

SEMINAR ON ECCLESIOLOGY

OFFICE IN THE CHURCH

In 1982, the CTSA Seminar on ecclesiology pursued an issue raised at its 1981 sessions and suggested at that time for more extensive examination in the future: "Office in the Church."¹

Recent works by Edward Schillebeeckx and Raymond E. Brown provided a basis for the discussion.² To stimulate analysis of these readings, the following nine questions were proposed by the moderator:

1. Understanding church office as pastoral leadership of an ecclesial community, Edward Schillebeeckx states: "The tension between an ontological-sacerdotalist view of the ministry on the one hand and a purely functionalist view on the other must . . . be resolved by a theological view of the church's ministry as a charismatic office, the service of leading the community, and therefore as an ecclesial function within the community and accepted by the community. Precisely in this way it is a gift of God" (p.70).

Is this in fact the best way to understand church office? Is focus on pastoral leadership preferable to emphasis on preaching of the word or on administration of the sacraments?

2. Is the word "ministry" well chosen as a translation of Schillebeeckx' "ambt?" (Cf. e.g. the reference to "non-ministerial services," p.31.)

3. Schillebeeckx states that "those who hold office, in solidarity with the whole of the community, nevertheless have their own unalienable responsibility for preserving the community in its apostolic identity and in the authentic gospel" (p. 35), notes that "although the local church chooses an episcopal minister of its own, it does not autonomously provide itself with a minister" (p. 42), and insists that office ought not be "seen purely as delegation by the community, without further theological implications" (p.105). Are the perspectives reflected in these passages adequately represented in the overall thrust of *Ministry*?

4. Raymond Brown observes that "there can be *episkopē* without an *episkopos*" (p.322) and concludes from his survey of the New Testament that "the manner and exercise of supervision varied greatly in the different places and different periods within the first century or NT era" (p.338). In a similar manner, Schillebeeckx argues that, while pastoral leadership of the local church is reflected throughout the New Testament, the choice of specific forms of office was determined by local needs. In part on this basis, Schillebeeckx suggests that while pastoral leadership is an essential component of an ecclesial community, no single structure of office is binding on the later Church: "The New Testament allows the church every freedom in the specific structures of the

¹Cf. John P. Galvin, "Seminar on Ecclesiology: The Augsburg Confession as Catholic?," *CTSA Proceedings* 36 (1981), 171-73.

²Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Raymond E. Brown, "Episkopē and Episkopos: The New Testament Evidence," *TS* 41 (1980), 322-38. All page references in the text are to these two works.

ministry; even the choice of an episcopal or presbyteral church order is not a schismatic factor in the light of the New Testament" (p.69).

What implications does the variety of church structures evidenced in the New Testament have for the issue of office in the contemporary Church? Is Schillebeeckx' position preferable to Karl Rahner's understanding of *ius divinum*?³

5. Schillebeeckx sharply criticizes certain aspects of Rahner's treatment of church office (pp.46, 73). In his presentation of Rahner's thought accurate? Is it preferable to approach these issues with a view primarily to the Church universal or primarily to the local church? Is it best to proceed from a focus on the basic unity of church office or on the factual diversity of church offices?

6. Schillebeeckx speaks frequently of the local church's "right to a minister or ministers and to the celebration of the eucharist" (p.37; cf. also pp.30, 35, 36, 78). Is it legitimate to speak of such a right? To what extent does this right take priority over other considerations (cf. p.37)? What qualifications, if any, are implied by reference to the need for the community to develop itself "in connection with and in the light of mutual criticism from all other Christian communities" (p.78)?

7. What is (should be) the relationship between pastoral leadership of the community and presidency at the celebration of the Eucharist (cf. p.30)?

8. How accurate is Schillebeeckx' historical analysis of developments in the first and second Christian millenia as a shift from a conception of church office as ecclesially mediated to a more individualistic understanding of ordination? Are his interpretations of the Councils of Chalcedon and Trent adequate?⁴

9. With regard to theological method, Schillebeeckx asserts: "For a theologian, what is called Christian practice is never a direct norm, but his agenda, i.e. that which he must clarify *secundum scripturas*, in the light of the great Christian tradition" (p.101; cf. also p.102). What is Schillebeeckx' understanding of the relationship of theory and practice, and how does this influence his conception of church office? Can the method applied in *Ministry* be described as critical reflection on ecclesial practice?

The twenty-six participants at the first session considered the problem of linking functional with trans-functional factors in the theology of church office, in order to express the mystery dimension of office and the special relationship of the office-holder to the Holy Spirit while avoiding static identification of the priest with Christ. Recognition of the pertinence of ecclesiological questions (function of church; relationship of church and world; distinction between Eucharistic and universalist ecclesiologies) to an understanding of church office led to reflections on charism and structure and to an extended discussion of the relationship of local churches and the Church universal. While one member wondered how useful New Testament notions of the local church are in our more complex society, others accented the value of recognizing pluralism within and among local churches and commended the theme of *communio* as a framework for overcoming monarchical models. The ambiguity of the term

³Cf. Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Concept of *Ius divinum* in Catholic Thought," *Theological Investigations* 5 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1960), pp. 219-43.

⁴Schillebeeckx has since modified his historical interpretation in "De sociale context van de verschuivingen in het kerkelyk ambt," *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 22 (1982), 24-59.

"local church" was noted, and several participants spoke of the need to prevent degeneration into a sect (cf. the convention address of Robert Bellah); in this regard, the importance of avoiding isolation and the value of mutual correction were stressed.

Seventeen participants began the second session by examining New Testament ecclesiology. After considering the relationship of sociological and theological argumentation and the sources of the diversity reflected in the New Testament, the seminar concentrated on the systematic implications of the recognition that pastoral leadership, present universally in the New Testament, assumed in that period a variety of concrete forms. Observing that not everything in the New Testament is normative, some held that what is necessary in the later Church is what belongs to the mature community, not what was present in the initial stages of the incipient Church; others argued that decisions not strictly required by the nature of the Church necessarily lack permanently binding character. Discussion then turned to Schillebeeckx' position on the right of an ecclesial community to pastoral leadership and to the Eucharist. Central to this part of the seminar was an effort to develop criteria for assessing *praeter ordinem* actions; among factors mentioned were fidelity to the apostolic witness, the relative autonomy of the local church and its unity with the entire Church, and the mutual criticism of various communities.

At the conclusion of the seminar, various topics were proposed for future meetings: the role of the Petrine office within conciliar fellowship as an approach to visible unity; the ecclesiology of the new Code of Canon Law; the idea of reception; the relationship between the faith of the assembly and the ordained minister in the celebration of the Eucharist; disintegration of and dislocations in ecclesiology since the Second Vatican Council; method in ecclesiology; and a review of some ecumenical dialogues (Anglican/Roman Catholic; Lutheran/Roman Catholic). A three-member steering committee (Peter Chirico, John Galvin and David Stagaman) was nominated to plan next year's session.

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