

REFLECTING ON MINISTRY: AN ONLINE RETREAT

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Thesis Three: Christian Ministry Is Universal

By this third thesis I mean that every Christian is called to ministry; no one is excluded. Not every Christian may *practice* ministry all the time, but ministry is something that every Christian is called to do--at least some time in his or her life. "Ministry," say the U. S. Bishops, "is the vocation, privilege, and responsibility of all members of the Church. . . . The whole Church is the primary recipient of Christ's mission . . ." ¹

This is the case for two reasons: in the first place, the church is "missionary by its very nature." ² To be a member of the church, first, is to be committed, like Jesus, to mission and ministry. Strictly speaking, the church is not an already-formed community that engages in ministry; ministry is rather *constitutive* of the church. "Ministry is not something the Church-communion *does*; it is something it *is*. Christ's Church is essentially ministerial." ³ Christian existence finds its essence in service, whether it is the service of building up the community internally--so that it might be a worthy sign and instrument of God's saving presence in the world--or in the direct service of preaching, serving and witnessing to the Reign of God in the midst of unbelief, injustice and violence. One cannot be a Christian and not be a minister, one who is at least in some way involved in the church's mission: it is, as Pope John Paul II has said, "the task of all the Christian faithful." ⁴

The second reason for the universality of Christian ministry is the charismatic structure of the church. "We, though many," writes St. Paul, "are one body in Christ and individually members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the favor bestowed on each of us" (Rom 12:5-6). Each member of the church is endowed with particular qualities or capacities which can be used for the good of the church and the church's mission in the world. As the Asian bishops wisely point out, not every charism necessarily blossoms forth into ministry--persons might not respond to them fully, or the church may not call a particular ministry forth at a particular time; nevertheless, each and every Christian is charismatic by virtue of baptism, and every ministry presupposes a charism. ⁵

The charismatic and universal ministerial structure of the church also points to the fact that "while all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ"--in other words, while there are no "higher" or "lower" ministries in the church, no states which are essentially "holier" than others--not all in the church "proceed by the same path." ⁶ All are endowed with gifts, but gifts that *differ*. There is a difference in variety, of course, but there is also a difference in kind, or in essence. While all ministry is an exercise of the priesthood which is common to the entire church, a first kind of ministry focuses on the carrying out of particular types of tasks, such as working for social justice, serving the community as a lector within the liturgy, teaching theology in a college, taking communion to the sick, or running an AIDS hospice. A second kind of ministry oversees and cares for the whole, making sure that the church maintains its ministerial structure, its "holy order." This latter ministry, performed primarily by the church's bishops, but also through the ministry of presbyters (priests) and deacons, exists for the sake of the former: this is the ministry that helps the whole church "to exercise faithfully and fully the common priesthood which it has received." ⁷

Thesis Four: Christian Ministry Is a Vocation

What is further implied by the charismatic structure of the church is that ministry is the result of a specific vocation. Every ministry supposes a charism, and "charism" literally means a gift, a grace. Ministry, then, is not something that a person decides to do (as I have said in thesis two), nor is it something to which a person has a right. While ministry is the responsibility of every Christian, we must never lose sight of the fact that that responsibility rests on a prior call. God has freely chosen to call women and men to the communal, ministerial existence which is the church; church is "ekklesia," those who are "called forth." We are, in the words of 1 Peter 2:9, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people [God] claims . . . to proclaim the glorious works" of the God who calls us into marvelous light.

Within this context, then, every *particular* ministry in the church is derived from God's gracious gift. "To one the Spirit gives wisdom in discourse, to another the power to express knowledge. Through the Spirit one receives faith; by the same Spirit another is given the gift of healing, and still another miraculous powers" (1 Cor 12:8-10). Paul goes on to name gifts of discernment, interpretation, and in Rom 12 he mentions prophecy, teaching, administration, authority and the ability to perform "works of mercy." Obviously, the list is not exhaustive, and in

our own day other gifts might be added to the list: hospitality, the ability to lobby effectively in circles of government, talent in music and the other performing and plastic arts.

A sense of vocation, then, means that ministers act not simply as a result of their own natural abilities or desires, but out of a conviction that such native abilities are the result of God's generous and amazing grace, given not for the minister's sake, but "for the common good" (1 Cor 12:7). In addition, the ecclesial dimension of ministry also points to the fact that ministry is a call from the church as well. Ministry is not simply the result of a sense of *personal* call, as important as that certainly is; the vocation of ministry entails as well a ratification of charism by the community. Ministry belongs not to individuals, but to the church as Christ's body; and it is the church that discerns the various ministries that the Spirit bestows within it.

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1. U. S. Bishops, *As One Who Serves: Reflections on the Pastoral Ministry of Priests in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Catholic Conference, 1977), p. 19.

2. Vatican Council II, Decree on Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*), in Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder / Association Press, 1966), #2.

3. Lawler and Shanahan, p. 54.

4. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Catholic Conference, 1991), # 71.

5. "Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church," in Gaudencio Rosales and C. G. Arévalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books / Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1992), 73-74.

6. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), in Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder / Association Press, 1966), #32.

7. John Paul II, *I Will Give You Shepherds* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1992), #17.