

THE PERMANENCE OF THE MINISTRY INTRODUCTION TO A SEMINAR

"Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech." How many holy cards sent out in invitations to ordinations and first Masses have carried these words in years past! Familiar also has been the axiom: "Once a priest, always a priest." But these affirmations are being questioned today. It is the purpose of this paper to clarify and refine the question.

The question is about the permanence of the ministry. 'Ministry' means service. The service in question here is that of holy orders—of bishops, priests and deacons—which is concerned with spreading the Word of God, presiding over the sanctifying liturgy, and shepherding the faithful to Christian maturity and community.

Generally, this ministry has been permanent *de facto*, that is, regarded and handled by the Christian people as permanent. It has also been permanent *de jure*, that is, permanent not simply because regarded and handled as such by the Christian people, but permanent because it is such objectively, apart from what people think and do about it.

De jure or objective permanence has been attributed primarily and absolutely to the deputation or power of ministry conferred by the laying on of hands and invocation of the Spirit. *De jure* or objective permanence has been attributed only secondarily and relatively to the exercise of the deputation or power of ministry. The permanence of exercise has been relative to the need for it, the opportunity for it, the possibility of it, and the authority of the pope and bishops acting in view of the common good. Thus a priest could be suspended, or could be returned to the lay state, or could retire, or could be restricted in the number of Masses he might say any day. In these cases, however, the deputation or power of ministry remained, for this was not at the disposal of men, as was its exercise.

This theology is being questioned today. Why? Contemporary

culture provides several reasons. Today's philosophical understanding of reality generally regards reality as contingent, relative, changing. The idea of permanence is foreign to contemporary understanding of reality. Even theistic interpretations of reality stress dynamism and process in their views of God.

Modern economic, industrial and technological society is essentially a changing sort of society, as it produces new products, seeks more efficient ways to produce and distribute better products, and seeks to create new markets. Man's place in contemporary society is not fixed; through education and change of jobs, he moves around in the social scale. The idea of permanence is foreign to contemporary society. It is death to an industry, a business, or a person's fulfillment.

Reasons for questioning the permanence of the ministry can be found within the Church also. Theology must interpret the message of Christ by using the language of contemporary culture. Hence theology has increasingly absorbed the view of the world common in today's culture, a view which regards everything as open to change, not fixed, not permanent, relative, contingent. Contrast the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* of Vatican II, written near the beginning of the Council, with the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* and the *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*, written near the end of the Council. The latter present much more dynamic, functional pictures of the Church, in accord with the contemporary way of looking at reality, although they do not go so far as most contemporary thought.

Historical studies have also revealed that the forms and styles of Christian life, both ecclesial and individual, have changed considerably over the centuries. Historical consciousness characteristic of contemporary culture has seeped into Christian consciousness, so that we are more aware of the historical contingency and relativity of all the facets of Christian life. They have changed in the past, and they can change again.

Aggiornamento presupposes the possibility of change, as does the assertion of the *Decree on Ecumenism* that the Church is to be continually reformed (*ecclesia semper reformanda*). The question is no longer whether there can be change, but how much can be changed and how far can change be extended.

From what has been said, it is obvious that to question the permanence of the ministry is not a sign of disrespect or contempt for it. Rather, given the historical situation, such questioning is a sign of concern, as well as being necessary and profitable for the People of God.

The question about the permanence of the ministry concerns chiefly its *de jure* or objective permanence. This question can be broken down into two questions. The first concerns the secondary, relative permanence of the ministry, that is, its exercise. The second concerns the primary, absolute permanence of the deputation or power of ministry.

In the past, the exercise of the ministry has been set aside only with reluctance in relatively few instances and for very grave reasons, while the radical permanence of the ministerial deputation or power has been acknowledged to remain. The question can be asked today: Should the People of God, while recognizing the radical permanence of the deputation or power of ministry, be more liberal at this time in history in allowing more men in orders to set aside the exercise of this ministry and undertake the ministry proper to the laity?

The answer to this question must be sought in the needs and dispositions of men today and in the requirements of the common good and mission of the Church. Do Christian people and ministers have some need—psychological, sociological, or other kind—for a permanent exercise of the ministry or for a nonpermanent exercise? Are men today capable of the commitment necessary for the permanent exercise of the ministry? Can the Church accomplish its mission more effectively in the contemporary world by a permanent or a nonpermanent exercise of ministry?

The second question concerns the primary, absolute permanence of the ministry, that is, the deputation or power of ministry. Is this deputation or power of ministry permanent in the first place, so that, although one may relinquish its exercise, the deputation or power endures?

This second question challenges the very theology of holy orders at a critical point. How certain are we that there is a permanent deputation or power in holy orders? Where did this idea come from?

Is it valid today in the light of new knowledge gained over recent centuries and decades?

Definitive answers to these questions are not available at the present time. Let us consider, however, some of the particular questions which ought to be answered in order to find solutions.

(1) What does Scripture say about the permanence of the deputation or power of ministry? Does Scripture say any more than that Jesus Christ is "a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech"? Even if the ministerial deputation or power of Christ is permanent, is there evidence in Scripture that this is true also of the deputation or power of ministry of those ordained by the Church to serve Christ the priest? Are we certain that the early Church had clearly defined ministers and ministries, so that one or another could be singled out and clearly defined as permanent? If the early Church recognized the permanence of the ministry of orders, was this a *de jure* or a *de facto* permanence, that is, did it arise from an insight into the nature of this ministry or from an unquestioning carry-over of the permanence of the levitical priesthood to the ministry of orders in the New Testament?

(2) Have we correctly interpreted the outcome of the controversy with the Donatists regarding rebaptism and reordination? Have we taken practical solutions and regarded them as theoretical descriptions of reality? Have we taken arguments of reasonableness for a solution to the controversy and interpreted them as ontological statements of fact? Have we mistaken metaphor (analogy of improper proportionality) for strict analogy (of proper proportionality) in the use of the notion of 'character'? Have we been too univocal in our thinking about baptism and orders? How much was the solution to this controversy and the arguments for it influenced by the static experience and understanding of nature and society at that time? To what degree has the concept of the sacred influenced the idea of the permanence of the ministry? Is the application of this concept to Christian realities legitimate?

(3) Did St. Thomas, in elaborating his theory of the sacramental character, accept too unquestioningly his theological heritage? How much was he influenced by the static nature of feudal society?

Have we forgotten that his understanding of the sacramental character was a theological theory, therefore only a probable opinion, and have we consequently given it more certainty as a statement of fact than it deserves? Has a metaphor for God's fidelity to his covenant been given the status of a statement about the structure of reality in St. Thomas' treatment of the character? Is his argument for the permanence of the character (by nature a transitory instrumental power) on the bases of Christ's will and the immortality of the soul an adequate argument (*Summa theologiae* III, 63. 5)?

(4) What is the intent of Trent's anathema against those who affirm that "in three sacraments, namely, baptism, confirmation, and order, a character is not imprinted, that is, a certain spiritual and indelible sign, so that these sacraments cannot be repeated" (Session viii, canon 9)? Does this canon mean that the denial is heretical and the opposite affirmation *de fide*? If it is *de fide*, in what sense is it so: absolutely or given the situation and the objections raised by the reformers? Is this canon primarily concerned with the theory of the character's nature or with the noniteration of these three sacraments, for which the indelible character is used as an argument of fittingness or a manner of expressing the Church's practice in the past? Are any limits to the indelibility of the character to be admitted? What is the implication of the fact that this canon is worded in very general terms familiar in Christian tradition and does not express any theological interpretation of the nature of the character? Do we think too univocally about the characters of baptism, confirmation, and orders in interpreting this canon?

(5) Are the questions which we put today, such as those above, prejudicing the answer to the question about the permanence of the deputation or power of the ministry of orders? Are they raised only by the mental view of reality today or do they have precedents in the past? Can we accept the contemporary view of reality as thoroughly contingent, relative, historical, and changing, and apply this view to the deputation or power of the ministry of orders?

In this introduction to our seminar, I have tried to offer some definitions, distinctions, reasons for the problem, and some further particular questions in regard to the permanence of the ministry of

holy orders. Our discussion can revolve around two points: (1) the practical question as to whether a permanent or nonpermanent ministry would be more beneficial to the Church today in its mission to the world; and (2) the theoretical question as to whether the centuries-old theology of the permanence of the deputation or power of ministry is still valid.

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