

Priestly Ministry Or Hierarchy:

The Sacrament of Order

Edmund Hill O P

In the previous article of this series, *Authority and Ministry in the New Testament*,¹ I set out to show how two planks of the ultramontane platform of magisterial papalism not only have no basis in the New Testament, but are actually at odds with the whole spirit of these foundational documents of the New People of God. The major plank is, of course, the concentration of all authority in the papacy, with the inevitable stress on uniformity that will accompany such a policy;² the second or supporting plank is hierarchical clericalism, the promotion of the clergy, in particular of bishops, as a ruling priestly class in the Church. In this article I will confine myself to this second plank, and investigate how this particular distortion and obscuration of true gospel values arose in the Church. We shall try to discern as far as we can what is sound in the developing tradition of the Church's doctrine and practice of ministry from what is sick and in urgent need of reformatory healing.

We discovered two things from an examination of the New Testament evidence on the Christian ministry. First, that in the New Testament Churches there was no distinction between bishops and presbyters, these being simply two names for the same persons, one ('bishop') denoting the office or function of 'over-seeing' the community, or being 'in charge', the other ('presbyter') denoting rank or status, that of elder or senior member. Secondly, that nowhere in the New Testament are these bishops/presbyters talked of in sacerdotal language as priests.

In both respects change came with historical development. Whereas in Acts 20:17-28 *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* are clearly the same people, and all from the one community or Church of Ephesus, in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch written about 109 A.D. there is only one *episkopos* (bishop) in each Church or community, on whose authority the writer is very insistent. He is assisted by several presbyters and deacons. It seems that this arrangement was not yet universal even in Ignatius' time, for all the high theological value he gives the office of 'monarchical bishop', and that the two most important Churches of the Chris-

tian *katholike* (the word first occurs in Ignatius), Rome and Alexandria, continued to be governed by a 'presbytery' of bishops/presbyters until well into the second century.

Bishop Lightfoot, whose discussion of the ministry in his Introduction to his *Commentary on Philippians* still, in my view, retains its magisterial⁹ authority after well over 100 years, considered that it proved bishops (as we have known them since Ignatius) to be "elevated presbyters" rather than "localised apostles". What this means is that we cannot look for the origins of the episcopal office in the apostolic office, but rather in the collective presbyteral office. Bishop Lightfoot suggests that the model for making one of the presbyters of a community into sole *episkopos*/bishop was the position of James, brother of the Lord, in the Jerusalem Church.

The sharp reader will no doubt have noticed that so far I have talked with unremitting pedantry about 'presbyters', and avoided the word 'priest' like the plague, when according to normal usage I should have talked of bishops, priests and deacons. This is, of course, because of the ambiguity contained in the English word 'priest', which we noticed in the preceding article. The word's primary meaning in English is 'sacred official', 'performer of rituals', 'offerer of sacrifice', and none of these concepts was associated with Christian ministers of any rank in the period we have so far had in mind, from the New Testament time till about 150 A.D. At least the Greek and Latin words, *hiereus* and *sacerdos*, properly translated 'priest', were never applied to them.

They began to be very soon afterwards, however. By St Cyprian of Carthage (died 253 AD) the word *sacerdos* is regularly applied to bishops. Only to bishops, however, not to presbyters. This usage continued throughout the patristic age until the 7th century and even later. It is still to be found in some of the older liturgical texts. When these talk of *sacerdotes* they mean bishops, not presbyters, and so in these cases it is misleading to translate the word 'priests'. One has, I think, to translate 'high priests'.

The origin of this development seems to be in the growing understanding of the eucharist as a sacrificial action. This goes back very early to the *Didache*, about 80 AD -- if not to the New Testament accounts of the institution themselves. As the bishop was the minister who normally presided over the eucharist, he came to be thought of as the man who offered, and thus as the *sacerdos* or priest.

The usage must have been extended to presbyters when the northern European nations were converted to Christianity, and the common minister of the eucharist was no longer a bishop, who had become a remote figure in a huge missionary diocese, but a

presbyter. And so the presbyter gave the name of his office to the Germanic languages to signify primarily the sacerdotal office or role, pagan and Jewish as well as Christian.

Thus it was that the Christian ministry came to be thought of as primarily and essentially a sacerdotal ministry, and Christian ministers as a sacred class mediating between the people and God. In the over-simplified theology of the Carolingian age they were assimilated to the levitical priesthood of the Old Testament, bishops being the high priests, presbyters the Aaronic priests, and deacons the levites. This unfortunate development has also left its mark on liturgical texts.

Combine the development of monarchical bishops out of the New Testament's collegial presbyterate with the sacralisation of the Christian ministry in terms of priesthood, and you get the concept of *hierarchy*, rule of the Christian people by a sacerdotal class. It was given tremendous respectability and a rather bogus mystical value by the Pseudo-Denys, who saw the ecclesiastical hierarchy as reflecting the celestial hierarchy of the nine choirs of angels, thus incorporating the concept into a neoplatonic view of the world where it properly belongs. But whether the Christian ministry properly belongs there is very much open to question.

This then is the total development which we must now try to evaluate, assessing which elements in it are dogmatically necessary, and thus actually or potentially binding in faith; which, without being necessary, are none the less in accordance with the spirit of the New Testament; which, without having even that positive stamp, are yet harmless and innocent adaptations to particular circumstances; and which, finally, are not harmless because they distort or obscure the true spirit of the New Testament. (See *Authority and Ministry in the New Testament, New Blackfriars*, November 1980).

The evidence adduced seems to me to prove that we cannot regard any structural development of the Christian ministry that we have so far remarked on as being dogmatically necessary. Take first the emergence of the monarchical episcopate from the collegial presbyterate. That this was so early and so universal a development shows that it was a proper one, harmonious with the spirit of the New Testament Churches. That it was lacking concretely to the New Testament Churches shows, however, that it was not dogmatically necessary. It could have been otherwise – it could still be otherwise, though there is no particular reason (in my view) why it should be.

Here we must exercise a little historical imagination, and understand what, in concrete terms, we are talking about. We are *not* talking about the emergence from the collegial presbyterate of

rulers of large territorial dioceses, like the bishops we know today. The communities over which Ignatius and his colleagues presided in 109 AD hardly ever, I suppose, numbered more than 1,000 souls, rarely even as many as that. And they were overwhelmingly communities of people living in towns. This continued to be the case with Christian communities (local Churches) for the most part in the Mediterranean lands down to the time of Constantine and the peace of the Church. That is why the Latin for 'countryman' or 'peasant', *paganus*, came to be a synonym for unbeliever, for 'heathen' (which in English too originally meant 'inhabitant of the heath').

So the modern concrete equivalent in the Catholic Church of those first monarchical bishops is the parish priest of an urban parish, assisted by anything up to four curates; not the modern bishop. Now it is perfectly conceivable, without the slightest modification of current Catholic doctrine about the real distinction between bishops and priests, that all parish priests should be ordained bishops, and all curates, until they rise to a parish of their own, should remain deacons only. That would, in effect, re-enact the structure of the ministry in the early post-apostolic Churches, if you threw in a few respected members of the parish council being ordained priests (presbyters) *honoris causa*, and assisting the parish bishop more with their counsel than with active pastoral and sacramental services; these would be the job of the full-time deacon-curates.

I am not in any way proposing that that is what should be done. But by saying it *could* be done, I think I am showing that the real distinction between bishops and priests is not as absolute as perhaps we are inclined to think. And this, I suggest, is a very valuable ecumenical idea to digest. It means that an agreement with the non-episcopal Churches on ministry is not beyond our theological grasp, and that at least we don't have to go on arguing with them whether bishops are or are not strictly necessary to the structure of the Christian ministry. The *real* theological issue between Catholic and Protestant doctrines of the ministry lies elsewhere, over the sacramental nature of the ministry, a point to which I shall return.

Under that heading I shall also discuss what may well seem to be the dogmatic affirmations of Vatican II on the real difference between the episcopal and the presbyteral orders. But now, what about the bishops being the successors of the apostles? Is this view of their office, which I take to be at least theologically certain, easy to reconcile with seeing them historically, in Lightfoot's phrase, as elevated presbyters rather than as localised apostles?

Yes, surely, if you don't take succession in a purely material

sense, but in a formal one. Though the episcopal office (of 'overseeing' a Christian community) is not a derivative of the apostolic office (of witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the gospel to new communities), this does not prevent the bishops from succeeding to the *authority* of the apostles in a formal succession. A secular analogy would be, for example, the office of President of Tanzania, whose incumbent succeeds to the authority of the British imperial crown, though his office does not derive from that of the British monarch.

The development of a sacerdotal concept of Christian ministry is a more complex matter to assess. Bishop Lightfoot, a good low Churchman I suppose, at least in this respect, regards it as an aberration pure and simple, an infection from the circumambient hellenistic paganism of the Roman Empire. But this is altogether too simplistic a judgment. After all, there is plenty of secular hellenistic influence evident in the developments of trinitarian and christological doctrine during the same period, which in no way invalidates those developments (unless you happen to be, what no Christian theologian has any business to be, a puritanical hebraist).

I would assess it in several ways:

i) When framed in the explicitly held context of the unique priesthood of Christ, and the participation in that priesthood of the Church and all its members, then the concept of the Christian ministry as priestly is a legitimate and harmonious development. A fairly good illustration of the way in which this concept of ministerial priesthood can and should be put into that context is to be found in the extract from a sermon of St Leo the Great on the anniversary of his consecration, chosen in the new breviary as the second reading for his feast day, 10th November.

ii) Whether it is a dogmatically necessary development I am not so sure. I think it was both a useful and an inevitable development in so sacral a society as that of the ancient Graeco-Roman culture, just as it was useful and inevitable in the Graeco-Judaic culture of the apostolic Church to conceive of Christ's redemptive work, and of the Church's participation in it, in sacrificial and sacerdotal terms. But whether this kind of language says things about Christ's work, the whole Church's participation in it, and the Christian ministry that cannot be said in any other kind of language even in a desacralised, secular culture like ours, which provides no generally recognised slots for sacral language, is another matter. I offer no opinion on it, either way.

iii) However, this sacerdotal concept of the Christian ministry does conceal a development in our understanding of the ministry that is for Catholics dogmatically necessary. That is the sacra-

mental character of ministerial orders. I suppose from the time of Augustine onwards, as a kind of by-product of the Donatist controversy, ordination to the Christian ministry began to be assimilated to baptism and confirmation as an unrepeatable sacrament, which like these two sacraments of initiation confers on the recipient a participation in the priesthood of Christ.

This is not the place to justify the dogmatic necessity of this development. I would just say that it seems eminently suitable that a community which is constituted in its members as the new people of God and the body of Christ by the initiatory sacraments of baptism and confirmation, should be further “set in order”, articulated, institutionalised, by the sacrament of Order.

Vatican II was very explicit on the sacramental nature of episcopal consecration, or ordination as we now call it. Can this be reconciled with what I have said earlier on about the episcopate emerging as a distinct order from the presbyterate (like Aphrodite from the foam), and not springing fully fledged and armed from the apostles (like Athena from the head of Zeus)? I think it can. Let us see what Vatican II actually says. In *Lumen Gentium* 21 it is written, “The Holy Synod teaches that the fulness of the sacrament of order is conferred by episcopal consecration, which is called both by the liturgical custom of the Church and by the voice of the holy Fathers the high priesthood, the totality of the sacred ministry. Now episcopal consecration confers the offices of teaching and ruling, together with the office of sanctifying, which however of their very nature can only be exercised in hierarchical communion with the head of the college and its members”. And in *Christus Dominus* 3 (the decree on the pastoral ministry of bishops) it says “Bishops, sharing in the solicitude for all the Churches, exercise this episcopal office, which they have received through episcopal consecration, in the communion and under the authority of the Supreme Pontiff ...”

It is clear from these two texts that the sacramentality of episcopal consecration is being insisted on in a context of comparing the authority of bishops with that of the pope. The point is very firmly being made that bishops do not derive their authority from mere papal delegation, while at the same time the *caveats* are entered (you can feel the ultramontane unease behind all this) that episcopal authority cannot be exercised except in communion with the pope and under his authority. But in no sense is episcopal consecration being compared with priestly ordination. What is said is that it confers the fulness of the sacrament of Order. It must therefore be said, on the Lightfootian hypothesis which I am supporting in this article, that this fulness of the sacrament was conferred on those first presbyters of the New Testament Churches

who were also, as we have seen, *episkopoi*. When, in the scheme of things manifested by Ignatius, bishops and presbyters become distinct orders, one has to say, I suppose, that the sacrament has been distributed, that its fulness is no longer conferred on mere presbyters, but only a certain share in it, as is already the case with deacons. So perhaps we should revise the Lightfootian hypothesis to this extent, and instead of saying that bishops are elevated presbyters, say instead presbyters are lowered or reduced bishops. It doesn't sound so nice, but it solves the little theological problem. It also means I can no longer go on comparing the bishops, in their genesis, with Aphrodite, which is a pity.

iv) Coming now to the more negative assessment of the sacerdotal concept of Christian ministry, I shall make it together with my almost wholly negative assessment of the closely related concept of hierarchy. I persist in thinking this a thoroughly unsatisfactory term, though I have to admit that it has been sanctioned by Vatican II itself. But then that Council did not totally escape ultramontane influence. The ultramontanes were defeated there, but too strong for their influence to be entirely eliminated from the conciliar texts. Well, it was a pernicious influence, providing the party with a bridgehead in the documents which they are now exploiting for all it is worth.

What the apostolic Church received from Jesus Christ was *brotherhood*, a community of *brothers*: "Don't you get yourselves called Rabbi; for one is your master, and you are all brothers" (Mt 23:8). The apostles observed that piece of dominical advice to the letter, and always addressed their fellow believers as brothers, as '*Andres adelphoi*'. But the fascination with the hierarchical concept that has bewitched the Catholic Church for centuries has emasculated any real possibility of Christian brotherhood amongst us, brotherhood being fundamentally an egalitarian notion. So I am against 'hierarchy' from the start. Furthermore, it represents a neoplatonic concept of participation which is a complete reversal, as I see it, of the evangelical concept of sharing. *O admirabile commercium!* That is the genuine theological concept of sharing or participation; Christ shares with us (all human beings, potentially) our human condition, and so gives us (all of us) a share in his divine condition. But the neoplatonic concept of hierarchy *grades* participation from the top down. Those nearest the source (in this case pope and bishops) participate most fully in the divine grace and authority; those further away less fully, and derivatively through the higher grades. This seems to me to be quite simply an unchristian view of the human cosmos — at the very least unevangelical. But it goes very deep in the tradition of the Church. Even Leo the Great, in the extract from a sermon which I have already

referred to in support, is infected by it.

Given the sacerdotal concept of the ministry, the proper evangelical concept should have been, not hierarchy, but 'hieroduly'. But for all sorts of reasons of propriety it would have been absolutely impossible for bishops of the late Roman Empire to think of themselves as hierodules – since it was a term commonly applied to the temple prostitutes of both sexes dedicated to pagan cults. That, however, is no longer an everyday association of the term. So may I recommend it to our present hierarchs for their serious consideration?

Just as 'hierarchy' renders null the concept of Christian brotherhood, so the exaggerated concept of a sacred ministry and sacred ministers evacuates the idea of a Christian holy people, sacred *laos* or laity. The really great achievement of Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium* was to put the hierarchy (bishops) in the context of the people of God, and not the other way round. Even so it could not escape enough from the habits of centuries to put the chapter on the laity before the chapter on the bishops. For what the exaggerated, unbalanced and out-of-context stress on the sacerdotal ministry has done is to desacralise, to profane in the strict sense, the laity, the Christian people. Another way of putting it is to say that it has caused people, Christian people in overwhelmingly Christian cultures, to identify the Church with the clergy. This is not, to be sure, just a Roman Catholic aberration. It used to be the sterling tradition of many good Anglican gentlemen and aristocrats to put some younger sons into the Church, while others went into the Army. But the most magnificent statement of this gross distortion of the true evangelical values will always be the papal bull of Boniface VIII entitled *Clericis laicos*.

If the Christian laity are, as such, no longer brothers, and no longer holy or sacred people (except in some ancient liturgical texts, which are not taken seriously), what are they? The answer is: subjects, and passive recipients of the magisterial administrations of the hierarchy. So, I regret to say, Thomas Aquinas, in his discussion of the sacramental characters of baptism, confirmation and order says: the first two are a *passive* participation in the priesthood of Christ, the last an *active* participation in it (*Summa Theol.* III, 63, 1 and 6).

If such a view of the laity is, to put it at its mildest, a little out of date, then so is the hierarchical clericalism which produced it. To put it with more propriety and less mildness, both are *scandalously* out of date. But to say this enables us, in conclusion, to end on a less carping note with a kind of *apologia* for the concepts of hierarchy and sacerdotalism. Just as we saw that sacerdotalism was useful in a highly sacral culture, so perhaps was ecclesiastical hier-

archy in a rigidly stratified society. Such was late Roman society and its successors in Europe, Germanic, Byzantine and feudal societies. When such societies were widely and officially christianised, the Church could only function in them comprehensibly by also being stratified. But this was not, in principle and in fairly extensive fact, a mere conformity to the world. For the ecclesiastical hierarchy, unlike the social and political one in the Middle Ages, was a ladder up which people (any people) could climb. It was the one area of life in which social mobility was possible, and thus it represented an actual criticism of the worldly values of rank and status. This was one positive value, too, which attached to that corollary of clerical sacerdotalism, the law of clerical celibacy. This was a law, incidentally, which it took centuries to introduce, starting with Nicaea in 425 (when a proposal to pass a canon making it compulsory was successfully resisted by an Egyptian monk on the grounds that it would be unjust and inhumane), and not ending until well into the late Middle Ages. But what it did achieve in a feudal society was to prevent ecclesiastical office from becoming hereditary, and in this way it contributed to preserving that very valuable social mobility.

So these things have had their value in their time. But their time is not our time. In our time their value becomes more minus, more negative with every year that passes. It is a characteristic of the ultramontane party of magisterial papalism to be unable to read the signs of the times.

1 *New Blackfriars* November 1980.

2 I call it the 'O'Grady policy', from the army game (if game it can be called) which we used to play on the drill ground; that you must only obey an order when it is prefaced by "O'Grady says . . .".

3 This is the proper use of the concept of *magisterium*.