

TALK ON PRIESTHOOD AND MODERNITY

I am aware as I begin speaking that I live in a time or period of transition in our Church. The certainties of yesteryear – the 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s, say – are gone. We no longer think that the Catholic Church alone is the one true Church and the rest – Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians etc. – are misguided, somehow don't count, and must learn from us. Under Pope Francis that kind of attitude has gone. We can learn from others. We are more humble, less self-assured. Change is no longer a thing to be afraid of. We have become aware of the changes in our own history. There are those who refuse to change and who condemn Pope Francis and this notion of synodality which he has introduced. It is because we today must attempt to make our Church more relevant, more helpful to people in our world, that I shall offer my thoughts on priesthood and advocate certain changes that would make priests more responsive to the actual needs of people today. As it happens, the number of priests in our Church is steadily dwindling and priests are also ageing. The forecasts about the number of priests in the future is frightening. But my argument is not about numbers or ageing but about relevance and purpose.

Let us begin with the notion of celibacy. There was an interesting letter in the Tablet recently in which the writer recounted being examined by the celebrated Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan who asked him 'Cur celibatio?' – why celibacy? The author said he replied with a theological and spiritual defence of celibacy. Lonergan disagreed and said it was 'res economica' – it was about money. (Exams at the Gregorian university at that time were oral encounters across the table from each other). There were practical advantages in favour of celibacy – it made transferring a priest from one parish to another quite easy; there was no wife to consult, no children's education to bother about and, in most cases, no mortgage to re-negotiate. But the epistles to Timothy and Titus advise presbyters to be faithful to one wife (1 Timothy 3: 2 and Titus 1: 6). The first thing we have to come to terms with today is that for more than the first Christian millennium priests, bishops and Popes married and had children. In fact, it was not until around 1130 AD THAT A POWERFUL Pope Innocent III imposed celibacy as a condition for ordination. He wrote: 'Who does not know that conjugal intercourse is never committed without itching of the flesh and heat and foul concupiscence whence the conceived seeds are befouled and corrupted?' THESE SENTIMENTS were repeated by the First and second Lateran Councils, and celibacy became mandatory in the Western Church from the twelfth century onwards. Today we have to ask if celibacy has passed its relevance, especially when we read the words in the Vatican II document 'Gaudium et Spes' which says in section 49: 'The love (of the spouses) is uniquely expressed and perfected through the marital act. The actions within marriage by which couples are united intimately and chastely are noble and worthy ones.' – a complete reversal of the words of Pope Innocent. Celibacy is certainly a major reason for priests leaving the priesthood and a reason for the large number of homosexuals in the ranks of our clergy –

which Donald Cozzens, a priest for more than 40 years but also a qualified psychologist and seminary rector considered to be disproportionate.

I think it helps to go back to the early church when decisions were taken on the best way forward for the church. There we do not find any arguments in favour of celibacy. Rather in the epistles to Timothy and Titus we find presbyters being urged to be faithful to one wife – the expectation was that, like most men, they would marry. The modern English word ‘priest’, like the German and Dutch word ‘priester’, the French ‘pretre’, the Italian ‘prete’ and the Spanish ‘presbitero’ all derive from the Greek word ‘presbyteros’ which is the comparative form of the word ‘presbys’ meaning ‘old’ and hence ‘presbyteros’ simply means ‘older’. The usual translation of “presbyters’ in both the Old and the New Testaments is ‘elders’; elders were a distinct group of advisers who were considered to have authority in religious affairs. In the Christian era ‘presbyteroi’ (plural) were one of three groups identified as authorities in the Christian religion. The other two were ‘episcopoi’ and ‘diakonoi’ – bishops and deacons. The role of these three was to serve the needs of the faithful, the baptised. The role of episcopoi was to oversee – epi – scopoi – and keep the faithful free from error. The funny thing is that the roles of presbyteroi and episcopoi were often not clearly demarcated. Paul begins to talk about what he thinks the qualities and values of presbyteroi should be and before we know it he is talking about the qualities we should find in a bishop. In fact, scripture scholar Raymond Brown speaks about a kind of amalgam, a ‘presbyteros-episcopos’, whose role or function was to teach and preach and keep the baptised faithful free from error.

I use the word ‘function’ advisedly for there is a tendency to regard priests and bishops as Sacred Persons. Along with Herbert Haag, at one time president of the German Catholic biblical association, I reject that tendency. According to Haag, the most serious misrepresentation of the biblical evidence about priesthood was the transference of biblical statements about Israelite and Jewish priesthood to the priesthood of the Christian Church. He argues that this was completely contrary to the intentions of Jesus who rejected the Jewish Temple priesthood vehemently. Jesus maintained a considerable distance from the priests of the Temple. When he announces that he will rebuild the destroyed Temple in three days, this can only mean the absolute end of the Jerusalem Temple and of Temple worship. In place of the Temple, Jesus refers to his own body (Jn 2: 21), meaning that from then on God would be present among his people in and through Jesus. We should also recall the cleansing of the Temple, when Jesus expelled the animal sellers and money-changers from the Temple, an episode reported in all four gospels. Jesus’s action turned the Temple priests into his arch enemies and it is for this reason that the High Priest features so prominently in the passion narrative (Mk 14: 1, and parallels). Jesus is condemned to death by the Sanhedrin which is headed by the High Priest. It is the chief priests who ask Pilate that a guard be put on his grave (Mt 27: 62) and who gave the soldiers money to say that his disciples had stolen Jesus’ body (Mt 28: 11-15).

So much for celibacy which has given us a male celibate priesthood. But what about women in the NT? We know that there is a demand for women to be given more decision-making roles in our Church and it is little wonder when we see the number of positive references to women there are in the NT. For example, in chapter 16 of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, we read: 'I commend our sister Phoebe to you; she has been a deacon of the church at Cenchrae' and 'a good friend to many, myself included'. He goes on to add: 'My greetings also to Prisca and Aquila who worked at my side in the service of Christ Jesus', going on to add he had good reason to be grateful to them as indeed do 'all the churches of the Gentiles' (Rom 16: 4). What is more, in his reference to Prisca and Aquila Paul adds: 'My greetings also to the congregation that meets at their house,' a statement that strongly suggests that Prisca and Aquila presided at the Eucharistic celebrations held at their house since, according to Schillebeeckx, the practice in the early church was for the owners to preside at the Eucharistic services held in their homes. In the same chapter of Romans, Paul extends greetings to Andronicus and Junia, who, he said, were held in high esteem among the apostles. This is an interesting pairing since Andronicus is a man's name and Junia is a woman's name and Paul makes no distinction between the two. In 1 Corinthians 1: 11, Paul refers to 'Chloe's people' in a way that suggests that Chloe is the leader of a local Christian household or community. Other examples in Paul's writings could be cited but suffice it to say that in the highly patriarchal society of Judaism at his time Jesus declared, 'You are all brothers and sisters alike.' (Mt. 23 : 8-9) In 1 Peter 5- 9, the Church is referred to as 'the brotherhood throughout the world' and, as we have noted, the early Christians referred to each other as 'brother' and 'sister'.

In light of the above it is not surprising that early Christian worship was completely different from Jewish worship. Acts describes how Jesus' religion was developed into a universal religion by dispensing with animal sacrifice, circumcision and the Jewish dietary laws. Christian worship took place in profane and not sacred places. The newborn community continued to pray in the Temple but they also held their celebratory meals in 'this house or that', and did so with great joy and happiness (Acts 2: 46). The break with Judaism is explained in the Epistle to the Hebrews which makes clear that in the Christian church there is only one priesthood, that of Christ himself, and that this priesthood supersedes the priesthood of the Old Testament. The New Testament uses the sacral word 'hiereus', meaning 'priest', when referring to Jesus. 'Hiereus' is sacral because it refers to someone who is engaged with 'to hieron', meaning 'the sacred'. It is a significant word since it refers exclusively to Jesus and is never used with reference to any other minister or office-holder in the early Church. But this exclusive term is also very inclusive for when the NT speaks of the baptised faithful being a 'holy priesthood' or a 'royal priesthood' (1 Pet. 2: 5 and 2: 9) the word used is 'hierateuma', the collective priesthood. The fact that the word 'hiereus' is used to refer to Jesus and not to any other church minister or office-holder while the faithful are termed a 'hierateuma', a collective priesthood, indicates a very important point: namely, that the primary relationship in the Church is not that between Jesus and Church ministers – priests, bishops, cardinals and the Pope – but between Jesus and the baptised faithful. The

various ministries are there to support, nourish and guide this primary relationship between Jesus, the good Shepherd, and his flock. Priesthood remains a high calling, but titles such as 'pope', 'bishop', 'priest' (as this is ordinarily used) are pastoral and not sacral terms. They relate to functional ministries within the church and their function is to support and nourish the faithful. Ministries are not an end in themselves but are there to help and serve the baptised faithful, who are the intended beneficiaries of Jesus' work of salvation.

I hope to have shown in this talk that the history of the early Church – the earliest church which existed before ordination was introduced – provides no solid grounds for excluding women from what today we term 'priesthood' and, indeed, provides good reasons for including women, who clearly played an important and indispensable role in supporting and nourishing the faith of the early church. I hope also to have shown that the fact that we have ended up with a male-clerical dominated church is an accident of history based on the mistaken modelling of the Christian priesthood on that of Judaism. As Herbert Haag has argued, 'all ministries, including that of bishop, were established by the Church, and what the Church has made by its decisions and actions, the Church can abolish, change, reform or renew.' So if the Church decided, women could be ordained priests and, I would argue, they would enrich the service of the faithful with their inherent gifts. There is nothing special about men that makes them better than women as servants and supporters of the faithful.

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(2,043 words)