

Catholic Theological Association 2018 Conference Papers Ministry: Who Ministers What To Whom?

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INTRODUCTION

Once the topic of 'ministry' had been suggested for the annual conference of the Catholic Theological Association – it emerged at the 2016 AGM from an examination of the origins of the presbyterate – it became clear that it was both one that was urgent for the Catholic Church as it copes with change at the pastoral level, and one that could open up a series of more profound theological questions which had not been examined in recent years by the CTA. In terms of the pastoral engagement of the Church, particularly in the UK, two issues were uppermost. Major changes are taking place in the Church due to the fall in numbers of 'professional' religious: be that the numbers entering seminaries to prepare for the presbyterate (leading to the amalgamation of parishes and seeking clergy from abroad) or the numbers entering religious orders (leading to a drastic reduction of this dimension of Catholic theological education – we are still coming to terms with the closure of Heythrop College). There are also new endeavours, such as the ordination of permanent deacons, where the theological underpinning is often obscure. So it was hoped that these issues 'on the ground' would be the subject of theological examination. The other issue, which exploded in the weeks before the conference, was the suffering caused to the most vulnerable members of the Church through sexual abuse by clergy. We must now speak about ministry in the shadow of the crimes of those who claimed to be the servants of the Church and mindful of the suffering they have caused. This problem is so widespread – it cannot be tied to one place, language area, or any particular group – that it cannot be passed off as simply 'rotten apples': it suggests that there is something wrong with the ecclesial barrel – and this needs to be studied by theologians.

The question of ministry also raised issues for our tradition of theology. For too long, we have so identified ministry with the notion of a priesthood as the mediating group between God and humanity that

we have failed to take account of the vocational nature of baptism. Fifty years after Vatican II this sacerdotalism is still alive within the Church, it prejudices new developments, and is a running sore in discussions with other churches. Likewise, we have often imagined that a theology of ministry was simply another name for the study of the nature of the Sacrament of Order – or even more narrowly the question of the ‘powers of Order’, which is a topic that is frequently explored in relation to the restoration of the diaconate. A related issue is that of the place of a clergy within the Church – quite apart from the issues relating to clericalism – and whether we have particular ministers who have the duties of presbyters (called ‘priests’ individually and ‘the priesthood’ collectively) or whether there is a ‘priesthood’ at all in the New Covenant? This raises again the relationship of the faithful to the High Priesthood of the Christ, the baptised as a priestly people, and the identity of the clergy. This latter point has been a source of confusion in the West since the time of Isidore of Seville (d. 630), was and is a major problem for the unity of Christians since the sixteenth-century, and is a source of a credibility gap: we use the language of ‘service’ (e.g. ‘*servus servorum Dei*’ used by the Bishop of Rome) as a camouflage for a power structure such as is ridiculed in John 14:4-16.

All these background questions ensured we would have a fascinating conference and they can be seen emerging, in one way or other, in every paper that we heard. James Sweeney opens by seeking to understand the structural context in which we might answer the question of who ministers what to whom in the church. He examines our expectations of the church and also of society at large, and who might fulfil these expectations – and how these expectations might be met in the present crisis in the church.

Nicholas King follows with an analysis of the language of ministry in the New Testament and shows how ministry focuses on service by using slave-language. Then we have a short paper given at the conference by Geoffrey Turner who identifies four different types of priesthood in the NT, with an appeal that they should be differentiated theologically so that they might not be muddled. In my own paper, based on the discussions that were taking place during the conference, I try to look at some ways that ministry might be developed by ordained priests and lay people. Some fresh thinking might stop bishops closing churches and damaging their communities, and allow churches and parishes to grow in new ways. Martin Pendergast describes how one such parish in central London continues to flourish without a resident priest, and he shows how such an arrangement mirrors Pope Francis’s vision of community life.

One way in which the Catholic Church has tried to maintain its present parish structures has been to ordain married men into the Permanent Diaconate. Ashley Beck, who runs a major training

programme for deacons, points to where we might find a theology of the diaconate, against claims that no such thing has been developed. He also argues that training programmes for deacons should focus on ministry as *diakonia*, service, and have Catholic Social Teaching at their centre. Though much derided for its failings in practice and its specialised nature, canon law can be a positive force in the church's ministry, according to Helen Costigane. While giving some examples of how canon law has been misapplied, she shows how it is a force for good, when used properly, in the structure and life of the Catholic Church.

John McDade wonders whether Christian ministry is possible at all in a world that considers itself post-religious since Rousseau's bifurcation of individual, personal religion and an essentially secular, civil religion. Following Marilynne Robinson, he thinks that people might be seen to live serious lives in hope and love despite the absence of much explicit religious belief. Finally Sara Parks describes, from her own experience, how the tutorial and seminar room can and should be a locus for ministry, while remaining academically and theologically neutral. She focuses on how some students can be short-changed or discriminated against because of their gender or ethnic background. She is particularly concerned by how women are side-lined in academic life (as in social life).

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