PRIESTHOOD AND MINISTRY FROM THE
NEW TESTAMENT TO NICAEA

Why bother to study the history of the priesthood in the first three centuries when it is painfully clear that what the church needs today is an up-to-date theology of ministry that meets the present needs? One response might be that the answer to our present crisis lies in a recovery of the tradition of the past; if we could only get back to the mind of Christ and the practice of the primitive church we will be in possession of the solid, timeless theological truths concerning the ministerial priesthood. Another response might be just the opposite; the theology and pastoral customs of the late Roman Empire have nothing to say to the contemporary world of rocketry, atomic energy, and electronic technology. Yet both of these responses are marked with impatience, if not panic, for our age desperately needs both the experience of tradition and the questioning of the spirit, "if tradition is not to become arid and lose its sensitivity to life and if the spirit is really to be one of renewal and not merely destructive, alienated from its origins."[1]

However, in attempting to construct a theology of ministerial priesthood, it is not enough simply to affirm the "both-and" of past tradition and present question. Methodologically there has to be a priority. In a thought-provoking article entitled "How to Get Rid of History", John W. O'Malley points out that the past exercises a tyranny over the present, and on the analogy of the method of psychoanalysis, the only way to relativize the past and make it an ally instead of a despot is to know it.[2] To put it in terms of method,

[1] Hans von Campenhausen, *Tradition and Life in the Church,* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968, p. 7.

[2] John W. O'Malley, "How to Get Rid of History," *Woodstock Letters,* XCVII, Summer, 1968, 394-412. O'Malley observes: "The past is a tyranny . . . Without our being aware of its presence it clouds our vision of the present by forcing us to view the present with categories and assumptions we have absorbed from the past without being able critically to reflect upon them. This is what is particularly offensive about the past's power over us: It hampers our ability to control the present and to prepare in a rational way for the future." *Ibid.,* p. 399.

only by understanding the terms, categories, and state of the question as inherited from the past is the spirit of the present liberated for its search to construct a future.[3]

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

If one takes seriously the historical succession of past, present, and future, then some theory of historical development is called for. "Development of doctrine" is a favorite phrase among theologians these days. But the term "development" is susceptible to several quite different interpretations. For instance, it can be understood in a progressivistic sense, graphed as an ever ascending line that demonstrates the superiority of the new over the old. Or to take the opposite approach, development may be understood as a tragically descending line, a continual falling away from the pristine ideal of "the good old days". More commonly, however, among Catholic theologians, development means homogeneous growth, the horizontal line along which one historical form smoothly evolves into its successor. In this view there are no historical surprises once one has grasped the inner logic of teleology; the ragged edges of evolution are tucked away out of concern for consistency. Over against these three types of development, is it not realistic to graph historical development as an unpredictably jagged line? The constant is the line itself, and the dynamism which causes it to advance. As O'Malley puts it in methodological terms, "Rather than speak of development of doctrine, we can better speak of continuity of data and discontinuity of insight."[4] As regards Christian history the continuous data is the revelation of Jesus Christ and its acceptance by those who thus form the Christian community. The discontinuity of insight comes from the very concrete attempt to live out the Christian life in vastly differing times, places, and historical situations. Moreover, as the years pass by, the discontinuous insights of today become part of the continuity of data. But the crucial point is that the living and thinking church does have fresh insights into the data of the past in its effort to live the present.

[3] Historian Joseph Blenkinsopp makes the same point: "To close our minds of the past means in effect to close them on the future also. . . ." *Celibacy, Ministry, Church,* New York; Herder and Herder, 1968, p. 146.

[4] "How to Get Rid of History," *Woodstock Letters,* XCVII, p. 396.

These discontinuous insights may be good or bad, but they are new and different, or there is no real development. The underlying assumption here is that human freedom is operative in the creation of history. Consequently, as Paul Tillich puts it, "History cannot be calculated; it has the character of a leap."[5] To risk a metaphor by way of summary, time marches on, but history staggers, stumbles, and lurches forward.

In our search today for a new insight into the ministerial priesthood, it is essential that we be aware of the continuity of data, but historical studies in this area are notably lacking. The editors of one of the most recent volumes of *Concilium,* Vol. 43, *The Identity of the Priest,* remark in their preface: "Unfortunately, and in spite of a great deal of trouble, it has not been possible to find an author to deal with the historical evolution of the 'priestly office' . . . . against such a background the present changes would probably not appear to be so 'exciting', 'destructive' or 'arbitrary' if we had a more concrete picture of the intensity, the inevitability and the extent of the changes." In the same volume, Karl Rahner underscores the importance of historical studies in this area which "force us to take a more radical look at what can and what cannot change in the Catholic priesthood."[6]

The theme of this paper is that there is a genuine development, a continuity of data and a discontinuity of insight, from the New Testament period to the Council of Nicaea in regard to the church's understanding and practice of the ministerial priesthood. This period was selected because the era of origins is usually very significant for subsequent developments, and because the early church by virtue of its seniority deserves special consideration. Since the accent here is on development, it seems preferable to sketch several overviews in order to get a feel for the motion of development rather than to exhaustively document any one aspect. However, enough detail is provided to justify the development. There may well be others, but this study is limited to outlining three areas in which the ministerial priesthood

[5] Paul Tillich, *The Interpretation of History,* New York; Scribner's 1936, p. 282.

[6] *Concilium,* XLIII, *The Identity of the Priest,* New York: Paulist Press, 1969, p. 86.

reveals significant development: (1) development in terminology, (2) geographical development, and (3) development under external pressure.

Development in Terminology: "Priest"

Of the many terms employed by the early church to describe its ministry, that which is most intriguing for a Roman Catholic theologian is the term "priest", in the sense of the Greek *hiereus* or the Latin *sacerdos,* that is, one who offers sacrifice. Many authors have already traced the evolution of this term, and it suffices for our purpose here to summarize the main points in the development.[7] The most striking fact is the total absence of the term from the pages of the New Testament in regard to the ministerial priesthood. When *hiereus* does occur, it refers to Jewish priests, pagan priests, Christ Himself as in the Epistle to the Hebrews, or the glorified Christian martyrs as in the book of Revelation. Moreover, Hebrews as a Christological essay centers on the priesthood of Jesus, and does not speak to the question of ministerial priesthood.[8] In fact, it stresses the once-and-for-all efficacy of the sacrifice of Jesus which renders any other sacrifice superfluous, and hence, a priesthood pointless. (Heb. 7:27; 9:12-26; 10:10-14).

Despite the non-use of the term by the New Testament writers, around the year 200 it began to be applied to the ministers of the church.[9] In his *Ecclesiastical History* (V. 24, 3), Eusebius cites

[7] A Michel, article "Prêtre" in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique,* XIII, Paris, 1936, col. 138-161; Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Presbyter to Priest: Ministry and the Early Church," *Worship,* XLI, August-September, 1967, pp. 428-438; Pierre Grelot, *Le Ministère de la Novelle Alliance,* Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1967; George H. Williams, "The Ministry of the Ante-Nicene Church," in *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives,* edited by H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel D. Williams, New York: Harper & Row, 1956, pp. 27-59.

[8] Cf. A. Gelin, "The Priesthood of Christ in the Epistle, to the Hebrews," in the *Sacrament of Holy Orders,* Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1962, pp. 30-43.

[9] A case is sometimes made for the First Epistle of Clement as first applying the term "priest" to "presbyter", at the end of the first century. Cf. Myles M. Burke, "The Catholic Priest: Man of God for Others," *Worship,* XLIII, Feb. 1969, p. 78. Others tend to qualify the application on the grounds that the disputed text (Ch. 40) makes an appeal for orderly procedure in the church after the example of the Old Testament high priests, priests, and Levites, and thus is at most an oblique reference to the church order prevailing in Corinth at that

Polycrates of Ephesus (c.190) referring to St. John as *hiereus.* By the early third century both Tertullian and Hippolytus are using sacerdotal terminology in regard to the bishop. By the middle of the third century St. Cyprian applies it also to presbyters. However, in Cyprian, indeed until well into the fourth century, priesthood was understood to apply first and foremost to the bishop, and only secondarily to the presbyter when he actually presided at the eucharist.

This phenomenon of the gradual growth of priestly terminology poses two related questions: why is the New Testament so pointedly adverse to it, and why did it later take root? The generally accepted response is that the New Testament authors avoided a sacralization of the Christian ministry in order to highlight its contrast with the Jewish religion and pagan religion, but that a deeper insight into the nature of the eucharist as a sacrifice furnished a basis for viewing the Christian minister in priestly perspective. Jean Colson has skillfully elaborated this argumentation in exhaustive fashion for the critical period of the New Testament and the early second century.[10] He stresses that in the New Testament "apostleship replaces priesthood but without succeeding it." The Christian minister is essentially apostolic, sent by God and the church, and hence, instrumental or sacramental. In contrast to this ministerial discontinuity with the Old Testament, there is a certain continuity between the two Testaments as regards a sacrificial-sacerdotal theme. Within the New Testament itself there is a spiritualization of religious values while retaining sacerdotal imagery such as the temple. The priesthood of the faithful, the eschatological glorification of the martyrs of priests (Cf. Rev. 5:9-10; 20:4-6), Christ as High Priest, the sacrificial connotations of the eucharist—all are demonstrable themes of the New Testament which leave the door open to a priestly interpretation of the ministry. In the literature of the sub-apostolic period we find echoes of the same connotations, with stress upon the Christian community as a "priestly people."[11] According to our theory of development, Colson

time. Cf. P.M. Gy, "Notes on the Early Terminology of Christian Priesthood," in *The Sacrament of Holy Orders,* p. 113, and Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church,* London; Geoffrey Chapman, 1959, p. 136.

10 Jean Colson, *Ministre de Jésus-Christ ou le Sacerdoce de l'Evangile,* Paris: Beauchesne, 1966.

11 Hans Küng has masterfully developed the priority of the priesthood of

demonstrates the continuity of data, while the use of the term "priest" for the Christian minister only at the beginning of the third century indicates a creative, discontinuous insight on the past of the early Church.

This priestly designation of the Christian minister has continued in the Roman Catholic Church down to the present time, but the fact that it was not always so is significant. Vatican II has emphasized three aspects of Christian ministry: ministry of the word (prophetic), ministry of cult (priestly), and ministry of leadership (royal).[12] Consequently, for us today the cultic term "priest" which represents only a part of this ministry stands for the whole of it. On this basis a priest could just as legitimately be called a prophet, without denying in any way the sacerdotal aspect of his function, just as the early church in no way denied his prophetic function when they selected the term "priest." Several theologians are urging the adoption of the category of the word as a better way to theologize about the Christian minister.[13] Are we on the verge of a fresh insight into the nature of the Christian ministry? Will a new terminology be demanded to identify those whom we now call "priests"?

GEOGRAPHICAL DEVELOPMENT

A good way to sense the currents of development is to view them geographically. From different soils spring different customs, outlooks, and organizational structures. Although the sources are scanty and spawn conflicting interpretations, scholars are impelled to venture some necessarily tentative conclusions concerning local differences in the development of church order, simply because geography is such a stubborn reality of life.[14] At the risk of oversimplication,

the faithful so that the role of the priestly minister is to serve a priestly people. *The Church,* New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967, pp. 363-387.

[12] See *The Constitution on the Church,* No. 21, and *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests,* Nos. 4-7.

[13] Cf. Karl Rahner, "What is the Theological Starting Point for a Definition of the Priestly Ministry?" *Concilium,* XLIII, pp. 80-86, and Joseph Moingt, "Caractère et Ministère Sacerdotal", *Recherches de Science Religieuse,* LVI, Oct.-Dec., 1968, pp. 563-589.

[14] Cf. Jean Colson, *L'Evêque dans les Communautés Primitives,* Paris, Cerf, 1951; Adolph Harnack, *The Constitution and Law of the Church in the First*

we will briefly contrast the development of ministry in Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Rome, and Alexandria.

The history of the Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem is short but significant. The very early community there, under the general leadership of the Twelve, soon evolved a presbyteral form of government based upon the Jewish sanhedrin composed of elders. This collegiate style was also adopted by the Gentile churches. Although the terms *presbuter* and *episcopos* are interchangeable until well into the second century, some individual did function as head of the presbyterate. It is somewhat amazing that the man who emerged as leader of the local church in Jerusalem was not St. Peter nor any of the Twelve for that matter, but James the Less, a kinsman of the Lord. After the martyrdom of James in the year 62, Simeon, another blood relative of Jesus, assumed the leadership. Some historians speculate that if it had not been for the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 followed by the Emperor Vespasian's search to liquidate altogether the line of David, the government of the Jerusalem church could have developed into an oriental-type caliphate based upon blood relationship to Jesus. Finally, Jerusalem did not emerge as the mother church of Christianity. The Jewish-Christian community there ceased to exist in the year 135 when the Emperor Hadrian sacked the city, drove out the Jewish inhabitants, resettled it with Gentiles, and stripped it of its name, calling it Aelia.

The evolution of church order at Antioch is difficult to trace, even if one grants that the *Didache* is a Syrian document.[15] In Acts 13:1 we read: "now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and

Two Centuries, New York: Putnam's 1910; John Knox, "The Ministry in the Primitive Church," in *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives,* edited by H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel D. Williams, New York: Harper & Row, 1956, pp. 1-26; Jules Lebreton and Jacques Zeiller, *The History of the Primitive Church,* two volumes, New York: Macmillan, 1942, 1946; A. Michel, article "Ordre" in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique,* XI, Paris, 1931, col. 1193-1405; B. H. Streeter, *The Primitive Church,* London: Macmillan, 1930; George Williams, "The Ministry of the Ante-Nicene Church" in *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives,* pp. 27-59.

[15] Cf. J. T. Audet, *La Didaché: Instructions des apôtres,* Paris: Gabalda, 1958; Robert M. Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers,* Vol. I: Introduction, New York, Nelson, 1964; Robert A. Kraft, The Apostolic Fathers, Vol. III: *Barnabas and the Didache,* New York: Nelson, 1965.

teachers. . ." The *Didache* reflects the same emphasis upon prophets and teachers, but also clearly indicates the existence of bishops and deacons. However, ten to fifteen years later the letters of Ignatius reveal a fully developed tripartite structure of ministry consisting of the bishop, presbyters, and deacons. Moreover, it is the monarchical bishop, as evidenced by the famous passage in the Letter to the Smyrnaeans:

> Apart from the bishop no one is to do anything pertaining to the church. A valid eucharist is to be defined as one celebrated by the bishop or by a representative of his. Wherever the bishop appears, the whole congregation is to be present, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the whole church. It is not right either to baptize or to celebrate the agape apart from the bishop; but whatever he approves is also pleasing to God—so that everything you do may be secure and valid.[16]

Other churches would gradually evolve to this form of episcopacy, but not as rapidly as the church of Antioch.

In the church of Corinth we see a special emphasis upon the charismatic quality of church leadership. Although the question of Pauline church order is a tangled thicket of conflicting theories, certain characteristics of the Corinthian church are discernible. To begin with, Paul recognized at Corinth a variety of charismatic ministries: "And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues (I Cor. 12:28". Some scholars tend to stress charism at the expense of office, to glamorize the Corinthian church as being directed more immediately by the Holy Spirit.[17] While one must admit the more charismatic approach of Corinthian church order, two facts should be underscored: the unquestioned authority of Paul himself who severely criticizes the Corinthians for their misuse of charisms, and Paul's expectation of an imminent Parousia which would undercut concern

[16] Chapter 8. Translation by Robert M. Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers,* Vol. 4: *Ignatius of Antioch,* Camden: Nelson, 1966, pp. 120-121.

[17] Cf. Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament,* London: SCM Press, 1960, Ernst Käsemann, "Ministry and Community in the New Testament," in *Essays on New Testament Themes,* London: SCM Press, 1964; and Hans Küng, *The Church,* New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967, pp. 393-413.

for a highly organized church order. At any rate, even the Pauline churches had room for a presbyterate, since Acts 14:23 indicates that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the churches they founded. Thus, by the end of the first century, the letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians bears witness to an established presbyterate as well as the rambunctious charismatic spirit of the Corinthians who were in revolt against it. It is also worth noting that Clement uses the terms *presbuteroi* and *episcopoi* interchangeably. We have little information about the Corinthian church during the second century, but Eusebius' description of Dionysius, bishop of Corinth c. 170, shows that the episcopate developed even among the charismatic Corinthians.[18]

In addition to being graced with the presence and influence of Peter and Paul, the Roman church was distinguished by other characteristics of its ministry. Although the basic tripartite division of bishop, presbyter, and deacon is evident by the early second century, nevertheless, I Clement, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus witness to the pronounced collegiate character of its presbyterate.[19] Furthermore, Justin Martyr and the *Shepherd of Hermas* speak of the ministry of teachers, while Justin is alone among the sources in referring to the "president" of the Christian assembly. Finally, the lists of Roman bishops supplied by Hegesippus, Irenaeus, and Eusebius indicate that the head of the Roman presbyterate emerged as a clearly recognizable individual. His responsibility increased as other churches looked to Rome as the Mother Church and the guarantor of unity.

The development of the Church in Egypt was strongly influenced by the fact that up until the beginning of the third century there was only one bishop for the entire area, the bishop of Alexandria. A veil of obscurity surrounds the Alexandrian church until late in the second century, but certain stubborn traces of evidence seem to point to a strong presbyteral form of church government.[20]

[18] *Ecclesiastical History*, IV, p. 23.

[19] Cf. B. Botte, "Collegiate Character of the Presbyterate and Episcopate," in *The Sacrament of Holy Orders*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1962, pp. 75-97.

[20] Cf. J. B. Lightfoot, "The Christian Ministry," appendix in *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, New York: Macmillan, 1868, pp. 225-234; E. W. Brooks, "The Ordination of the Early Bishops of Alexandria," *Journal of Theological Studies*, II, 1901, pp. 612-613; Charles Gore, "On the Ordination of

The *presbyteroi-episcopoi* who composed it all had the power to confirm, and they apparently elected and ordained one of their number as head of the college. In addition to this structural peculiarity, the ministry at Alexandria placed special emphasis upon the role of teacher, as evidenced by both Clement and Origen.

This geographical survey of church order up to the end of the second century reveals decidedly different emphases in structure and practice: blood relationship to the Lord, the monarchical episcopate, charismatic leadership, presbyteral government, and the teacher as minister. But amid this diversity, the early Christians had the insight into the need not only for unity but also for a certain amount of uniformity. Thus, as Streeter puts it, "The history of Catholic Christianity during the first five centuries is the history of a progressive standardization of a diversity which had its origin in the Apostolic age."[21] This process of standardization continued through the Middle Ages; it was completed and hardened in the fires of Reformation controversy. But in our own day Vatican II has begun a reversal of the process by its stress upon the identity and importance of local and national churches. Perhaps the discontinuous insight of our times is the need for decentralization and the destandardization that logically accompanies it.

DEVELOPMENT UNDER PRESSURES

The ministry of the early church evolved not only according to its own inner dynamism, but also in response to the pressure of events such as persecution and liberation. What is under discussion here is not terminology or practices, but rather a pervading context, the air, so to speak, breathed by the early fourth century minister.

In the pre-Constantinian Church persecution was not an everyday occurrence, but when it did break out periodically (for instance,

Early Bishops of Alexandria," *Journal of Theological Studies,* III, 1902, pp. 278-282; E. Molland, "Irenaeus of Lugdunum and the Apostolic Succession," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History,* I, 1950, pp. 12-28; W. Telfer, "Episcopal Succession in Egypt," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History,* III, 1953, pp. 1-13; W. Telfer, "Meletius of Lycopolis and Episcopal Succession in Egypt," *Harvard Theological Review,* XLVIII, 1955, pp. 227-237; Eric Kemp, "Bishops and Presbyters at Alexandria," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History,* VI, 1955, pp. 125-142; Edward Hardy, *Christian Egypt: Church and People,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1952.

[21] *Ob cit.* B. H. Streeter, *The Primitive Church,* pp. 46-47.

under Decius in 250 and Diocletian in 303) the conflict between the Church and the world stood starkly revealed. In time of persecution the task of the minister was to comfort his fellow Christians, encourage them by word and example, and suffer with them. Eusebius relates how, during the persecution of Diocletian, ". . . the prisons, which not long ago had been prepared for murderers and graverobbers, were filled with bishops and presbyters and deacons, readers and exorcists, so that there was no longer any room there for those condemned for wrongdoing."[22]

Imagine the surge of relief when the persecution ended and the imprisoned Christians were released. Eusebius exclaims: ". . . as though some light shone forth all at once out of a gloomy night, one might see churches thronged in every city, and crowded assemblies. . ." The champions of the faith "proudly and joyously went through every city, full of unspeakable mirth and a boldness that cannot even be expressed in words. Yes, thronging crowds of men went on their journey, praising God in the midst of thoroughfares and market-places with songs and psalms. . ."[23] The ministry of reconcilation, as St. Cyprian powerfully demonstrated, suddenly took on new urgency when those who had lapsed in the faith, either actually or technically, rejoined those who had stood firm.

But the end of persecution was only the beginning. Constantine himself looked with favor on the Christians, subsidized the building of churches, extended privileges to Christian clergymen, and took the initiative in preserving Church unity by calling various synods, including the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325. There at Nicaea, Constantine, the personification of the power and glory of the Roman Empire, kissed the empty eyesockets of Bishop Paphnutius, blinded by the persecutors. It was as if today Chairman Mao of China were to declare himself a catechumen and begin constructing churches throughout China.

What was the insight of the persecuted and liberated Christian into this contradicting data? Eusebius concluded triumphally that it was all a gift of God. Jerome, writing with the advantage of some decades of hindsight, called attention to the heavy price paid for state favor in terms of a diminution of freedom. One historian, with

22 *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII, p. 6.
23 *Ibid*. IX, p. 1.

an eye on the Nicene canons dealing with clerical life, expresses the insight as follows:

> The original tension between the Church and the world was replaced by the difference between clergy and laity. The 'churchman' was henceforth the cleric, and not the baptized Christian as such. . .[24]

The clericalization of the church progressed along with its numerical growth and under the strong influence of civil organizational structures.

Today the church enjoys a two-fold peace, if "peace" can be taken to mean at least the absence of hostility. First, there is the ecumenical peace, or at minimum, "truce", which alters entirely the atmosphere in which the minister labors. Old battles need not be refought, defensive postures can be abandoned, and attractive possibilities for a different approach to ministry follow upon the "Peace of Pope John". Secondly, the attitude of the world toward the church is one of indifference. Although the tax-exempt status of churches is being questioned today, this is still a far cry from confiscation. Behind it is a basically indifferent view that places the church alongside the other agencies in society.

Ecumenical understanding and secular indifference seem to point to the insight that the church of tomorrow will be freed of past defensiveness and stifling privileges in order to serve both its own members and the total community of men. The church of the future can be a servant church, like its founder who came to serve and not to be served.

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In conclusion, the church of the first three centuries reveals true growth, a succession of discontinuous insights. But between that church and the church of our era there is operative the most continuous datum possible, the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

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[24] Peter Stockmeier, article "Constantinian Era," *Sacramentum Mundi,* I, New York: Herder arnd Herder, 1968, pp. 420-421.