

Robert Murray S.J.

1. What Jesus said and did is the determining principle.

Since early times Catholic tradition has used language of priesthood for ministry. This is dangerous because of all that priesthood has meant in various human cultures. We cannot adopt a general concept of priesthood and then argue that the ministry comes under it. Fidelity to the New Testament demands that we allow priesthood language only because it is used of Jesus in his teaching activity. Secondly and dependently it is used of the Church; only gradually does it come to be used of ministers. Of this more below.

Rather than discuss any particular term, even ministry, we ought to start with Jesus himself and his activity as seen by the faith of the early Church. The first salient fact is that he was not of the priestly tribe (though a whole Judaeo-Christian tradition tried to give him a double genealogy, from Levi as well as from Judah). He was, therefore, a layman in Israel. He was not even, strictly, a rabbi (itself a lay function, though a very special one), though he spoke and acted with all a rabbi's authority and much more; this won him a rabbi's status in the eyes of those who respected him, but hatred as for a usurper in the eyes of the 'establishment'. Jesus taught, with more than the rabbinic style of authority; he chose and trained disciples, to whom he entrusted not mishnah but his own fresh, racy teaching; he acted as a prophet, pronouncing God's judgements in general and particular, affecting private, social and political life, in the tradition of the greatest prophets. He forgave sins; in this he claimed more than the levitical priesthood could, with its laborious expiatory rites which still left the position that 'none can forgive sins but God alone'. He reinterpreted the Law, boldly breaking down the 'hedge around the law' and holding table-fellowship with outcasts and national traitors.

Jesus's clearest words about his aim and work are 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to lay down his life as a ransom for many'. This saying seems to reflect the Isaian 'Servant', which certainly provided the early Church with its first theological expression of Jesus's nature and function, and at a major turning-point they came to understand that the 'many' included non-Jews, and saw Jesus as anticipating this extension of God's kingdom to 'many from the east and the west' by unrestricted table-fellowship. Perhaps it was this latter, more than anything, that precipitated the final conflict with the 'establishment'. Before Jesus died he held a last supper with his disciples. The gospel evidence is inextricably conflicting on whether this was strictly the passover supper or not. Perhaps it does not matter, for it was in any case under the shadow of the Passover when he suffered, so that the early Church naturally saw his death as revealing the ultimate meaning of the Passover and as superseding it. At the last supper Jesus (either adding to the passover ritual, or else acting freely at a non ritual-meal) took bread and wine and gave it a new meaning with reference to his impending death and the prophetic promises of the New Covenant, which was to fulfil the old Covenant with its promises sealed by blood (Ex 24) and to inaugurate a new 'law' written in the heart of each believer, which would assure and effect true forgiveness (Jer 31:31-4, Ez 36:26-8).

Jesus's death was decreed by the lawful heads of God's people and was executed in a way which made him a 'thing accursed' to all Jewish religious sentiment. His disciples were totally demoralized; yet two days later they saw him again and gradually came to realize that he was truly alive again. He renewed his meals with them and gave them more instructions (Ac 1:3-4), which may have determined some matters of church order (but we cannot be sure); finally he ended his appearances. The disciples were then interiorly transformed by a power which made them entirely new men, a power which they understood to be God's Spirit, sent by Jesus.

These hitherto unpromising men now went out in the name of Jesus, continuing his work with a concern for permanence which he is not recorded to have shown. They spoke of their function especially in terms of witness or proclaiming the 'good news'; they saw themselves as 'servants' (diakonoi) of Jesus the 'Servant of the Lord' or as his emissaries or representatives (apostoloi, presbutai). In the local communities which they founded they appointed local leaders called variously managers or overseers (episkopoi), dignitaries or elders (presbuteroi) or simply servants (diakonoi). Before they died, they saw to the maintenance of what

they had founded, and of the purity of the Gospel, by authorizing presidents of local churches, to whom gradually, in the second century, the term episkopos came to be reserved. (The previous situation is much debated; I favour the solution which sees presbüteros as designating a member of the local committee, episkopos as the term for any particular functionary within this; presidency may at first have been exercised in rotation.)

In the whole New Testament period no word meaning 'priest' or priestly function is applied to any holder of this new Christian ministry. The words chosen are all secular, evoking neither the levitical nor the pagan background. This seems deliberate, and its implications challenge the Church perennially, since it is deep in human nature to want to express the religious yearnings of the flesh by setting up an elaborate structure of sacred things, rites and persons. Christianity represents a decisive break with this, more radical even than we find in the prophets. The appointment of Christian ministers was not by consecration as previously practised in Israel. The rite used was prayer for the candidate to receive the gifts of the Spirit, and laying-on of hands as a symbolic sign of appointment and empowering. This rite was adopted from the ordination of rabbis, not of priests. It is striking that the same rite, laying-on of hands, was used both for every Christian, after baptism, and for ordination of ministers; also for appointing members to special missions, as Paul and Barnabas in Ac 13. We possess no examples of ordination prayers earlier than those preserved in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus (representing, therefore, the usage of the Roman Church about 200), but many verbal similarities with Irenaeus and even with 1 Clement 40-44 suggest that the tradition was long established. In the prayer for consecrating a bishop the key phrase asks God to send on the candidate the 'princely spirit' (hegemonikon pneuma), a phrase from Ps 51:12 in the LXX, understood (not without Stoic influence) as the Spirit of leadership which the Apostles had. This means that the primacy of the Spirit was still clearly expressed at a time when the language of priesthood was being more and more generally applied to Christian ministry. We must now look more at this application.

In the N.T. the facts about Jesus and his activity, and the nature of his emissaries and their activity, with the clear and deliberate exclusion of priestly language in any everyday sense, allow us to see this language as usable only in a symbolic sense. This does not, of course, mean untrue. On the contrary the letter to the Hebrews (the N.T. writing which presents the deepest and richest theology of Jesus's role and work) applies priesthood language systematically to him. It insists, however, that his earthly title to priesthood is not the levitical priesthood but the model and type of Melchizedek. Jesus has superseded all that the levitical priesthood could do; his death is the one all-effective sacrifice of all time, the inauguration of the New Covenant. He and no other is truly to be called priest; <sup>indeed</sup> in the light of what Jesus has done there never was any other real priest, who could really effect expiation, forgiveness and reconciliation as a true and doubly representative mediator between God and man.

Apart from Jesus and his work, the N.T. ascribes priesthood only to the new people of God as a whole, when it alludes to the covenant promise in Ex 19:5-6 (1 Peter 2:5,9; Rev 1:6; 5:10). The expression is really only a way of filling out what the status of the new covenant people means now that the activity of the one Mediator has given us 'access in one Spirit to the Father'. When priestly or sacrificial language is used of Christians it is a way of speaking of their self-consecration in their ordinary lives (Rom 12:1; Heb 13:15-16). If Paul uses sacrificial language of himself it is simply figurative (e.g. Phil 2:17).

How, then, did priesthood language come to be applied to Christian ministers? The answer lies, doubtless, in the early Church's gradual discovery of what lay implicit in the Eucharist. It was inevitable that this would be thought of as somehow sacrificial, because it is partaking in the one sacrifice which the Church saw as realized in Jesus's death, resurrection and gift of the Spirit. This is clear already in the Didache, Justin and Irenaeus. Once such language was accepted, it was only natural to draw on the O.T. in speaking of the Eucharist, and to use the language of priests and altar, as we see already in Ignatius. Some Judaeo-Christian circles went further, trying to give Christ's priesthood a levitical pedigree and to show that Christian ministry was a direct continuation of the old dispensation. Even 1 Clement 40-44 implies something of this view. To such Judaeo-Christian circles we owe the term 'order' (taxis) for the whole system of ministry

with its grades. Also, perhaps, kleros (the root of 'clergy'), originally meaning an allocation of land, and perhaps denoting the inheritance of the tribe of Levi. It seems to be used in a context of ministry in 1 Peter 5:3 (not the only Judaean-Christian feature in this letter!). One more word which has come to be much used in Catholic tradition is 'hierarchy'. This is an innovation far later than the New Testament, a sixth-century development due especially to the Pseudo-Dionysius. It incorporates a sense of hieros, sacred, (now regarded as an essential quality of the ministry and the dread world of the sanctuary which they alone dare enter), arising from a resurgence of the 'religion of the flesh' which is unable to bear the challenge of the Gospel. The Gospel breaks down the human wall between sacred and secular, teaching us that there is 'nothing common or unclean'; in Christ all is holy, except a human will that resists God's will.

## II. The developing Catholic Theology of Order

After Christ himself, only the Church is properly to be called a priestly body. But the Church is full of ministries, ways of service. St Paul lists typical forms as they were known in the early Church (1 Cor 12, <sup>Rom. 12</sup> Eph 4); most of these continued. The main ministerial functions have always remained those which are traditionally also called 'pastoral': preaching and teaching the Gospel, administering the sacraments, and leading and co-ordinating the Church's life and mission. Of 'Order' as a sacrament, we can say that it was instituted by Jesus in the sense that he chose and empowered the Apostles and no doubt told them to appoint leaders of the future communities of believers; we do not need, as Catholics, to maintain that he determined the structure of the ministry in greater detail than that, or that he taught the Apostles that Order was to be a rite of the same kind and standing as baptism and the Eucharist. It is too clear that the Church only gradually worked out which of its traditional customs were to be regarded as of this standing—that is, as what we now call sacraments. Catholics maintain that Jesus instituted the sacraments, but not necessarily that he taught any clear account of them or determined their form in much detail. Among the Catholic sacraments Order is rather exceptional, in that it has stages or levels without being several distinct things. If we take typical early statements such as the Didascalia in the East or Hippolytus's Apostolic Tradition in the West, we see the 'fulness of Order' in the bishop, who by the 'Spirit of leadership' is made a successor of the Apostles. He preaches and teaches the Gospel as it has been entrusted by a line going back to the Apostles; his teaching is, therefore, 'apostolic tradition'. He administers all the sacraments including ordination, and he guides his local church (and sometimes joining in a general council, the whole Church) with true authority, provided that he stands in the Catholic system of ecclesiastical communion, the earthly centre of which, at least from about the third century was <sup>generally</sup> recognised to be the see of Rome.

Beside the bishop, sharing in the sacrament of Order but in a dependent degree, stand the presbyters. The ordination prayer in Hippolytus, as ever since, compares them to the elders to whom Moses gave of his spirit; they are the bishop's helpers, counsellors and representatives. With their bishop, they can do, perhaps, everything that belongs to church order (there is a theological opinion that when, at an ordination, they lay on hands after the bishop, they are really co-ordinating, though they can do this only with him); without the bishop, they cannot ordain other presbyters, and without his authorization they cannot lawfully perform certain functions. In early centuries 'Priest' (hiereus, sacerdos) normally meant only the bishop; the presbyterate was called the 'priesthood of second rank'.

The third rank is the diaconate, entitled to preach with authority, to give communion (but not to celebrate the Eucharist) and to baptise solemnly. (Any person can, according to Catholic tradition, baptise validly, but lay people will not know or use the extra solemnities which make baptism more clearly an act of the Church). The diaconate was in the early Church (and in the East has always remained) a vocation in itself, not necessarily leading to the presbyteral or episcopal grades. This possibility has now been restored for the western Church also by Vatican II. Otherwise, regularly in the West and commonly in the East, the diaconate has been a transition stage, either to the presbyterate or direct to the episcopate. (For several centuries most popes were consecrated bishop straight from deacon, and some, I believe, straight from layman). Previous to the diaconate there are several minor orders, never generally regarded as stages in the sacrament, and now mere survivals.

Episcopate, presbyterate and diaconate have been regarded, since patristic times, as different degrees of participation in Christ's priesthood- participation for ministerial functions. All other Christians participate by virtue of their baptism in the same one priesthood, sole source of priesthood. This sharing makes all Christians able to offer themselves and all their concerns as an 'acceptable sacrifice'; all this offering is gathered up and given its supreme expression in the Eucharist celebrated in the name of Christ, and also of his body the Church, by bishop or presbyter. This idea of participation at various levels was evidently much assisted by the Platonic view of the structure of reality which was so general among the Fathers. The levels of participation were also symbolized by the use from earliest Christian times of Chrism (a specially blessed mixture of fragrant unguents and oils) in both baptism, confirmation and ordination. 'Chrisma' or 'anointing stuff' is what makes a person 'christos' anointed. On Maundy Thursday morning each diocesan bishop consecrates all the chrism to be used in his diocese throughout the coming year. In one prayer he describes the chrism as that 'wherewith thou didst anoint kings, priests and prophets', using a phrase that has not changed since the second century.

This brief sketch has attempted to sketch the theology of Order and its place in the priestly people of God in the early centuries, when the laity were still conscious of their dignity and responsibility, clericalism had not yet made the ministry remote in language, esoteric knowledge and social status, and all members of the Church fulfilled their functions in a comparatively healthy way. But between the early centuries and the present century a lot of things went seriously wrong. This is a sweeping thing to say and there is time only to offer a sketch, even hastier than the above; I must attempt it, however, in full recognition that a brief summary can hardly fail to be seriously defective.

The chief things that went wrong concerned the theological understanding of what bishops and presbyters essentially are, and how they are related. In the formative period of theology this had never been adequately clarified. Some patristic writers such as Jerome (a presbyter/<sup>too interested</sup> in his own dignity against both bishops and deacons) led later generations to accept the view that the sacrament of Order is essentially complete with ordination to the presbyterate. The episcopate simply adds higher dignity and responsibility. This idea, greatly assisted, from the 13th century, by a novel, systematic distinction between Order and jurisdiction, naturally opened the way to a more legalistic, less pastoral, view of the episcopate. Another baneful development was the practice in the early middle ages of consecrating bishops to be sacramental functionaries without their being the head of a local church. This practice, expressly forbidden by the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, developed as part of the rather odd church order that evolved in Ireland, first isolated but then very influential in all western Europe. This development weakened the whole concept of the bishop as pastor. Next the same thing happened to presbyters. Many, especially monks and then friars, were ordained without pastoral function and responsibility. Their ordination needed a justification; this was found in the fact that they celebrated mass (often only privately with a server, and often for the dead, not for the present concerns of the faithful), and this came to be seen as the priestly function par excellence, instead of a part (albeit a very important and essential part) of the pastoral function more broadly conceived. Now 'Order' was defined essentially in terms of offering the eucharistic sacrifice, with or without any actual congregation; though it was understood to be in the name of the Church and in the presence of the angels, it is not surprising if the Eucharist came to be viewed (especially by the clergy who had a monopoly of theology) as not necessarily an act of the concrete gathered Church, but equally validly performed as an almost silent, almost private act which meant, first and foremost, for many priests the daily foundation and centre of their personal self-consecration. The laity themselves, when they attended at the hieratic splendours of mass in a dead language, enacted in the remote, mysterious world of the sanctuary, could themselves only participate in silent personal contemplation. But it was not only presbyters and laity who suffered. If the differentia of the episcopate was only a matter of jurisdiction, the primitive, Ignatian idea of the bishop standing at the centre of the eucharistic life of the local church gave way to a less eucharistic view of the episcopate, in which the bishop suffered a cleavage between his personal 'priestly' eucharistic life and his public life of great functions and ecclesiastical politics. It is little wonder that from the middle ages on so many bishops became morally and spiritually disorientated, or that too often the wrong type of man wanted what he saw was there to be enjoyed in episcopal status



The reformers tried to tackle this situation, but since they only partly diagnosed it, they could not do more than partly reform it. To some extent they succeeded in restoring the primacy of pastoral service in the idea of ministry, especially on the side of preaching the Gospel, and they gave back a real sense to the common priesthood of all believers. But in the total situation they both destroyed too much and did not really reform enough. The Church of England and the Lutheran Churches in Germany and Scandinavia remained very seriously unreformed in many essentials regarding church order and ministry, while the reformer's attacks on the sacrificial doctrine of the eucharist left the latter in many places a mere shadow, hardly capable of being the central expression of the Christian community's worship. Not least among the new evils caused by the reformation was the one-sidedness of the Catholic reaction. On Order, as on so many other points, Trent did not attempt a balanced view of the whole picture, but concentrated on emphasizing points which the reformers denied or attacked. But these points now became the focal points for Catholic instruction and theology; post-tridentine theology dances to protestant tunes, but in reverse. The Catholic Church became habituated to a more sacerdotalist view of ministry, a more exclusively sacrificial view of the Eucharist, than ever before; and though Trent instituted important pastoral reforms, it was to be two and a half centuries before the liturgy could begin again to act out the fundamental doctrine that the Church as a whole is the priestly people of God.

### III. Vatican II

We must leave this lamentably cursory sketch for a brief assessment of the greatest official theological stocktaking ever undertaken by the Catholic Church, the second Vatican Council. Unlike all earlier councils, the aim now was not to counter this or that error, but to review the whole 'scene' of the Church in the world and to try to express things in balance. I call it a stocktaking, not a revolution or a sudden breakthrough; nothing in human affairs happens without due preparation, and the essential movements leading to Vatican II had been in full swing for several generations, though some countries, especially in the English-speaking world, were hindered by historical accidents from taking much part in this preparation; many in these countries have been taken unawares, and sadly upset, by reforms leading us back to the mainstream of Catholic tradition.

In what follows I refer to the documents of Vatican II and hope that my readers will look up the passages. I refer to the Constitution on the Church as IG (Lumen Gentium); that on the Liturgy as Lit, on Bishops as Bps, on Priests as Pr.

1. When priesthood is mentioned the primacy is clearly given to Christ, our great High Priest and Mediator; IG 5, Lit 7, 83.
2. He has made the Church, his body and God's new holy people, able to share in his priesthood and exercise it through him. IG 10.
3. This participation by the whole Church is prior (IG 10) to the differentiation of levels, ministerial (IG 21) and lay (IG 34).
4. The ministerial mode of participation is said (IG 10.ii) to be 'different in essence, not only in degree'. Long study of this curious phrase and its history in the formation of the text has left me doubting whether it is much more than a compromise formula to carry the conservatives along. What does it mean to exclude 'in degree'? Who ever would say this? And what can 'essence' mean? The essence of priesthood must lie in some such concept as mediation, which precisely is not in question between the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministry. In fact the passage goes on virtually to give what is surely the real basis of distinction, namely different function. One conservative bishop asked that the priesthood of all the faithful should be declared to be 'in improper sense'. The drafters replied 'no, in a proper sense, but analogical'. They are two modes of sharing in Christ's priesthood.
5. In all the operations of the Church for worship to God and witness and sanctification for men, ministers are the functionaries who lead the people and act for Christ. Their power is not from the people but from Christ, but they have

no power but his. In all the Church's liturgical worship Christ is the true and principal celebrant and agent (Lit 7, IG 7).

6. The primary function of the bishop is to be Christ's representative and agent (IG 21) in all that pastoral service according to the Gospel means. The Council returns to the primitive doctrine that the episcopate is the fulness of the sacrament of Order (IG 21). The broad sense now given to pastoral service deliberately bypasses the medieval distinction between order and jurisdiction (this is broken down constantly between IG 21 and 27; the word 'jurisdiction' is hardly ever used). The narrow medieval definition of Order in terms of eucharistic sacrifice is broadened to include all pastoral service- ministry of the Word (IG 25), 'sanctifying' functions, including of course presidency at the Eucharist (IG 26) and directive authority (IG 27).

7. The bishop in his local church represents Christ the Shepherd there. He is the focus of unity (IG23), the head of the brotherly 'college' of presbyters and deacons (IG28). The unity of the local Church, like that of the universal Church, is not 'monolithic' but structured with various functions. This is shown forth in well-ordered liturgy, especially when the bishop celebrates in his own church with his clergy and people around him (IG 26, Lit 41). The structure of the local church is essentially 'collegial' and calls for warm trust and cooperation between bishop and his helpers (IG 26, 28; Bps 16; Pr 7), just as the structure of the universal Church is now seen to be collegial (IG 22-3).

8. The presbyter is called to be for his parish or sphere of pastoral work what the bishop is for the diocese. Some priests, especially if brought up on the old 'Hieronyman' theory of priesthood, and seeing the great emphasis of bishops at Vatican II, have got depressed and said, e.g. 'according to Vatican II a priest is someone who has neither the fulness of the priesthood nor the charisms of the laity'. This is not so; once again, the council has reaffirmed the authentic tradition on what presbyters are, the 'second order', helpers of the bishop. They are, like the bishop the leaders of the worshipping people; not mediators between God and the laity, but functionaries empowered by Christ to act in his name and to enable the people to offer his one eternal sacrifice; they speak his message in his name and guide and coordinate the witness and mission of their church. If the stress is not on their unlimited dignity but on their participatory status, this only goes with the prior stress that priesthood is not predicated of the Church at all except by participation in Christ's one priesthood.

9. Vatican II is a stocktaking, not a final pronouncement. On many important matters it presents a challenge which, after five years at least, has only cautiously and partially been taken up. Some points which I would open up in closing:

a. There is new stress on the local church as well as the universal Church. But 'collegiality' has now to be worked out at both levels, and we are hardly past the growing pains as we loosen the grip of bureaucratic centralization in the universal Church and, all too often, untrusting tyranny in the local church. One point becomes clearer- the concept of the local church needs much more thought. The present mammoth dioceses are far too big for truly human Christian relationships between bishop, clergy and people. The parish is in many cases too nearly a sociological non-entity to become a Christian reality. We need to learn from the experience of other traditions, and to find the right size and structure for the local church.

b. With the return of a more functional concept of ministry, the Catholic ministry is challenged to review its image of itself and to see, in the light of the Gospel of Jesus, the layman and prophet, how much traditional sacerdotalism and the spirituality which went with it not simply a pure response to the Gospel, but an amalgam of Christianity with age-old human elements innate in the carnal religious sense of mankind- a sense which is challenged radically not only by the O.T. prophets but above all by Jesus and Paul.

c. Ecumenical implications. I will simply open up a few questions raised by Vatican II, above all by the broader definition of ministry. (i) It is one thing to define what is central to a concept, but do we know what are the limits of validity of ministry?

(ii) Anglican orders (e.g.) were declared null on the basis of the restricted late medieval definition in terms of sacrifice. Is the position equally clear on the basis of a broader, more pastoral definition?

(iii) Where there is some degree of 'ecclesial reality', there must be some degree of participation in Christ's priesthood, and it seems that the Eucharist and ministry of such a group cannot be simply and entirely invalid.

(iv) All Catholic codification has bypassed the charismata; it has not tried to pin down prophecy. But may there not be an authentic prophetic ministry (typical, perhaps, of the Free Churches) even where the Catholic tradition cannot see its way to direct recognition of 'orders'? (Cf Ecumenism 3, 20-23).

-----