

## REFLECTING ON MINISTRY: AN ONLINE RETREAT

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### *Thesis Eleven: Christian Ministry Is Holistic*

This thesis gets its impetus from a warning in Henri Nouwen's marvelous little book on Christian leadership to which I have referred already: "spirituality" must not become "spiritualization." Precisely because ministry is the witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, it needs to be *holistic*: attending both to body and soul, focusing both on individuals as well as their social and cultural milieu, answering to immediate human needs and suffering while at the same time working toward the reform of the unjust structures that more often than not lie at suffering's roots.

The immediate context for Nouwen's remark has to do with the minister's need to claim his or her bodiliness, to recognize its need for intimacy, to confess one's weaknesses and failings to the community within which one ministers, to learn to integrate the message he or she communicates with their own personal lives. "Christian leaders," says Nouwen, "are called to live in the body--not only in their own bodies but also in the corporate body of the community, and to discover there the presence of the Holy Spirit."<sup>1</sup> A healthy sense of being and remaining a human being needs to be part and parcel of one's ministerial identity, no matter how great are one's responsibilities within the community. As many ministers will attest, a great deal of ministry is accomplished not by the skills which have been learned or the authority or prestige with which a minister has been invested, but by the humanity by which one person encounters another, and in that humanity somehow touches the living God. Thesis One pointed out how every minister is a sacrament of Christ. Just as God becomes present through his humanity, so he becomes present in the minister's.

Nouwen's warning against "spiritualization," however, can be extended in other directions as well, first to the minister's engagement with human cultural reality, to human society, and to the cosmos in which we live. The minister's task of evangelization is one that enters into a deep dialogue with the particular culture or cultures within which he or she works, a dialogue in which both the culture and the minister's understanding of it is constantly being transformed. The Lord to whom ministers witness is an *incarnate* Lord, who became "like us in all things but sin" (Heb 4:15), and the gospel to which they minister is not one that has fallen from the sky. Indeed, as Pope John Paul II has said so trenchantly "a faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out."<sup>2</sup> Even the *effort* on the minister's part to learn a culture, or in some cases to learn and perfect a people's language, is already ministry, because through it the minister pays homage to the presence of God within a culture and community, and to the sacred humanity of the people among whom he or she lives.<sup>3</sup>

Church documents are clear about the fact that the church's mission includes neither direct involvement in economic or technical development, nor in political issues. "Rather," says Pope John Paul II, "her mission consists essentially in offering people an opportunity not to 'have more' but to 'be more,' by awakening their consciences through the Gospel."<sup>4</sup> But this, too, should not be "spiritualized," because the gospel to which we minister is holistic. Jesus' ministry was to preach in both word and deed to the already-but-not-yet Reign of God, and that ministry involved words and actions which subtly--and sometimes not so subtly--challenged the unjust status quo. Christian ministry, then, consists of words and actions that promote and struggle for human wholeness, human development, and human and cosmic liberation from forces of oppression. At whatever level Christian ministers engage in ministry, they need to keep in mind those powerful words of the 1971 Synod of Bishops: "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world full appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel . . ."<sup>5</sup>

In recent years both theological and magisterial reflection has begun to recognize "the links between concern for the person and for the earth, between natural and social ecology," between social justice and eco-justice. "The web of life is one,"<sup>6</sup> declares a document published by the United States Catholic Conference in 1991. What this means in terms of a holistic ministry is that ministerial activity includes not only the care for human beings in their cultural and socio-political dimensions; it involves also the care for the earth, and indeed the entire cosmos. Ecological and eco-justice themes, therefore, should be part and parcel of homilies and liturgical prayer; part or all of a minister's efforts could be devoted to the promotion sustainable development and ecological awareness in one's local faith or civic community; ministers could witness to and encourage a simpler, less consumerist lifestyle; parish ministers could work toward "greening" the parish facilities by installing solar panels, more efficient lighting, water saving devices and so forth. A fully "spiritual" ministry, in other words, includes service to *all* of creation.

## ***Thesis Twelve: Christian Ministry Takes Cognizance of the “Other”***

Ministry is about service to others, but often the service that is given does not recognize the “otherness” of those served. Instead, ministers may succumb to the temptation to decide themselves what a person needs, or perform their ministry out of a theological or ecclesiastical tradition that seems tried and true, and which possesses (so they imagine) universal applicability. For ministry to be truly, *ministry* however, that otherness needs to be acknowledged and honored. Ministers need to be aware not only of the uniqueness of each individual they encounter, with his or her personal history, intelligence and particular characteristics; just as important is for ministers to be aware of unique perspectives represented by differences in sex, sexual orientation, culture, age, education, and so forth.

Herbert Anderson writes with eloquence about the importance of “seeing the Other whole.” Such an ability he calls a *habitus* or “disposition of soul,” and what is clear that this is not something that comes natural to human beings. It is rather a “personal spiritual discipline,” that is acquired as one works at cultivating four “distinct attitudes”: a sense of wonder in the face of human uniqueness; recognition of the Other as truly “other;” hospitality to the stranger; and patience on the way to reconciliation.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding the Other begins with wonder, and this is surely a first step of authentic service--we cannot serve persons we do not deeply reverence. Anderson says that such wonder has three components. In the first place, wonder means suspending judgement about the person or persons before us, accepting the other despite what are often reflex feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity before difference. Rather than interpreting a particular person through an already preconceived grid, our task as ministers is to see the person or community to whom and with whom we minister as a mystery to be experienced, to be savored, to be honored. The first gift of ministry is acceptance of the person or persons whom God has delivered into our care. Second, wonder involves the willingness to learn from the Other--as I will propose in the next thesis, the willingness to be ministered to, to be enlarged and enriched as one reverences difference. Third, wonder includes the “courage to be surprised.”<sup>8</sup> No better example of this aspect of wonder can be given than that of Jesus in his encounter with the “otherness” of the Canaanite woman in Mt 15:21-28 or Mk 24-30. Jesus, the Model of ministers, took cognizance of the Other and was surprised!

The other then needs to be *recognized*--as different, as separate from oneself. Instead of seeing the other as a mere image of his or herself, “as projects to transform, as unbelievers to convert, as embodying ideas needing correction, or as incomplete beings needing formation,”<sup>9</sup> the minister needs first to see people *as people*, exercising what Jürgen Habermas calls the virtue of “moral sensitivity,” the characteristics of which “are what we otherwise associate with care: the ability to listen, the willingness to be emotionally involved, and the capacity to accept, even encourage, personal uniqueness.”<sup>10</sup>

Anderson’s third and fourth attitudes of hospitality to the stranger and the patience to wait for reconciliation are both actions that flow from wonder and recognition. In the act of hospitality the minister reaches out toward the other, integrating otherness into his or her life, and into the life of the community in which he or she serves. The patience in face of reconciliation is the minister’s incarnation of the patience of God. Jesus’ parable of the loving father in Lk 15:11-32 is an example both of God’s respect for human freedom in allowing the son to leave home and of God’s patient waiting for the son to come home after “coming to his senses” (v. 17) on his own. This is a powerful parable of the ministry of reconciliation, a ministry that honors and acknowledges the Other while at the same time holding fast to the persuasive, reconciling power of the Spirit of God.

Doing ministry in acknowledgement of the Other assures that ministry is not just the imposition of a preconceived agenda on a person or a people or a culture but an authentic response to God’s presence in what is always a unique and often surprising and transforming situation.

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1. Nouwen, p. 48.

2. Pope John Paul II, quoted in Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 231.

3. Jon Kirby, “Language and Culture Learning IS Conversion . . . IS Ministry,” *Missiology: An International Review* XXIII, 2 (April, 1995): 131-143.

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4. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, #58.

5. Synod of Bishops, 1971, "Justice in the World," Introduction. In David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 289.

6. U.S. Catholic Conference, *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflect on the Environment in the Light of Catholic Social Teaching* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1991), p. 2.

7. Herbert Anderson, "Seeing the Other Whole: A Habitus for Globalization," *Mission Studies*, XIV, 1 and 2--27/28 (1997): 40-63; the quotations are found on p. 44 and 45.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 56.