

Recognition of ministries: what is the real question?*

The question of the recognition of ministries remains central to the ecumenical task. More than one reunion scheme has come to grief precisely over this point. For the Catholic tradition the most prominent symbol of this is undoubtedly the bull *Apostolicae Curae* of Leo XIII, dated September 1896. The conclusions of this document, which have always been officially upheld, continue to mark Roman Catholic/Anglican relations in a way it is no exaggeration to call 'dramatic'. Every effort to move forward towards full sacramental communion inevitably comes up against it.

Two inadequate views

Anyone familiar with the material on 'recognition' of ministries will know that it turns in a groove: two radical positions oppose one another, each too radical to contain the truth.

On one side we find the minimalising position which comes down to seeing this recognition purely in terms of the future, with no serious account being taken of the profound significance of the breach, that is, of the fact that a certain group 'substituted' a new form of ministry for the one recognised by the great Tradition, at least from the time of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 120), as the guarantee of a continuity with the primitive Church.

On the other side we find the classic Catholic position which envisages 'recognition' of ministry purely from the perspective of an engrafting into the trunk of an uninterrupted succession of ordinations, a succession which has perpetuated communion with the primitive institution. Faced with a breach of this continuity, the broadest solution, for cases within the Catholic community, is a *sanatio in radice*, and for cases of the ministries of another community (apart from the eastern Churches and sometimes Old Catholics or Churches assimilated to them), re-ordination, which is rarely 'conditional'.

Let me say at once, to avoid objections, that this classical Catholic outlook is also seriously reductive at the ecumenical level. Let me give just one instance of this narrowness: the fact that, to ensure the validity of their ministry, some Anglican bishops have themselves been ordained by eastern or Old Catholic bishops, as if the only problem consisted in being inserted in such a way into the phylum of history. And justification can be given for the criticism made by some Orthodox theologians who think the weakness of the Catholic position can be summed up like this: in the long run, the quality of faith and evangelical living of the community and

* Fr Tillard first gave this paper at a symposium on ministry in Ottawa

of the minister matter little provided the minister has been validly ordained – that is, ordained by a bishop who has been validly ordained himself by a bishop who has been validly ordained. This criticism is a caricature, of course, but like all caricatures it has a grain of truth. The Catholic West – in which the Anglican tradition must be included – has not integrated Augustine's solution in the face of the Donatist crisis very well. Because, according to Augustine, the holiness of the minister does not affect the efficacy of the sacramental act which he performs, there has been a temptation to give a privileged and virtually exclusive status to the requirements for validity, as an action which can be canonically assured and controlled. The minister has been considered separately from his community; sometimes in theological elaboration he has been completely cut off from it. So the 'recognition' of ministry becomes reduced to a single line – the verification of its insertion into a continuity of acts of valid ordination. Its relation to the faith of the Church is by that very fact then seen to be all but exclusively linked up with the intention of the person who ordains another minister by passing on to him the power of valid action: this person must have the intention to do what the Church wills.

The acute unease which one feels about this outlook – which seems to have persisted as the Catholic Church's official position – arises from what the ecumenical quest itself has brought to our notice about the nature of 'recognition'. The problem really is one of knowing whether or not a particular ecclesial community is in communion with the Church of the apostles, and therefore whether one 'recognises' in it the essential features of the apostolic community as these have been understood and explained by the great Tradition. We should ask of ministries only questions related to this broader 'recognition', which is, let it be said, the only essential one. Ministries do indeed stem from the reality of the succession of all the Christian generations within the apostolic Tradition. But this belonging is radically inseparable from the presence of other elements in the same succession, above all of the apostolic faith, worship and mission. And all these elements influence each other.

So far western ecclesiology has understood this mutual influencing in a way which tends to give the function of ministry a unilaterally privileged position. It holds, and with reason, that in the grace of the Holy Spirit, ministry has the major responsibility for *episkope* (of which the episcopate is only one form). This implies that the keeping and nurturing the local churches in the apostolic faith, the faithful celebration of the sacraments, missionary zeal, are not just entrusted to it but depend on it. It is the backbone of ecclesial life precisely because it stands – at least for all the catholic traditions – within the thrust of the calling of the apostolic group in all that goes beyond the once-for-allness of the witness given by this group to the Lord's resurrection. But as regards this mutual influencing, this kind of western ecclesiology has left

too much in the shade or forgotten the complementary aspect of this efficacy, which by its nature cannot be dissociated from it. Ministry is authentically ecclesial only when it is exercised in and with the community and not just for the community. The community depends on ministry, but ministry also depends on the community.

The role of the local church regarding fidelity to the apostolic Tradition

1) This dependence is not realised just at the level of liturgical action of which the community, as Fr Congar puts it, is the integral subject. Remember the lovely formula of Guerric of Igny in the twelfth century: 'The priest does not consecrate alone, nor does he offer alone: the whole assembly of believers consecrates and offers with him' (*Sermo* 5, PL, 85, 87). During the first centuries the role of the community and the choice of the bishop went along the same lines. That is something too well-known to need dwelling on. Let me just refer to the fact that evidence for this occurs much earlier than is generally thought. For while the letter of Clement to the Corinthians (c. 95) contains the famous paragraphs 42-44 on what has been termed succession by historical continuity, it also refers, in two passages which I find increasingly to the point, to the approval and even the authority of the local church regarding the choice or the continuance of its ministers. Bishops are 'those who have been appointed by them (the apostles) or later by other eminent men with the approval of the whole church (*suneudokesases tes ekkleestas pases*) and have fulfilled their office towards the flock of Christ in a blameless way' (44 : 3), who can, when they feel their presence has become damaging, go away in obedience 'to the orders of the multitude' (54 : 2). It is clear that the major role played here by the community is also to be traced out in the whole difficult question of the ordination of persons constrained to receive the rite despite their reluctance. The will of the community can not only precede the free acquiescence of the man who is to be their minister but can even include his reluctance in the unfolding of the rite of ordination. In such a case only this call from the community may be held to interpret God's calling of this man to the ministry. In study of the material relating to instances of ordination *coactus* or *invitus* (constrained or reluctant), there is one point which has not been deepened out enough. If this member of the faithful was brought before the bishop for motives other than the evangelical well-being of the community, even if those motives were very noble ones, its resistance would make the ordination null and void. The will of the community is imperative to the extent that it is rooted in the purpose of guaranteeing in its own life fidelity to the apostolic Tradition. Here – and it can never be overemphasised – the intention of the minister who ordains is a response in formal terms not to the consent of the ordinand but to what is willed by the community. The problem with western theology is that little by little it has shifted the decision which leads to ordination solely towards

the ordinand, cut off from any truly living link with this will of the community. The ordinand's 'yes' has been abstracted from the community's own relation to the apostolic Tradition.

2) The relation of the local church to the apostolic Tradition is, I think, also to be found at the important point when it enters into the actual rite of ordination. The prayer at the consecration of a bishop handed down by the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus of Rome shows that two groups of actors are present. The importance of this document for any serious reflection on the theme of ministry is accepted: 'Let there be ordained as bishop a man who has been chosen by all the people, of blameless character. When his name has been announced and he has given his consent, the people (*populus*) are to come together with the presbyterium and the bishops present on a Sunday. With the consent of all, let the bishops lay their hands on him and let the presbyterium stand without any action, and all keep silence, praying in their hearts for the Spirit to come down. After this, let one of the bishops present, at the request of all (*ab omnibus rogatus*) pray as he lays his hands upon the man to be made bishop in these words . . . When he has been made bishop, let all (*omnes*) give him the kiss of peace . . .'

It can be seen that the ordination rite is not an action which unfolds between the person of the bishop who ordains and of the man ordained. It unfolds between a group of bishops on one side – witnesses of the living presence of the apostolic Tradition in their own communities, and charged with passing on 'the power of the sovereign Spirit' for the apostolic *episkope* – and the community on the other. As the community still lacks a pastor, it is made up both of the presbyterium and of the whole people of God. The 'descent of the Spirit' is to come about while the whole community prays. But also thanks to this prayer. And it is to this prayer that, through the mediation of the epiclesis and the gesture of one of the bishops, God in some fashion responds, the liturgical action of the bishop bringing about the aggregation of the newly-ordained to the group of those who truly exercise *episkope* on God's behalf. Much more, the first action of the newly ordained bishop is to preside at the Eucharist where the community expresses and nourishes its true identity. Ordination therefore implies that the community takes an active part. And the fact that this is not the part of the agent directly instrumental in passing on the power of exercising *episkope* does not make it a secondary and therefore an insignificant part. The prayer of the people and the consecratory epiclesis are enclosed one within the other.

3) Again, when the people choose one of its members for the episcopate – always within the traditional scheme set out above – because it judges him to be 'blameless' (*irreprehensibilis*), it necessarily includes in its verdict a judgment about his faith as a believer. Here again is proved true the mutual influencing referred to earlier. The minister is to be the one who will keep this local church in the apostles' faith. But

this faith is not something other than the faith which this church *hic et nunc* bears within it, which gives it life, and which the minister himself has received from the church.

It is of the first importance for our problem that this should be understood. Ministry is a service of the faith which the minister receives from the community. He is not above the community. Nor, in the case with which we are concerned, is it the minister who brings faith to the community. His church comes first with its faith and the conformity of this faith to the apostolic Tradition. He has been ordained within this transmitted faith for the sake of this faith and so that his church may continue to transmit it. It is this faith of the community which bears and encompasses his act of ordination. It has not been sufficiently understood that the reference to the *fides Ecclesiae*, the faith of the Church, invoked in the case of infant baptism and seen as enveloping the whole rite, in fact holds true for every sacrament celebrated in a community enrolled in the apostolic faith. The classical expression *sacramenta sunt sacramenta fidei* (sacraments are sacraments of faith) must be understood in a more precise sense than is usually applied to it. For they are not just *sacramenta* of the faith of the individual who receives them. They are fundamentally *sacramenta* of the faith of the Church in which and by which they are celebrated. This is as true of order as of baptism. Any community which was to put itself at the fringes of the apostolic faith, at least in regard to its essential points, would by so doing be putting itself at the fringes of sacramental life even if its minister had received ordination from the bishop of a solidly orthodox Church. An authentic ecclesiology obliges us to deal more sensitively with the reductive outlook which says: it is enough to have a valid minister to have a sacrament.

4) To go further: in exercising his *episkope* the minister can be an authentic servant of the word of faith only if he remains attentive to his church. Here arises again the question of the *sensus fidelium*. I think we must see this *sensus fidelium* in its essential relation to what we in the West call the Church's indefectibility. The classic instances, which marked Newman's reflections on this subject so deeply, show that the *episkope* of ministers in matters of faith is itself subject to the control of the faith as lived in the community – that is to say, in fact, to the living Tradition. It is astounding that in present-day studies on 'reception' – which are of prime importance for ecumenism if it is to have a future – there has been so little insistence on the link between reception and this living Tradition, and hence with the *sensus fidelium*.

If then there has to be a concrete judgment passed about a Church's faith, it is important that it should not be limited to an inquiry into what its ministers teach or confess. There must also be an attempt to discover whether, and how, the community 'recognises' itself – that recurring word – in the voice of its ministers. For it 'receives' in proportion as it

'recognises' in what is proposed to it precisely *its own* apostolic faith, and so *its own* fidelity – throughout all the succeeding generations – to what was taught by the apostolic Church. If we apply this to the ordination of a bishop in the faith of his local church we are then obliged to explain that this faith is just as much the faith lived daily, in the very fibre of the living Tradition, as the faith of the pastors' verbal teaching which nourishes it. In as far as this teaching is actualised, with the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, it is living Tradition.

The 'recognition' of the ministry of another Church after a schismatic break

If we adopt these perspectives we are obliged to rethink the complex question of the 'recognition' of the ministry of another Church. It seems clear to me that this 'recognition' must be based not just on the quality of the one who ordains – the validity of his own ordination – but also and perhaps chiefly on the faith of the community for which a person is ordained. And from the outset it must be made clear that far from being laxist, this outlook is much more demanding.

1) The question is particularly important in regard to the judgment to be passed about the initial act leading to a break. Let us think about the very typical case of the first Anglican ordinations. It is indeed this case and some personal study of the way the verdict of *Apostolicae Curae* evolved which has led me to the considerations put forward here. I am convinced that the method followed by Leo XIII's commission was bound to lead to a dead-end, precisely for lack of an ecclesiology. Such a problem could not be regulated just on the basis of historical evidence. We have to ask what was the faith of the community, or again how did it 'receive' what the first English reformers proposed to it in the new rites. It is not then simply a question of finding out whether these reformers had the intention of making a break. It also involves the will of the local churches as such. Does a local church leave the universal communion simply because, without its realising it or at any rate without its being fully aware of the consequences involved, it has at its head a pastor not in total alignment with the faith and practice of the Tradition in which, till that point, all its generations had 'succeeded' one another? That is the real question.

2) It is essential to note that this question touches again on the perplexity of the scholastic tradition faced with the role played by the intention of the minister – though in a new context. And again there arises in what I have put forward the intuition of what has been called the 'externalist' school.

For this school of thought, wherever there is an authentic ecclesial context the minister's intention cannot be defined in itself apart from any reference to the community's intention, however minimal this may be, when it is gathered to celebrate the sacrament. For this school locates

the minister within the Church and holds that he is placed there to accede to the need and will of the liturgical assembly that he should preside both as its servant and as 'steward of the divine mysteries' on its behalf. The assembly's intention is so far imposed upon him that if he comes forward to preside over the celebration of a sacrament with a perverse or schismatic intention, and does not explain this openly so as to make it understood, then it is not his intention but the community's which prevails. Despite all, the sacrament is celebrated in the Tradition of the apostolic Church. The assembly's desire, and the assumption that the minister in question is not contradicting it, connect with the deep intent of this Tradition. There is no celebration outside the apostolic Tradition except in a situation of connivance between celebrant and assembly. This is why, it seems to me, the intention of causing a breach cannot be deduced simply on the basis of the ministers' doctrinal position.

3) The problem of the 'recognition' of ministries then, seen in this light, is set in a different framework from the usual scheme. If one feels confident that the leaders' doctrinal position is incompatible with the vision of Tradition, it is necessary to study carefully at what moment, and under what special pressures of preaching and politics, the community *as such* made the 'innovators'' ideas its own. This is where the problem really starts. But it is also right to ask to what extent the people *as such* really did change their outlook at that point and opt for a break with what is essential to the Tradition handed down and lived until that point. For example, the fluctuations of the Anglican Churches – to which the history of the Prayer Book, and the rise (since Laud) of Catholic parties bears witness – and the upholding within *comprehensiveness* of a firmly traditional element allow us to ask questions about the solidity of the way in which the Anglican Communion *as such* adheres to the ideas of a Cranmer or Jewel.

To go further, though one rarely meets with a schism that has no mixture of some doctrinal element at least savouring of heresy as regards the faith of Tradition, it is important to remember that schism does not necessarily imply a break with what is essential in the common faith. This explains why the Roman Catholic Church continues to 'recognise' the reality of the eastern episcopate, though (it must be emphasised) all the Orthodox Churches *pertinaciter* reject Vatican I's solemn definition about the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. To come back to the example of the Anglican communion, there can be no doubt that a schism did take place – Pius V indeed put the seal on the situation. What is not so clear is that, on the part of the local churches as such involved at the time, there was an obstinate (*pertinax*) rejection of the traditional vision of the Church and the ministry which intended to set up another Church. This is all the more so because such a rejection would have had to come from the adhering of churches *as such* to a doctrine which had been set out

with all the clarity needed to convince an ordinary parishioner. The notion of *peritina*, essential here, does not hold just for individual cases but also for groups. So if today, after a history during which the most traditional vision has ceaselessly resurfaced, the Anglican communion 'recognises' in this vision its own faith, then it seems to me that it must be concluded that, in its case, the apostolic ministry has probably never been interrupted.

4) A final, and sometimes forgotten, point must be mentioned. The ministry of communities which have become 'separated' in the course of history from what is called the Mother Church cannot be judged in the same way as that of communities which have been born without any relation to this Mother Church and out of the sheer intuition of an inspired individual or group of believers. The case of Anglicans or Lutherans is ecclesiologicaly different from that of Adventist or Kimbanguist groups. At first sight more serious, a schismatic breach all the same has ecclesiological consequences in this sphere which are less difficult to weigh than the pure and simple emergence of a new group. For a stream which branches off still has so much of the river's water that the break is never total.

In the other case, quite the contrary, there is a new reality with no direct attachment to any great current of the river of Tradition. A new source has sprung forth.

The analyses I have made of the connection between the community and the new rite of ordination hold good only in time of schism, of a direct break with the Mother Church. However, apart from extremely rare exceptions, the groups which have arisen without schism also have a conception and practice of ministry which is implicitly equivalent to a break with the tradition of the old Churches. They seem to be more in continuity with the 'protests' of the Reformation than with the line running through the first centuries. So it is necessary for a Church of the catholic tradition, wanting to 'recognise' the ministry of such a community, to study to what extent these communities have come into being in a way harmonious with the nature of the Church as this is conceived of in the Tradition stemming from apostolic times to the fragmentations which followed the Reformation. Questions need to be asked about the nature of the Church rather than about similarities in ministries.

It may happen that we shall discover how, under different forms and ideas, at least the main lines of apostolic *episkope* have reappeared in such communities. For it is not necessary for the threefold ministry – deacon, presbyter, bishop – to be attested in the classical form for apostolic *episkope* to exist. The *id quod requiritur et sufficit* would consist in such cases in the fact that all the functions or services essentially required by the life of the Church in conformity with the apostolic institutions are present. The classical triad makes them actual

in a form which has the burnish of the centuries upon it and quite certainly represents them in what we might call the full form. But it must be asked whether the essentially apostolic functions and services may not re-emerge in other forms. The question of 'recognition' may then be resolved in a positive way. We still have to learn – but that is no part of the present study – the way in which this 'recognition', once acquired, will apply the canonical soldering to these ministries and those of the old Churches.

I was asked to speak explicitly as a Catholic theologian about the 'recognition' of ministries of other Churches, especially of the Anglican Church. I will conclude on a note of hope: it may come about that we reach a discovery that even at this level, fundamental to ecumenism, our separations have not prevented the evangelical source from soaking through everything. 'Others'? Maybe! But first of all brothers and sisters.

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In my daily dealings with scientists I am struck again and again by the important role of the little word 'perhaps' in their scientific method of theorizing. A Nobel Prize winner in physics recently confided: when we think we have solved a problem we are immediately faced with ten new questions! This 'perhaps' is, alas, almost completely missing from our theological discourse with its axiomatic form and its over-eagerness to objectify.

'Ecumenism as Celebration', p. 33.