

WHY "BROTHERS" AND NOT "FATHERS"

Lay Religious for an Ecclesial Mission (3/9)

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c. The continuing mythologization of the priest: rights and privileges

St Augustine (ob 430), in spite of his being a bishop, stresses the common dignity of all Christians: "...a Christian with you, a bishop for you"; "...a member of the flock with you beneath the crook of the only shepherd"; "...a sinner with you". Conversely, St John Chrysostom (ob 407) has some frankly unrepresentable claims such as when he says that there is as great a difference between the brutish animals and men with the power of reason as there is between the shepherd and the sheep in the Church.

Clerics went on canonizing themselves more and more. They saw themselves as men chosen from among the people and set apart (just as the priests of the Jews and the pagans). St Isidore of Seville (ob 636), who had such great influence, adopted the Roman conception of the priest and presented it as Christian: the priest is he who dispenses the sacred, consecrates and sanctifies; he is like the pontiff (a person who guards a bridge) between God and humanity. Clerics centered their attentions more on cultural than on pastoral and missionary affairs. Still later, in the age of the scholastics, the priest was seen more as a representative of Christ than as president of the ecclesial community.

Gradually the clergy was transformed into a privileged class, as much within the Church as in society at large. They had their own clerical career ladder with its various steps. They formed a body which enjoyed a social status recognized by the Roman state itself. Bit by bit they accumulated rights and privileges (exemption from taxes, military service and other civic duties; donations, legacies, riches...). More and more they became mirror images of the civil authorities and Roman functionaries and by the same token distanced themselves further and further from the people.

They also began to use distinctive external markers which had been forbidden formerly (clerical clothing, the tonsure, etc...). In the sixth century special liturgical vestments appeared (aping Roman styles as opposed to the boorish barbarian style of dressing). Architecture itself was clericalized; the altar now was not situated in the center of the assembly, surrounded by all, but in the sanctuary, removed

from the congregation. (In Spain another stage of separation was added: the choir of canons.) The growing wealth of the Church permitted its ministers to make a living from the altar with no need for a secular employment (like Paul, for example), still another separation from the people. The same can be said of celibacy (which also boasts a powerful economic motivation). In summary, the clergy suffered a process of segregation and accommodation which perdures to the present.

To continue, Latin and education became more and more the privilege of the clergy and the monks. However, the clergy concentrated in large measure on the conduct of liturgy and on the civil and ecclesiastical administration of the parish, diverting attention from the ministry of preaching and evangelization. The champions of education and of the second evangelization of the continent were above all the monks. The clergy itself was divided between high and low according to their respective connections with the nobility or with the servants and tenant farmers of feudal lords. And it could not be otherwise! In all this, economic considerations had a very great and less than glorious part to play, surely.

While all these developments were taking place very important things were becoming blurred: that the entire community is priestly; that the sacraments are always the act of the ecclesial community; and that the ministers do not enjoy the sole right of access to the Spirit.

Contrary to these truths, the centrality of the minister in the sacraments was emphasized. The priest was transformed into a specially consecrated person who acts in the name of Christ and on behalf of the faithful. There is a quantum leap, then, from the ministerial to the personal, to power and social position. For example, the invocation to the Holy Spirit (epiclesis) to make the eucharistic consecration efficacious is displaced by prayers which seem to make the priest the consecrator par excellence. Something similar happens in the sacrament of reconciliation (formulas in which the priest, representative of the Church, is the one who absolves, even though we all know that no human person can forgive sin). The cleric seems to be a super-Christian, the only one truly consecrated, one who has personal rights and powers, at the edge of the Christian community. The Augustan doctrine of the indelible character of the priesthood and a certain "theology" about the efficacy "ex opere operato" of the sacraments reinforce this entire vision of things. Later still, the belief took root that the texts of the Mass were for the exclusive use of the priest. There were also problems with and ultimately prohibitions against the use of the vernacular in the Mass and in the reading of the Bible. As a result the people were alienated from the liturgy and gave themselves over to private devotions.

In more recent times, the French school of spirituality (Bérulle...) darkened still more the lines already drawn. It easily transferred to the priest the prerogatives of Christ. It insisted that the priest is another Christ (contrary to all available evidence, of course). It propounded that the intercession of the priest is superior to that of the Virgin Mary and of the angels. ("The very perfection of the angels is inferior to ours. We are called to something higher.") All this took place at the cost, evidently, of the priesthood of all Christians. This school sees the ministerial priesthood as the most perfect state, superior even to the religious life because the priest is the religious of the Incarnate Word. It emphasizes

izes the sacrificial character of the priesthood but neglects its ecclesial and communal character. Far from that, it stresses the interior and even the physical separation of the priest from the community.

d. "The Church is its priests!"

Little by little the Church continued to identify itself with its clergy, with the hierarchy. For example: "The Holy Church which is constituted principally by its priests...." (Gregory VI, ob 1046) Beginning with Gregory VII this whole tendency is systematized and reinforced. In the Decree of Gratian (a canonical collection of the monk Gratian, circa 1140) it is clearly stated that there are two kinds of Christian: those who give themselves over to prayer (priests and monks) and the laity, who occupy themselves with temporal pursuits. The former, those who renounce the world, are the more courageous; the secular life, on the other hand is seen as a concession to human weakness.

Trent (in its pastoral decrees) and the Roman Catechism defend the importance of the priesthood of the faithful. But St Robert Bellarmine (ob 1621), cardinal, archbishop and Doctor of the Church, is quite explicit: "The laity are plebeians and commoners, as it were, from whom no ecclesiastical function is required. Clerics, on the other hand, are the Lord's portion and inheritance; they are consecrated to divine worship and have received a divine command to promote religion and sacred things." Attitudes like this bring to perfection the monopoly of the clergy on the life of the Church. (This clericalization exists even today when it is said, for example, "the Church says, the Church teaches, orders, does...". In reality, the body that says, teaches or orders is usually the hierarchy and not the whole Church, which is generally not even consulted.)

e. Creeping monopoly

The Church was passing from diversity to the professionalization of its ministers. Thus there arose an ecclesiastical career (which was completely developed from the sixth century onwards) similar to the civil career ladder. The Christian minister became a functionary of the Church. His great temptation: to take on responsibilities and ministries for monetary rather than pastoral reasons, as in the case of benefices, for example. There is also the danger of domination and authoritarianism. From the fourth century onwards, reduction to the lay state becomes the punishment most feared by a cleric (supposing that an excommunication would be revoked). When clerics became functionaries of the Church, it is true that there were better training and formation available to them. But also all other ministries were eclipsed. There was no complementarity but a gradation of powers that were given only by delegation. It was not the community that recognized and accepted a charism; it was the hierarchy which consecrated ministers and granted responsibility for a particular ministry.

This growing clericalization or monopoly had two dimensions:

- 1) The assumption by the clergy of activities which were formerly carried out by the laity;
- 2) A growing control over the laity and their activities. The end result has been fearful: the clergy alone have re-

sponsibility for the Church, as Bellarmine said with horrifying clarity.

Here is a short list of some clerical forays into foreign territory, that is to say, into what is properly the business of the laity.

– Minor orders have been the clerical version of duties which laypeople formerly performed. It even came to the point of asserting that Christ himself had exercised and instituted them.

– Choice of Ministers: Leo the Great (ob 461) said: "He who is placed at the head of all must be chosen by all." But such election came to be and remains in the hands of the clergy.

– The celebrant of the Eucharist: In the early Church it was the entire community which celebrated the Eucharist; that is why plural forms were used. But little by little the clergy made themselves the almost exclusive protagonists (use of singular forms, prayers said sotto voce, the growing distance between the altar and the laity...; laypersons could no longer distribute holy communion, something that from the beginning they used to do).

In short, even today, the liturgical ceremonial continues to send out, subliminally but very powerfully, a quite strong message about the superiority of some and the inferiority of others in the Church.

– Prophecy: The role of prophet, which was a function of the laity, was also clericalized to such an extent that the bishops were looked upon as the born successors of the prophets. Unfortunately, in this way two charisms were joined in a single person (those of apostle and prophet). They were separated in the New Testament and, for the well being of the Church, they should be dialectically opposed to each other. The same thing happened, finally, in the Old Testament: the religion of law was imposed upon the prophets; the priests and rabbis won the shuffle and ended up with the power of interpreting the law.

– Preaching too became solely the occupation of the clergy. St Leo the Great strictly forbade monks and laity to preach, even if they had adequate preparation. In the West, we had to wait until the second millenium for a resurgence of the laity's claims in regard to preaching, catechesis and theology. The impediments were enormous. Ignatius of Loyola, for example, had difficulties with the Inquisition because he used to preach while still a layman.

– Teaching also became a clerical monopoly in spite of the importance once enjoyed by Christian teachers and intellectuals, who, like their Jewish counterparts, were laypersons versed in the Scriptures and gifted with a special ability to argue the case for Christianity, as much with the Jews as with pagans hostile to Christianity. Lay theologians included Justinian, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Origen. (6)

– Matrimony: finally--and this is the very limit!--even the most lay of all the sacraments, matrimony, was clericalized, as though the priest were the minister ("I join you in the name of the Father,...") instead of a simple official witness for the Church. It is understood that the ministers are the spouses themselves.

(6) Cf. Volume I of M. Sauvage, *Catequesis y laicado. Participación de la laity in the ministry of the Divine Word and the mission in the Church of the lay religious educator*. 2 volumes, Instituto San Pío X, Salamanca, 1963.