REFLECTING ON MINISTRY: AN ONLINE RETREAT

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Introduction

"Christian Ministry" is one of those "slippery words" that can mean many things. In the minds of some, ministry is restricted to the activity of those few who have been solemnly commissioned--ordained--as office holders in the church. The idea of "lay ministry," as one bishop is purported to have said, is a contradiction in terms! Others mean by ministry any activity of service that a person renders another--and in specifically Christian context this means any task--parenting, lawyering, practicing citizenship, bringing Christian values to the workplace--which a Christian undertakes that builds up either the believing community or the world to which the community is sent on mission. Still others, while not restricting ministry to the ordained, see it as a task that is the result of a public commissioning by the church community for the sake of public service in the community's name. This third idea seems to be the one held by most people who think and write about Christian ministry today, but discussion and questioning still go on. It always has. A study of history reveals that Christian ministry has been understood in different ways as the church has lived through different periods and has incarnated itself in various cultures. Our own time at the beginning of this millennium is no exception, and so the search to understand Christian ministry does and *should* continue.

The aim of this essay is to contribute to that search by trying to come to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Christian ministry in the context of today's world and contemporary theological thought. This will not be done, however, by proposing a neat definition and then elaborating on it. While several fine definitions have been proposed, [1] I don't believe that ministry can, ultimately, be adequately grasped in this way. The key to what I propose to do here, rather, is in my very deliberate use of the word "understanding." Like all theology, which is a quest for *real* and not merely *notional* (i.e. merely rational, "head") knowledge, understanding *ministry* theologically is something that can only be achieved with mind and heart and imagination all working together. My tack, therefore, will be to approach an understanding of ministry by reflecting on a number of propositions or theses, each of which expresses a truth about the nature of ministry from a particular angle or perspective. Each of these theses is true, but no one of them captures ministry's entire reality. Only by holding all of them together--and perhaps along with others that readers might add themselves--can one come to some kind of adequate understanding. But even this understanding allows only a glimpse of Christian ministry's full meaning, because, like every object of theological reflection, Christian ministry is a mystery. It reflects in its own way the mind-boggling reality of God's closeness and God's love, the communication of which God has entrusted to us.

I will focus here on specifically *Christian* ministry. In doing this I don't mean to say that this is the only valid form of ministry. There is certainly a place for what Richard McBrien calls "general" ministry, [2] and religious ways like Judaism, Buddhism and Islam all have their own forms of ministry as well. Nevertheless, Christian ministry--whether Protestant or Catholic--has its own distinctive characteristics, even though it might share those characteristics with other ministerial forms.

Thesis One: Christain Ministry Is Witness to Jesus Christ

"Even an atheist can be a minister," one of my students claimed in a session of theological reflection several years ago. I understood what my student was trying to say--that one does not have to be a believer or a Christian to regard people with love, to reach out and be of genuine service, to be genuinely touched and enriched by another person's simple humanity. Nevertheless, I had to point out to my student that, from the point of view of *Christian* ministry, he was, in the final analysis, wrong. Christian ministry is not just about doing good deeds. "To be *Christian* ministry, . . . action must flow from Christian being, from the belief in and communion with Jesus, the Christ, and with the God he reveals." [3]

To my mind, a key New Testament text for an understanding of Christian ministry is the passage in Second Corinthians where Paul is speaking about God's reconciling action in Christ. That ministry, that "message of reconciliation," Paul says, God has in turn "entrusted . . . to us"--a fact that "makes us ambassadors for Christ" (see 2Cor 5:19-20). Ministry, in other words, is first of all *Christ's*; what makes *us* ministers is that we are spokespersons, "ambassadors" of that ministry. This is a truly foundational understanding of Christian ministry: it is not first and foremost our work, but the work of Christ which has been entrusted to us. As Christ is the sacrament of God, Christian ministers--*all* Christian ministers--are sacraments of Christ. This sacramentality differs according to whether one has been ordained or not--for ordained ministers sacrament to all Christians what they sacrament to the

world as baptized members of the church--but all ministers do indeed re-present Christ and his ministry. It is indeed accurate to say that every minister is "another Christ."

Because of Christian ministers' basic identity with Christ and his ministry, the basic task of ministry, and so the task which is the reason for ministerial activities in all their variety, is to witness to and to proclaim "the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth."[4] There is, in other words, something *intentional* about Christian ministry; it is activity done for the sake of Jesus Christ, in his name and in order to enable women and men to encounter his saving presence. What this means is that ministers are charged with becoming clearer manifestations of the reality that they already are: the continuing presence of Christ in the church and the world. As Jesus lived his humanity as totally open and willing to be transformed by the Spirit, so Christian ministers need to struggle for continued openness in their lives. As Jesus' consuming passion was his preaching, serving and witnessing to the Reign of God, so Christian ministers need to be committed to deepening their understanding of Jesus' vision and to enabling those in their care to be transformed in its light. Again, this is the task of *all* Christian ministers, whether lay or ordained, whether involved in a ministry of teaching or activism, whether in a ministry involving high and heavy responsibility or one that is less demanding. If it is *Christian* ministry, it needs to be inspired by the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and have as its goal that Lordship's manifestation.

Thesis Two: Christian Ministry Is Ecclesial

The Christian vision of what it means to be human is one that is radically different from the view that has emerged in the modern West. Under the influence of thinkers like Descartes, Kant, Locke--and even religious geniuses like Martin Luther--modern western men and women have come to see themselves first as individuals and then only as communal or social beings--*I* think, therefore I am; *I* have made this factual or moral judgement, therefore it is true or moral for *me*; here *I* stand, I can do none other. As Robert Bellah and his colleagues have pointed out in *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*, community in modern consciousness is seen as important, but can only be the product of a "social contract" among individuals, entered into to protect individual interests and to be terminated whenever those interests--in the judgement of an individual!--are not served.[5]

In contrast, the Christian vision is much more similar to that of cultures in which the community, not the individual, is the primary experience of being human. It is the community that constitutes the individual; "I am because we are." Because of this, there is no such thing as a private Christianity, because Christianity is participation in a communal existence. Individual Christians do not make the church; it is participation in the church that constitutes individuals as Christians. A person cannot baptize himself or herself; he or she can only *be baptized* by others.

The western, individualistic view of being human and being Christian has also affected understandings of ministry. We speak, for instance, of *my* vocation to ministry, or of *my* decision to become a minister; priests often speak of "my priesthood." While this is not entirely wrong, the impression given is that ministry is something that is a personal, private call, and is one's personal responsibility. The fact is, however, that ministry does not belong to individuals; in the most fundamental way it belongs primarily to the church, which, *as a community*, shares and continues the ministry of Jesus the Christ. Ministry, therefore, is always and everywhere an ecclesial reality: it is always authorized by the church community, always exercised in the name of the community, has as its goal the furtherance of the community's mission and the building up of the community.

1Notes

. See, for example, the definitions of ministry proposed by Thomas F. O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry* (New York/ Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 142 and Richard P. McBrien, *Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 11-14.

2. McBrien, pp. 11-12.

3. Michael G. Lawler and Thomas J. Shanahan, *Church: A Spirited Communion* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press [a Michael Glazier Book], 1995), p. 64.

4. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference), #22.

5. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row [Perennial Library Edition], 1986; *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991), pp. 85-90. See also Robert N. Bellah, "Religion and the Shape of National Culture," *America*, 181, 3 (July 31 - August 7, 1999): 9-14.