

New Ministries: From Dream to Reality

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Somehow, the subject of new ministries always calls up to my mind the picture of those hundreds of young people who, in the course of an ecumenical session held in Manchester in 1970, had filled a vast auditorium to hear Canon John V Taylor give an address on possible new forms of ministry. Expectations were running high. On the Protestant side, there was the widespread feeling that the pastorate was welded to the establishment rather than in live contact with people. On the Catholic side, there was the vexing combination of decreasing numbers of vocations to the priesthood and growing numbers of resignations from it. The Canon's address was challenging and one could feel that the crowd was of one mind with him: indeed there was a vital need to re-assess the Church's ministerial structures and to re-distribute ecclesial functions. The trouble began when he went on to propose his list of reformed ministries. These turned out to be a selection from the wide choice offered by the New Testament, and they rallied no one; to some they appeared to be no match for the priesthood, to others they seemed to be too ancient to again deserve a place under the sun. The question-period soon degenerated into a high-pitched barrage of objections and confusion was the net result of the day.

Ten years have passed. In the Catholic Church at least, the question of priesthood and ministry has been studied from all angles and there is a growing consensus on the need to disentangle the two. Some concrete steps have been taken in that direction, as witnessed by a recent issue of *Pro Mundi Vita Dossiers* (June 1980). The problem, however, is a mighty one. Its source is the complex evolution of the Church which gradually produced a grossly inflated type of priesthood cramped with the monopoly of most other ministries. The episcopate had come to be understood as a high-

priesthood, the diaconate and all minor orders had been channelled towards the altar and made into stepping-stones to the priesthood, wide-ranging studies had pushed priests into the positions of Church-administrators and of overseers of religious teaching, the vow (or oath?) of chastity had subtly brought the monastic ideal into the priestly office and so on. In that kind of situation, how could you go about reducing the priests' sphere of authority without them getting the feeling that their vocation was threatened? And even when circumstances turned some sharing of powers into a necessity, what new services would you actually establish once you had opted for re-distribution?

When Real Needs Inspire Service

Quite possibly, the late sixties' dream of diversifying ministries is slow in becoming a reality precisely because it is too much bound up with the decentralizing process of a given datum: what new you create (ministries), you must detach from the old (priesthood). To be successful, however, the exercise must break out from that narrow framework in which what is gained by B is felt as a loss by A and it must bravely begin with what comes first in the very notion of ministry, namely the people to be served and their actual needs. There is something refreshingly spontaneous and yet consonant with faith in the Spirit's guidance in the following episode of the early Christian community: wise and responsible men were needed to look after the daily distribution of common goods so as to put an end to grumbling, the community met and chose seven such people, the Apostles prayed and laid their hands upon them ... and thus the Church had its first *deacons* (Acts 6:1-6).

As a priest of Rulenge Diocese, it has been my privilege to live in recent years a community experience which in its simplicity and its bold faith is a close replica of the one narrated in Acts. There we were: giving baptismal birth to an always swelling Catholic population, yet without a chance of spiritually feeding and educating them through the existing services. For missionaries were getting older and fewer while diocesan priests were increasing at a rate much inferior to the one of the Catholic community. Those of the flock who managed to resist indifference were becoming vocal in their demands for the priest to at least visit them and to baptize their children. In 1975, Bishop C Mwoleka and his pastoral team went around all the parish communities of the diocese and discussed the matter with them. Here is the tableau which gradually emerged both of the communities' *Christian* needs and of the

ministries which should come into existence to answer them:

1 *Prayer*: Christians are sons and daughters of God, hence a dialogue with Him called prayer which as a community they hold weekly and on important occasions. Thus you have your first community service and its holder is the *Prayer-Leader* (in Swahili: *Msalishi*).

2 *Education*: Schools are crowded with kids, post-primary leavers without jobs abound in towns and villages. Who will take responsibility for organizing religious education and youth counselling? The answer is: the *Education-Animator* (*Mlezi*).

3 *Material Welfare*: Foreign assistance cannot forever be brought in to cancel the excess of the community's expenses, self-support in the Church is imperative. Sunday collections must be fattened by profits coming from communal projects designed to simultaneously assist development. Here is a job for the *Provider* who not only keeps the accounts but plans the community's overall material welfare.

4 *Spiritual Life*: A depressingly high proportion of the baptized stop praying, while others who are barred from the Eucharist slowly become marginal. The *Spiritual Counsellor* (*Mhuishi*) has to find ways of vivifying the tenuous bonds that still remain between them and the Church.

5 *Fraternal Love*: St Paul in his time was already complaining that "to have lawsuits at all with one another was a defeat" for Christians (I Cor 6: 7). Conflicts within the community, whether or not they are brought before a civil judge, give the lie to Christ's basic commandment of brotherly love. It is the *Peacemaker* (*Mjima's*) duty to try and reconcile opponents.

6 *Marriage*: Youngsters who co-habit before marrying in the Church are legion. And marriages which fail to last or which make room for a second wife are not a rarity. To make Christian marriage attractive and to assist married couples in trouble is the *Matrimonial Adviser* (*Mnyumba's*) formidable task.

7 *Unity*: For all those volunteers to work harmoniously as a team and for the community as a whole to co-operate, a centre of unity is required. This is the *Servant* (*Mtumishi's*) ministry, a ministry which is so much more meaningful than the former one of President and which is orientated towards life rather than towards meetings.

As a matter of fact, it is not only the former function of President which is giving way to that of Servant, it is the whole body

called Parish-council which is being replaced by the team of seven ministers described above. One problem with the Parish-council as we knew it was its very design, geared to meetings, with the result that too often the work of its members stopped with the closing prayer while priests became executors of the council's decisions. Now we have a set-up which decidedly opens on to life. Another problem was that the functions listed in the council (president, vice-president, secretary, etc) had nothing specifically Christian in them; by contrast, the new ministries are substantially inspired by the Gospel and are at once felt to fit in well with the realities of the Church. A further noticeable improvement is that the new structure goes up all the way from the *small communities* (indeed, it was first thought out in connection with the planning of small communities) to the diocesan pastoral team. At all levels, including those of out-stations and of parish, the same seven ministries operate, so that the persons holding the same ministry albeit at different levels can meet on occasions and help one another by sharing experiences which are basically common.

The Shape of Ministries to Come

How do those new ministries relate to those traditionally assigned to priests? Clearly, a good deal of rethinking has been necessary and the road ahead is often obscure. Guidelines are regularly proposed by the diocesan pastoral team, then discussed in seminars regrouping priests, religious, catechists as well as representatives of the faithful. Yet, it is praxis rather than theory which has been leading the way and we are learning as we go – sometimes painfully, it must be admitted, as priests are forced to sacrifice the habit of doing almost everything by themselves while lay people are confronted with the challenge of permanent and substantial commitments.

The picture we get at this stage is that of a twofold division of ministries which is gradually substituting for the division which used to be termed clerical and non-clerical functions. On the one hand, we have the *pastoral* ministries, which tend to be modelled upon the episcopate and to find their source in it. Like the episcopate, although at lowlier steps, the pastoral ministries encompass the various sectors of Church life and are intended to animate them, while the leadership they provide seeks to awaken and to cultivate a sense of co-responsibility. Furthermore, ministers in that category are selected from above, ultimately from the bishop whom they represent; they are known in society to have one chief duty in life, the service of the Church, whether or not that service is a full-time activity.

Also worth mentioning are two developments of possibly vast repercussions which are taking place in the same area of pastoral ministries. First, although the parish-pastor usually is a priest, it is not necessarily so and out of the seventeen parishes of Rulenge Diocese three have a sister as parish-pastor. The parish-pastor normally works in a team of three or four priests and sisters, with whom is associated the parish-catechist. It is worth noticing that a priest can very well work in a team headed by a parish-pastor who is a sister ... it is in fact happening in two parishes. Second, there is the theology which is gradually evolving around the role of the catechist. As long as the ministry was monopolized by the clergy, there were pressures to ordain catechists to the priesthood in spite of the fact that their charism was so obviously distinct. In the new perspective of pastoral ministries, the catechist becomes the out-station's (a sub-division of the parish) pastor, a task which is fulfilling without exceeding his abilities and which allows him to go on living with his family and in the same social context. The result is that the danger of turning the function of catechist into one more stepping-stone to the priesthood is avoided.

On the other hand, there is the new set of ministries this article has described, ministries which immediately originate in the community and for which there is no exact prototype. Those ministries can aptly be termed *lay* since their holders continue to be known in society by the profession they exercise. To take an example, a prayer-leader might be a housewife who, at the community's request, takes on the task of guiding her neighbours in prayer, while the catechist is professionally a Church-worker who also does some farming to sustain his family. Yet, those ministries remain distinct from the Catholic Action movements for they correspond to definite departments of Church-life within which the ministry-holder has responsibility; Catholic Action groups, by comparison, are catalysts for Christian life in some sections of the community such as workers or students.

To be sure, there still is a measure of fluctuation between the pastoral ministries, the Catholic Action movements and the evolving lay ministries as the latter gradually occupy a field of activity of their own. The old dream of remoulding the Church's ministerial structures and of designing new, diversified ministries is nevertheless slowly materializing into a reality, no matter how modestly. One's prayer is that the Spirit will guide our community's elders in their attempt at forming adjusted forms of *diakonia* in the same way he guided the Apostles when circumstances led them to take similar steps.