

# THE ROLE OF THE PRIEST-RELIGIOUS

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**M**ANY PRIESTS and religious are troubled today by an identity crisis. They are no longer sure of their own situation in the christian community, and are often unconvinced that their work, whatever it is, is helping to define their role. Ironically, the teaching of Vatican II, on the call of the whole Church to holiness, has led them to reject the traditional view, also upheld by the same council, that the priesthood and religion are states of life in the Church particularly conducive to growth in Christ, guaranteed paths to salvation; for every christian is consecrated by his baptism and empowered by the Spirit to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to Christ.

In our attempt to answer the question, what is the role of the priest-religious in the Church of to-day, we must clarify first of all what is implied in priestly ordination, and then examine the meaning of religious consecration. This may enable us to see whether the two ideas are mutually compatible or not.

The role of the priest is being widely questioned today, and so far no complete agreement on an answer seems to have emerged. In fact, the answers proposed often contradict each other. Some maintain, for instance, that because their number is steadily dwindling, all priests should be engaged only in what is directly priestly work, leaving non-priestly work to other members of the christian community. This, of course, presupposes general agreement about what is and what is not 'priestly' work. Yet perhaps it is lack of clarity and precision about this that lies at the heart of the confusion. Some would deny that any clear-cut distinction can be made; they would maintain that the area of priestly work has in the past been far too narrowly circumscribed. Today, because of the growing gulf between clergy and laity, it is suggested that the only way the priest can get into vital contact with the modern world is by engaging directly in the tasks of the people among whom he lives. He should get a recognized job that will be valued by others and give him status and independence. He will then be better able to fulfil

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his role as minister of Christ. In short, every priest, in order to be effective as a priest, should become a worker-priest or a priest-teacher or the like. On the other hand, there are priests who do in fact have recognized jobs as teachers, administrators and so on, yet they are not happy with their situation. They feel they are neglecting their true role as priests. They are unhappy about having to spend so much of their time and energy on work that seems to bear no direct relation to their priesthood; and all the while effective preaching of the gospel is being neglected. Therefore they want to be free to dedicate their lives completely to the direct communication of the message of Christ to modern man. There are, then, two lines of approach to the problem. One maintains that the priest cannot really get the message of Christ across to modern man unless he gets a job in the secular city which will provide him with status and independence. The other argues that the priest's actual job, salary and status are obstacles to his effective dedication to the priestly ministry. Is one compelled to choose one or other of these views?

The latin rite of ordination talks of Christ sending his apostles into the world, so that through them and their successors he might continue his work as teacher, priest and pastor. This same approach to the priestly ministry has been adopted by the Second Vatican Council. The Constitution on the Church describes priests as the bishops' commissioned assistants who, through the power of the sacrament of Order, are consecrated to preach the gospel, preside over the liturgical worship of the community and act as shepherds over Christ's flock.<sup>1</sup> In this activity the priest is to be seen as a sign of the presence of Christ in the world, and as an instrument of the risen Christ in carrying on his redemptive work. A triple function is assigned to him. He is to be a minister of the word of God, a minister of cult and sanctification through worship and the sacraments, and he is to be a pastor or leader of the followers of Christ. These three functions he has in virtue of his sacramental ordination. That is to say, he is commissioned by the Spirit of God and is not simply an administrative official.

The conciliar documents consistently relate the role of the priest to that of the bishop. He is the bishop's commissioned assistant. A glance at the beginnings of christianity shows that the pastoral mission entrusted to bishops and presbyters involved the provision

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<sup>1</sup> Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 28.

of spiritual leadership; this was to be exercised through an exemplary christian life – with its resultant moral authority – combined with the function of preaching the gospel, presiding over liturgical worship and providing pastoral guidance on how to live according to the gospel. It involved, too, a permanent vocation and the dedication of one's life to the ministry; and it gave sacramental expression to the headship of Christ over his Church.

Within this pastoral mission the bishops have always been regarded in a special way as the successors of the apostles, with a particular supervisory responsibility to preach the gospel and safeguard the unity of the christian community. The presbyters, although in a subordinate position, shared this responsibility with the bishops, as their helpers and colleagues. Together they were charged with the direction of Christ's pastoral mission. Some passages in the documents of Vatican II could give the impression that presbyters are ordained simply because the bishop cannot be everywhere at once, and that therefore he needs subordinate officials to replace him and represent him. This is a misleading impression. The bishop does not ordain presbyters merely because he himself cannot be everywhere, but to be his colleagues, to assist him in his pastoral mission where he is. Bishops and presbyters are expected to work together. Hence the importance of the *presbyterium*, in which priests and bishop are seen to share responsibility for the pastoral guidance of the Church. There has been a renewed emphasis recently on the *presbyterium*, as is clear from the conciliar documents, and the current attempts to restore this as a working reality today is in harmony with a well-founded tradition, firmly supported by the theology of the sacrament of Order and by the practice of the early Church.<sup>2</sup> All this is not without implication for discussions on the role of the priest. It may be that such a *presbyterium* must have room for variety in its composition, if the bishop is to be provided with adequate support in his leadership of the local church.

While, therefore, there is general agreement on the triple function traditionally assigned to bishops and presbyters, history demonstrates that the way in which these functions have in fact been carried out has varied in the past, and continues to display quite a startling variety. The circumstances of each local church will

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<sup>2</sup> Cf Power, D. N., O.M.I.: *Ministers of Christ and His Church: The Theology of the Priesthood*, (London, 1969); Rahner, K., S.J.: *Bishops: Their Status and Function* (London, 1964).

determine what is best in that particular time and place. Communication of the gospel may at times require the priest to become a worker or a teacher, or to be what may be termed a 'full-time' priest. Similarly, the spiritual dialogue that is implied in the priestly role as minister of cult and sanctification can be carried out in many different ways. The priest is not meant to be simply a cultic functionary. He presides at the liturgy because he is a leader of the christian community. He is not a leader of the community because he presides at the liturgy. The distinction is an important one. The priest's essential role would seem to be to embody the christian way of life and teach this to others. He is expected to be existentially committed to Christ, to be a man of prayer and to preside at the liturgy with faith and piety, and not just as a ritual functionary. And lastly, there are many ways of exercising pastoral leadership and trying to build up the Body of Christ by fostering unity and charity in the community and encouraging collaboration.

It would seem, then, that the pastoral role of the priest in the Church can be carried out in a great variety of ways. And no single one of these is specifically demanded by priestly ordination. There is no single univocal answer to the question, how the priest should fulfil the triple role that tradition assigns to him. This triple role does in fact indicate clearly the general direction that his life should take; but apart from that, it leaves great freedom for individual development. Much depends on the circumstances of a particular mission, and much too on the character, temperament and talents of the priest himself. It would appear, therefore, that there is scope both for the full-time priest in the traditional sense of the term and also for worker-priests and for hyphenated priests of all kinds; room too, presumably, for the priest-religious.

Just as many priests are troubled about their role in the modern Church, a number of religious are equally anxious about the role of religious life today. Has it a future or is it already outmoded? Here again, it is difficult to uncover a univocal answer, equally applicable to all forms of religious life; which is why so many conclude that religious life itself has no future. It may be, however, that the deductive approach to the problem is mistaken, and that a more inductive method of inquiry is called for. That is to say, each religious should ask himself, not, 'what is the role of religious life as such', but, 'what is my role as a member of this particular religious institute here and now in the Church'. The charismatic

dimension of the christian life would suggest that this second approach is the more satisfactory. The variety of religious life in the Church is a particularly striking witness to the diversity of the gifts of the Spirit. Religious life is, after all, a charismatic growth in the Church.

In a document published by Rome two years ago on religious formation, *Renovationis Causam*, a number of changes were proposed in the training of religious. The aim of these changes and fresh emphases was to foster in the candidates themselves a progressive realization of what a particular religious vocation involves, namely, a fully personal and individual response to the invitation of Christ, an invitation that calls for a permanent and irrevocable life-commitment. The stress is on the individual personal response. Each individual institute and each individual member are to be encouraged to develop according to the guidance of the Spirit. They should not be forced into a mould that might endanger or thwart this development. In *Renovationis Causam*, greater confidence has been shown in the charismatic inspiration of each religious institute. The particular legislation of a religious family has now greater freedom than before to develop in accordance with the inspiration of its own particular founder. Previous canonical legislation for religious had stressed uniformity; but the decrees of the Second Vatican Council have shifted the emphasis to the guiding Spirit of God. There would seem to be a clearer realization of the working of the Spirit in the Church, and a more careful attention to the charismatic aspect of the christian life.

Let me clarify what is meant here by the word *charism*. St Paul has a lot to say about various charismata in his letters to the romans and to the corinthians.<sup>3</sup> They are to be distinguished both from sanctifying grace and the indwelling of the Spirit, and also from various personal gifts of the Spirit to individual christians. A charism is a particular inspiration of the Spirit which invites an individual christian to perform some special role in the Church's mission; it also furnishes the individual with the ability to perform this role effectively. It is something given for the benefit of others, for the common good of the Mystical Body, rather than directly or primarily for the personal sanctification of the individual who receives it. There are a great variety of such charismata in the Church: for teaching, counselling, healing and so on. It is to such

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<sup>3</sup> Cf Rom 12; 1 Cor 12.

that St Paul appears to be referring when he says: 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good'.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, then, every religious congregation is a charismatic institution. It has grown up from a special charismatic gift that was granted to the founder or foundress. The congregation and its members share this charism that is granted for the general good of the Church; which explains the Vatican Council's stress on the need for deep reflection on the life and inspiration of the founder.<sup>5</sup>

To return now to the question about the future of religious life. Religious life exists today in the Church because a great variety of individual Christians responded to a free gift of the Spirit of God in a particular way. They received both grace and charism from the Spirit for a definite way of life which put special emphasis on a particular aspect of the following of Christ; and they attracted others to join them and share their charism and their vision; or rather, the Spirit of God drew others to dedicate their lives to the same ideal. Presumably, therefore, religious life will continue in the Church as long as the Spirit of God continues to inspire individuals to live this particular sort of life, and they respond to this inspiration.

However, just as priestly ordination implies the triple function of spiritual leadership, preaching and the administration of the sacraments, so also religious consecration involves the three public vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. These three vows of religion are the expression of the positive consecration of a person who feels drawn by the Spirit to undertake this particular way of following Christ poor, Christ chaste, Christ obedient, Christ the servant of the Father. The religious makes this renunciation and enters upon this particular way of life, not in a spirit of self-confidence or with the selfish idea of taking out an insurance policy on salvation, but in a spirit of complete trust in the power of the Spirit who, he believes, is drawing him to this way of life. Often, too, he may be sustained by the knowledge that the way of life he has adopted has been approved by the Church, hallowed by tradition and tested by the experience of saints as a safe path and sure guide in the following of Christ. He has confidence in the Spirit, and can say with St Paul: 'For I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him'.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 12, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Lafont, G., 'L'Esprit Saint et le droit dans l'institution religieuse', in *Supplément to La Vie Spirituelle*, 20 (1967), pp 473-501; 594-639.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Tim 1, 12.

These religious vows are not, however, taken in a vacuum. They are always to be understood according to the constitutions of a particular charismatic institute. And the history of religious life in the Church is proof enough that they are compatible with a large variety of activities. It would probably be difficult to name any activity for the advancement of the kingdom of Christ which has not been undertaken by some religious congregation or other. *A priori*, therefore, there would seem to be no internal contradiction involved in the idea of a person who has consecrated his life in an apostolic religious institute also being ordained a priest. Only a narrow view of the priest as primarily a cultic functionary would tend to exclude the religious from the *presbyterium*. The priesthood must always, of course, be exercised in collaboration with the local bishop or under the direction of the college of bishops with the pope as its head. But provided that this collaboration is assured, there would seem to be nothing against a member of an active religious institute being an ordained priest in the local Church with a place in its *presbyterium*.

There is another matter causing concern to apostolic religious, and in particular to clerical institutes. This is the decline in the need for community enterprises run by religious. Schools, universities and hospitals are being handed over to laymen, and religious communities are no longer required to provide the service in these areas that they once supplied. There is still, of course, great scope for group activity by a team of religious, but there is also increasing scope – and indeed demand – for individuals to undertake work on their own, and take on jobs that used to be considered unsuitable for priests and religious. This slackening in the demand for community services has led some people to conclude that the days of the active, apostolic institutes are numbered and will soon come to an end. They have served their purpose and can now disappear. It may be so, but the conclusion is not obvious.

Here we must return to the charismatic aspect of religious life. A religious community implies a group of Christians who share the same gift or charism of the Spirit. This involves in its turn the common possession of a shared vision of the Christian life. And this is of vital importance. Without it there would seem to be little point in such religious communities. My particular Jesuit vocation, for example, implies a particular gift of the Spirit which impels me to see the urgency of the gospel as lived in this particular way and to dedicate my life to this ideal. As a charism, meant for the service

of the Church, it impels me to enter this particular charismatic community and take an active part in its life and development.

The shared vision is of vital importance, but it does not entail that every jesuit community should be engaged together in some common enterprise such as the running of a school or college. Nor does it entail an external structure of observances conformity with which will be both a sign of unity and a bond that holds the community together. It does, however, necessarily imply some kind of shared experience. It does entail the shared acceptance of the jesuit way of life as this is embodied in the jesuit constitutions, and the shared attempt to live up to the christian ideal that is proposed by St Ignatius in those constitutions. If there is this sort of shared vision and experience, then there will be a strong sense of community, even though it will not always mean living and working together on a common enterprise.

What binds the members of an active apostolic institute together is the possession of a common charism and a common approach to the christian life. 'To live in brotherhood in an apostolic institute', writes Fr Beyer, 'is to live united by the same spirit, even if the work undertaken is largely personal, as in the case of priestly work and the type of mission which demands mobility and a high degree of availability. The house of the institute is then no longer a convent or a 'community house' but rather a home port, a place of rest, study and silent prayer where the apostolic worker can relax when a task is accomplished without being caught up in a rhythm of life detrimental to repose and peace'.<sup>7</sup> But if such an institute is to thrive, docility to the Spirit is vital and fidelity to the particular charism fundamental. Members must follow faithfully and wholeheartedly the charismatic inspiration that brought the group together and led to its growth and development. Hence the need for prayer and reflection about the institute's charism and spirituality.

It is here that the need for mutual support and encouragement becomes clear. And this is the value that many are finding today in such activities as group prayer and group reflection on the spirit and ideal of their own particular religious family. This type of informal communal prayer was apparently quite common in the early Society of Jesus, and Fr Jerome Nadal has left the following description of it: 'In these spiritual meetings the brothers should

<sup>7</sup> Beyer, J., 'Institutes of Apostolic Life', in *Supplement to The Way*, 8 (1969), p 203.



speak out in complete humility and sincerity, describing things not speculatively but experientially, not in scholastic terms but in terms of their own devotion, not quoting others' words, but relating their own feelings. They should express what they have understood in their own spiritual experience'.<sup>8</sup> Where members of a community are all engaged in different and individual apostolic tasks, the survival of the religious commitment might well depend upon such regular periods of communal prayer and reflection, so that experience can be shared and mutual support and encouragement provided. Otherwise there is serious danger that the religious family will either disintegrate all together or degenerate into a sort of club.

In conclusion, then, it may be said that there is no obvious incompatibility between being a religious and being an ordained priest. In fact, the double role can be a source of strength, since each aspect is supported by the other and both are really directed towards the same goal, which is the embodiment of the christian ideal in one's own life and the effort to transmit this ideal to others. There is no incompatibility in theory, because by priestly ordination a man is consecrated by the Spirit for a particular responsibility within the christian community. And as has been seen, there is a great variety of ways in which this responsibility can be carried out. Similarly, religious consecration is quite compatible with an endless variety of tasks in the Church. Nor is there any built-in incompatibility in practice: the two roles have been successfully combined for centuries. The history of the last thousand years provides abundant evidence that the gospel can be effectively preached by men who felt called to dedicate their lives by the three vows of religion as well as by accepting priestly ordination. The combination has worked in the past and there is good reason to think that it will continue to work in the future, provided that each individual is faithful to the direction of the Spirit of God, who continually inspires a great variety of expressions of the christian life within the Church. And it is fidelity to the Spirit that matters. 'Serve one another with the particular gifts God has given each of you, as faithful dispensers of the magnificently varied grace of God'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Monumenta Historica S.J.*, IV, *Selecta Natalis Monumenta*, 553.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Pet 4, 10.