

An Assessment of Common and Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of c. 517§2

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Introduction

During an address to the general audience of 30,000 people in St. Peter's Square on 24 June 2009, Pope Benedict XVI focused his remarks on why he initiated the 'Year for Priests' and what it means to be a 'Priest'.

Pope Benedict identified two conceptions of the priesthood: on the one hand, a social-functional conception which identifies the essence of priesthood with the concept of service and on the other hand, a sacramental-ontological conception as determined by a gift called Sacrament, granted by the Lord through the mediation of the Church. "Priests are Christ's servants, in the sense that their existence, ontologically configured to Him, has an essentially relational character. The priest is in Christ, for Christ and with Christ at the service of humankind," the Pontiff explained. "Precisely because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of man".

The terminology 'priesthood' is so wide and all the baptised fall into this category, giving due respect to a passage from the letter of St. Peter (1 Pet 2: 9). Hence a distinction between the laity and clergy in the field of priesthood is needed. The Church has made a distinction, based on the terminology of Vatican II,

between common and ministerial priesthood. Hence, in this article I shall make an attempt to focus on the duties and obligations of common and ministerial priesthood in the light of *CIC* c. 517 §2, in which due importance is given to the role of lay person(s) in the daily affairs of the parish in the event of a dearth of priests.

1. Common Priesthood of the Faithful

There is much confusion these days in some quarters about who and what is a priest; there is an overwhelming amount of what they call identity crisis in many priests. So many writers state that ordination makes no difference, that every Christian is equally a priest, and that priests (as they are properly called) are merely functionaries.

We have the explanation in the first letter of Saint Peter, in which he speaks on the priesthood of all Christians. My intention is first to quote what he says, and then explain briefly what the Church says what he means, all the while make applications to our own personal and corporate spiritual life.

“He (speaking of Christ) is the living stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him; set yourselves close to him so that you too, the holy priesthood that offers the spiritual sacrifices which Jesus Christ has made acceptable to God, may be living stones making a spiritual house..... But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people at all and now you are the People of God; once you were outside the mercy and now you have been given mercy” (1 Pet 2, 4-10).

As we prayerfully reflect on the inspired words of the first Vicar of Christ, we find that they contain four great mysteries of

Christian revelation that are like four pillars of the priesthood of the faithful. They are: **vocation, community, faith, and responsibility.**

Not everyone has been actually called to Christianity. In a word, our primary **vocation**, on which all other vocations rest, is our vocation to Christianity. Fundamentally, it was this that Christ, speaking to all of us, meant when He said, "Come follow me". We do not often enough think of being a Christian as not merely a vocation, but "the" vocation, of which all other vocations are only aspects and variety. God's ways are not men's ways. The fact is plain that not all have actually, existentially received this call. In our own country there are millions who haven't the vaguest notion of who Christ is!

We, unworthily, have been called. That is why Peter uses the word "chosen". We have been called and selected. Truly it cannot be because God foresaw such great heroic virtue in any of us. No Lord, depart from me a sinner! Never get the idea that having a vocation or being called is something which the one who is called merits. God calls whom He wills. But He does choose. Having been chosen, we then have an extraordinary dignity. All our consequences of being Christians follow from the fact that we have been called specially.

We are called to something; that something is a **community**. That is why Saint Peter uses words that are symbolic of community. He speaks of Christians forming a spiritual house made up of many stones; that was in the days before they made houses of wood. It takes many stones to build a house. We are a chosen race having a common ancestry in Jesus Christ. That is what a race is, people who somehow have a common heredity. We are, he said, a consecrated nation, having been born. And that is what "nation" really means: people somehow born together, politically speaking,

within a geographic space; and spiritually speaking, all born of grace. We form one nation, a nation of grace and we are a people set apart. Our priesthood as Christians, therefore, is that of a community. We belong together; we are members of the Body of Christ. Christianity is not solitary that is a contradiction in terms. There are no solitary Christians, which does not mean that we don't sometimes feel lonely.

By our **faith** we believe, which means we grasp what we cannot see. We accept the word of God. We take His word; we embrace what He tells us is true. But let us never think that because we do not see with reason when we believe, we do not see. Yes we do! We see by faith. One of the most comforting phrases in Latin is "*lumen fidei*", the light of faith. We have it. We can see things that people who don't have the faith just don't see. When we kneel down before the Holy Eucharist, reason tells us it is bread; faith tells us it is Jesus. We love other people including those who don't love us; reason sees an enemy, while faith sees a friend. When a person dies, reason sees the life principle of the body leaving the body and leaving a corpse; faith sees the human spirit leaving this world, thank God, for a better one. The heart of the Christian priesthood is faith. Whether it is the priesthood of the faithful, which is why they are called faithful or whether it is the priesthood of those who are ordained, the heart of the Christian priesthood is faith.

One of the great joys of this common priesthood of the faithful is to be in the company of other people who also believe. We all had enough experience in life to know what the opposite means. The moment we enter a home or a group or a religious community we relax and feel that we belong, even though we may never have met before. It is as though we have known each other all our lives.

The fourth element is **responsibility**. God does not call anyone in vain. He always calls for a purpose. Every vocation implies a mission. Simply put, called to be a Christian is a call to exercise the responsibilities of a Christian. The responsibilities manifest the vocation of their priesthood which demands sacrifice. To have been called to be a Christian is to be called to a life of sacrifice. Sacrifice means surrender. Since the priesthood we are talking about is the priesthood of Jesus Christ, who sacrificed not things outside of Himself but Himself, it must also somehow mean the surrender of ourselves.

2. Common Priesthood and the Ministerial Priesthood

This Church is the people of the New Covenant who, through Baptism and the anointing of the Holy Spirit are reborn and consecrated as a spiritual temple and a holy priesthood. By living the Christian life, they offer up spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the prodigious deeds of Him who called them from darkness into his own wonderful light (LG, no. 10). By the will of Christ some are constituted “teachers, dispensers of the mysteries and pastors” (LG, no. 32)

The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood “though they differ essentially and not only in degree... are none the less ordered one to another; (since) each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ”. (LG, no. 10). Between both there is an effective unity since the Holy Spirit makes the Church one in communion, in service and in the outpouring of the diverse hierarchical and charismatic gifts. Thus the essential difference between the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood is not found in the priesthood of Christ, which remains forever one and indivisible, not in the sanctity to which all of the faithful are called: “Indeed

the ministerial priesthood does not of itself signify a greater degree of holiness with regard to the common priesthood of the faithful; through it, Christ gives to priests, in the Spirit, a particular gift so that they can help the People of God to exercise faithfully and fully the common priesthood which it has received" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, [PDV], no. 17).

This diversity exists at the mode of participation in the priesthood of Christ and is essential in the sense that "while the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace, the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood... and directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians"(Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1547). Consequently, the ministerial priesthood differs in essence from the common priesthood of the faithful because it confers a sacred power for the service of the faithful. For this reason the priest is exhorted "...to grow in awareness of the deep communion uniting him to the People of God" in order to "awaken and deepen co-responsibility in the one common mission of salvation, with a prompt and heartfelt esteem for all the charisma and tasks which the Spirit gives believers for the building up of the Church" (PDV, no. 74).

The characteristics which differentiate the ministerial priesthood from the common priesthood and consequently delineate the extent to which other members of the faithful cooperate with this ministry, may be summarized in the following fashion: (i) the ministerial priesthood is rooted in the Apostolic succession, and vested with "*potestas sacra*" consisting of the faculty and the responsibility of acting in the person of Christ, the Head and the Shepherd; and (ii) it is a priesthood which renders its sacred ministers the authoritative proclamation of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments and the pastoral direction of the faithful.

The ordained ministry, therefore, is established on the foundation of the Apostles for the up-building of the Church: "and is completely at the service of the Church". "Intrinsically linked to the sacramental nature of ecclesial ministry is its character of service. Entirely dependent on Christ who gives mission and authority, ministers are truly servants of Christ' (Rom 1, 1) in the image of him who freely took for us the form of a slave' (Phil 2,7). Because the word and grace of which they are ministers are not their own, but are given to them by Christ for the sake of others, they must freely become the slaves of all".

3. The Distinctive Ministerial Functions

The functions of the ordained minister, taken as a whole, constitute a single indivisible unity in virtue of their singular foundation in Christ. As with Christ, salvific activity is one and unique. It is signified and realized by the minister through the functions of teaching, sanctifying and governing the faithful. This unity essentially defines the exercise of the sacred minister's functions which are always an exercise, in different ways, of the role of Christ as Head of the Church.

Therefore, since the exercise of the *munus docendi, sanctificandi et regendi* the office of teaching, sanctifying and governing by the sacred minister constitutes the essence of pastoral ministry, the diverse functions proper to ordained ministers form an indivisible unity and cannot be understood if separated, one from the other. Rather they must be viewed in terms of mutual correspondence and complementarity. Only in some of these functions, and to a limited degree, may the non-ordained faithful cooperate with their pastors should they be called to do so by lawful authority and in accordance with the prescribed manner. "He (Jesus Christ) continually provides in his body, that is, in the

Church, the gifts of ministries through which, by his power, we serve each other unto salvation...".(LG no, 7). Only the Sacrament of Orders gives the ordained minister a particular participation in the office of Christ, the shepherd and head in his eternal Priesthood. The task exercised in virtue of Orders takes its legitimacy formally and immediately from the official deputation given to pastors, as well as from its concrete exercise under the guidance of ecclesiastical authority. Thus there is an interdependence between the common priesthood and ministerial priesthood. This interdependence calls for a careful reflection so as to arrive at well considered conclusions in their regard.

4. The Indispensability of the Ordained Ministry

The community of the faithful, that is the Church, cannot be guided according to political criteria or those of human organisations. Every particular Church owes its guidance to Christ since it was He who fundamentally linked apostolic mission to the Church and hence no community has the power to grant that mission to itself or to delegate it. In effect, a canonical or juridical determination made by hierarchal authority is necessary for the exercise of the office of teaching and governing.

The ministerial priesthood is, therefore, necessary for a community to exist as "Church": "The ordained priesthood ought not to be thought of as existing posterior to the ecclesial community, as if the Church could be imagined as already established without this priesthood" (PDV, no. 16). Indeed, were a community to lack a priest, it would be deprived of the exercise and sacramental action of Christ, the Head and Pastor, which are essential for the very life of every ecclesial community. Thus the ordained priesthood is absolutely irreplaceable.

5. The Collaboration of the Non-ordained Faithful in Pastoral Ministry

Among the various aspects of the participation of the non-ordained faithful in the Church's mission considered by the Conciliar documents, that of their direct collaboration with the ministry of the Church's pastors is considered. Indeed, "when necessity and expediency in the Church require it, the Pastors, according to established norms from universal law, can entrust to the lay faithful certain offices and roles that are connected to their pastoral ministry but do not require the character of Orders" (Christifideles Laici [CL], n. 23). In this way, it is not one merely of assistance but of mutual enrichment of the common Christian vocation. This collaboration was regulated by successive post-Conciliar legislation and particularly by the *Codex Iuris Canonici*.

The Code, having referred to the rights and duties of all the faithful (Cf. CIC cc. 208-223), in the subsequent title devoted to the rights and duties of the lay faithful, treats not only of those which are theirs in virtue of their secular condition, but also of those tasks and functions which are not exclusively theirs. These stipulation aim at better and effective coordination and collaboration between the ordained and non-ordained.

Some of these latter refer to any member of the faithful, whether ordained or not, while others are considered along the lines of collaboration with the sacred ministry of cleric. With regard to these last mentioned areas or functions, the non-ordained faithful do not enjoy a right to such tasks and functions. Rather, they are "capable of being admitted by the sacred Pastors... to those functions which, in accordance with the provisions of law, they can discharge" or where "ministers are not available... they can supply certain of their functions... in accordance with the provisions

of law” (C. 230, § 3; cf. 517, § 2; 776; 861, § 2; 910, § 2; 943; 1112).

To ensure that such collaboration is harmoniously incorporated into pastoral ministry, and to avoid situations of abuse and disciplinary irregularity in pastoral practice, it is always necessary to have clarity in doctrinal principles. Therefore a consistent, faithful and serious application of the current canonical dispositions throughout the entire Church, while avoiding the abuse of multiplying exceptional cases over and above those so designated and regulated by normative discipline, is extremely necessary.

Where the existence of abuses or improper practices has been proved, Pastors would promptly employ those means judged necessary to prevent their dissemination and to ensure that the correct understanding of the Church’s nature is not impaired. In particular, they will apply the established disciplinary norms to promote knowledge of and assiduous respect for that distinction and complementarity of functions which are vital for ecclesial communion.

In the light of the aforementioned principles and remedies, based on the normative discipline of the Church, we shall focus on the role of lay person(s) in the Code.

6. Canonical Understanding of Common Priesthood in c. 517 §2

The canon says, “If, because of a lack of priests, the diocesan bishop has decided that participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon, **to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons**, he is to appoint some other priest who, provided with the powers and faculties of a pastor, is to direct the pastoral care”.

While discussing lay collaboration in priestly ministry in general, the *Instruction*¹ says that appropriate titles are to be given to lay persons who serve in the Church: It is unlawful for the non-ordained faithful to assume the title such as the pastor, coordinator, moderator or other such similar titles which can confuse their role and that of the pastor who is always the bishop or priest. The *Instruction* gives no specific titles concerning the application of c. 517 §2. The deacon or lay person(s) should neither be called as moderator of the parish nor its coordinator. The *Instruction* explains that c. 517 §2 provides an extraordinary form of collaboration and its strict adherence to conditions contained in it. These are:

(a) *Ob sacerdotum penuriam* (because of lack of priests) and not for reasons of convenience or ambiguous 'advancement of the laity'.. etc.

(b) This is participation in *exercitio curae pastoralis* (participation in the exercise of pastoral care). It is nothing to do with directing, coordinating, moderating, or governing the parish. The above mentioned competencies, according to the canon, pertain to a priest alone.

The same canon, however, reaffirms that these forms of participation in the pastoral care of parishes cannot replace the office of parish priest. The *Instruction* will occasion a review of every aspect of the application of the extraordinary form of collaboration envisioned by c. 517 §2, throughout the Church. A careful study of the history and teaching of the canon leads to the following conclusions about the pastoral leadership arrangement it authorises:

¹ *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests*, Washington, D.C., USCC, 1997. See also: *AAS* 89 (1977), pp. 852-877.

Requirement: *Shortage of priests to be pastor.* The arrangement is possible only when there is a true shortage of priests to fill all parochial and other positions in the particular Church. The diocesan bishop is to make a prudent judgement about such a shortage. The arrangement is clearly exceptional.

Priest-Director: The arrangement requires the appointment of a priest with the powers and faculties of a pastor who is to direct the pastoral care of the parish. He is the community leader and is not technically the pastor of the parish.

Lay Person Participating in the Pastoral Care: The arrangement also involves entrusting of a participation in the exercise of parochial pastoral care to a deacon, a layperson or a community of persons who are not priests. These persons participate in the pastoral care, but do not exercise the full care of souls, for such an office can be validly conferred only on a priest (c. 150).

It is important to note that the role to be specified to the lay person is not specified in the code. Then the diocese is free to respond to a particular pastoral situations with a certain creativity in accordance with the law. Now a question arises: Should the lay person, entrusted with the participation in the pastoral care of the parish, assume the responsibility of legal representative of the parish? The answer is not clear. It touches upon the unresolved question of the exercise of power of governance by lay persons or power of lay jurisdiction.

Vatican II clearly taught that lay persons have a share in the ministerial functions of teaching, sanctifying and governing (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, no.2). The council was ambiguous in its statement on the possibility of lay persons holding ecclesiastical offices and the final wordings of the canon also retained the ambiguity. C. 228 states that the lay people can hold ecclesiastical

office. But c. 274 states only clerics alone hold those offices for which the power of orders or governance is required. C. 129 states that those who have received the sacred orders are '*habiles*' ie. capable of possessing and exercising the power of governance. Laity on the other hand, can 'cooperate' in the exercise of that power according to the norms of the law. This is participation in *exercitio curae pastoralis* (participation in the exercise of pastoral care). It is nothing to do with directing, coordinating, moderating, or governing the parish. The above mentioned competencies, according to the canon, pertain to a priest alone.

The code does not give this person(s) any title, and the *Instruction* excludes a number of designations. Any title should reflect appropriately the mind of the Church and the canonical role of such figure(s). If a community of persons is given a share in the exercise of parochial pastoral care, one of them should be designated as the leader of the group or at least its contact person with the priest-director and others in the diocese.

Having said all this, it is advisable to give a note of caution to ward off misunderstandings and uncalled for interpretations. The interpretation of the Church's deep concern for the pastoral care of the souls as displayed in C.517§2 should not be stretched too far that the governing ministry becomes a monopoly of the priest; that the laity are at the mercy of the priest to exercise their legitimate baptismal right of partaking in the governing ministry of Jesus Christ; that the priest has the sole and absolute authority to decide on whether or not the people should participate in the governing function in a parish; that where there are enough number of priests, the baptismal obligation of the laity to participate in the threefold ministry of Christ may be over looked.

Conclusion

Today many writers state that ordination makes no difference, that every Christian is equally a priest, and that priests (as they are properly called) are merely functionaries.

This diversity exists at the mode of participation in the priesthood of Christ and is essential in the sense that while the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace, the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood and directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians. Consequently, the ministerial priesthood differs in essence from the common priesthood of the faithful because it confers a sacred power through the ordination for the service of the faithful.

Only the sacrament of Orders gives the ordained minister a particular participation in the office of Christ, the Shepherd and Head in his Eternal Priesthood. The task exercised in virtue of Orders takes its legitimacy formally and immediately from the official deputation given by Pastors, as well as from its concrete exercise under the guidance of ecclesiastical authority. To ensure that such collaboration is harmoniously incorporated into pastoral ministry, and to avoid situations of abuse and disciplinary irregularity in pastoral practice, it is always necessary to have clarity in doctrinal principles.

C. 517, §2 provides a new canonical solution to a pastoral need and at the same time recognises the resources of lay persons in carrying out the mission of Christ. This recognition of the laity reflects a shift from exclusion to a qualified inclusion. Despite the supplementary nature of lay persons' participation in the pastoral care of the parish, c. 517, § 2 nonetheless advances the role of non-priests in the leadership of the parish. c. 517 makes a realistic provision for the church of the third millennium in which there will

be a larger catholic population and fewer priests available for parish ministry. Unlike the West such a provision may not be a pressing issue in the East, particularly in India now. The evolving theology in the field of participation of laity in ecclesiastical affairs should critically read and creatively interpret c. 517, § 2. The role of the parish coordinator of c. 517, § 2 or, the role of common priesthood continues to evolve in response to the various pastoral needs present in parish communities, and in accordance with the Spirit of the said Canon.