

TEAM MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH

NEW TRENDS IN PASTORAL CARE

By

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The concept and praxis of team-shared-pastoral-ministry in the Church is firmly rooted in tradition. History bears witness to the existence in the early christian communities of leading groups of presbyters who, gathered around their bishop, formed a cohesive unit and ministered to the community of the faithful as a body. Though the origin, nature and functions of the old **presbyterium** continue to puzzle contemporary scholars, the corporate action of the presbyters stand out as the main feature of the priestly ministry of that era.

The old **presbyterium**, characterized by a common authority, the plurality of members and a corporate nature, lost most of its pristine meaning and even the sense of unity among its members but it refused obstinately to die. Remnants of such types of corporate structures can still be found in existing institutions such as cathedral chapters, the college of cardinals, the diocesan curia and synod, etc., which for centuries have carried on a life more symbolic than active.¹

Vatican II, moreover, made a vigorous effort to restore the communitarian concept of the old **presbyterium** and its corporate form of ministry. Thus, though the Council's Decrees refrained from using explicitly the term "college of priests", the various types of priestly ministry are constantly viewed as a communitarian undertaking. Such view ensues as a necessary corollary from the corporate nature of the priesthood itself which in turn stems from the sacramental character of the priestly ordination and finds its concrete expression in some form of community life through bonds of charity, prayer and other forms of cooperation.

"Priests by virtue of their ordination to the priesthood are united among themselves in an intimate sacramental brotherhood".

¹ Barberena, Tomás G., Collegiality at Diocesan Level; The Western Presbyterate. *Concilium*, Oct. 1965, pp. 13-18.

"Each one, therefore, is united in special bonds of apostolic charity, ministry and brotherhood with the other members of this priesthood. This has been manifested from ancient times in the liturgy when the priests present at an ordination are invited to impose the hands together with the ordaining bishop on the new candidate, and with united hearts concelebrate the sacred Eucharist. Each and every priest, therefore, is united with his fellow priests in a bond of charity, prayer and total cooperation".

"In order that priests may find mutual assistance in the development of their intellectual and spiritual life, that they may be able to cooperate more effectively in their ministry and may be saved from the dangers of loneliness that may arise, it is necessary that some kind of common life or some sharing of common life be encouraged among priests. This, however, may take many forms, according to different personal or pastoral needs, such as living together where this is possible, or having a common table or at least by frequent and periodic meetings".²

The foregoing texts underscore the need to revive and invigorate among the clergy of today the communitarian spirit and praxis of the ancient *presbyterium*. A technical formula, however, had to be found to adapt the various modes of pastoral ministry and the communitarian meaning of the old *presbyterium* to the present day milieu. This is precisely what the on-going revision of Church law has lately accomplished with the explicit formulation of the juridical structure of a new form of priestly mission, the so-called *team-ministry* or *shared-pastoral-ministry*.³

THE TEAM OR EQUIPE

The on-going revision of Church law, while retaining in principle the territorial structure of the parish, envisages the possibility of a parish or several parishes being entrusted to a group of priests who will collectively or corporately discharge the office of parish priest under the leadership of a Moderator or Director. In case of limited clerical manpower the pastoral team, always headed by a priest, could even include non-ordained or lay members. This latest form of ministry has been devised to cater for the pastoral needs of some peculiar parish or group of parishes and thus should not be viewed as a substitute of the traditional parish but rather as its

² Vatican II: *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, n. 8.

³ *Communicationes*, vol. 8, (1976), pp. 29-31; Pontificia Commissio Codici Juris Canonici Recognoscendo: *Schema Canonum Libri II. De Populo Dei*, cc. 349, 2; 374-376. Hereinafter quoted as: *De Populo Dei*.

complement and extension, since the old principle one-parish-to-every-pastor still remains the rule. The implication is that the centuries old parochial system is still the preferred working model of pastoral activity and, as a consequence, team-ministry should be of limited application such as determined by the special needs of the community it purports to serve.

The team or *équipe* system is not always the best suited program for all situations. Thus the adoption of the system in a large scale should be discouraged unless its viability and practicality in a given case have been beforehand tested and established through a pilot project and study.⁴

The need for a shifting to the team or group type of ministry may arise in small as well as in large parishes. A sparsely populated community may not need the full time services of a pastor while a large parish can not be adequately attended to by one individual priest. In both such cases alternatives should be sought and found. One could possibly be the entrusting of several parishes to one pastor or to a group of priests as the case may require. In large, complex parishes at least certain ministerial activities should be carried out through shared-parochial-ministry instead of vesting all responsibility and efforts of running the unit on one man, the parish priest. Indeed the pastoral possibilities of such huge communities are so varied and so complex that the united effort of a team becomes imperative.

From the juridical viewpoint the structure of a team-administered-parish is distinct from that entrusted to and run by a moral or juridical person such as a religious community, a canonical chapter and the like. As a matter of fact the old arrangement that made it possible for a moral or juridical person to take over the role of parish priest and act as such in the running of the parish entrusted to its pastoral care,⁵ will not be henceforth feasible.⁶ The new legislation explicitly provides that the pastor always be a physical, human person.⁷ However, a parish may still be entrusted to a religious institute or community either on perpetuity or for a fixed time on condition that one priest of that community or institute be appointed and act as parish priest and not merely as a *vicarius actualis* or simple administrator of the parish under the

⁴ Cora, F. George, Team Ministry: Theological Aspects. *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, vol. 167 (1973), pp. 684-690.

⁵ *Codex Iuris Canonici*, cc. 452; 1423, 2. Hereinafter quoted as: CIC.

⁶ *Motu Proprio: Ecclesiae Sanctae*, n. 21, 1.

⁷ *Communicationes*, vol. 8 (1976), p. 25.

authority of his own superior. The parish priest in such cases will henceforth have total independence and enjoy all the faculties and privileges of parish priests in general.⁹

THE TEAM LEADER

It is beyond question that any team needs a leader, someone who is ultimately responsible for the direction, the running and eventually the very performance of the group. On this score the revised law is quite definite and admits of no exception. The pastoral team needs a Moderator as much as the parish a pastor, (CIC., c. 406, 2). As a matter of fact the team-parish does not become vacant upon expiration of the Moderator's term of office or when somehow he becomes impeded to carry on his duties, in which case the senior team-member automatically takes over and acts as Director until the bishop should appoint as new Moderator, (*De Populo Dei*, c. 372,2).

What could certainly be a debatable question on this issue is the very nature of the Moderator's role and his position within the team. Is the Moderator of the team just like anyone of his peers? Or is he the senior associate whose main concern is to maintain unity among the members? Is the Moderator there just to hear the advise of the body and then make his own decision and enforce it with or without the consent of the other members? Is he the person ultimately responsible for the running of the group or unit?

The team can not and should not be composed of mere equals as the letter and spirit of the new law will assign the Moderator certain functions and impose upon him various duties which can not, as a rule, be delegated to any member or members of the team. For instance, the Moderator personally assumes the direction and the coordination of the team's work and efforts, (*De Populo Dei*, c. 394,2). Similarly he is the man responsible for the preparation and keeping in good, proper condition the parish books, registers and other records, (*Ibidem*, cc. 369;375,3). The Moderator alone represents officially the parish and signs in its behalf all official papers and documents mostly those related with legal or juridical matters such as lawsuits, (CIC., 1649, 1653), alienation of Church property, agreements and contracts of any sort, etc., (*Ib.*, c. 375, 3). The new law also reserves to the Moderator certain functions, but allows him when opportune to share them through delegation with any

⁹ Motu Proprio: *Ecclēsiæ Sanctæ*, n. 33, 1.

or all team members, such as the power to assist at marriages, to dispense from the Sunday precept, to dispense or commute the obligation of fast and abstinence, etc.⁹

Neither does the new law regard the Moderator as a senior associate or partner whose only and specific function is to preserve the unity of the team. As Card. Suenens puts it, "the problem is not primarily one of safeguarding the unity of command. It is much more profound than that. The fundamental role of the leader is to make collegiality possible. He is its guarantee. He is there primarily so that each member may be a part of the whole, and thus assume responsibility toward a common effort".¹⁰

Obviously such is the intention of the law when it clearly establishes a distinction between the senior team member that takes over as *interim* Moderator in the event of a vacancy in the leading position of the *équipe*, and the new Moderator to be appointed by the bishop in accordance with law, (*De Populo Dei*, c. 376,2).

It would be totally inaccurate, moreover, to look at the Moderator as the man who is everything in the *équipe*, the brain behind all decision making and planning, while the task of the members is limited to that of helping their leader with the implementation of his decisions and plans. The type of relationship expected to exist between the Moderator and the member-priests is not just that which can succeed in welding the team into a cohesive unit. Team ministry is a type of shared-pastoral-ministry where all the members collectively exercise the care of souls and are held responsible as a body, *in solidum*, for the duties proper to a parish priest. This is a typical case indeed of priestly collegiality at the local or parochial level. The implication being that all priests who share the responsibility of the pastoral work must get directly and personally involved in the decision-making process and be a part in the pastoral activity of the parish.

"The role of the one in charge, writes Card. Suenens, is not that of making a personal decision after taking the advice of others into account. For in that case it would still be his decision. His role is rather to make it possible, in so far as this depends upon him, for there to be a common decision, in such a way that they are solidly behind it and willing to accept all the consequences of

⁹ Pontificia Commissio Codici Iuris Canonici Recognoscendo: Schema Canonum Libri IV. *De Locis et Temporibus Sacris*, c. 43; CIC, c. 1245.

¹⁰ Suenens, Card. L. J., *Corresponsibility in the Church*, NY, 1968, p. 132.

what has been decided together. A true leader, ultimately responsible for the pastoral work of a locale, will find his place when his has succeeded in helping the others find theirs".¹¹

THE MEMBERS OF THE TEAM

The parochial team is not fashioned out of a group of parish priests who, through a common understanding, band together in order to run jointly their individual parishes. On the contrary, the team is made up of individual priests who agree to form the *équipe* and join forces to effectively exercise the pastoral ministry of a parish under the leadership of a Moderator. The presence of the Moderator in the team should not serve as a reminder of the often strained relations between pastors and their assistants or curates, when the parish priest makes the decision and the curate assists him in the implementation of the plans without being directly responsible for the running of the parish. In the *équipe* the relationship that should bind the team leader with the members is that of associates in a common undertaking. Since priestly ministry is a joint responsibility- of the team all its members must be directly and personally involved in the pastoral management and work of the parish. Yet total integration of the individual member into the parish life and ministry can not be attained unless he knows the pastoral objectives and the means conducive thereto.

On the other hand, since the team members are collectively bound to exercise the ministry of the parish entrusted to the care of the group, their qualifications for the job, the duties and obligations imposed on every member thereof shall be those of a parish priest, (*De Populo Dei*, cc. 354;374,1; 362,363,375).

Only the bishop has the right to nominate the team members and to appoint the Moderator or Director. In making the appointment the bishop should take into account the pastoral needs of a particular parish or group of parishes whose pastorship is to be entrusted to the *équipe*. To do this more effectively he is obliged to consult the dean or vicar forane and he may also, when and where opportune, be advised by other priests and even lay persons of the locality, (*Ib.*, c., 356,2). Candidates to the office should prove their fitness through an examination after a course of study, unless in a particular case the suitability of the person may be established otherwise, (*Ib.*, c., 359,2). The appointments should generally be for

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

an indefinite period of time, though with the approval of the Bishops' Conference, a diocesan bishop may appoint team members for a definite time, say five years, (*Ib.*, c. 355).

As a general rule, all the priests in the team are collectively responsible for the duties proper to every parish priest, viz.: to teach, to sanctify and to lead the flock, (*Ib.*, cc. 362,375). In practice, however, some specific duties such as the obligation of residence and the *Missa pro populo*, etc., will be apportioned among the members through team consultation under the direction of the Moderator, (*Ib.*, cc. 367,368,375).

Any member of the team may cease from office upon removal, transfer, resignation duly accepted by the bishop, or by lapse of time when the appointment was for a fixed term. In the future, any team member, like any other pastor, will be subject to forcible retirement upon reaching the age of seventy five, (*Ib.*, cc. 370,376).

The team ministry presently in its experimental stage is hoped to evolve into a truly juridical structure. But beyond the juridical readjustments therefor, important though they may be, and the benefits hoped for from this new system of pastoral action, team ministry offers immense possibilities in both the material and the spiritual realms for both the pastors and the flock. To quote one authority: "Friendship between the priests and the mutual support that they can give to one another are inestimable graces for the priests themselves and for their apostolic activities. The isolation which the ecclesiastical celibacy entails should, no doubt, be balanced by a strong interior life and genuine ascetism, but it should also be lived out within an atmosphere of affectionate and brotherly communion which grows with the passage of years because of an intimate sharing of a common ideal with others. We must resolutely live behind the era of individualism and isolation, and develop those things which lead to a sense of community".¹²

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 133.