

THE CHURCH AND THE MINISTRY

Towards a Church with a Future

During the Provincial Chapter of the Dutch Dominicans, held in June 2005, a motion proposed by some groups of Dominicans in Holland was discussed, the text of which was as follows:

Therefore, we request the Chapter to institute a committee or working group of experts as soon as possible, which committee will be given the task of studying the theological aspects of the question as to whether celebrating the Eucharist depends on the ministry of ordained men, or whether it is possible that the church community or the pastors it has appointed celebrate the Eucharist themselves. This study should result in a document that indicates a direction, and that the Dutch Dominicans offer to the Dutch Church (Acts 6.8; from ET sent to Master o.p.).

At the chapter this petition was supported to such an extent that the discussion resulted in a resolution formulated as follows in the Acts of the chapter, under the heading 'Parishes in the light of a new view of the Church'

A center for faith and spirituality can be a new form of church. Also in such a center the desire will arise to celebrate the Eucharist. This desire already lives in the parishes that do not celebrate the Eucharist because they do not have an ordained pastor. Therefore, we instruct the administration to institute a committee or working group of experts as soon as possible, which committee will be given the task to study the theological aspects of the question whether celebrating the Eucharist depends on the ministry of ordained men, or whether it is possible that the church community or the leaders it has appointed preside at the Eucharist themselves. This study should result in a document that indicates a direction, and that the Dutch Dominicans offer to the Dutch Church, notably to the parishes and centers for faith and spirituality, with the principal objective of creating an open dialogue in which all interested parties might participate. The committee should also think of a strategy to facilitate this open dialogue. (ib.)

This commission started its work by visiting a number of parishes in order to be able to visualize how people there reflect on the questions mentioned above, which realities they meet with in the parochial practice, and how they see things developing in the future. The commission found in none of these parishes absolute consensus among the members. They expressed questions and doubts and were uncertain how to proceed on the points that were mentioned.

And yet on a number of matters there appeared to be agreement in these discussions, especially on the relationship towards the concrete policies of the Church's leadership in the various Dutch dioceses, which was generally regarded as laborious. Many of the faithful sincerely feel discomfort as a result of the present situation, which is often experienced as painful and discouraging. Apparently there is a desire to clarify the various issues at stake. This report is an attempt at such a clarification. The text is composed by the commission instituted by the administration of the province from its members: André Lascaris, Jan Nieuwenhuis, Harrie Salemans, and Ad Willems. In easily understandable terms they have tried to throw light on various aspects of the subject: the image of the Church, the sacraments and especially the Eucharist, the ministry of those who preside at liturgical functions.

This report has been accepted by the administration of the Dutch Province of the Dominicans and is being distributed by them. It is not meant to be a guideline or doctrinal position, but a contribution to renewed discussions on a deeper level. It wants to help to find way out of the present deadlock and to start, if possible, a consultation which may improve the faith experience of many.

Jan. 11 2007, Provincial and Council of the Dutch Province of the Dominicans

1. The situation

Anyone who wants to get a bird's-eye view of the present situation of 'the church and the ministry' will find very divergent views and practices among those who actually have been charged with the organisation or supervision of ecclesial assemblies within or outside of the parishes. Above all it is clear that there is a fundamental difference between, on the one hand, the view and practice of the official bearers of authority and, on the other hand, the daily practice among those who every week are responsible for the celebration(s) in their ecclesial community.

The following paragraphs present a description, though very provisionally, of the actual state of affairs on these points and of the facts one is confronted with in the daily exercise of one's duties.

The present situation

Official church authority follows a strict and unambiguous policy especially with regard to presiders at celebrations of the Eucharist – sometimes also regarding the administration of other sacraments –, which is that only ordained priests can and may preside at the celebration of the Eucharist, and also at the administration of the anointing of the sick and of preaching. In the absence of such an ordained priest a celebration of the Eucharist is out of the question.

Some time ago this position was formulated in the daily newspaper *Trouw* of March 25 2006 as follows: 'According to the doctrine of the church the so-called "services of Word and Communion" are only a poor second: though you are sitting in the church the Eucharist passes you by. A pastoral worker, of course, cannot him/herself "transform" bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. He or she can only distribute hosts which earlier have been consecrated during a celebration by a priest'. Shortly afterward the bishop of 's-Hertogenbosch, A. Hurkmans, who holds the liturgy portfolio within the Bishops' Conference, wrote in the same newspaper: 'Services of Word and Communion can be quite valuable in regions where a celebration of the Eucharist really is impossible. But when such services become a fixed part of the liturgical programme as an alternative of equal value of the Eucharist, we fail to recognize the unique significance of the Eucharist for the life of the Church. As a result we build the church of tomorrow on a basis which is too unstable'. (April 6 2006)

This position does not appear to be shared by a part – probably a large part – of the workers in the field. Many parishes and groups of the faithful are confronted with the simple fact that, now or in the near future, an ordained priest will no longer be available and that there is no hope of a remedy for this situation. Church authority tries to meet this growing shortage either by importing priests from abroad, or by a policy of regionalization: by joining parishes into a region, in which one priest has to be of service to more than one parish. Many church communities are, to say the least, unhappy with this situation and try in various places to evade from this policy.

A fundamental objection of such communities to this policy is that in this way official church authority in principle opts for a protection of the priesthood in its present form over against the right of church communities to the Eucharist. In the official view using the approved eucharistic prayers and especially pronouncing the words of institution not only is more important than the faith community, but is also seen and used as an exclusive power which is restricted to ordained priests.

Many parishes and church communities question this structure, not just as a matter of actual necessity, but also because views on the significance and the administration of the Eucharist have changed since the Second Vatican Council. In general the official position on the administration of the Eucharist and of the other sacraments finds itself in a crisis. This report is intended first to analyse and identify the nature of this crisis and then, in the subsequent chapters, to identify in Scripture and tradition a basis from which a possible solution may present itself.

Obstacles in the present situation

In order to overcome the dilemma just described many parishes and faith communities make use of a distinction – in their presentation as well – between what is called either a 'celebration of the Eucharist' or a 'service of Word and Communion'. In the eucharistic celebration an ordained priest presides; in the 'service' someone who is not a priest presides. This does not pronounce the words of institution but distributes hosts consecrated earlier. The difference between these two forms of liturgy is usually announced beforehand, to enable churchgoers to know and also to decide whether or not they want to attend the service.

Why do such parishes choose this course? It is the only way out. Necessity forces them to choose this solution, which in their heart they would more often than not prefer to abandon. They experience both forms as genuine and valuable celebrations. So do most of those who come to church, hardly aware of the difference between them. A substantial part of churchgoers consider a service of Word and Communion to be of equal value with a strictly eucharistic celebration.

Partly because the difference between 'eucharistic celebration' and 'service of Word and Communion' in many cases is hardly relevant for the experience of the faithful, but mainly because of objections in principle against such a distinction – which will be discussed later – a number of faith communities do not or no longer make use of this distinction. At times they speak of 'agape celebration' or 'memorial service', sometimes only of 'weekend celebration' or 'weekly celebration', leaving it open whether or not an ordained minister will preside. Other groups use the term 'emergency service' when an ordained priest cannot preside. On this point the predominant picture is that one tries to balance one's steps along the margins of that which has been formally allowed by church officials, at times crossing or obscuring the boundaries, mainly in order to keep out of problems. In their hearts and in their faith experience the parishes would much prefer to be spared the duty to make this distinction.

They agree that stringent demands could and should be made of lay persons when they are asked to preside in a community celebration. In most cases they have to follow a specialized course to equip them for their function. In some cases a probationary period is required as well, during which it may become clear whether or not the persons they have invited are sufficiently capable to fulfil their function. In no case is it thought possible that someone could be appointed for such a task without some form of selection. But it is a common conviction that the selection of those who will take on this ministry is the responsibility of the community or parish, in other words: decisions should be made 'from below' and, if desirable, according to procedures which have been agreed upon. It is a deeply shared faith conviction that the function of presiding in community celebrations should not just be supported and confirmed by the community, but that in principle this community must provide the foundation and legitimation of this function. In most cases such parishes and faith communities take it for granted that the function of presiding in community celebrations has its origin 'from below' and that the minister should be appointed by the actual community itself. When such a lay president is appointed there is no precondition as to whether the appointee is a man or a woman. The predominant view is that women can equally fulfil such a position.

In all cases the faithful experience the current situation as too restrictive. The diocese expressly opts for clerical parishes. The parishes themselves would, if given the chance, rather and in principle let both 'ordained' priests and laypersons, both men and women, who have also been 'called', function in their midst. The parishes try to maintain a policy of transparency in this regard with the diocese, but sometimes have to choose for not putting everything on view. The present situation is, it is felt, blocked by higher authority: parishes cannot do what, inspired by pastoral concerns, they feel they should do.

In a number of parishes 'emergency plans', in various states of elaboration, exist for a situation in which they have to decide what course to take if a higher authority intervenes and forbids certain developments. Not always are they prepared to accept every priest appointed by this authority as a celebrant. There are also groups who do not wish to hand over the keys to their church to someone appointed by the diocese. And there are yet others that do not or dare not enter into a confrontation with the diocese. But in every case such parishes wish to remain within the greater whole of the Catholic Church. In some cases the contact with the diocese is felt to be a form of 'walking on eggs': on the one hand not all problems are worth getting into a conflict over; on the other hand they have the feeling, and sometimes the experience, of running into a brick wall and of not being able to do what they think or are convinced should be done. A widespread complaint is that the 'higher authority' tries to hold the church together by an enforcement of traditional structures. Whatever a parish experiences as a 'dream' often turns out to be rejected because of practical or doctrinal objections. 'Whatever happens, we will continue', some say. But over against this many fear that the dream will never come true. The relationship between the 'higher authority' and the grassroots of the faithful is extremely vulnerable and laborious. The parties have no or hardly any confidence in each other.

Ambiguities in the present situation

It has already been mentioned that a growing number of parishes and faith communities are finding solutions on their own terms. Maintaining a distinction between a 'eucharistic celebration' and a 'service of Word and Communion' (or an equivalent expression) is one of these. But in practice one finds that, if necessary, this distinction tends to be disregarded. If for instance there may not be enough consecrated hosts for a communion service they try to find them elsewhere, even though this is felt to be a solution which in fact is unworthy of the Eucharist. Sometimes the consecrated hosts available for the service are complemented by non-consecrated hosts, with the excuse that 'after all nobody knows'. One gets the impression, therefore, that the distinction mentioned earlier is used rather to avoid a conflict with the higher

authority than because of a doctrinal conviction based on a genuine distinction. The solutions used are shaky – and felt to be so – and thought to be pseudo- or emergency solutions.

The same applies to other matters related to the distinction. The use of official eucharistic prayers approved by church authority, for instance, is often disregarded in practice without much scruple. Some parishes call the official guidelines on this matter meaningless and act accordingly. Often the prayers composed by the presiding celebrant or by the community find more approval than the ones officially prescribed because these are on the same wavelength as the matters people are concerned with in their daily life. Also it is often proposed – and put into practice – to leave aside the fixed words of institution and substitute expressions easier to understand and more in tune with modern faith experience. On this level also the words and actions laid down by church authority are time and again experienced as an obstacle, with the result that in fact people, more or less surreptitiously, choose their own way. The whole picture on these matters is characterized by a great deal of equivocation, out of sheer necessity, by underground activity and resistance with a high degree of secretiveness. It would seem that on these points the church has returned to the catacombs, while above-ground no one can or wants to know what is happening down there.

A comparable level of ambiguity shows itself during the selection and appointment of lay people, both male and female, to preside in the services of Word and Communion. They have to comply with clear sets of requirements. Sometimes the intention is to put them on an equal level with the priest appointed by the diocese and then, for instance, a so-called 'pastoral team' is formed in order to bypass the exclusive role of the priest in this whole team.

A special factor in the conflict situation as it exists between a diocese and many parishes are church funds. In this matter there have also been a number of difficulties. Quite a few parishioners have stopped their financial contribution to the parish as part of it is handed over to the diocese. For this reason independent foundations have been established in some parishes, the funds of which are solely intended for their own pastoral and diaconal needs. Parishioners who do not want to contribute to the diocese may hand in their financial support to such a foundation. It has its own administration not connected with official church administration and appoints the lay ministers, male and female, chosen by the community, for carrying out its ministries. Structurally this position involves a double track in church administration, in order to escape from the exclusive control of the higher authority.

On the other hand, church buildings are usually owned by the diocese and by this means church authority has the power to prevent service in these churches, or is at least able to exercise control over them. Many parishes feel this situation to be a form of restriction. Parishes are bound hand and foot and are unable to do what they would want to; they feel as if walking into an unmoveable wall, making things impossible that those parishes feel should be possible. The matter of church funds forces the faithful rank and file to keep to the rules. They do not feel free. As a result they look for secret routes in order to escape from a situation they experience as restrictive. In this way the church resembles a bottled-up resistance movement rather than a faith community which receives its inspiration from above.

Looking towards the Future

When asked what their hopes are for the future, parishes often reply: 'to be able to go our own way'. This does not mean unchecked lawlessness, but being able to do, on their own genuine responsibility and according to their own equally genuine faith convictions, what at the deepest level they believe should be done.

In the first place this means that in principle men and women can be chosen to preside at the Eucharist by the church community itself, that is: 'from below'. This does not mean that they do not wish this choice to be followed by a confirmation or blessing or ordination by church authority, in fact by the local bishop. On the contrary, in their view such a confirmation or ordination is most important for this ministry. Consequently they hope for a ritual in which the local community could propose to the bishop for ordination those persons – both men and women – it has selected itself to be leaders in the community, and in which the bishop would do so. In this hoped for procedure there would, therefore, be a combined action of 'below' and 'above': the community presents candidates and the bishop blesses and confirms them on the basis of the apostolic tradition. It certainly cannot be said that communities such as these do not see the relevance of church authority and of the apostolic tradition. On the contrary, they want to restore this authority to its place in tradition and consequently to give it a higher respect than is the case at present.

In this line they would in fact hope for a liturgy in which the words of institution could be pronounced both by those who preside in the Eucharist and by the community (from which those who preside take their origin). Pronouncing these words is not thought to be the sole prerogative of the priest; were this the case, how could one avoid a form of power and of right that is almost magical? The words constitute a conscious declaration of faith by the whole community, which lends its voice to the person presiding in the celebration.

In this hope for the future the task and ministry of the leader in the community are basically ('democratically') determined by the church community. As a leader he or she is part of the community, one of the faithful taken from its midst. On the other hand his or her ministry is at the same time and of its own right a function 'over against' the community: by virtue of this ministry he or she has to proclaim and declare something to the community on the basis of the tradition of the Book. It is, therefore, literally a double function: called by and out of the community, this same community commissions them to proclaim what should be proclaimed. Having their origin in the community and remaining members of it these leaders are given 'author-ity' (the Dutch word is derived from *zeggen*, saying) by the community in the literal sense: he or she 'has something to say' and has to say it if the function is to be meaningful.

The double reach of the ministry also applies to its function of presiding in the Eucharistic prayer. The community requires those presiding in it to make the liturgical gesture and entrusts it to them. It could not be said that the minister by ordination receives the power to do what others are unable to do. It is a form of responsibility rather of power which the community entrusts to her or him in order to act on behalf of all and in the name of all. The leaders in the community are then as it were for a moment lifted above themselves by the community. For a moment they withdraw from themselves in order to become the embodiment, the hand and the voice of the community. The liturgical gesture therefore is an exclusive one, but not to such an extent that it would give power or be literally exceptional. It is not made 'with the exclusion of you', but 'including you, thanks to and on behalf of you'.

Some figures on the present situation

A few figures to close off this section. In The Netherlands the number of Eucharistic celebrations (at the weekend) has dropped between 2002 and 2004 from ca. 2200 to 1900; the number of services of Word and Communion rose during the same period from 550 to 630. In most Dutch dioceses the number of these services is about half of the Eucharistic celebrations. In the dioceses of Utrecht (165 celebrations every weekend in 2004) and Breda (70) the number is much higher. In the diocese of Den Bosch the shift was highest of all in 2004: each weekend there were 95 fewer celebrations of the Eucharist than in 2003 and 50 more services of Word and Communion. The diocese of Groningen/Leuwarden beats all others: the number of Eucharists in this region equals that of services of Word and Communion, namely 50 each weekend. In the diocese of Roermond there is not only the highest number of Eucharists, namely 530 each weekend in 2004, but also by far the lowest number of services of Word and Communion. According to diocesan spokesman Bemelmans part of the reason is that in the diocese very few pastoral workers are active. 'But it is also due to our policy of discouragement. We call these services "Eucharists with a hole in it"'. The situation in the diocese of Roermond is relatively favorable, as it has enough priests at its disposal to have a Eucharistic celebration each weekend in every parish. Bemelmans: 'But we too have to close down churches, about twenty in the past ten years. For years already we have been urging parishes to reduce the number of celebrations: it is better to have one real Mass each weekend. And we get priests from abroad, for instance from India and The Argentine'. Only the dioceses of Haarlem and Utrecht have succeeded in actually reducing the number of alternative services in 2004 and even to raise slightly the number of Eucharists. 'We are firmly determined to reduce even further the number of services of Word and Communion', said Wim Peeters, spokesman of the diocese of Haarlem.

The ever greater discrepancy between the grassroots in the church and the policy of church authority could hardly have been formulated more accurately than by these figures. There is a striking difference between on the one hand the strict views on the church, liturgical celebrations and the ministry, and on the other hand the divergent views and practices in many places in the pastoral field. Regular information on this matter in newspapers, periodicals, tv and in the soundings this committee has conducted earlier leave no room for doubt on this point.

In order to evaluate this situation and consequently to draw conclusions from it it seems necessary to keep in view the connection between the various problems we indicated. To enable such a process we should first draw attention to views on what is 'church'.

2. What is church?

A move that tends to be forgotten

The gap we are now often confronted with so painfully, dates from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), though the opposing positions had their origin much earlier. At the council, however, the opposition which had been dormant for a much longer time showed itself at the 'highest' level. A serene Flemish expert who followed the council from close at hand, observed this as early as 1967. According to him two divergent currents 'of which one wished to continue the classic routes of the earlier century [the 19th century is meant], while the other current showed a greater openness towards actual theological developments' (Msgr. G. Philips, *De dogmatische constitutie over de kerk*, Antwerp 1967, p. 12).

A first very important difference in view of the church quickly came to light during the council. After intensive consultation the bishops present there decided to change the proposed order of the chapters in the document on the church. The purpose of this change was to be able to insert a new chapter in it, with the title 'The People of God'. Only after this chapter would the hierarchy (of pope and bishops) be treated with explicitly.

To the displeasure of the 'classic' participants of the council this insertion was accepted on the basis of short but powerful arguments. It was stated that 'the people themselves and the salvation of the people' was the goal of the church community. Thereafter it was stated (in the official commission report) that 'the hierarchy is directed towards this end as a means'. In this the hierarchy was strictly speaking considered to be of secondary importance. The discussion on this point was very fierce, and no wonder, for such a view has far-reaching consequences. And precisely because of these consequences this move at the council was relegated to the background in the years after its completion. After the council the main organs of the central organisation of the church did not feel the need for a new image of the church. The change in the constitution of the church became 'a forgotten manoeuvre'.

And yet the hope raised in many people has never faded away completely. It had been made clear that the church is not first of all a hierarchical organisation built up from the top downwards by the pope and the bishops. Rather the church is the people of God as a whole in its pilgrimage through the ages. In this people a great variety of gifts of the Spirit has been at work. By recognizing and appraising these gifts an organic faith community came into being in the course of the years. Originally the substance and the names of these gifts of the Spirit varied in the various regions where the Gospel was accepted. In accordance with local needs of a community the framework of ministerial functions was varied as well.

Leadership in the community

One of the gifts which necessarily manifested itself in every community was leadership. Usually the founder of a community had this function as a matter of course. But during the period after the founder's death it was usual for the community as a whole to have the final say. Ultimately the community has to judge what is useful and building up the community (1 Cor. 12, 7.10; 14, 3-5.12. 32; cf. J. Tigcheler, 'Bouwen op het fundament van apostelen en profeten', in: *Speling* 57 [2005], nr. 4, p. 18).

In the course of time the service of leadership was broken down into various functions and given various names. Apart from apostles and prophets evangelists, pastors and teachers appeared to function in the community also (Eph. 4, 11). In later Pauline communities deacons, supervisors ('episkopoi') and a 'council of elders' ('presbyteroi') also had a function (1 Tim. 3.1.8; 4, 14). The handing over of leadership became more of an institution: the leader who was chosen received the grace through 'prophetic words' spoken by the council of presbyters during the 'laying on of hands'.

The ritual handing on of leadership and presiding at the liturgy was called a 'sacrament' in antiquity. Originally this term was used to indicate various usages within the church community. St. Augustine did so with great conviction. If

the faithful confirmed the prayers with 'amen' he called even this a 'sacrament'. He did this because he was convinced in faith that all activity within the church community was somehow sacramental, as it re-presented holy reality in visible signs and actions. Only centuries later was the term 'sacrament' reserved for the seven sacraments known today.

The church as a pyramid

In the course of church history the view on leadership in the church has changed. The predominant ('strict') view sees the priesthood as part of a pyramid. The top of this pyramid, that is the highest levels of the hierarchy, reaches into heaven and therefore participates in divine life to the maximum extent. From this top supernatural life flows down, through priestly, sacramental mediation, to the lowest regions of the church and finally reaches the base of the pyramid, that is 'lay people'. The sacraments essentially are 'instruments of grace' and are only effective if they are used by ordained ministers. In the course of the centuries this view of the church was laid down in an elaborate juridical system, eventually recorded in a code of canon law.

In this model a priest is 'ordained' at his appointment. This means that he is essentially changed because his whole person and essence are sanctified. By ordination he is admitted into the special domain of the holy and supernatural, which takes him beyond the domain of the natural and profane. Therefore he also is the only one who has the power to perform sacramental actions which are 'valid' (that is; recognized by law). In this way an 'essential' distinction between laypeople and the ordained minister comes into being, which is indelible. Obviously in this view there can be no such thing as a part-time priesthood. One is 'essentially' a priest, that is from head to foot, from the early morning till late at night, 'in aeternum'.

A different model: the church as a body

By inserting a new chapter in Vatican II's constitution on the church a different model of the church came into better view: less strictly hierarchical, more organic and directed towards the community as a whole. This view is in line with the Pauline image of the church as a body. This change also made room once more for a different view of the function of leadership in this community. In the first period of the church the appointment of such a minister in several communities did not imply an ordination in the sense of a 'consecration' [which in Germanic languages is the term for a priest's ordination, tr.], but as giving a place or 'order' in a body among its various functions. By this the leader in a community was not transferred into a different order of being, but appointed and accepted by the community voor een specified function. Such a minister could, like Paul, exercise a profession outside the church (cf. 1 Cor. 4, 12; Acts 18, 3–4; 20, 34). According to this view it was not self-evident that a certain group of people should be excluded beforehand from such a function because their 'being' was thought to be impure or too worldly. Peter the apostle was given a key function even though he was married and in the early church there also was a number of 'deaconesses'. In the hierarchical view of the church and its ministry which is still current the ordained priest functions as a 'hinge' in the mediation of grace, a function which is unassailable and not open to competition from within: the ordained minister defines the church, which in his absence cannot function any more. In the 'organic' model of the church the situation is different: the faith community decides which variety of ministries is necessary here and now. As long as the threat of competition determines the view on church and ministry, however, there will be no room for an organic connection in which various ministers can cooperate.

In actual fact it is clear that, as long as the hierarchical model of the church remain predominant, there will be no room for those we now call 'pastoral workers'. Seen from the 'church as a pyramid' they can only be regarded with suspicion, because of the fear that in addition to the 'validly ordained priest' a 'parallel clergy' is coming into being.

Not a threat but a challenge

The situation the present authority in the church still regards as a threat is a real boon for active 'laypeople' in many local church communities. This means it is also a challenge. As they become aware more and more that they resume an old tradition of the church, restored to its earlier importance by the Second Vatican Council, they will be able to function in a less inhibited way. Their own creativity in faith will gain inspiration by encouragement. Unrestricted recognition by the other members of their community will soften the forced efforts at candid mutual relationships one can still observe in our days.

III. The Eucharist

The celebration of the 'Eucharist' is rich in meaning. The word itself means 'thanksgiving': in the Eucharist we express our gratitude for creation, for our life, for the liberating narrative of Israel and of Jesus. At the same time we ask that God's creating and liberating power will continue to support and inspire us, to give us wings and allow us to let the whole world profit from it. The Eucharist consists of a mixture of prayer and activity, in the sharing of bread and wine. The prayers can take various forms; in the early days there were several versions of the words of institution. These are not magical terms and could, as some of the old texts show, be absent altogether.

A Sacrament

The Eucharist is called a 'sacrament', a Latin term which means 'something which provides a guarantee'. In the Roman army the military oath of allegiance was called a 'sacramentum'. The term was adopted by the Latin-speaking church in the West and used to indicate various actions in the church, among them the celebration of the Eucharist. To indicate what it implied the word used by the Greek-speaking, Eastern church is preferable: 'mystêrion', 'something which was first hidden but now becomes manifest'.

If we want to understand the Eucharist we should start from what we do when we celebrate it; this form of thanksgiving has the shape of a common (ritual) meal, and the prayers indicate how special a form of meal it is. We do not have an elaborate meal with one other, but as it were concentrate it in a gesture, which 'symbolizes' (we 'throw it together', which in Greek is 'symballein') or sums up what is at stake in this particular meal. In modern languages the meaning of the terms sacrament and symbol has become too divergent from each other.

Sharing

The Eucharist is not something we 'possess'. In the sharing of bread and wine the faith community recognizes what is at stake in the *Thora* – the Jewish tradition - and how this has taken shape in Jesus. Sharing constitutes the centre of this common meal. In the celebration of the Eucharist we express our trust, we represent and celebrate that at its deepest level life is sharing. We express our conviction to ourselves and to the whole world that God wants to share his very self and communicate himself to us, that He accepts us unconditionally and that in imitation of God we intend to share and communicate our own selves.

This has first been realized as an example in the life and activity of Jesus of Nazareth, who shared out his own life even to his death at the cross. This form of unbounded sharing is liberating: it liberates us from constricting bonds, from evil, from mistakes we have made, from 'sins', from an oppressive past. It promises us that in the future, which always remains uncertain, we may always have trust in the God who is love.

Presence

In the common sharing of bread and wine, in doing what Jesus has done, he is present in our midst. The bread which is broken refers explicitly to Jesus' life and death, the wine points to his life force, to his strength of mind and spirit, to his blood; in the Bible 'blood' means life force.

At the celebration of the Eucharist the whole world is present on the table. People's labour, the violence between men and women, induced by both individual persons and groups, the lack of food, usually the outcome of unjust economic relations, the poisoned environment, the desire of every person to be seen and be recognised, – all this comes to the table even when it is not mentioned explicitly.

The history of the Jewish people, with its exodus from the 'house of slavery', the long journey through the desert and the cry for food and drink, the exile and return to the promised land, but also the holocaust, are on the table, and so is the life story of the Jew Jesus, his death and resurrection, on the whole history of those who have tried to follow him, in their good and bad moments. The fact that people keep celebrating the Eucharist is a token of their hope that there will be a time in which justice will be done to every person.

A meal for on the road

The Eucharist brings people together around Jesus, a victim who refused to make other people into victims. The Eucharist is a meal on the road during our lifetime. It is not the conclusion of the unification of all people or of all Christians, of the moment when God will be all in all. We are still on the way. All sorts and conditions of people can join in the Eucharist if and when they share the intention of its ritual. It is a table which is open also for people from different religious traditions. In and through the celebration we are made into a community. This common celebration anticipates what the Bible calls the 'kingdom of God' and ultimately the 'new heaven and new earth, in which God will be all in all.

The Eucharist as a Sacrifice

We realize that the interpretation and appraisal of the Eucharist by many Catholics in The Netherlands differs from that by church authority in Rome. The emphasis we lay on its character of a (ritual) common meal is seen as a threat by the leadership of the church. A typical example of this view is the Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* which Cardinal Francis Arinze, head of the Congregation for the Liturgy, published on March 25 of 2004, in close cooperation with the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, then headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI on April 19, 2005.

Number 38 of this instruction reads as follows in the official English version: 'The constant teaching of the Church on the nature of the Eucharist not only as a meal, but also and pre-eminently as a Sacrifice, is therefore rightly understood to be one of the principal keys to the full participation of all the faithful in so great a Sacrament. For when stripped of its sacrificial meaning, the mystery is understood as if its meaning and importance were simply that of a fraternal banquet'.

The rulings contained in the instruction is aimed at excluding as much as possible any element which could suggest that the Eucharist has the shape of a common meal. What constitutes the 'sacrifice' in the Eucharist remains unclear in the instruction. Our view is that Jesus' surrender of himself in his life and death may be called a 'sacrifice'. This sacrifice is made present in the Eucharist in the shape of a common meal and the faithful who share in it join Jesus' act of sacrifice. This is what we described as 'sharing' and surrendering oneself.

The preference of the instruction for the term sacrifice is connected with a onesided emphasis on the 'vertical' character of the Eucharist. This presupposes an image from the philosophy of the ancient world: everything that is 'good' descends in varying degrees from top to bottom, in this case via the priest as representative of Jesus, until it reaches the faithful. The faithful respond to this downward movement by a movement ascending in degrees also – through the priest – which is called 'sacrifice'.

The selection of this image makes it easier to defend a view of ministry in which the leadership in a community is indeed called a 'service', but those who provide this service are in fact always put on a higher level than their fellow faithful and in this way have control over them. Though in theory the Eucharist is said to be the centre of the church's liturgy, celebrating it is in fact made dependent on the person presiding at it, which in fact makes ordination the most important sacrament.

As we see it the Eucharist is a sharing of bread and wine by brothers and sisters, in which Jesus is in our midst.

IV. Ministers in the church

The function of leadership is of great importance for every church community, as it is one of the channels through which the narrative of Jesus can be kept alive in it. Therefore the community of the faithful has the right to be assisted by functionaries who can keep it going and assure its inspiration, as witnesses to the Gospel they can identify with. In the same way as they have the right to celebrate the Eucharist as a sacrament of solidarity and union with Jesus and with each other.

From the perspective of the Bible and of theology one cannot speak of one form of ministry in the church as the only possible or legitimate one. Reflection on church history therefore does not provide ready-made answers to the problems surrounding ministry in our days, but they do suggest alternatives which are worth thinking about.

Various Phases in History

Particularly during the first millennium the shape of the ministry in the church varied considerably, parallel to the various cultural patterns and developments in Palestine, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome and Egypt.

In the early church all members of church communities are equal on the basis of their baptism: 'For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 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' (Galatians 3, 27f.). Every baptized person with her of his own talents and gifts ('charisms') is at the service of the community of equal members.

In the richly varied community life of the early church there were, of course, particular members who initiated and directed the missionary, catechetical, prophetic, liturgical and the many other activities by which Christians in common responsibility had their faith build up the community. The function of the leadership is felt to be necessary for building up the church in continuity with the tradition of the apostles and in order to safeguard their legacy, namely the Gospel. The communities themselves chose and 'called' their leaders from their own midst on the basis of their personal qualifications as leaders. Pope Leo the Great (440-461) stated: 'He who has to lead all, should be chosen by all'. In the early church such leaders were given a special place (were 'ordained') in the whole order or range of the community's ministries and activities. As a result it was only natural that they also presided in the celebrations of the Eucharist.

After the first generation of Jesus' followers the services in the various communities gradually tended to be regulated according to more uniform patterns. At the same time it was also felt that the allocation of the leaders in the community should be accompanied by a liturgical celebration. In such a service the laying on of hands by leaders of neighbouring communities creatively expressed the collegiality among the local church communities.

Eucharist and Celibacy

In the first ten centuries neither the Eastern nor the Western churches had any intention of making celibacy, being unmarried, a condition for entering church leadership. Both married and unmarried were welcome to take it on. At the end of the 4th century canon law - in line with cultural assumptions during this period - adopted a rule of (sexual) continence as a liturgical law: the prohibition of sexual intercourse during the night preceding eucharistic communion, something which had already been practiced for some time. When, at the end of the 4th century, it became usual in the Western church to celebrate the Eucharist on a daily basis, this meant an almost permanent continence for married priests. At this moment the Western church in fact prescribed continence in a law, the law of continence.

After Christianity in the 4th century had become the official religion instead of a persecuted religion, its clergy received the status of 'officials' and more and more acted accordingly. The function which at first was understood as a form of service then was expressed in terms of power and authority: power of ordination, of jurisdiction. The service of leadership became the power of an official. The question 'who can be a leader in the church?' is changed into: 'who is allowed to be a leader?'. A process of clericalization sets in. The faithful - from now on: 'laypeople' - change from subjects of faith inspired by the Spirit into objects of priestly pastoral care. The priesthood is narrowed down to presiding at the Eucharist and the faith community to a congregation celebrating the liturgy.

At The Second Lateran Council in 1139 the law of continence which had been in force for priests since the 4th century was replaced by the law of priestly celibacy. This law of celibacy was intended as a drastic instrument to at last make certain that the law of continence, which had been observed with only relative success in spite of sanctions and economic penalties, would be adopted effectively. Since then the priesthood is an invalidating impediment for marriage; the Code of Canon Law calls ordination an invalidating impediment (can. 1087), only unmarried persons can become a priest, and only unmarried celibate men are allowed to preside at the Eucharist. In 1215 The Fourth Lateran Council states explicitly that only validly ordained priests can validly pronounce the 'words of consecration'.

Since the 17th century Jesus' priesthood was no longer based on his humanity, but on his divinity. This means that priests in the church from now on share in the divine power. Priests no longer are given a function ('ordained') by the faith community in order to maintain and continue in it the narrative and the imitation of Jesus, but are now 'consecrated' by the bishop in order to be able to celebrate the Eucharist. The church becomes a hierarchical society, a church from the top downwards, like a pyramid, the top being in heaven, from which God's grace through the hierarchy can flow downwards in a broad stream, – as has been explained at greater length in our section 'what is church?'

The Second Vatican Council has fundamentally changed this view of the church. After an extensive and penetrating discussion it decided to let a chapter on the people of God precede the chapter on the hierarchy in the proposed constitution on the church. In the wake of this change the hierarchy is said to be at the service of God's people. In fact, the pyramid put upside down.

How to continue?

When there is a shift of the predominant image of humankind and of the world, when there are socio-economic changes and a new socio-cultural awareness manifests itself, the church order as it has developed historically may in fact contradict and block elements it intended to safeguard in earlier days: building up a christian community. One may wonder whether and in how far certain forms and rules which made sense and were relevant and therefore realistic in past times, still are sensible and realistic in our own time, or perhaps, on the contrary, counterproductive.

When saying this we refer specifically to the canon which prohibits non-celibate men to be invested with full leadership and to the law which excludes women from the office of leadership. Historically an outdated philosophy of humankind and an antiquated view of sexuality are at the origin of both laws. They are ecclesiastical and therefore human laws, not divine legislation.

In his opening speech at the Second Vatican Council Pope John XXIII called on the church to open its windows to the world. A church which wants to be up to date should have the courage and take the liberty to abolish laws that stifle the vitality of church communities and the celebration of the Eucharist in many places. Often before in the past 'illegal' practices at the grassroots have convinced church authority that it is sensible and meaningful to change the existing legislation. New experiments can be valuable pointers towards changes in the shape of the church which are adapted to our time. Is it true to say that in our Western society unmarried people are per se more suitable to be leaders of a faith community than married ones? And that in our Western cultural pattern men are per se more suitable to lead and inspire a christian community than women are? Our answer, and that of very many fellow faithful, to both questions is an unequivocal 'no'.

The present shortage of priests is frankly unnecessary and therefore unreal. In many present-day parishes men and women are active in a heartwarming and stimulating way as persons who initiate and inspire communities in a way adapted to our time, as christians people can identify with. Many members of these communities would have every confidence to 'ordain' them as their official leaders and their official ministers to preside in the liturgical celebrations. For such a function we think first of all of the pastoral workers, male and female, who have been officially appointed, but also of the many volunteers. These men and women are at the heart of their local community, often more so, in fact, than the ordained priests. These priests have been appointed – often in more than one parish – to preside at sacramental celebrations, mainly the Eucharist. Inevitably, to their own frustration and discouragement, they become more and more 'strangers' for the faithful they celebrate for in the church.

Criteria for Leaders in the Church

Which criteria should be used at the selection of community leaders?

- Those who preside in local celebrations should be inspired members of the community in question. Whether they be men or women, homo- or heterosexual, married or unmarried is irrelevant. Of interest is whether or not their faith attitude is stimulating and inspiring.
- They also should have expertise, that is know how to use the Scriptures and the material from Christian traditions, in order to be able to preach.
- They should allow the local community to assess their liturgical creativity.

- It is also important that they have a flexible talent for organisation, with an eye for the chances there are to continue what takes place in the community.

An Urgent Plea

With some emphasis we urge our faith communities, the parishes, to realize what is at stake in the present emergency situation of the shortage of ordained celibate priests and to take – and to be allowed to take – the extent of freedom which is theologically justified to choose their own leader or team of leaders from their own midst.

On the basis of the priority of the 'people of God' over the hierarchy – stated explicitly during the Second Vatican Council – a diocesan bishop may be expected to confirm such a choice after due consultation by the laying on of hands. If a bishop should refuse such a confirmation or 'ordination' on the basis of arguments not involving the essence of the Eucharist, such as obligatory celibacy, parishes may be confident that they are able to celebrate a real and genuine Eucharist when they are together in prayer and share bread and wine.

We urge parishes to act in this way with a great amount of self-confidence and courage. It is to be hoped that, stimulated also by such a relatively new practice, bishops may in the future live up to their commitment to serve and eventually confirm the leaders of local communities in their office.

In conclusion we would like to emphasize once more that our argument is based on statements of the Second Vatican Council and on publications of professional theologians and pastoral experts which have appeared since this council. We present a selection from it below.

The Swiss pastor Kurt Marti, who has become known for his sharp, witty and very true statements, once wrote:
Where does it all end
if everyone says where does it all end
and no one tries to find out
where it would all end if we went on.

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