

## **The Identity of the Ministerial Priest in Communion with the Bishop**

---

*Most Rev. Angelo's Gracias, Archbishop's House, 21-  
Nathalal Parekh Marg, Mumbai - 400 001*

I like to begin with a quotation from an article I once read: "To a great extent, the renewal of the Church can be accomplished only in as much as there is an improvement in the relations between priests and their bishops. Unfortunately, in more than a few cases, this relationship remains superficial, bureaucratic, cold and most of the time unsatisfactory. Often there is no communion, no dialogue and no mutual esteem and trust".<sup>1</sup>

The author may be generalizing too much and giving too bleak a picture of the relationship between the bishop and his priests. Nevertheless, it is against the background of his remark that I would like to reflect on the topic assigned to me in this article: **The Identity of the Ministerial Priest in Communion with the Bishop**. I will begin with an initial reflection on the word 'Communion' and then move on to consider what that implies for the identity of the ministerial priest vis-à-vis the Bishop.

We begin first with a simple reflection on the word 'Communion'. If we take a tiny pup home and rear it away from the company of other dogs, when that dog grows up, it will behave very much like a dog: it will bark like a dog, play like a dog, eat like

---

<sup>1</sup> Fr. Arulselvam Rayaappan, "Bishops, Love your Priests as Jesus Loved the Apostles" *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Research*, (VJTR), 70(2000), p. 37.

a dog etc. It follows an instinct which dictates a particular type of behaviour. But if we were to take a small baby and rear it in the wilds, away from the company of other human beings, even if that baby were to survive, it would hardly *behave* like a human. For one thing, it would lack the knowledge of any human language and with language goes so much of the process we call socialization or 'humanization'.

To grow up as human beings, we need other human beings. We require the love, affection, the sense of belonging etc. that comes from being part of a family. "To be me, I need you"! More than ever more we realize that no one is an island. We are persons, but *persons in communion*. Each of us is a reflection of the mystery of the Trinity in our inmost being as humans. Truly, we have been made "in the image and likeness" (Gen.1:26-27) of the Triune God.

That is why Communion is a key concept. In his encyclical letter, at the dawn of the new Millennium, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, John Paul II speaks of a "*Spirituality of Communion*". He affirms: "To make the Church *the home and the school of communion*: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings."<sup>2</sup>

Theologically, Communion is one of the key concepts today. The Church, for example, is seen as the People of God, the universal sacrament of unity. In the Eucharist, the emphasis is on the meal aspect. Hence it is not surprising that Communion should be visible in theological reflection on the priesthood. Within the Church, the sacrament of universal unity, the priesthood is seen as the sacrament of the Headship of Christ, drawing all people into the unity of His Body.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 43

In this article, we focus on just one aspect of the priesthood, applying the concept of communion to the bishop-priest relationship. This is perhaps best expressed in the idea of the **Presbyterium**. We will first trace the idea of the Presbyterium in the New Testament, in early Church history, in Vatican II and then draw out a few implications of this for the mutual relationship of the priest and bishop.

### **I. The Presbyterium in New Testament<sup>3</sup>**

To understand the institution of presbyters in the New Testament, we have to cast a glance at the **Old**. 'Presbyters' already existed in Israel even prior to Moses. The latter were commissioned by Yahweh to 'gather the elders of Israel together' and with them to appear before Pharaoh (Exodus 3:16,18). It is from these elders that Moses chose 70 who were to assist him in the guidance of Israel (Num. 11:16-25).

This institution of Presbyters lasted through all the stages of Israel's history. It always acted as a collegial body. It served, for example, as a consultative body for the kings (Cfr. 1 Kgs. 12:6 ff: 1 Kgs. 20:7, etc). In the post-exilic period, especially at the time of the Roman occupation, it took the form of local 'Sanhedrins' which were patterned on the Sanhedrin of Jerusalem, the supreme ruling body of the Jews. It was this Sanhedrin that played a great part in the trial of Jesus (Lk. 22:66) and continued its activity of surveillance and repression in the early days of the Church (Acts 22:5).

---

<sup>3</sup> For this section, we have used chiefly the first part of Raymond E. Brown's excellent work, *Priest and Bishop*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1971 and also a little of Keenan B. Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church*, Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1981, pp. 44-52.

Against this background, we can understand the institution of presbyters in the **New Testament**. They appear for the first time when Paul and Barnabas come to Jerusalem bearing the contribution of the Antiochian Church at the time of the famine (Acts 11:30). They appear as trustees and administrators of the Jerusalem community. They act as judges, resolving the controversy about the obligations of the law, as well as legislators, issuing, along with the Apostles, the Council decree (Acts 15:2,4,6, 22; 16:4.).

We find presbyteral colleges existing also in the Christian communities outside of Jerusalem. Luke mentions that right from their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders in every church with prayer and fasting" (Acts. 14:23), and at the end of his last missionary journey, Paul gathers the elders of Ephesus at Miletus (Acts 20:17ff). His farewell speech shows what significance he attached to them: they are appointed by the Holy Spirit as overseers and shepherds and have to administer the legacy of the apostle, to follow his example and protect the church against the danger of error.

This leads us to the churches described in the Pastoral Letters. Here the presbyters are mentioned in three places: 1 Tim. 4:14: 1 Tim. 5:17-22: Titus 1:5. In the Pastorals, the institution of Presbyters appears to be the typical form of leadership. It is in the Pastorals too that we find the only use of the term **presbyterium** in the Christian sense, as a college or council of elders who laid their hands on Timothy (1 Tim. 4:14). Thus, in 1 Tim., the term **presbyterium** *designates a group having in the Church a special ministry, and, in particular, that of imposing hands for the institution of new ministers on whom is conferred a charism corresponding to their function.*

We would summarize the N.T. data as follows: The college of presbyters is a set of officials who always act as a body charged with the leadership of the community in the N.T. Church. It is remarkable that the N.T. always speaks of term in the plural.<sup>4</sup> The presbyterium is the collective term used for this college of presbyters.

## II. The Presbyterium in Post Apostolic period

This "biblical germ" the presbyters, as Paul Cordes terms it, grew in the post-apostolic period.<sup>5</sup> We find evidence of a collegial presbyterate in 1 Clement and in Hermas. However, it is Ignatius of Antioch (+ca.115), who is one of the principal sources of our knowledge about the presbyteral colleges. Ignatius has 13 texts about the presbyterium, in different contexts which allow us to establish its meaning. An examination of these texts shows us that the presbyterium is composed of a group of men, who, under the bishop and set above the deacons, are engaged in the ministry of official instruction of public worship and of leading the local Christian congregation. It is a committee of presbyters which appears at times between the bishop (always in singular) and the deacons, or at other times mentioned simply with the bishop.

---

<sup>4</sup> Except, of course, when the N.T. refers to a single presbyter as in 1 Pt. 5/1, 2 Jn. vs. 1, 3 Jn. vs. 1. We keep in mind too what Raymond E. Brown points out that the N.T. vocabulary with regard to priest and bishop is still fluid. The concept of the 'monarchical episcopate' only becomes clear in the letters of St. Ignatius (+ 110).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Cordes, in Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Burns and Oates, London, 1969, Vol. 4, p. 246. For this section, we have relied very much on this Commentary as well as on two articles by Dom B. Botte, "Holy Orders in the Ordination Prayers" and "Collegiate Character of the Presbyterate and Episcopate", Aquinas Press, *The Sacrament of Holy Orders: Some Papers and Discussions concerning Holy Orders at a Session of the Centre de Pastorale Liturgique*, 1955, pp. 5-23 and 75-97).

The office of presbyters is thus seen by Ignatius specially under its collegial aspect, synedrion theou, a senate of God around the Bishop. The words 'synedrion', was used for the Sanhedrin of Jerusalem, the Aeropagus of Athens and the Senate of Constantinople and it denotes an established body, endowed with important functions for the running of the community, and in particular, a function of deliberation in order to arrive at decisions affecting the common good. The Bishop is the unchallenged head, but the 'presbyterium' participates in the government of the Church. The faithful must be subject in single-minded obedience to the Bishop and his presbyterium, thus ensuring that a harmony of thought, action, prayer and charity animates the Christian community.

The Traditio Apostolica of Hippolytus of Rome (+ 235) throws light on the liturgical function of the presbyterium. The presbyters are mentioned in connection with the election of a bishop, though they do not take part in the consecration of the new bishop. After the consecration, along with the bishop, they extend their hands over the gifts. At the ordination of a new priest, they lay their hands upon him after the bishop has done so.

Reflecting on the first Roman rite of ordination, attributed to Hippolytus, Dom B. Botte comments: "In Hippolytus, the priesthood and diaconate are therefore defined by reference to the episcopate. This bishop is the pastor and high priest. The priests participate in his priesthood and form a sacerdotal body which acts with him in governing the Church".<sup>6</sup>

We can deduce the same close unity from other ancient Christian documents. After tracing the history of the sacrament of Holy Orders, Dom Botte sums up thus: "They are not isolated

---

<sup>6</sup> Dom B. Botte, "Holy Orders in the Ordination Prayers", p. 7

individuals, each having a particular mission of his own; they form a college sharing the bishop's concerns".<sup>7</sup>

We could sum up the evidence of the New Testament and early Church history in the words of Karl Rahner: "... the constitutional and theological structure of the Church in so far as it requires a polar unity of a monarchical and a collegial element in indissoluble relationship to one another can stand a model of the relationship between bishop and presbyterium" and he adds: "In fact, the New Testament and the early Church do not really take account of the individual priest, but of the presbyterium.... He (the Bishop) does not ordain an individual but surrounds himself with a college. He does nothing without the presbyterium".<sup>8</sup>

As time went on, however, this bond weakened. Partly, this was due to the difficult times. During the persecution of Decius, for example, we find Cyprian authorizing individual presbyters to celebrate the Eucharist in order to avoid detection by the police. Partly, however, this was due to the very extension of the Church. "The bishop could not be everywhere. As urban and rural churches were multiplied, the needs of Christian people grew and the bishop was compelled to delegate priests to the various churches".<sup>9</sup> From this moment the collegial concept of the presbyterate entered a period of slow but fatal decline. "The link with the bishop became looser and looser and the concept of the presbytery faded".<sup>10</sup> Traces did remain, for example in the cathedral chapters, diocesan synods, the imposition of hands in the rite of priestly ordination, the sending of the 'fermentum', bread consecrated at the Bishop's

---

<sup>7</sup> Dom Botte, "Collegiate Character of the Presbyterate and Episcopate", p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> *Bishops: Their Status and Functions*, Compass Books, 1963, p. 45 & 46.

<sup>9</sup> Dom Botte, "Collegiate Character of the Presbyterate and Episcopate," p. 81

<sup>10</sup> Cordes, *Op. Cit.*, p. 248

Mass etc. But they were rather faint traces! There grew also, under Jerome and others what has been termed a "Prebyterian movement".<sup>11</sup> The result could be stated thus: "Sacerdos no longer normally signified the bishop as it did up to the fourth century. It became synonymous with presbyter. And so attempts to define the sacerdotium began with the priesthood and it was asked what more the bishop could have than the priest. Furthermore, the episcopacy as such disappeared from the list of Orders".<sup>12</sup>

### III. The Presbyterium in Vatican II<sup>13</sup>

It is against this rich biblical and patristic background that we can understand the importance attributed by Vatican II to the presbyterium. Going back to the sources, the Council re-discovered and gave new life to something that had been 'traditional', but had practically fallen into oblivion. To understand the significance of Vatican II's teaching, we have to compare it with the teaching of the Council of Trent on the priesthood.

The starting point for the Council of Trent was the priesthood of the presbyter, if we may so put it. As Ernst Niermann points out, already in the medieval Church, with regard to the priest, "the accent was shifted to one simple function, even though the highest of priestly functions, that of offering the Eucharistic sacrifice. The priesthood was thus defined as *potestas in corpus eucharisticum*. The other functions remained in the background".<sup>14</sup> Trent reinforced

<sup>11</sup> Botte, "Collegiate Character of the Presbyterate and Episcopate", p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> Botte, "Collegiate Character of the Presbyterate and Episcopate", p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> In quoting Vatican II, we use the first letters of each document: C.D. for *Christus Dominus*, L. G. for *Lumen Gentium* and P. O. for *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. We have used Flannery's edition of the documents, St. Paul's, Mumbai, 1975.

<sup>14</sup> Ernst Niermann, "Priest", *Sacramentum Mundi*, Burns & Oates, London, 1969, Vol. 5. p. 99.

this view. As a result of Luther's denial of a sacrificial priesthood, Trent defined on the priesthood mainly in terms of offering the Eucharistic sacrifice.

Now, in the line of offering the Eucharist, the bishop has no more power than any priest. Hence on the level of priesthood, the episcopate and presbyterate are equal. Nothing was said in Trent about the sacramentality of the Episcopate. "The office of bishop, the *potestas in corpus mysticum*, was primarily regarded as the power to govern".<sup>15</sup> The bishops are the successors of the apostles, but not more than priests in sacerdotio. It is only government of the church which justifies the necessity of the episcopate; It was "established by the Holy Spirit to govern (regere) the Church of God".<sup>16</sup> The bishop is thus superior to the priest, but only in the line of ruling or jurisdiction, something exterior to the sacrament itself.

*In contrast to Trent, where the bishop is defined in relationship to the priest, at Vatican II, the priest is defined in relationship to the Episcopal order.* The starting point is the Universal Church, i.e. its hierarchical sign, Episcopal collegiality. The presbyterate is presented as the 'ordo' of auxiliaries and helpers of the Episcopal order. Vatican II is thus faithful to the data of history and of the liturgy which far from presenting the episcopacy as a complement to the presbyterate, sees the presbyters as collaborators of the Episcopal order.

---

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Niermann, "Priest", p. 99. Cfr. Thomas Lane, *Priesthood in Tune. Theological Reflection on Ministry*, Columbia Press, Dublin 1983, pp. 116-117: "Episcopate as such was not seen as a sacrament. The bishop was seen as possessing a jurisdiction over and above what was entailed in priestly ordination. There were differing views as to the exact source of this jurisdiction. Hence, the many medieval disputes about the relationship between the 'power of orders' and the 'power of jurisdiction'."

<sup>16</sup> Neuner Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, No. 1711. The existence of the hierarchy is defined in Trent (No. 1719), but the link with the Sacrament of Orders is not spelt out.

At first sight, it may seem that the priest is 'downgraded' by Vatican II. A more attentive examination will show the opposite. Whereas at Trent, the Bishop was superior to the priests at Vatican II, the priests are cooperators of the Episcopal order, *subordinato gradu*, in one and the same mission. Essentially the call to priesthood is a call to cooperation with the bishop.

By virtue of belonging to one presbyterium, the priest is thus intimately linked with his bishop. The Council expresses this close link as a 'communio' which arises from the 'unitas consecrationis et missionis' (P.O.7). This spiritual bond is described in various terms: in addition to looking upon priests as co-workers, sons and friends (L.G. 28, C.D. 16. P.O. 7), the bishop should look upon them as "necessary helpers and counselors" and as "brothers" (P.O. 7). He should have at heart their material and spiritual welfare, welcoming them with special love and listen to them. (C.D. 6, P.O.7). A striking example of this communion with the Bishop is concelebration: but at every Mass too this communion is visible in the mention of the Bishop of Rome and the local Bishop (P.O. 7).

By belonging to the presbyterium, the priest is thus united to his bishop and his fellow-priests. This, however, is not all! The priest is united too to the whole order of bishops. Priests become "prudent cooperators with the Episcopal order (L.G. 28): they enter into "hierarchical communion with the order of bishops" (P.O. 7). And the Council does not hesitate to apply to priests St. Paul's words that they must have at heart the "care of all the churches" (P.O.10). The presbyterium thus opens up the priest to his bishop, his brother priests and the whole Church. His horizon is now the Church Universal!

As we end this section, we can look anew at the title of the article: **The Identity of the Ministerial Priest in Communion**

**with the Bishop.** Wherein lies the ministerial priest's identity? We could ask: Wherein lies the identity of a religious? It lies in his/her belonging to the religious institute, sharing in the charism of the Founder. We could apply this to the priest. He is surely called by the Lord Jesus to share in his mission. But that mission has been concretized. In the case of the ministerial priest belonging to a diocese, the mission of the Bishop. The priest is not a lone ranger. His identity as a ministerial priest lies in his belonging to the presbyterium sharing in the mission of the bishop.

#### **IV. A few Consequences:**

By way of conclusion, taking our starting point the Conciliar teaching we have just seen, we shall try to draw out a few consequences for the priest-bishop relationship.

From the fact of belonging to our presbyterium, tremendous consequences flow for the priest in his relationship to his bishop. The priest can see better the *ecclesial significance of his office*. No matter what he does, if he does it as a priest, he does it as a member of the presbyterium. When, for example he presides at the liturgy, he does so as a member of the presbyterium, as one representing the bishop. When he absolves, it is not his own name that he heals and gives life, he is a representative standing for the bishop and as he stands for the bishop, he stands for the Church. The priest represents and even more actualizes the presence of the bishop, the chief pastor, in the 'local gatherings' of the faithful. Karl Rahner well observes: "The dignity of the parish priest is not diminished, but elevated, if he is seen as a member of the Episcopal presbyterium, as the representative on the spot of the bishop's Church"<sup>17</sup>.

---

<sup>17</sup> Karl Rahner, Op. Cit., p. 40.

This belonging to the presbyterium further colours the priest's obedience to his bishop – it could be termed as an 'obedience-in-service'. The words of the Council, 'co-worker', 'collaborator', 'helper' etc. indicate, besides subordination, partnership. This consciousness of belonging to the presbyterium will lead the priest not to be satisfied with merely external obedience, a mechanical 'doing my duty' attitude. He will realize that *the Diocese is his mission too as a co-worker*. Through the presbyterium, the individual priest is related to the bishop and to his whole *pastorale*. Even when the individual priest has a particular territory assigned to him as the official sphere of his work, as a member of the presbyterium, he has a task of responsibility to the diocese as a whole, obligations which are not satisfied by diligence at his particular post.

But this bond of the presbyterium has consequences also for the **bishop** in his relation with the priests. The documents of the Magisterium speak very strongly of this. Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical letter on Priestly Celibacy says so strongly: "Before being the superiors and judges of your priests, be their masters, fathers, friends, their good and kind brothers always ready to understand, to sympathize and to help. In every possible way encourage your priests to be your personal friends and to be very open to you. This will not weaken the relationship of juridical obedience; rather it will transform it into pastoral love so that they will obey more willingly, sincerely and securely".<sup>18</sup>

Pope John Paul II expresses the same truth very graphically when he says: "The action of the priest who places his hands in the hands of the Bishop on the day of his priestly ordination, as he professes him 'filial respect and obedience', can at first sight seem

---

<sup>18</sup> Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter on Priestly Celibacy, 24 June 1967, No. 93.

a one-way gesture. In reality, the gesture commits them both: priest and Bishop. The young presbyter chooses to entrust himself to the Bishop and the Bishop for his part obliges himself to look after those hands".<sup>19</sup>

This has been further spelt out by other documents. The *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops* affirms:<sup>20</sup>

"The Bishop should consider it his sacred duty to know his diocesan priests well, their character, their aptitudes, their aspirations, the depth of their spiritual life, their zeal, their ideals, their state of health, their financial situation, their families and everything which concerns them. And he should know them not just in groups (as for example when he meets the clergy of the whole diocese or of a deanery or vicariate) or through pastoral bodies, but also *individually* and, as far as possible, in their place of ministry. This is the purpose of his pastoral visits, when as much time as possible should be given to personal matters, rather than to administrative concerns which might equally well be addressed by a cleric delegated by the Bishop.

The Bishop should manifestly hold his priests in esteem, showing them trust and praising them as they deserve. He should respect and require others to respect their rights and should defend them against unjust criticism".

This relationship has surely to be spelt out in structures. The need for such a structure was already felt at the Council itself (P.O. 7). The Motu Proprio of Pope Paul, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* and the Circular Letter of the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy

---

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Gregis*, 16 October 2003, on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his election to the Pontificate, No. 47.

<sup>20</sup> Directory issued by the Congregation for Bishops in 2004, no. 77.

of May 7, 1970, took concrete steps towards providing such a structure in the form of Priest's Senate or Council. In this way, the presbyterium takes on flesh and blood. But even more than structures, is the need of a good spirit of love and collaboration between the bishop and his priests so that the "superficial, bureaucratic, cold and most of the time unsatisfactory" relationship between the bishop and his priests referred to in the initial quotation at the start of this article will be replaced by communion, dialogue and mutual esteem. That will, indeed, bring about a renewal in the Church!