

Apostolic Succession in the New Testament

The need for clarity calls for a preliminary demarcation of the precise area under discussion. The following affirmations will serve to define the scope of this paper.

1. Our prime concern centers in the role of those individual Christians who, in the church of the New Testament, carried on the ministerial service of community leadership.

2. This paper prescind from the "sacerdotal" character of this ministry. As J.M.R. Tillard has pointed out, the transitional character of New Testament life shrouded the cultic aspect of ministry in silence:

"We have verified two points which seem to be certain.

First of all, the absence in the New Testament of a properly priestly designation of the Christian ministries...

On the other hand, we have discovered that the rise of the priestly vocabulary came about... under the aegis of an enlightened and extremely nuanced comparison with the institutions of the Old Testament."

3. The phrase "apostolic succession," as used in this paper, focusses attention on that aspect of ecclesial ministry which identifies it as a derivation from and an extension of the saving mission of Christ as first exercised by the Twelve (the "Apostles" par excellence).

4. The phrase "apostolic succession in the New Testament" refers to the New Testament in its ultimate literary stage as an historico-theological corpus illumined by the mature understanding of the inspired authors and reflecting the faith-convictions of the church itself.

I Relation of Ministry to the Gospel

In a perceptive article Père Yves Congar² has affirmed that the main concern in any discussion of apostolic succession is the abiding inherence of ministry in service of the Gospel. This principle emerges from a New Testament base which is much broader than the linguistic usages of the much discussed word, "apostolos"³. In a proportional yet true sense the principle enunciated by Père Congar applies to all those ministries which Paul describes as charismata (Rom 12:6-8; cfr 1 Cor 12:27-30; Eph 4:11-12). Because they are services to the life of the church and are exercised within its ambient, they all "make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12). The authenticity of these ministries, therefore, flows from and rests upon the life-giving mystery which the Gospel proclaims.

This relevance of ministry to the Gospel comes to the fore most clearly in New Testament references to what we shall term the apostolic ministry par excellence. Ministers who proclaim and teach the Gospel (apostoloi, prophētai, euaggelistai, didaskaloi) and those who guide the community in its evangelical life (episkopoi, presbyteroi, proistamenoι, poimenai, kybernetai⁴) are appraised far more for their fidelity to church teaching and its paradosis than for the human modalities which may have endorsed them as ministers. The New Testament has little to say about the precise way in which the apostolic ministry drew into its ranks men like Junias and Andronicus (Rom 16:7), Apollos (Acts 18:24-28; 1 Cor 1 - 4), Epaphras (Col 1:7; 4:12), Aristarchos (Phm 24), and the other ministers whom Paul commends. When the ministry of these men is spoken of in the New Testament, its purpose is always represented, at least implicitly, as the diffusion and radication

of the Gospel message in the life of the community.

This primary dimension of church ministry appears clearly in the explicit criterion which both Paul and John single out as the norm for ministerial authenticity. Though Paul was fully aware of the diverse origins of the mission given to him and that given to Apollos, he emphasizes that both Apollos and himself (and all preachers of the word) must face an identical judgment on the measure and quality of their fidelity to the Gospel (cfr 1 Cor 3:5 - 4:6). When, therefore, he defends the authority of his own ministry he goes beyond the divine character of its origin to stress the integrity with which he always proclaimed revealed truth (Gal 1:5 - 2:14; 2 Cor 4:1-18; 5:20 - 6:10). Without saying a word on the origin of the late first century ministries, John cites fidelity to the Gospel as the norm for judging their authenticity (1 Jn 4:1-3; 2 Jn 7-11; 3 Jn 12).

The New Testament writings, however, do not treat this theme in a merely academic way. Besides affirming the general norm of fidelity to the Gospel as the test of ministerial authenticity, the inspired writers often concretize this norm by stressing the need for accord between the ministers of the church and its divinely appointed leaders. Even St. Paul, though fully conscious of his own special vocation, was keenly aware that the success of his mission depended upon his acceptance by the authorities of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:1-35; Gal 2:1-10). In the letters of both Paul and John, approval or disapproval by these two recognized leaders authentically measures the status of all lesser church ministers (1 Thes 5:12-13; 1 Cor 4:17; 16:10-12; Col 1:7-8; 2:16-19; 4:10-14; 3 Jn 9-12).

Conclusion: - The New Testament focusses on fidelity to the Gospel as the criterion of ministerial authenticity. Concretely, this norm

meant that all ministers were subject to the favorable or adverse judgment of approved church leaders. This solid anchor is always present in the writings of Paul and John, even when they exalt the free gifts of the Spirit.

II Ministry and Mission in the New Testament

Though the New Testament has little to say about the "ordination" of ministers, it often emphasizes that ministry involved a mission from the Lord of glory acting through His Spirit to empower men for service of the Gospel; cfr. 1 Cor 12:4-11; Eph 5:10-13. From the very beginning, however, the founders of the church considered it necessary to ratify some of these divine missions with a manifest public voucher. This took place especially when ministry involved leadership in a local church or when missionary activity included the exercise of authority.

The New Testament contains no mention of a special act of ecclesial endorsement for the ministries of prophecy, teaching and healing. But scattered references describe how ministers who would govern the church were endorsed by a special rite. Thus the Twelve imposed hands on the Seven who would preside over the church of the Hellenists (Acts 6:1-6); the leaders of the church in Antioch officially deputed Paul and Barnabas for their extensive mission to the Gentile world (Acts 13:2-3); in his missionary journeys Paul imposed hands on those who would be overseers of the local communities (Acts 14:23; cfr 20:17,28-32). The role of Timothy as a church leader began with an imposition of hands by the elders (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6).

Without specifying the time-length of these commissioned ministries and without describing all their functions, the New Testa-

ment makes clear that, for the good of the church, a rite of endorsement was conferred upon those who would be leaders of the church. Whether this always took place we do not know; the examples we have cited could be typical of a general practice or they could be exceptional. All we can say with certainty is that, at times, a distinctive rite was used in the early church to endorse the minister and to call down God's special blessing on his work.

It is significant that the New Testament never interprets this commissioning as a link in a "pipe-line" to the Twelve and to the historical Jesus. Just as the charismata were an actual gift of the risen Christ, so the endorsement of a minister was seen as a present necessity for the life of the church. Implicitly, however, commission by the church involved the reality of derivation from the past. If the church endorsed a minister with a public act, it did this in order that he might dedicate himself to the service of the Gospel which drew all its power from the past saving deeds of Jesus which the Twelve were the first to proclaim.

An important example of this kind of commission is found in Paul's appointment of Timothy and Titus to rule the churches of his previous apostolate. Though the authenticity of these letters is questioned by some, they witness to four noteworthy facts in late 1st century church life:

1. Timothy and Titus are commissioned to assume a directive role in local churches where the founder can no longer be active.
2. They are empowered to act in the same way as did Paul himself (1 Tim 4:12-16; Tit 1:10 - 2:10).
3. Their appointment bestows on these two ministers the authority and duty to commission others for the work of ministry and to supervise their life and service (1 Tim 5:17-22; Tit 1:5-9).

4. The simple assumption in these letters that Timothy and Titus will be accepted by the local churches and the casual reference to Timothy's "ordination" (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6) intimate that appointed leadership was already commonplace in the church (cfr 1 Thes 5:12-13; 1 Cor 16:16; Phil 1:1; Acts 20:17-18,28).

Conclusion: - Even in the early days of the church, the Twelve in Jerusalem and leaders of the local churches publicly deputized others for works of ministry which involved the exercise of authority. This validation seemed to be necessary in order that the minister's authority would not be questioned. There is no indication that this commission was seen as tying a bond between the minister and the Twelve.

III Ministry, Mission, and the Twelve

The New Testament record of life in the 1st century church, whether in Palestine or in the Gentile churches of Paul, shows that Christians were mainly concerned with the opportunities and liabilities of the present, while they looked forward to the ultimate manifestation of the Lord of glory. Except for the first years of Christian life in Jerusalem, it would be difficult to find any special sense of dependence on the Twelve. Even when Paul bespeaks his esteem for the Jerusalem church as "the church of God" par excellence (1 Thes 2:14; Gal 1:13), one suspects that his thoughts are drawn to this city not because of the actual presence there of the Twelve (which is doubtful) but because the originary experiences of the Jerusalem community made it the "mother church" and transformed it into a symbol of the new Jerusalem.

At the same time, however, the living power of the Gospel as the heart and force of all ministry was bound to link the present

to the past. Ministry in churches that lived by the Gospel emanated from the dynamism of the Gospel itself. Later reflection on the words of Jesus, illumined by historical experience, gradually brought men to see that the saving work of Jesus involved a series of "sendings." Prompted by love, the Father "sent" his Son to live the Gospel. The Son, in turn, "sent" his intimates to proclaim the Gospel, prompting them not only by word of command but, even more, by the love which fired them to speak (cfr 2 Cor 4:13-15; 5:14-15). Indeed, the very reality of the Gospel bears an inner dynamic exigency to be manifested and to be radicated in the life of the church.

Prompted by the impulse of the Gospel and recognizing the missionary thrust of the charismata, the church of the 1st century felt constrained to express in her public life the "sending forth" which Jesus had emphasized as an essential requirement of his saving mission. The inner logic binding together Gospel and mission in the life of the church (as in the words and practice of Jesus) finds its classic expression in the words with which St. Paul affirms that the Gospel cannot beget faith unless the Gospel's intrinsic need for "mission" is fulfilled:

"How could they invoke one in whom they had no faith?

And how could they have faith in one they had never heard of?

And how hear without someone to spread the news?

And how could anyone spread the news without a commission

to do so?" (Rom 10:14-15)

Though Paul speaks here of the "sending" of Gospel preachers who would lay the "foundation" of local churches (cfr Eph 2:20), his words apply equally to the solicitude with which church founders

"commissioned" men to guide the church and to radicate the Gospel in its daily life. It is significant that the author of Ephesians groups together indiscriminately "apostoloi," "prphetai," and "poimenai" - "in the work of service, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11-12). In this text the "poimenai" share equally in the mission of the "apostoloi" and "prophetai" to illumine the Christian community and to safeguard it from deviation (cfr Eph 4:13-14).

This activity of the church in "sending" ministers to preach, to teach, to guide and to "oversee" was rooted in and flowered from the church's awareness of its compelling mission to serve the Gospel. Reflection on this actual experience was bound to widen and deepen a Christian understanding of history. Though at times Paul eschewed the historical dimension of Christianity to emphasize the "Now" of Christ's Lordship and the contemporary fullness of the Spirit's gifts (cfr 2 Cor 5:16 - 6:2), the Christian community itself came gradually to a more balanced estimate of the role of human history in the diffusion and radication of the Gospel. Men came to see that the Gospel was not only a gift from heaven but also a gift that had first entered into human history through the preaching of the Twelve whom Jesus had chosen and whom the Spirit had illumined.

This growing awareness of the role of history coupled with a growing need to safeguard the integrity of the Gospel was bound to throw new light on the mission and teaching of those who first featured in the historical economy of salvation. The ensemble of their mission, their gifts and their duties were seen as originary and normative. In the Semitic sense of the word, they were looked upon as "corporate personalities" who had first received

from Christ the fullness of the Gospel in which all others were to share. This is why, at the end of the 1st century, the Twelve are referred to as the "Twelve Apostles" par excellence (cfr Apoc 21:12-14). Whatever the local communities owed to Paul or to the other "apostoloi" who had founded them, they owed in an eminent way to the Twelve who were sent by Jesus himself to bear the full economy of salvation onto the level of human history.

By the year 60 A.D. awareness of the preeminent role of the Twelve was already exerting a marked influence on the literary form of the Gospels. (It is ironical that Luke, the disciple of Paul, is the most outstanding of the evangelists in denominating the Twelve with the title, "apostoloi.") While faithful to historical memories, the evangelists appear untroubled by obvious obscurities. Their main concern centers in the large role which the Twelve played in the ministry of Jesus for the future life of the church. This concern explains the hieraticized and ecclesial character of the Twelve as presented in the Gospel portraiture. It also provides the reason for the frequent blending of Jesus' words to the Twelve with later church directives to its own ministers (cfr Matt 10; 16:13 - 19:12; Mk 14:32-42; Lk 9:51 - 18:30). What is most significant is the "corporate personality" character of the Twelve which comes clearly to the fore when Jesus speaks of their mission, their role, and their authority (Matt 16:17-19; 18:15-18; Lk 12:4-12; Matt 28:16-20; Jn 17).

The mentality which gave this special coloration to the Gospel story of the Twelve reflects a conviction which eventually dominated church thought. With great gain for its own fidelity, the church came to realize that integral faith-response to God's saving action in the present rested on, flowed from and had to

square with the originary and eminent experiences of the Twelve. Integral church life must manifest both an existential and an historical dimension: "The city walls stood on twelve foundation stones, each one of which bore the name of one of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Apoc 21:14).

Nowhere to my knowledge does the New Testament explicitly draw the obvious conclusion to this principle as applied to ministry. "Qui tacet dicit nihil." Yet the conclusion was inescapable. Very shortly it comes to the fore in an axiom which is a piece of bed-rock in Christian tradition: "The ordained leaders of the church are the successors of the Twelve Apostles."

In the light of the treatment in this paper there is no need to nuance this affirmation. Far from suggesting any "pipeline" connection between church ministers and the Twelve, we think that the "succession" is to be found in the proportional order of relationship to the Gospel - the Twelve as endorsed by Jesus and His Spirit to be the originary proclaimers of the Gospels, and all other ministers as endorsed by the Lord and His Spirit through the church to carry on the role which the Twelve first exercised.

In things human the proportional relationship of succession from founder to follower always involves progressive diminution of verve, conviction and purpose. But the "succession" of which we speak is not merely human. The Gospel and the Spirit that gave life to the originary apostleship of the Twelve are the very same Gospel and Spirit that give life to all church ministry. Jesus spoke to the Twelve as "corporate personalities" when he said to them: "Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time" (Matt 28:20).

Footnotes

1. Jean M.R. Tillard, What Priesthood Has the Ministry? (Grove Booklets; Bramcote, Notts., 1973), p 26.
2. Yves Congar, "Composantes et idée de la Succession Apostolique," Oecumenica (1966), pp 61-80.
3. Like K.H. Rengstorf, art. "apostello" in TWNT I, 407-448,
 - Rudolph Schnackenburg discusses the complexities involved in the study of "apostolos". He concludes: "One thing is clear: there is no unified apostle-concept in the New Testament, so that there is a possibility of different conceptions of the apostolic ministry and of the principle of apostolicity". Cfr. "Apostolicity: The Present Position of Studies," One In Christ, VI, 3 (1970), p. 251 (243-273).
4. Paul's paratactic denomination of ministries does not exclude the patent fact that several could be exercised by the same person - as actually occurred in Paul's own case.
5. L. Bouyer, confronting the suggestion that the "Twelve" as the primordial group of apostles was a later fiction retrojected into the Gospel, calls attention to the witness which Paul gives to the "Twelve" in a piece which he has drawn from early tradition: "He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve" (1 Cor 15:1); cfr "Ministère ecclésiastique et succession apostolâque" in NRT 95,3 (1973), p. 247 (241-252). I have gained much from this article.