

PASTORAL PROBLEMS IN THE AMERICAN CHURCH

I accepted Father Wright's kind invitation to take part in this convention not with the illusion that I might open a new chapter in theology but out of a desire to show appreciation for the dedicated and invaluable service of American theologians to the Church in the United States.

It is difficult to reflect on pastoral problems in the American Church without looking for some basic pastoral problem which touches all others.

The American Church, like the whole body of the Church scattered throughout the world, is a variety of gifts. Despite the gifts it remains a pilgrim Church, groping in the darkness of faith toward the promise of the Father. Pilgrim and human, then, we discover not only variety of gifts, but divisions and conflicts. The variety of authentic gifts comes from the Spirit. Hostilities and factions thwart the work of the Spirit and dim the beauty of the Church.

Jesus prayed for unity in love as the sign by which all the world would recognize his disciples. The apostolic letters of the New Testament relentlessly insist on unity as the compelling sign and the indispensable matrix for the true flowering of the gospel. I believe, then, that the most basic, the ever present and never solved pastoral problem is the need for unity in variety, for love which is genuinely kind and compassionate in the face of differences, not merely when those differences are well reasoned and plausible, but especially when they are fatuous, narrow and the fruit of limited minds. We must find a way, in obedience to the gospel, to be accepting toward the learned and the simple, toward the open and the closed-minded, all of whom belong equally to Christ and have an equal claim on our charity and respect.

This fundamental pastoral problem is particularly acute today because of the generation gap, the knowledge explosion, theological and philosophical pluralism and the opening of the Church to a new sensitivity to the world. Differences in thought and outlook are profound and often enough irreconcilable. But one thing is clear. The

gospel of Christ calls us as Paul said, "to bear with one another lovingly, making every effort to preserve the unity which has the Spirit as its origin and peace as its binding force, . . . professing the truth in love" (Eph 4:2, 3, 15). All of us can justly take note of the powerful timely witness of loving patience which the Holy Father gives the universal Church in the face of overwhelming difficulties. Months and even years would not suffice to speak on all the specific pastoral problems of the American Church and so let me take just a few of them which have fairly broad implications.

First is the priesthood. We have come beyond a vision of the priesthood which understands the priest almost exclusively in cultic terms. The leadership role of the priest has assumed new-found importance. More and more we understand the priest as builder of community, the center around which the parish community constitutes itself. The priest's role is also seen more clearly as a reflection of the Church's call to serve the world. And while this development of understanding is the gift of the Spirit, there are pitfalls we must be conscious of for the pastoral good of the priest himself and for the pastoral good of the people he serves. For instance, we are more aware now that the Eucharist is not the only function of the priest. But it will be perilous if in our expanded understanding of the priesthood we forget that the Eucharist remains the heart and center of the priestly ministry as it is of the whole life of the Church. The Eucharist is not the only thing, but it is the central thing. It is also perilous if we fail to perceive that among all the exigencies of service, prayer is a true and indispensable ministry of service, as study and intellectual improvement are forms of service.

A second very important need in the priestly ministry is pastoral realism. By this I mean the kind of realism which Jesus shows when in the parable of the seed he notes the difference in productivity, "some forty, some sixty and some a hundredfold." He included in the parable also that which produced nothing. It is essential to have this kind of perception of the uneven response which will greet even the most dedicated and unselfish efforts. If the ministry is not to be a continual frustration there must be a sense of the limitations of other people, limitations not only of enthusiasm but also of understanding. It is important also to know that the lack of response is not confined to

those who are evil but may well be found in the good. But a pastoral realism which is not unduly deflated in the face of the limitations of real people must be complemented by a faith which truly believes that "the word of God is not bound" and that "power is made perfect in weakness."

The pastoral reality of the uneven response together with the new perspective of the priest as builder of community and leader can also bring a return to the old system in which the priest makes all the decisions and just tells the people what to do. People frequently are only too happy to leave everything to the priest and the trouble comes when he is only too happy to have it that way. It will take skill and much patience to lay hold of these new insights and at the same time avoid either authoritarianism or paternalism.

The need for a priestly leadership of vision and perception calls, of course, for theologates to insist on high standards not only in admission policies but also in the content of theological teaching. We are building a slum-like fantasy world if we believe that any good can be served by diluting or reducing our requirements in theology. More than ever before the pastoral priest needs theological depth and sound critical judgment. The pastoral good of the people is not served by the capricious endorsement of every new idea any more than it is served by intransigent resistance to legitimate development. Shallowness never has been and never will be in the best interest of the Church. Experience proves that it is not only the learned who can be victims of pride but also the ignorant. And the Church which has been injured by learned heretics has frequently been saved by learned doctors. The highest ideals of the Church and the best interests of the pastoral ministry demand theological depth.

More and more, and with good reason, the renewed concept of ministry brings with it a cry for more professionalism. It is supremely important, though, that this search for professionalism be made in the light of faith which understands that the priesthood is unique and that it does not fit into any single human model. There can be no adequate professionalism in the priesthood unless it is dominated by the overriding biblical concept of the priest as servant. Whatever is done to make the priest more professional must converge toward making him a more perfect and effective servant of Christ Jesus and of the people he

is called to serve in Jesus' name as minister of the Church. Otherwise we revive in the name of professionalism the ugly image of dominance, arrogance and conceit, the skilled functionary. Somewhere between the simplistic spontaneity of good will and the impersonal skill of the functionary we have to find the good shepherd "who lays down his life for his sheep" and who embodies the words of Paul that "in all that we do we strive to present ourselves as ministers of God, acting with patient endurance amid trials, difficulties, distresses, as men familiar with hard work, sleepless nights and fastings, conducting ourselves with innocence, knowledge and patience in the Holy Spirit, in sincere love" (2 Cor 6:4-6).

It is also necessary that we find systems of accountability which will at once respect the unique nature of the priesthood and not unduly threaten those it is designed to help. But again this presupposes a vital understanding of the concept of servant and the ability of the minister to give priority to the pastoral needs of the people.

A second pastoral problem, related indeed to the first, is the ecclesiological problem, the understanding of the Church.

This comes especially to the fore when dealing with varieties of co-responsibility and collegial structures such as senates, diocesan pastoral councils, parish councils and the like. If we are to avoid misunderstandings and serious conflicts, it will be necessary to have a sense of the Church as a divine mystery and one which, as Cardinal Suenens has lucidly pointed out, does not conform to any given human social structure. If there is an expectation that these forms of participation are not a synodal diakonia but a new democratizing of the Church then of course we clearly invite resounding collisions and bitter cynicism. The question has to be asked, "Are these new structures simply democratic institutions to be governed by compromise and majority vote or are they representative of the mystery of the Church in which "not all have received the same gifts" and in which one of the gifts is the authority of service given by the prayer of the Church and the laying on of hands?" There is a difference between the transfer of decision making and the sharing of decision making. Too often perhaps there is an unarticulated assumption that the creation of a pastoral council or parish council implies the transfer of responsibility from the bishop or pastor to the council rather than a sharing of responsibility

by the bishop or pastor with the council.

A third pastoral problem relates to the Sacrament of Penance. One of the pressing needs of our time is moral conversion. The Holy Father has given prominence to this in his call for a holy year directed chiefly to the inner renewal of man. One of the powerful forces we have had in the past for this moral conversion has been the Sacrament of Penance. It is certainly paradoxical that at a time when it is most needed it receives least emphasis. It is obvious that in the face of the continuing depersonalization of man in genetics and social structures, the unequal distribution of wealth, the profligation of the earth's resources, moral expediency dramatized by Watergate and the oppression of minorities, there is a colossal need for conversion and repentance.

We have indeed witnessed a growing appreciation of the social aspects of sin, a reaction to the all but exclusively interiorized concept of sin as between "me and God," which prevailed in the past. If we are to deal with sin as it really is, there must, of course, be an understanding of its social dimensions. But these social dimensions must not be restricted to the effect of sin on the social situation of the times such as racism and unjust labor practices. The social dimensions of sin must also be understood in terms of the effect of sin on the mystery of the Church. Sin strikes not only at the city of man. It desecrates the temple of God as well.

We must also be careful in pointing out the social dimensions of sin that we do not thereby anesthetize all sense of personal responsibility through too great an emphasis on the sinful community. The need for personal conversion is necessarily linked with the sense of personal responsibility.

The new norms on the Sacrament of Penance, then, are a good thing in that they require a re-evaluation of some of these things even though there may be pastoral advantages in a greater latitude regarding general absolution than the present norms allow. But it is silly to think that general absolution itself could be a pastoral solution to problems related to the Sacrament of Penance and the needs of conscience. What pastoral value it could have lies in its complementarity with other forms of the Sacrament.

Problems connected with marriage absorb more and more of the interest not only of the pastor but of theologians and canonists as well.

The widening restriction in various dioceses of teen-age marriages is only one of many indications of the understanding of the seriousness of marriage. But this is not enough. Nor is it enough to simplify tribunal procedures. There is an urgent pastoral need to improve our preparation of young people for marriage and this preparation must make use of the resources of the behavioral sciences. But if we understand marriage as not merely the wedding event, but a sacrament and a life-long covenant of love then we must also improve our pastoral ministry to the married couple after the marriage ceremony. We have to find more effective pastoral supports for the family. An abiding pastoral need is to foster growth in prayer, growth in spiritual values, growth in the sense of dependence of the power and presence of God in their marriage and in the family. Especially in marriage and family life the biblical words are relevant, "unless the Lord build the house they labor in vain who build it."

One of the serious pastoral problems we all face is the problem of those marriages which have failed. The simplified norms used in most of our tribunals have certainly helped but the magnitude of the problem remains. The magisterium needs the service of serious theological and biblical scholarship as it tries to come to grips with this issue. Pastorally, there is always the tendency to follow the ostrich path of expediency, the simple solution, instant and easy, which ignores the real problem and usually makes it worse. Pastors and scholars must work together. Neither the ultimate good of the people nor the will of Christ is served by pastoral action which ignores the demands of the *koinonia* and which, however sincere, can in reality be a form of apathy before the exigencies of faith. The gospel is not a dichotomy between love and truth and he who said "I am the life" also said "I am the truth." The burden for all of us lies in serving the demands of both.

Lastly, I believe I should include the hermeneutic problem in this review of some of our American pastoral concerns. We went through the bravado of demythologizing and the death-of-God rage. This led to anxiety about what it means to speak of God, and why he is experienced in Church rites, among other things. This trend now seems to have given place to a renewed search for God and to a new interest in the quest for meaning which Dean M. Kelley in a recent book has called the fundamental business of religion (*Why the Conservative Churches*

Are Growing, Harper and Row, 1972).

But we must be careful not to indulge too much euphoria over this phenomenon. The new emphasis on the God of Christian revelation as one who is totally other and incomprehensible could also lead to new forms of abandonment of the world, to a retreat into purist spiritualities oblivious of the world and seeking to be alone with the Alone. Cognate to this problem is the problem of Christian education. It is clear that there is an ideological split among Christian educators about the approach to Christian education. The problems are real as are the dangers. The path to solutions is complex. In this highly sensitive matter, the only successful approach is going to have to involve the collaboration of pastors and educators in a pastoral work of service which will be concerned with not merely technique and the experience of God but also with content, and which will be directed not merely to the student but also to the parents.

These, then, are some of the pastoral problems as I see them in our American Church. A host of others is implied in those I mentioned. In all of them emerges the imperative of reconciliation, of progress in patience, and that kind of love which binds everything together "in justice, peace and the joy of the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17).

†JOHN R. QUINN

Archbishop of Oklahoma City