

# Preface

This issue of *New Blackfriars* contains six of the seven papers delivered at the third Annual Conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain at Leeds in September 1987. (The seventh paper, Edmund Flood's investigation of 'Women in the Ministry according to St Paul', has already been published, and could not be included in this collection.) The theme of the conference was 'Christian Priesthood and Ministry', a theme chosen for its relevance to the synod then impending on the role of the laity in the Church.

Although the titles of the papers suggest a roughly equal mix of the doctrinal and the pastoral, as it turned out almost every paper combined the two aspects within itself. John Coventry explored the doctrinal foundations with a paper entitled 'Theology of Ministry'. He applied to the understanding of ministry a distinction between 'faith-statements' and 'value-statements'. What is of faith concerning ministry is that 'the risen Lord is encountered in the continually developing ministries of the Church, and exercises his own care and service of the Church through them'. But the particular form in which the Church realises this essential ministry is a matter of value, conditioned historically and culturally, and therefore within the competence of the Church to change, however radically, into whatever pattern provides the most effective instrument for Christ's saving purpose.

Timothy Radcliffe examined the understanding of priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews. In that epistle the priesthood of the Temple is contrasted with that of Christ. 'The OT priest was such by virtue of his separation from others; Jesus is the great high priest by virtue of his solidarity with us.' The sacred author takes Jesus' death 'outside the camp' as a symbol that the Saviour in exercising his sacrificial priesthood did not separate himself from the impure, but grasped and transformed it. In the same way, ministry in the Church 'brings in those who feel themselves to be unclean, impure, weak and suffering, overthrowing the distinction between lay and priest'.

Kathleen Walsh's first concern was also to question the 'dualistic thinking' within the Church which draws too sharp a distinction between lay and ordained ministries, especially when it implies that the priest is to be treated as a 'class apart', 'a higher order of Christian being'. She went on to apply this principle to her own experience within the pastoral planning of Bishop Guazzelli's area of East London.

Nicholas Lash explored the meaning of ministry of the word. He too protested against a separation between cleric and lay at this point. This ministry is not only the responsibility of all Christians, but is 'one way of understanding who it is, as Christians, that we are, and what, in everything we do and undergo, we are required continually to become'.

Consequently in every sphere of life Christians are called 'to practise and foster that philology, that word-caring, that meticulous and conscientious concern for the quality of conversation and the truthfulness of memory, which is the first casualty of sin'.

Austin Smith's brief was to reflect upon his long experience of ministry within the Inner City. He too spoke of the need to remove the gap between priest and people. Indeed, the priest has something to gain from his urban poor: 'the priest must find a union with God through a union with the powerless'. Fr Smith, like Profesor Lash, saw the crucial relevance of language to ministry: 'the essential ingredient of an Inner City ministry ... is to be located in an understanding, a sharing and a communication of the content and the mode of speech.'

Bruce Harbert was asked to speak of the priest in literature. Eschewing studies of clerical life in the novels of Jane Austin, George Eliot or Trollope, he turned to the more elemental insights concerning priesthood in writers like James Joyce, David Jones and William Langland. These writers understood priests as 'men of the margin', like Melchisedek, men with 'no place in the familiar structures of society'. The one who offers sacrifice shares 'in the exclusion, marginalisation, rejection that are the lot of the victim'. Thus Fr Harbert's exploration of the concept of priesthood led to the same conclusion as other speakers' examination of the ministry of the word.

The word 'explore', which has featured several times in this summary, indicates the spirit in which the papers were delivered and received. The speakers' brief was not to provide a text-book summary of 'the teaching of the magisterium' concerning priesthood and ministry, but rather to search for understandings of priesthood and ministry which would enable the Church to fulfil its vocation in late twentieth-century urban society. Several speakers raised the question of the extent to which the forms, as opposed to the reality, of priesthood and ministry are of divine institution and therefore invariable. The need for the priest and the minister to be identified with the powerless was constantly stressed, as was the fact that priesthood and ministry are aspects of the general Christian vocation; the danger of defining priesthood in terms of power was several times pointed out. More than one speaker insisted that the accurate, truthful and sensitive use of words is an essential aspect of the ministry of the word.

This Preface offers the opportunity to acknowledge with gratitude the great contribution made to the success of the conference by its hosts, Trinity and All Saints' College—Principal and Staff, both academic and domestic. Theology can indeed emerge from persecution and oppression; but it is also powerfully encouraged by a milieu of congenial hospitality.

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