

## REFLECTING ON MINISTRY: AN ONLINE RETREAT

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### *Thesis Seven: Christian Ministry Is a Ministry*

Christian ministry is not, strictly speaking, a “state.” One becomes a minister not to *be* something, but to *do* something--or, as Richard McBrien expresses it, “One doesn’t become a minister to *become* a minister, that is to enter the ministerial state. One becomes a minister to *do* ministry, that is to fulfill the function of a minister.”<sup>1</sup> This does not mean, McBrien is quick to point out, that ministry is only about external activity, and not rooted (as I will also insist on in Thesis Nine and Ten) in a life of reflection, prayer and contemplation. The point is, rather, that the be-ing of the minister is not centered on being a *minister*, but (as I have insisted in Thesis One) on being a *Christian*. To speak of ministry as a function also does not preclude, I believe, the fact that, when one is called by God and that call is ratified by the church, a person undergoes an “ontological” change. When one is invested with a particular responsibility of ministry, when one is commissioned to act in service to the community or to the world in a particular way, one’s be-ing as a Christian is certainly changed--becoming a minister of communion, a parish family minister, a presbyter or deacon changes people in radical ways. But it is because one has been commissioned to act differently--to function in a certain new way--that one changes, and not vice-versa. A minister who does not *minister* is a contradiction in terms!

This is an idea that I know many people have trouble with, particularly in terms of the sacrament of order. Magisterial documents argue strongly against a “merely functional” understanding of ordained ministry in the church. If, however, one would look to some of the insights proposed by some branches of philosophical thought, it is hard to understand anything as “merely functional” as opposed to “ontological.” Contemporary process philosophy (and theology) emphasizes the radical relational nature of reality, arguing that something maintains its existence only in relation to something else: relations, connections, responsibilities constitute reality, not individual substances.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the philosophies of Maurice Blondel and John MacMurray both focus on the priority of action over static substance: “. . . the Self,” John Macmurray argues, “has its being only in its agency, and that its reflective activities are but negative aspects of this agency;” “we know existence by participating in existence. This participation is action.”<sup>3</sup> It is through the *practice* of ministry, by functioning as ministers, that we live out our identity as ministers.

### *Thesis Eight: Christian Ministry Is an Exercise of Authority*

Ministry, I have said in Thesis Five, is always and only done together, in collaboration. What this means, in a first step in understanding this thesis, is that each and every minister is vested with authority and the power that goes with it. Authority, ultimately, is the authority of Jesus Christ, and that authority is his gift to the whole church (whether in its local or universal manifestation). This means, as I have said, that *every* minister in the community has a “piece of the wisdom,” and so must be taken seriously by the community itself and the leadership of the community as well. Every minister has authority because she or he shares in the ministry of Jesus Christ. On a second level, however, each minister possesses authority in the context in which she or he ministers. Ministry is an exercise of authority and power, and ministers need to recognize this. Again, their authority and power is not their own; it is the *dynamis* of the Lord. But it is real authority and power nonetheless.

The nature of Christian power and authority, of course, has nothing to do with domination or control. Power and authority in Christian terms are exercised through service: ministry. In the same breath as Jesus assigns to the disciples at the Last Supper “the dominion my Father has assigned to me” (Lk 22:29), he explains to them what true power and authority is: “Earthly kings lord it over their people. Those who exercise authority over them are called their benefactors. Yet it cannot be that way with you. Let the greater among you be as the junior, the leader as the servant” (Lk 22:25-26). Recent thinking on the nature of power and authority has come to the same conclusion. In what has become somewhat of a classic article, Bernard Loomer distinguishes between “unilateral power” that conceives an authority as external to others, and “relational power” that is based on human relationality and interconnectedness. Relational power “is the ability both to produce and to undergo an effect. It is the capacity both to influence others and be influenced by others. Relational power involves both a giving and a receiving.”<sup>4</sup> In this connection, then, authority means the ability to enable the women and men who are entrusted into one’s care to “author” their truest selves.

Recently I heard the story told of an eighty-something year old sister who used to spend time talking with a

group of gang members from the “Back of the Yards” neighborhood in Chicago. When asked what kept these young men coming back time and again to this woman, one of the gang members said: “It’s because she speaks with authority.” Hers was the authority that came from years of authentic living, from years of prayer, from deep respect for persons. Real power and authority, as people also recognized when Jesus spoke, is something that compels not through force but by the very nature of goodness and truth--but it does compel. As the early twentieth century British theologian, John Oman, has written, Jesus’ authority came from the fact that he spoke “the truth He has seen and to which his hearers cannot be blind, unless they close their eyes.”<sup>5</sup> No doubt this was the way that sister spoke, and it is the way ministers need to speak and act as well.

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1. McBrien, p. 8.

2. From a vast literature, see Sally McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 6-14. I have also argued along these lines in “The Service of Ordering: Reflections on the Identity of the Priest,” *Emmanuel* 101, 7 (September, 1995): 404-405.

3. John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (New Jersey and London: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1991 [1961]), pp. 15, 17. See also *Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

4. Bernard Loomer, “Two Kinds of Power,” Appendix to Bernard J. Lee, *The Future Church of 140 B.C.E.: A Hidden Revolution* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), p. 183.

5. John Oman, *Vision and Authority* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928 [1902]), p. 107.