

THEOLOGICAL METHOD AND THE NATURE OF MINISTRY

This paper falls into two parts. The first treats of the nature of ministry. The second deals with theological methodology from the very restricted viewpoint of its relationship to the exercise of ministry in the Church.

THE NATURE OF MINISTRY

The ministry,¹ as we conceive it, is basically that unifying body of men consecrated to represent Jesus Christ in His universal activity in the world in general and especially in the visible Church. In this short paper it will be impossible to defend this conception of the ministry.² What we can do is to indicate by a series of statements its implications and, indirectly, the manner in which it summarizes and unifies traditional assertions about the ministry.

First of all, this notion implies the universal saving activity of Jesus Christ. During His earthly lifetime Christ consecrated His own

¹ We are treating of ministry in general and not simply of the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church.

² While we cannot defend this concept of the priesthood in a paper of this length, we can indicate the methodology by which it would have to be defended. That methodology is twofold. On the one hand, it involves a study of the concrete ministry of each age and a corresponding study of the Church's understanding of the ministry in these epochs. Such a study would uncover varying notions of the ministry suitable to the common sense mentality that has prevailed in the Church from the beginning until recent times. The test of the validity of the notion that we have advanced would then be its capacity to explain by its dynamic nature all of the prior concrete understandings of ministry. Thus, for example, it would have to explain the shift in the New Testament ministry from that of an apostle and prophet to that of a teacher and scribe to that of an overseer, elder or deacon. (See the article "Ministry as Stewardship of the Tradition in the New Testament" by Richard Dillon elsewhere in these *Proceedings*.) On the other hand, the defense of the notion we have advocated would have to account for those aspects of Christianity that have continuously been associated with the ministry. On this score the notion would have to explain why the ministry has been associated with preaching the word (even to the point of infallibility in the Roman Catholic tradition), with involvement in certain needs of each epoch, etc.

humanity step by step to the Father by every activity spread out over thirty years (cf. Jn. 8:29). That continuous offering of Himself to the Father was not just for Himself but for the co-sanctification of all men (Jn. 17:9). These acts of offering that characterized His whole life were supremely expressed and climaxed by His final offering on the cross. As a result of that offering, the Father raised Him up and made Him the supreme Lord of creation that He might pour out the Spirit upon all and bring every creature to glorify the Father in Him (Phil. 2:5-11; Jn. 12:32; Jn. 19:30). From the moment of Easter the risen Christ is forever engaged in the universal activity of bringing men and all of creation to the Father (1 Cor. 15:22-28; Mk. 16:14-18). There is nothing that exists that is beyond the reach of His mediation. He is the Lord and Savior who reaches out to all creation whether in the heavens, on the earth, or under the earth.

Secondly, this notion assumes that the universal activity of Christ takes two forms. On the one hand, Christ works mysteriously in the depths of men who are unaware of His existence, who carry out His will in following the intrinsic orientation of their beings toward Him and His Father even though they are unable to pronounce His name. This may be called the anonymous activity of Christ.³ On the other hand, Christ acts in others in such a way that they are enabled to recognize Him in a more or less conscious fashion. In the light of their awareness of His unifying presence among them and of the inherent demands for expression that this recognition makes upon them, these men constitute the visible Church by appropriate communal manifestations.⁴ Thus, there follows a mutually accepted expression of faith, a common recognition of their mutual orientation to one another, to Jesus Christ, and through Him to the whole Trinity. There follows, further, an acceptance of a common mission to awaken in all other men the recognition of their relationship to God in Christ through a common ministry of service that reaches to every area of life. Thus, the whole of the visible

³ See Karl Rahner, "Die anonymen Christen" in *Schriften zur Theologie*. VI, Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1965, pp. 545-554.

⁴ See Peter Chirico, "One Church: What does it Mean?" in *Theological Studies* 28 (December 1967) pp. 659-682, especially pp. 668-680.

Church is consecrated to making visible in every aspect of creation the unified reconciling offering work of Jesus Christ. By their words, their activity and all that they are, the men of the Church are to manifest that Christ is uniting all men and creation for the glory of God. There follows, finally, a communal celebration in word and symbol of the ultimate meaning of the Church's communal faith understanding and her communal mission. This is the liturgy, the action in which the Church summarizes and expresses all that she understands and all that she does in and with Christ to the glory of the Father.

Thirdly, the ministry is that unifying body of men consecrated to represent Jesus Christ in the world and especially in the visible Church. This simple statement carries with it a number of implications.

In the first place, the ministry is constituted by a body of men. Because of the unity of Christ's action and the consequent unity of the Church called to make that action visible, the notion of an isolated minister caring for the needs of an isolated congregation cannot be held as the Christian ideal.

In the second place, the corporate ministry has as its function the representation of Christ acting in the world and especially in the Church. Thus, the ministry is not simply representative of a Christ who lives in splendid isolation in the bosom of the Father. Rather, it is representative of a Christ who lives and works in the midst of the world in continuity with His action in the past from the time of His birth to the present. It is precisely because of this representation of Christ living and acting in the world and in the Church that the minister must know His people and be capable of discerning the Spirit of Christ who dwells in them; and he must know the world in which he lives as well as the Christian past out of which the world and Church have grown. The representative function of the minister demands that he know both the richness of Christian tradition as well as the conditions of the present; for it is only by the judicious evaluation of the tension between the two that he may hope to approach the attainment of an understanding of the Christ living in the world.

In the third place, this representation of Christ is accomplished

by assuming leadership in the Christian community in the articulation of the communal faith, in the promotion of the communal mission, and in presiding at the communal celebration. In these three areas it is the minister's function, on the one hand, to detect the influence of the risen Christ in the world and the Church, and, on the other hand, to summarize and express that influence's meaning in words, in public action, and in the liturgical celebration.

In the fourth place, the goal of the activity of the ministry is the unification of the visible Church. In the degree that the ministry promotes a common understanding and articulation of faith, a common direction of mission, and a eucharistic celebration that is truly expressive of common faith and mission, to that degree will the ministry promote the visible unity of Church members. The effectiveness of ministry is to be measured by the unity in Christ it visibly achieves.

In the fifth place, the ministry is a body of men consecrated to its task. This consecration implies a twofold reality. On the one hand, there is a designation of new ministers by the Christian community in the persons of those who already represent it. On the other hand, there is the free acceptance of that designation by those who have the capacity for ministry. Thus, the Roman Catholic rite of ordination by the Bishop is simply the traditional symbolization by which the Catholic community through its chief representative recognizes and officially accepts as a new minister one who freely offers to its service his real capacity for ministry.

We may summarize what we have been saying by calling the ministry the epitome of the living Church. The ministry is to sum up and express in the light of the Christian past the meaning of the whole of Christ's activity in the world and the Church of today. Its preaching, its leadership in mission, and its presidency over liturgical celebration are just so many ways of carrying out its epitomizing ministry for the sake of uniting men as completely as possible to one another, to Christ, and through Him to the Father.⁵

⁵ The bibliography on the priesthood is immense. For a handy compilation of modern views and bibliography we suggest the March, 1969 issue of *Concilium* (Vol 3 #5). The whole issue is devoted to the Ministry. Of special value for our purposes are the articles by Walter Kasper, "A New Dogmatic

THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP
TO MINISTRY

In this section of the paper we shall treat three notions: methodology in general, theological methodology, and the relationship of ministry to theological methodology.

In general, methodology refers to a standard procedure for understanding and solving certain types of problems or for accomplishing certain types of tasks. In order that a methodology exist and be articulated at least three factors must be present: a common structure in reality, a history of encounters of subjects with that common structure, and an environmental change.

In the first place, we must be treating a class of realities or problems that possess recurring structural properties. Precisely because a given set of objects has a common relational pattern of elements and a common developmental pattern of growth, it is possible for the human subject to devise a standard procedure for the understanding and the manipulation of the individual objects in the set. Thus, a methodology for training baseball pitchers can be formulated to the extent that there are common elements involved in the art of pitching and a common developmental process by which any given individual can acquire those elements in their appropriate interrelationships.⁶

In the second place, the possibility of an explicit recognition of a methodology demands a history of occurrences of incidents of the recurring relational and developmental pattern. The human mind is

Outlook on the Priestly Ministry," pp. 12-18; and by Karl Rahner, "What is the Theological Starting Point for a definition of Priestly Ministry," pp. 43-46. The page references are to the periodical edition of *Concilium* published in England. A convenient summary of Rahner's views are available in his *Servants of the Lord*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1968. A bibliography of Rahner's work relating to the priesthood appears on pp. 217-218 of this volume.

⁶ The most generic methodology is that of the rational human subject and its development as such. The methodology according to which the human subject treats of a specific class of objects is but a further specification of this generic methodology of the human subject. For an exhaustive treatment of the latter see Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957.

not invested with *a priori* methodologies.⁷ It can only discover them in the process of its own development in encounter with the world. It can only become aware of the methodology implicit in various groupings of objects by adverting to the recurring processes by which it has approached these groupings in its experiences, its understandings, and its judgments. Only after a more or less lengthy individual and social history of encountering a given classification of objects is it possible for the individual or group to become aware of the recurring structure of the approach to these objects. And it is only at that moment of awareness that it is possible to begin the explicitation of a methodology. History and performance come first. Methodology always comes later.

In the third place, the need for a methodology ordinarily does not become pressing unless there are marked changes in the environment in which one encounters the realities in question. In a relatively static environment in which men are dealing with and solving relatively simple problems, no need for method ordinarily arises. Men soon stumble upon a procedure that happens to work and they are satisfied that it does work; they cannot be bothered with thinking about the methodological approach to what they are doing. Or they understand themselves and their activities in a concrete manner and in a given terminology that makes sense to their contemporaries; they cannot be bothered with thinking about a more basic way of understanding the realities in question based on the underlying structures of these realities and the enduring process of the human mind. Thus, a group of successful students rarely takes time out to work on a method of studying; the students are too busy achieving concrete results. Imbedded in their concrete activity is a good methodology of studying and as long as that methodology is concretely operative, there is no need to make it explicit. However, should the conditions of operation change and should the students be forced to

⁷ One can say that the human mind is potentially every conceivable methodology. Whatever it does, it is constrained to follow its own generic methodology if it would develop effectively. And when it encounters a particular class of reality, it must follow the methodology implied in the pattern of that object if it is to approach the full understanding of that object.

attack a given set of realities to be studied under entirely new conditions, either they must muddle through towards finding concrete procedures that work under the new conditions *or* they must recognize the need to make explicit the methodological principles that would have to be imbedded in any concrete approach to the study of the given realities under any conditions and then proceed to the task of implementing those principles in the new conditions.

If we now apply what we have said to theology, it becomes apparent why there can be a theological methodology, why such a methodology can now be explicit, and why the need to make such a methodology explicit is now being widely felt.

In the first place, there can be a theological methodology precisely because there is a continuing faith which at its roots is a recurring developmental life process of enduring relationships of man to man, man to Christ, and of man through Christ to God.

In the second place, the explication of a theological methodology has now become a concrete possibility because of the long history of the Church and our present state of awareness of that history. As a result of the continuing encounter of men with God in Christ and the reflexive awareness of the processes of that encounter, we now can begin to glimpse the recurring relational and developmental structure of the faith life that constitutes a theological methodology.

Finally, the cultural shift now taking place, which constitutes one of the most thorough changes in environment in history, has made imperative the uncovering in explicit terms of a theological (and one might add, a pastoral, a liturgical, a magisterial, etc.) methodology. No longer can the values that pertain to faith be implicitly realized by men in a pattern of structures successfully worked out in the past. No longer can ancient formulas, ancient authoritarian procedures, and ancient symbols express and convey the enduring Christian values they once expressed and conveyed; for the whole contextual environment in which they effectively operated is being swept away. Unless we are to muddle through (and in the present context of continuing change it is doubtful that muddling through will arrive at any solution), we must first uncover explicitly the methodological steps that have characterized the life of faith in its

long history and then effect the changing concrete implementations that such a methodology will demand. Today, as never before, an explicitly grasped theological methodology is a necessity.

At this stage it would appear that we have treated two entirely disparate topics—the ministry and theological methodology. It is now time to bring them together by highlighting their relationships in the concrete life of the Church.

In the first place, the function of the ministry is to concretize theological methodology in a given age and place. In its task of epitomizing the Christian meaning of the life of the Church, the ministry is really summarizing and expressing (whether consciously or not) the recurring processes imbedded in that life. The ministry is effective to the degree that it manifests and imparts in living terms adapted to the men it serves and the situations it finds the enduring structure that can be explicit in a theological methodology.

In the second place, it follows that the ministry, as the focal point (in the ideal order, of course) of the Church's life, is a convenient source for the explicit formulation of a theological methodology. Imbedded in the life of a fruitfully practiced ministry over the course of the ages are those principles which, when articulated, constitute a viable theological methodology.

In the third place, there is actually a continuing dynamic relationship between the life of the Church and its summarizing ministry on the one hand, and the gradual unfolding of an ever more nuanced theological methodology on the other hand. First of all, comes the life of the Church and the ministry which emerges at the service of that life in order to understand, represent, and unify it. Only after the passage of centuries and the recurrence in varying circumstances of the processes of the Church's life and the exercise of its ministry, is it possible to finally thematize explicitly the dynamic principles underlying that life and ministry. Henceforth, the ministry is a continuing effort to implement more or less consciously the already known methodological principles. Henceforth, too, it is this implementation that leads to a further development and differentiation of Christian consciousness and eventually to the further refinement of explicit theological method. And so on.

In conclusion, let me say that I am well aware of the abstract

nature of this presentation. However, I would suggest that should the points I have made here be grasped and accepted, there would follow the realization of significant implications for the training of men for theological work, for the pastoral ministry, and for the practical interrelationship between members of the pastoral ministry and those of the scientific theological community.

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