

Revisiting the question of "ministry"?

Some criteria for a pragmatic theology of liturgical ministry

"We need to revisit the issue of ministry in the Church," said [Anne-Marie Pelletier](#) in June 25 article in *La Croix International*.

But what would such a revisiting look like? It raises several fundamental questions and might be far more undermining of the status quo than the few changes in the Code of Canon Law that are envisaged by those bishops who are willing to even consider the matter.

Where are we now?

Meet any group of Catholics today and within minutes someone will mention that their diocese or local area is undergoing a "re-organization".

Parishes are being combined, the ordained ministers being spread more thinly around communities and the access to gathering for Eucharistic activity being curtailed.

The process is sometimes given an elegant name derived from analogies with businesses that are "down-sizing", but this does not hide the reality that this is driven by two key factors: fewer and aging presbyters.

Moreover, there is little prospect that this situation – even with the addition of presbyters from Africa and India – will change any time soon.

In answer to this, we need to reflect on the basics of ministry and not merely imagine that what has been the paradigm of ministry in the Roman Catholic Church since the early seventeenth-century is either set in stone or in any way ideal.

Rather than being an ideal, it was instead a pragmatic response to the Reformation. In terms of Trent's vision of "the priesthood" (a *sacerdotium*), it was perceived as an officer-led rebellion that was to be prevented from recurring.

Liturgical ministry

Every religion, and every Christian denomination, has religious leaders, and these take the leading roles at its rituals.

Moreover, ritual requires expertise, and the amount of expertise required is usually a direct function of the length of the group's remembered tradition.

But there is a binary model at work here: a sole minister or small ministry-group that acts, leads and preaches/speaks/teaches on one side and, opposite them, a much larger group that attends/listens/and receives ministry. We see this model in a nutshell in the statement, "the clergy administer the sacraments".

This is a valuable and widely appreciated model because it fits well beside other expert service providers in society (e.g. medics providing healthcare to the rest of the community, or accountants providing financial services).

So full-time "ministers of religion" are aligned by society, and often by themselves, with those other experts. Because society needs a "chaplaincy" service, we have a justification for the clergy and their liturgical ministry within society.

Discipleship as community service

In stark contrast to such highly structured notions of ministry or priesthoods, Jesus was not a Levite; his ministry barely engaged with the formal religious expert systems, and when those structures are recalled (e.g. Lk 10, 31-32; Jn 4, 21), they are the objects of criticism or presented as transient.

Moreover, while Jesus was presented as appointing messengers/preachers (apostles), there is no suggestion that these were thought of as ritual experts.

Leaders emerged in the various early Churches with a variety of names. For example, there were "elders" (*presbuteroi*) or "overseer-servants" (*episkopoikaidiakonoi*), originally a double name for a single person that, later on, would divide into two ranks – "bishop" and "deacon".

But it took generations (until the later second-century – in contradiction of older textbooks we know now that Ignatius of Antioch wrote after AD 160 at the earliest) for those patterns to be harmonized between communities and then systematized into authority structures.

There is no suggestion in the first-century documents that leadership at the two key community events, baptism and Eucharist, was restricted in any way or the preserve of those who were community leaders, much less a specially authorized group.

The link between (a) leadership of the community and (b) presidency at the Eucharistic meal (a linkage that would drive much later thinking on ministry and even today is a major source of Christian division) would not be forged until the third-century. And only later again would "the history of its institution" by Jesus be constructed.

The Church within society

It has long been an illusion of the various Christian denominations that a study of history – particularly the first couple of centuries and the texts from those times that they held to belong to the New Testament canon – could provide either a blue-print for ministry (e.g. "the three-fold structure of order": bishop, presbyter, deacon) or a conclusive answer to issues relating to ministry that have arisen in later situations (such as, at the time of the Reformation, what "power" can be seen to come from Christ to the priest, or whether a woman can preside at the Eucharist today).

This is an illusory quest, for it falls victim to the anachronism inherent in all appeals to a perfect original moment, a much-imagined period in the past when all was revealed (at least *in nuce*).

It also assumes that ministry, as it later developed, was not itself the outcome of multiple, often conflicting, forces in particular societies, as well as adaptations by Christians to well-known inherited religious structures.

So, for example, the clerical system, within which was/is located liturgical ministry, for much of Christian history related originally to the political needs of the Church as a public body within the Roman Empire.

Given that there was no "original" plan for liturgical ministry in the Church and, as a result of centuries of disputes, there are many conflicting views about what constitutes someone within ministry, so it is quite

impossible—except within the mythic spaces of particular denominations—to produce a systematic basis for liturgical ministry.

However, given that ministry occurs and is needed, one can set out some criteria that can help individuals and communities to develop a pragmatic theology of liturgical ministry.

Criteria for ministry

a) Every specific ministry is a particular variation of the ministry of all the baptized, and in baptism there is a radical equality. "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3, 28).

This radical equality is a characteristic of the new creation brought about in Christ.

Therefore, any subsequent distinctions, such that particular ministries are not potentially open to every baptized person, are tantamount to a defective theology of baptism by which all ministry is brought into being.

So, making further demands for "signs" of particular divine election (e.g. being able to speak in tongues or handle snakes) as indications of suitability for ministry flies in the face of the incarnational dispensation seen in baptism.

Likewise, regulations that restrict ministry to particular states of life (e.g. demanding celibacy as a condition for the presbyterate) have to be seen as an undue concern with the status of certain ministries.

They imply that baptism is merely some basic entry requirement for Christianity rather than that which creates the new person who can minister, and in that new creation no such distinctions exist.

Similarly, the notion that women, as such, can be excluded from ministry on the basis of some pragmatic historical appeal (e.g. "Jesus did not ordain women!" — assuming such a pre-critical view of "history" has any value), fails to take account of the fundamental role of baptism in all Christian existence and action.

b) We must also respect the awareness that all action and ministry by Christians is Christ-ian in nature.

Christians form a people, a priestly people. We all too often, and too easily, lose sight of the fact that Christians must think of their liturgy in a way that is radically opposed to that commonly found in other religions of a "religious service" due to God or the gods.

In that paradigm, the divine is the opposite of the world in which we live and to which something is owed, presented or transferred, and this constitutes a mode of contact with the divine realm, which might constitute a debt of loyalty/praise/petition or appeasement.

Making this connection, whether by an individual or a group, assumes a technical knowledge and some sacred skill—usually the work of a special priesthood—such that the divine recognizes that the action performed is the appropriate sacred deed.

Christians, contrariwise, conceive their worship on the basis that their priest has come to them and is with them as a community.

Therefore, where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, he is with them (Mt 18:20), and so their actions together—such as celebrating a meal—take place in presence of the Father, because Christ, present among them, is always their High Priest.

This theological vision has important implications for individual Christians who find themselves performing specific acts, ministries, within the Church.

Within Christianity, the ministry is that of the whole community.

Language and priestly ministry

It is also worth remembering that language plays us false in understanding "priestly ministry" in particular.

The Old Testament *cohen* (which we render by the word "priest") performed special tasks on behalf of the rest of Israel (see Leviticus and Numbers).

This was rendered in the Septuagint by the word *hiereus*—a word commonly used for pagan temple officials—and then, later, into Latin by *sacerdos*, which was a generic word covering all the various special temple "priesthoods" such as *flamines* and *pontifices*.

The early Christians did not use these words for their leaders: *hiereus/sacerdos* belonged to Jesus alone in the heavenly temple. Christian leaders were designated by their relationship to the community: as the ones who oversaw, led or served it.

Later, the *hiereus/sacerdos* language was absorbed and became the basis of Christians' perceptions of their presbyters. So our word "priest" is etymologically from the word "presbyter", but conceptually it relates to the sacerdotal functions.

Once this had occurred they had to ask what made them different and what special religious quality they had that others did not possess.

The answer came with the notion of a power "to consecrate", and then this power (itself the subject of rhetorical inflation) became the basis of "ontological difference" between them and "ordinary Christians" whose ministry is to "pray, pay and obey".

After more than a millennium and a half of these confusions in Christianity, in both the East and West, it is very hard for many who see themselves as "ministers" in a Church—especially those with elaborate sacerdotal liturgies—to break free of this baggage.

Tradition can be like a great oil tanker turning at sea: it takes a long time to overcome inertia and for the ship to answer the helm!

Where do we start?

In every community there are those who have the skills that have brought that group together and given it an identity. The task is to recognize these actual ministers and to facilitate them to make that ministry more effective and fruitful.

Some will have the gifts of evangelizing and welcoming; others the skills of leading in prayer and the offering of the thanksgiving sacrifice of praise; others the gifts of teaching; others of reconciling; others for the mission of each community to the building up of the kingdom of justice and peace; and some will have management skills. None is greater and none is less!

In every discussion of ministry we need to have the advice of Paul to the Church in Corinth around 58 CE echoing in our heads as he presents ministry as the working out of the presence of the Spirit in the assembly:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another

faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit (1 Cor 12, 4-13).

If these statements were to reverberate through our discussions today we might need to talk less about "closing churches" and "combining parishes" and could then move on to the more fruitful task of discovering the wealth of vocations that are all around us.

But there is only one [merely logical] certainty: the future will not be like the past. And when the present seeks to recede into its past, it is untrue to its own moment.

Thomas O'Loughlin is a priest of the Catholic Diocese of Arundel and Brighton and professor of historical theology at the University of Nottingham (UK). His latest award-winning book is *Eating Together, Becoming One: Taking Up Pope Francis's Call to Theologians* (Liturgical Press, 2019).

A fuller exploration of the theme of this article can be found in "Facing a Liturgy-Starved Church: Do We Need to Rethink the Basics of Ministry?" (*New Blackfriars* 100 (2019) pp. 171-83).