation in God's continuing self-revelation through the instrumentality of the Church. Man certainly contributes to his own growth and creates much of his own progress. Yet the ultimate liberation of man is in the moment when, lifted up to a judgment of faith and a desire inspired by hope and love, he is being freed by the Spirit of God. The harmony between man's effort and God's gracious help has always been a mystery that centuries of theological debate has never succeeded in clarifying.

*How do new ministries develop?*

We can hardly achieve a good understanding of the development of the structures of ministry without first considering the capacity of the christian community to create new structures and to dismantle them if necessary. We know that the early christian community was assisted by the Spirit to create institutions and structures for the Church. The most obvious case was the composition of the scriptures. Through the inspiration of the Spirit, the community articulated its own faith: an articulation which, again through the work of the Spirit, was accepted by the whole community as normative for all future generations of christians. We know that the first communities had this gift of inspiration, but that it has never again appeared in the Church. The canon of the New Testament was closed at the end of the apostolic times. The early community also had the capacity to create structures and institutions. How far was this due to the inspiration of the Spirit, and how far were their institutions and structures intended to remain permanent for all Christian generations? For example, it is not enough to say that the New Testament does not draw clear distinctions between presbyters and bishops. It is also necessary to ask what kind of permanence did the first communities inject into the structures they created. It is

not enough to say that the first communities freely created different types of offices. It is also necessary to ask if the Spirit injected a stability into those offices which later christians have no right to dismantle.

*Dialectical tensions in the Church*

When we speak about structures in the Church, we have a picture of lifeless, solid constructions, which 'keep order' among people, rather as rigid highway lanes keep the traffic flowing. Or, the picture may be of constructions which protect people, rather as houses give shelter against the weather and other calamities, but which also blot out the sky and the countryside, and depress the mind and heart by their weight and rigidity. Such models can, however, be erroneous. Structures are really subtle channels in which the vital forces of the community flow, meet together, create and sustain life. A better model than monuments of brick and mortar would be the arteries and the veins in a human body, carrying its life-blood.

If we look at the Church we find that many of these vital forces operate dialectically. We have, on the one side, ecclesiastical offices which must be maintained with steady regularity if the ordinary life of the Church is to go on. But we also have the prophets and saints, who come and go as God sends them, and give a new impetus to the life of the community, frequently beyond anything that the office-holders can achieve. Tensions between the two do arise; but out of the tension new life appears. Then we have universality, with its broad and general demands. The Church has no limits in space and time. It must expand to reach all men of all times. But there are also small groups with their own specific needs: the local communities tied to a specific time in history. Between the two, tensions develop, which are scarcely ever fully resolved. Yet there is here a movement of life that keeps the universal Church in balance with the particular churches.

When it comes to the work of men and women in the Church, there is the same dialectic of living forces. Does progress consist in a movement toward steady equality in uniformity, or in a deepening insight into a dialectical movement in which different roles are assigned to each group? It is in this context that we need to consider the current question about the ordination of women. Before any practical decision is made, we must pose and answer the following question: does the dialectic between men and women in the Church include the dialectics of office versus prophecy? What will happen

to the office-holders if they are not systematically challenged by another group? And what will happen to the prophets if the tempering effect of an office is not present? At any rate, is it correct to assume that women are better disposed for the gift of prophecy? The question is tentative. Any future solution, in whatever direction, must grow from a ground that has been honestly cleared and where every aspect has been carefully considered. Weakness in the preparatory process for a solution, that is, the avoidance of hard questions, would ultimately weaken the answer.

*The dynamics of the christian life*

The difficulties that beset the understanding of the development of structures are compounded by the fact that the dynamics of the Church's life cannot be fully comprehended by human reason. They can be appropriated only through faith, a gift of the Spirit. St Paul described these dynamics with his customary bluntness. It is 'sheer stupidity' for the greek and a 'shocking scandal' for the jews: it is God's wisdom.

Such dynamics suppose a mature faith, hope and love. Small wonder, then, that often they are not visibly manifest in the life of the universal Church, of smaller communities in the Church, and of individual christians. After all, this is a sinful Church, where God's people grow slowly and painfully into the full stature of Christ. It follows that much that surfaces in the christian community will not reflect the fulness of faith, hope and love. Our salvation history indicates that the best success was achieved through the paradoxical road of foolishness and scandal.

It is by no means easy to draw practical conclusions, if it is possible at all. Right and justice certainly should be respected, actively pursued and put into practice. But when all that is done, we have to accept that success comes through the unexpected means of weakness and failure, to the point of a *kenosis* similar to that of Christ himself.

*Authentic structures and permanent ministries*

In discussing the nature of development we remarked that, in the process of an increasing understanding of doctrine, as in the process of expanding creation of structures, the mind and will of christians may come to a resting point, when the Church authentically declares that their understanding is true and their practical creation is right. Such authentication does not close the road for further development, but it marks a point of no return to any opposite of



the acquired truth. In the matter of ministerial structures, several have been authenticated by the Church and cannot be obliterated. The episcopacy, for example, became a permanent part of the organization of the Church even independently of the pronouncements of the councils of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II. Episcopacy was accepted when the Church accepted the Word of God as ultimately discerned by the bishops, ever since the Council of Nicaea. To raise doubts about the episcopacy is to raise doubts about conciliar decisions and the creeds that were composed by bishops at successive ecumenical councils. The Church has indeed accepted that power given through episcopal consecration confers on the bishop a unique position in the visible body of Christ. Visible communion is necessary to hold the Church together. There must be an explicit structural communion among its members, lay folk, religious, presbyters, bishops, and the pope.

Besides the universal priesthood of the Church in which every member shares, there is a *specific priesthood* conferred through consecration – the episcopate and the presbyterate. Consecration gives both the power of order and the power of jurisdiction. They both come from the same source. They are closely united, even if here and there they can be separated.

### *Ministerial ordination of women*

While we are convinced that the ministerial priesthood is not identical with the universal priesthood of the faithful, it remains an open question whether women should be so ordained.

Although much research is still going on, it would appear that we are in possession of the essential theological data, and that no dramatic breakthrough can be expected from logical reflection on scripture or tradition. The arguments for both sides have been marshalled with reasonable competence. It is difficult to foresee an intellectual insight that could change the situation radically.

How then can progress come? Only, it would seem, by the gentle guidance of the Spirit, while the whole Church stands before God in prayer. Such guidance could hardly come without an ecumenical council, since a fresh development or a definite ratification of the Church's present stand is a major issue affecting the faithful all over the world. The question for prayerful deliberation could, perhaps, be stated in these or similar terms:

Should the office of priestly ministry be given equally to men and women, or is it part of God's plan that there should be a dialectic in

the contribution of the two sexes to the life of the Church? Should men, who have the official and public ministry, be challenged all the time by women who are free from official structures, and are moved by the Spirit independently of formal consecration; or should the two groups share the burden of office equally, to be challenged by the rest? We cannot answer these questions. In fact, we are saying that the answer can be found only through the prayerful deliberation of the whole Church. There are serious arguments for equality.

At present the field is certainly open for any kind of sacred ministry not explicitly reserved to those who receive the sacrament of order. There is openness in preaching the Gospel, in ministering to the sick and the poor, virtually in every conceivable way.

There is an opening in ministry concerned with temporal and secular matters, provided that such work is assumed into the sacred ministry of a whole community; provided that there is a sacred dimension in the finality of the work. Secular ministry without a sacred dimension cannot be the proper work of religious. But there are many secular ministries, unexplored today, that will as easily fit into a sacred framework as education did in the past.

#### *Some conclusions*

All ministries are the creation of the community. Nor do structures develop by themselves. They arise when Christians recognize new vital forces in the community that need channelling. To channel them they create structures.

At certain times, the universal community, through the ministry of the bishops, may authenticate structures that prove themselves integral to the life of the community. They then contribute to the permanent identity of the Christian Church. Such are especially the structures connected with sacramental activity.

There is room for development in many ways. Women as well as men may be called to sacred orders, if the Church should so discern.

The field for service, beyond that reserved to consecrated ministers, is immense. It would be idle to speculate what concrete ministries can develop in the future, because progress depends on the creativity of those entering this field and searching for better ways of helping the Church and mankind. But all activities in the Church ultimately have a sacred dimension that cannot be cancelled out. Nonetheless all that is good and human belongs to the Church, provided it is incorporated into the community's sacred mission.