

## THEOLOGY OF THE PRESBYTERIUM

The topic which I have been asked to treat is certainly a timely one. For during the past few years since the close of the 2nd Vatican Council many diocesan senates and priest associations have arisen, culminating in the National Federation of Priest Councils during March of last year. These various forms of priestly associations have sought to respond to the professional and pastoral needs of their members and of the Church today. Increasingly they have sought a greater voice in the life and service of the Church and the wider community. Yet at times these same associations have been met with suspicion and doubt. Are they signs of healthy growth or warts of dissension? It is not the purpose of this paper to seek to justify or apologize for the existence of such senates or associations nor to sit in judgement on them or their actions. They are facts in the present life of the Church, facts which theology and the theologian must consider as he studies the life of the Church. First we must recognize that these and similar associations are rooted in a basic human right, the right of association. Hence these groups do not depend upon any theological reasoning for their existence. The basic right of men to associate for mutual benefit is prior to theology and has been recognized by the Church in the great social encyclicals of this century. Yet their existence does posit questions for the theologian. Are they within the ambit of our tradition or outside it? Aside from their sociological and pastoral importance do they give evidence to a deeper theological reality in the life of the Church? It is my hope that this paper might shed some light on the theological basis for such associations and point out some areas which theology must address in the future. Nor do I feel that this is merely an intramural topic between priests, Bishops, and theologians, one more clerical game without importance to the Church and world. Indeed as I hope to show this underlying reality is essential for the life of the Church and the world which we hope to serve.

Yet I realize that the task we set before us is not an easy one. How can one speak of a theology of the Presbyterate without developing a theology of the priesthood? Yet today it is difficult to give completely cohesive theology of the priesthood since this very theology is itself in process of change in the light of modern biblical, liturgical, and ecumenical studies, not to say in the very changing lives and ministries of priests themselves. Moreover the very existence of so many and different groups of priests—diocesan senates, priest associations and mixtures of both, diocesan and interdiocesan, even national groups—is something new in the life of the Church, at least new to us, so much so that it is difficult to find any clear parallels from the history of the Church that supply a clear and univocal answer from our tradition. Finally our task is enlarged because so many other issues are involved—the issue of authority in the Church, the relationship between bishop and priest, the notion of dissent, the relationship between priests and the wider community, the danger of clericalism—all of which are far wider topics than can be treated at this time, yet all of which are the context in which this issue must be seen. Granting these difficulties and perhaps in spite of them, it is important for us to address the subject of the theology of the Presbyterate or *Presbyterium*.

Let me now narrow the topic of our concern. For the purpose of this paper I wish to treat this question: Does our theology give evidence of a *Presbyterium*, or universal priestly brotherhood, which though closely united to the College of Bishops is yet distinct from them? And if so, what relationship does it bear to that College of Bishops and to the wider community of the faithful? In other words is there a true sacramental brotherhood of priests *secundi ordinis*, not as a clerical caste, but as a vital and essential part of the Christian community. The means and manner of its expression may indeed vary in the life of the Church, yet the reality is always present. I do not wish to enter into the question whether such a Presbyterate, whatever form it takes, is of divine institution or ecclesial, but only that its presence has been considered as a reality in the Church's life and necessary for that life. (As an aside, let me say that the term *Presbyterium* is difficult to translate into English so I will usually keep its Latin phrase. Moreover I am using the term in an analogous

way when I refer to the universal communion of priests, but this analogy is based on the local or diocesan presbyterium as I will show.)

In particular I wish to treat this question in the light of the Documents of the 2nd Vatican Council, particularly the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* and the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*. Since this group is familiar with the major concepts of the *Constitution on the Church* let me proceed to consider article # 28 *de clericis*. Yet bear in mind the major concepts of the earlier articles of the same Constitution, particularly the concepts of Church as community, and the collegial unity of the Bishops, as these will be helpful for an understanding of article # 28. This article treats of the priest in four ways- the relationship of the priest to Christ, to the Bishop, to his brothers in the ministry, and to the faithful. In the original draft of the Constitution only a very brief discussion was given to the status of the priests under the general heading of the "episcopate as the supreme degree of Orders." Only ten lines were devoted to the priesthood, and the main interest attached to its orientation to the episcopal office, and dependence on the Pope or competent bishop in matters of jurisdiction. This reflected the juridical and narrow theology of the earlier draft. What is important for us is not that the final draft gave more than ten lines to the priesthood, because even this draft is woefully insufficient for such a topic, but that it took a much more scriptural and theological position. Wisely the Council avoided the historical questions of the origins of ecclesiastical offices. It left as an open question the manner in which the episcopate, priesthood, and diaconate developed in the life of the Church. "When the Council speaks of the triad 'episcopate, priesthood, diaconate,' it is well aware that the group as such is not mentioned in the New Testament. Though the New Testament does use such terms in different places to distinguish and characterize the offices, the Council does not mean to affirm that the present day division coincides with the actual division which we find in the New Testament."<sup>1</sup> It allows for the gradual evolution of these orders within the early life of the Church. Yet what the Council clearly does show is that all of these share in the One Priesthood of Jesus Christ.

<sup>1</sup> *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. H. Vorgrimler; New York: Herder and Herder, 1967; p. 216.

Throughout the document the priest is shown as closely associated with the Bishop. He does not possess the fulness of the sacrament of Orders; he is dependent on the Bishop in the exercise of his office; he is called to be the cooperator of the Bishop. Yet he is not a mere delegate but has a true participation with the Bishop in one and the same priesthood and ministry of Christ. "He is to be the necessary helper and counsellor in the ministry and in the task of teaching, sanctifying, and nourishing the people of God."<sup>2</sup> While the document shows the priests' cultic role, it gives major importance to his role as servant of his people. In a significant passage the Council Fathers widen the concept of the relationship between the priest and his Bishop:

"All priests both diocesan and religious by reason of orders and the ministry, are associated with this body of Bishops and serve the good of the whole Church according to their vocation and the grace given them."<sup>3</sup>

and still again:

"Priests are prudent cooperators with the episcopal order, as well as its aids and instruments."<sup>4</sup>

In both of these passages, while in no way derogating from the priest's relationship to the local Ordinary, the Council Fathers seem to give evidence of a more universal relationship between the priest and the entire episcopal order, a relationship to the entire College of Bishops. I think that this is a significant use of terms and not just a matter of words. Without unduly pressing the words, I think they signify that priests as a group bear a special relationship to the College of Bishops, a relationship distinct from other members of the community yet within and for the service of the community. This relationship is based on their common reception of orders and of the ministry which they share with the Bishops.

<sup>2</sup> *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, no. 7 in *The Documents of Vatican II*. (ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J.) New York: America Press, 1966, p. 547.

<sup>3</sup> *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no. 28 (The Documents of Vatican II pg. 54).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Yet, further in this same article, the Fathers speak even more clearly of this universal relationship between priests:

"In virtue of their common ordination and mission all priests are bound together in an intimate brotherhood which should naturally and freely manifest itself in mutual aid, spiritual as well as material, pastoral as well as personal, in meetings and in a community of life, of labor, of charity."<sup>5</sup>

Here again, without regard to boundaries, age, or rank, priests are seen as joined in a real communion based on their common ordination, on the sacramental life of the Church. This same concept is repeated in the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*:

"Established in the priestly order by ordination, all priests are united among themselves in an intimate sacramental brotherhood. In a special way they form one presbytery in a diocese to whose service they are committed under their own bishop."<sup>6</sup>

From these three passages, brief as they are, I believe the Council Fathers give evidence of a universal *Presbyterium*, a communion of all priests based on their common sharing in the Priesthood of Christ. This Presbyterate reaches beyond all boundaries and unites all as a body of cooperators with the Bishops. Moreover in each of the passages quoted the Fathers seem to speak of a *group* distinct from the College of Bishops, though closely related to them. Though the Council Fathers obviously wished to avoid using the term "college" for such a group, I do not think it is unwarranted to speak of a collegiality or better a communion among priests in the light of these documents. In each diocese this universal sacramental brotherhood finds its expression in the local *presbyterium*.

The *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* develops at much greater length the notion of a local or diocesan Presbytery, closely allied to its Bishop. "While there are important differences there is very obviously a close parallel between the episcopal college at the level of the universal Church and the presbyterial college at the level

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, no. 8 (The Documents of Vatican II pg. 549.)

of the local Church."<sup>7</sup> This presbytery is to assist the Bishop and in fact he is "to listen to them, indeed consult them, and have discussions with them about those matters which concern the necessities of pastoral work and the welfare of the diocese."<sup>8</sup> Indeed in response to this Decree many bishops have inaugurated such diocesan senates.

I realize that from so few passages one cannot expect to gain a complete theology of the *Presbyterium*. In the Council documents I see the notion of the Presbytery used in two different ways. On the one hand and much more expressly the Council speaks of a local or diocesan presbytery in which the priests are closely joined, almost dependent upon the Bishop and subject to ecclesiastical law. Yet in other passages the Council speaks of this more universal union of priests among themselves, related not just locally but to the entire College of Bishops and to all their fellow priests. These two notions are not in opposition, yet they are not always harmoniously drawn together. Nowhere is the connection between the local and universal clearly shown. Perhaps we could not expect this until further theological developments mature these ideas and thoughts. Yet it is this very point, the relationship between the local and the universal, that creates confusion and concern for so many. In many ways it is similar to the problem that the Council agonized over in relating the local Ordinary to the College of Bishops. If we accept the principle of unity as common ordination and ministry, it would seem that the individual priest is at one and the same time a member of both "Presbyterys." Yet if I might go a step further it is precisely his collegial unity with the total or universal that is the root of his membership in the local or particular ministry. Most of all we must be careful to maintain both relationships in regard to the priest, just as the Council sought to maintain both relationships in regard to Bishops.

I do not think it is sufficient to merely point out the existence of such a *Presbyterium*, especially in its more universal connotations, unless in some ways its role and function is delineated. Once again I

<sup>7</sup> *Vatican II: The Constitution on the Church* ed. K. McNamara; London: Chapman 1968; pg. 227.

<sup>8</sup> *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, no. 7 (The Documents of Vatican II pg. 547.)

think the Council documents can aid us. I am not implying that they speak clearly, but by an analogy from their remarks on the local presbytery, I think we can develop the role of the universal *Presbyterium*. The role is really threefold- in regard to the College of Bishops, to the priests themselves, and to the laity. In regard to the College of Bishops the role is one of cooperation in the same ministry. Yet this cooperation demands a mutual understanding and regard. The local Ordinary is advised to consult with his presbytery in all matters of concern to their ministry; it would appear that the same cooperative consultation should exist between the College or parts of it and the Universal Presbyterium or parts of it. Certainly steps should be taken to bring together National Conferences of Bishops and representatives of priest associations for just such consultation. Secondly the "Presbyterate" has obligations to their fellow priests, to be concerned with their pastoral and personal needs, not only locally but in the context of the whole mission of the Church. Moreover each individual priest should realize that he does not stand alone, but "that he shares by ordination and ministry in a 'collegial' presbyterate in intimate communion with his fellow priests. The lack of collegiality among priests is not merely a lack of cooperation; it is a real theological defect in their ministry."<sup>9</sup> Indeed our evolving theology of the priesthood ought to take greater notice of this "collegial aspect" of the priest's life if we are to be true to the Conciliar documents. Failure in cooperation is really failure in our priesthood. Lastly in regard to the laity, priests are not a group set apart, a clerical caste, but are as brothers and to work fraternally with the laity. Indeed we must keep in mind the key concept of community so central to the thought of the Constitution on the Church, lest any form of class distinction destroy the basic unity of the Church. Surely it is obvious that the more active role that priests take as a group in the life of the Church can only be of greater benefit to the whole community.

So far I have considered the theology of the Presbyterate in the light of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. By no means do I imply that this is the only *locus* for theological investigation.

<sup>9</sup> McNamara, *op. cit.*, pg. 227.

There is needed a much more comprehensive understanding of the *Presbyterium* as found in the New Testament and in the Patristic Age. The council of elders or *presbyteroi* mentioned frequently in the New Testament needs further elaboration by scripture scholars and theologians. Much has already been written in this area but many questions remain. What role did these elders play? How were they constituted? It is really in the Patristic Age that we find much clearer references to the council of presbyters as associated with the Bishop, particularly in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch: here indeed is a fertile field for greater theological investigation. Nor should we overlook several incidences in the later history of the Church which seem to give evidence of this *Presbyterium*. Time does not allow us to develop these at length but let me mention some of them. The rise of the mendicant orders in the 12th century shows that groups of priests and even laymen gathered together aware of an apostolic mission, though independent from local Bishops, yet associated with the College of Bishops through the Pope. Indeed these associations arose as a prophetic criticism of the clergy, bishops and priests, for their failure to care for the welfare of the poor. After much controversy these groups were institutionalized by the Church as an independent but continuing voice in the Magisterium. Another example would be the Council of Constance wherein along with the Bishops, delegates of the priests were voting members. In a similar fashion the Assembly of the French Church, prior to the revolution, was composed of Bishops and Priest representatives to deal with Church matters. In many of these instances controversy arose whether such associations would fracture the unity of the Church. Yet each time the Church was strengthened by opening channels for the representative voice of its priests. Without implying any strict parallel between these examples and our present day priest associations, it is my contention that diocesan senates, priest councils, and even National Federations, are not outside the ambit of our tradition, but are modern examples of this *Presbyterium*. The forms may change yet the reality continues. There are some who fear disunity and dissension, but the Church can only be strengthened when the body of its priests, moved by the Spirit, and acting in concerted efforts take a more active role in its life.



No doubt these remarks of mine are all too brief and in fact rather sketchy for such an important topic. Yet I do think that there is sufficient evidence in scripture, tradition, and theology to warrant an answer to the question we have posed: is there indeed a universal *Presbyterium*, distinct from the college of Bishops, though closely united with them. I think theology should answer in the affirmative. There is a real sacramental fraternity; it has a role and place in the life of the Church. It is one more sign of the unity of the Church, even though it takes diverse forms. Yet we must admit that our theology is still evolving in this regard. Let us hope that in the future theology will develop its understanding of this *Presbyterium* as the recent Council developed the concept of Collegiality among Bishops, for they are both parts of the Mystery of the Church.

In particular I would like to suggest four areas for such development. I am indebted to many of the earlier speakers at this convention for their remarks which have helped me to discover these four areas.

1) Role of the Presbyter:

So often the priest *secundi ordinis* has been defined in negative terms i.e., as one not having full possession of orders and as co-operator with the Bishop. Yet what is his positive role in the community? It is a unique role, not that of delegate or ambassador but as an intermediate voice or bridge between Bishop and local community. As such he has the *right* and *duty* to speak in both directions. His consultative role is not just a bureaucratic function which could be handled as well by others, but is part of his very priesthood to make the Bishop present to the Community and the Community present to the Bishop. If this is true of the individual how much truer of the whole group or presbytery.

2) Dialectic between historical fidelity and charismatic innovation:

Fr. Richard Dillon's excellent presentation on "Ministry as Stewardship of the Tradition in the New Testament"<sup>10</sup> raises the question of prophetic criticism and innovation within the life of the

<sup>10</sup> R. Dillon, "Ministry as Stewardship of the Tradition in the New Testament," in *Proceedings* Catholic Theological Society of America, 24 (1969).

Church. The voices of prophetic criticism do not rend the unity of the Church but maintain this dialectic between historical fidelity and charismatic innovation, true of the early Church and true in every age. Such criticism, done in a spirit of charity and humility, is a form of true cooperation and is part of the role of those called to be cooperators of the Bishops. The task that rests upon all, bishops, priests, and laity, is to maintain the balance between fidelity and innovation, not to opt for one against the other.

3) Ecumenical aspects of *Presbyterium*:

No doubt our theology can learn a great deal by a deeper understanding of those "ecclesial communities" which have maintained a greater presbyterial influence in their church policy. Here would be a most fruitful area for true ecumenical study.

4) Concept of *corporate leadership*:

This form of leadership so often found in business, academic circles, and modern governments, may be a model for further development of our concepts of leadership and cooperation between Bishop and Presbyters. In these forms the role of the leader is strengthened not diminished, precisely because all are involved in the decision making. I would recommend the many articles by Fr. Andrew Greeley on this point as helpful to a better understanding of how these new forms can be applied to the institutional life of the Church. In fact I believe that this form is closer to the concept of College of Presbyters gathered about their Bishop in the apostolic and Patristic Age, than the later model of Bishop and chancery office.

No doubt this list does not exhaust the many areas for fruitful theological inquiry in the Theology of the *Presbyterium*, but I believe they would be major points for such an inquiry.

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