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Mary Finbarr Coffey

## Ministry and Leadership in Early Christianity

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to return to the authoritative sources of Christian faith in the New Testament, for the purpose of restating their truth and meaning in order to meet the critical challenge of ministry and leadership in the Church of our time. One disturbing feature is that the ordained ministry has assumed an ‘all-importance’ as ministry. We tend to think that the only valid ministry in the Church is the ministry of the ordained. Related challenges to Church leadership had been aptly articulated as early as nineteen seventy by two German theologians, Thierry Maertens and Jean Frisque. I quote their text in full here:

“Do the attitudes of some Christians and some leaders (‘responsible ones’) in the Church not stand in contradiction to the reality of its mystery? And is this still not the case, even when one is not permitted to make the charge of hypocrisy for fear of offending public decency (because only Christ can judge the heart)? At least one can call it an illusion.

It is the illusion of those who believe in the Mystery of Poverty in the Church, but hold an Office or a position that is the inheritance of a ‘better-than-thou’ attitude, one that is based on a calculated imperial order. It is the illusion of those who know that the Church is not of this world, but use means simultaneously that resemble the might of this world-order – diplomacy, politics and influence – to spread the gospel. It is the illusion of those who believe in the humanity of Jesus, but are incapable of listening to a human being, of evaluating with him

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the serious consequences of his ‘paths’, of respecting his search and his hesitations.”<sup>1</sup>

This is undoubtedly still true. Therefore, the assumption behind this paper is that the earliest extant Christian documents and the letters of St. Paul should inform current Church practice. This does not rule out the belief that the Church’s application of the Gospel grows and develops through time, as the Holy Spirit guides her into all truth.<sup>2</sup> An ordained Christian priesthood is one example of such innovation. But not all developments here have been sound. Hence the urgent need to return *ad fontes* for the sake of continuing the mission of Jesus in the world and in the Church, particularly since today’s world is less patriarchal than that of the nineteen seventies – in patches anyway.

In order to build up a picture of Church life in the first century I will discuss prophecy as far as space allows, and, more especially because Jesus viewed himself as standing in this prophetic tradition. Luke stresses the title of prophet for Jesus (4:24; 7:16; 7:39; 9:19). Jesus is to be a light of revelation for Gentiles (2:32; Isaiah 42:6). He undergoes prophetic anointing and rejection (4:18-27). Jesus’ death is prophetic (13:33). The disciples on the way to Emmaus saw him as a prophet (24:19). He has a concern for the stranger in the land (10:29); the outcast and the widow (17:11ff).

## THE NEW PEOPLE OF ISRAEL AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ‘TWELVE’

During his earthly life and ministry, Jesus gathered many disciples around him, some of whom he also called apostles sending them out to preach, teach, and heal others (see the Synoptic Gospels). In Mark 3:14 we are told “And he appointed twelve to be with him and to be sent out to preach”. The significance of the twelve in early Christianity is not as an institution but as a ground for a further institution. Jesus saw these whom he called as a symbol of the New People of Israel. This is the significance of the twelve; therefore it has an ecclesiological meaning. The Community to be founded was to see itself as founded upon the new promise. As far as we know, there is no attempt in early Christianity to organise a Church around the council of the twelve. In the light of eschatological hope there was no need for a visible council of the Twelve. The Markan idea of what a disciple should be is: to “be with Him” (3:13) and to be “sent out to preach” (3:14). The apostles are to speak in His name, but also to have the power of authority and to do the things that Jesus did: to confront evil.

1 *Kommentar zu den Neuen Lesungen Bd. 6* (Verlag Herder, Freiburg 1970)

2 *Amoris Laetitia* #3

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These apostles, especially Peter and a core group known as “the Twelve,” would seem to have been the natural leaders of this New Community, that is to say, of those who continued to believe in Jesus after his death and resurrection. Yet his “brothers” James and Jude, members of Jesus’ own family, evidently also became influential leaders of the early Church, as did Barnabas and Paul and several others who also came to be called “apostles.”

Soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus, however, the early Christians also began using a variety of other titles for those who led and served the community of believers, as seen in various texts of the New Testament. Some of these titles were used for itinerant preachers who spread the Christian message throughout the Roman Empire, while others designated the resident leaders of local communities. At first, the most prominent leaders seem to have been called *apostles*, *prophets*, and *teachers*, among various other titles. Yet by the mid-second century, the church had developed a fairly uniform structure of leadership, consisting of three different “orders” called *bishops* (overseers), *presbyters* (elders), and *deacons* (ministers), despite some ongoing regional variations. In all of this, however, the emphasis was not on the authority or status of the leaders as rulers, but remained on their responsibilities to serve and care for the people in their communities.

### SOME FOUNDATIONAL NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS SHOWING THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF MINISTRY

Romans 12:6-9 and Ephesians 4: 11-15 are two classic places where the ministry of the Church is spelt out. God has appointed in the Church: first, Apostles; second Prophets, third Teachers, then Workers of miracles, those gifted with Healing, the Helpers (that is, those who bear the burdens of others), Administrators (helmsmen or directors), Speakers in tongues. These gifts, according to Paul are given by the Spirit to equip the ‘saints’ for work of ministry. The term ‘to serve; to minister’ – Gk. διακονέω/*diakoneo* – occurs 37 times in the New Testament, most often in the Gospels, where Jesus stresses that he himself “came not to be served but to serve”. In Mark 10:45, we learn that the Son of Man did not come as an object of service (or to be a recipient of service), but to give his whole life as a redemptive offering. Jesus is stating that his life was this kind of ransom; it was a payment whereby others can become free; it was a life of *diakoneo*/service. According to John Donahue S.J., Jesus uses the term (*diakoneo*) in Mark 10:45 to refer ‘to the lowest form of house-slave’ to the one who cleans boots in the Ancient world. His followers must do the same! This is the model of leadership as service being proposed. It is good

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news for a redemptive audience only! Discipleship is not simply following behind Jesus, but sharing in the pattern of his life. This is the work of equipping the ‘saints’, of building up the Body of Christ; it is always unfinished, until as Paul tells us, we achieve mature manhood in Christ.

From the very beginning in the life of the Church there have been leaders in the Church. We see this from 1 Thess. 5:12, the first Church document, where Paul calls on the members of the Community to “respect those who are working among you.”

All have been called to ministry in the Church; but not all have been called to the same Office, this is, His gifts were that some were: Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors (shepherds), and Teachers (Ephesians 4:11-12). There was room for a variety of gifts in the early Church and it was very much the Church of co-responsibility. In each of the lists of leaders, that is, in Ephesians 4:11-15 and Romans 12:6-9 apostles and prophets are always mentioned first. This suggests that the apostolic and prophetic Offices have primacy in the Church, at least at its origin.

### PROPHETS

The prophets are an important group in early Christianity. Antioch, one of the early Christian Communities is led by prophets and teachers. Acts 13:1 names five “prophets and teachers” as leaders of that Christian Community, among them were listed Barnabas and Paul. Several other Christians are also called prophets in Acts 11:27; 15:32, and 21:10. A prophet is an inspired person who speaks on behalf of the Lord and on behalf of those who have no one to speak for them.

In Acts 20: 7-12 there is evidence that the prophets celebrated the Eucharist; here Paul spoke at a gathering of the Community that lasted many hours. Furthermore, 1Corinthians 11 shows that there were women prophets: Here Paul tells us that a woman must not prophesy with her head uncovered. In this chapter Paul is not talking about behaviour but dress; he is not talking about women, but about men and women, although he places more emphasis on woman. Paul is saying that a woman may prophesy in Church provided her head is covered. To prophesy in this context means to give a homily, to read the scriptures and to lead prayers. This was Church practice and Paul has no problem with it. Prophecy was one of the many gifts in the New Testament.

### TEACHERS

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of preaching with wisdom, preaching instruction, together with faith, healing,

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miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues and the interpretation of tongues. Donald Gelpi S.J. proposes that Paul seems to have envisaged two pastoral forms of teaching: For Paul true wisdom is the understanding that comes only through faith in Jesus Christ, who is divine Wisdom personified. 'Preaching with wisdom', presumably meant the kerygmatic proclamation of the Good News about Jesus, who is the power of God, the Wisdom of God. This is similar to prophecy, but it differs from prophecy in its concern not only to proclaim, but to explain. Gelpi proposes Peter's Pentecost sermon as an example of early Kerygmatic teaching.

'Teaching instruction' is concerned less with initial proclamation and more with explaining the authentic meaning of the Good News that has already been believed.<sup>3</sup>

### HOW COULD EARLY CHURCH PRACTICE INFORM CONTEMPORARY CHURCH LEADERSHIP?

First, every member of the Church continually strives to accept the Gospel which aptly describes the task of ministers as 'slaves'. This understanding of leadership is unique to the New Testament. Something very new concerning leadership has happened with Jesus.<sup>4</sup> If God in Jesus Christ acts like this, then perhaps we should be a little more humble. Discipleship in the Church is a life of freedom from sin,<sup>5</sup> from law<sup>6</sup> and from death.<sup>7</sup> Manifestations of this freedom include freedom to be servants of one another. If we are really free we do not have to establish our freedom at the expense of others, not even sometimes!

Second, Church leadership adopts the general principle of a diversification of ministries instead of the current practice of confining several functions to the ordained ministry. In practice, the person with a gift of 'teaching instruction'<sup>8</sup> could be authorized by the Church to teach and to preach, having received the necessary formation. This does not require ordination. The same could be done for those who show signs of gifts of discernment of spirits, and for those with the gift of prophecy.<sup>9</sup>

Different functions and ministries can be developed. Find a bigger function for existing Church lay ministries, all of which congregate around the Liturgy of the Eucharist at present. The

3 Gelpi, Donaldm *Charism and Sacrament, A Theology of Christian Conversion*. New York: Paulists's Press, 1977, pp.63-96.

4 Nicholas King, S.J. Paper given at the *Theological Association of Great Britain*, Swanick, September 2018.

5 Romans 6:18; 1Corinthians 7:22; Galatians 5:13

6 Romans 6:14; 10:4

7 Romans 6:23; 7:5-16

8 1Corinthians 12:8

9 1Corinthians 12:10

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work of 'Readers' could be extended beyond the parish Liturgy of the Word. Wherever a violation of truth is detected, a 'Reader' could be called to preach. A Eucharistic minister needs to be a person with a genuine interest in the community, and, in society, especially where there is brokenness. Catechists are presently confined to transmitting the truths of the faith in a way the Church deems necessary; this task could be expanded to include exploring the expressions and the truth of the Faith. Ministries ought not to revolve round the Liturgy only, or around the ordained ministry. Each member has received a gift of the Spirit, an independent function and responsibility. Depending on the needs of contemporary society new ministries could be introduced and authorized, thereby consolidating the life of the Church so that it serves the Mission both within and outside itself.

Third, the contemporary Church accepts that the baptised share the same responsibility for building up the Body of Christ: some in ordained ministries and others in non-ordained ministries. We do not have to have everyone ordained to confirm his/her ministry. Earlier we noted that it is not possible to trace the present Church Offices of priest, bishop and pope back to the origins. Rather, we saw a stage of different ministries initially which quickly crystalized into the Office of bishop, who centralised and unified the pastoral ministry of the Church. In the contemporary Church the task of the bishop could be evolved, so that he is to ensure that all the gifts of the Spirit are functioning.

Fourth, the contemporary leadership acknowledges that office holding in the Church is an expression of ministry. Priesthood as a later evolution is a function of ministry, rather than ministry an expression of priesthood. Priesthood, bishopric and papacy are functions of ministry or service, rather than ministry an expression of the office.

Finally, apply Paul's 'tests' of the kerygmatic tradition<sup>10</sup>; the test of Agape (love)<sup>11</sup> to *all* those who present themselves for ministry in the contemporary Church. It is important to note that it is possible to possess charisms without love.<sup>12</sup> Paul also applies the test of building up the community for Mission in the world.<sup>13</sup> 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.'<sup>14</sup> Assessment of gifts and graces ought not to be legalistic or narrow, but would itself be a charismatic exercise.<sup>15</sup>

10 1 Corinthians 12:3; Galatians 1:6; 2:14ff

11 1Corinthians 13; Galatians 5:22-26

12 1Corinthians 13:1-3

13 Romans 14:17ff; 15:2.

14 1Corinthians 14:1ff.

15 Dunn, J., *Jesus and the Spirit*, Michigan: Eerдамans Publishing Co, 1977, pp. 291 ff.

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### CONCLUSION

If ministers are to be instruments of God, then they must understand themselves in terms of Jesus Christ. He is the One sent by the Father: nothing can be done without Him. The will of the Father becomes the important thing. It is the responsibility of a minister to be another Christ, to do what He did within one's limitations. It is important to keep this in mind, lest ministries become careers. An important quality of a Church leader and of each person in ministry is that he or she has come to serve and not to be served.

**Challenges of the Virtual World.** For many people, immersion in the virtual world has brought about a kind of 'digital migration', involving withdrawal from their families and their cultural and religious values, and entrance into a world of loneliness and of self-invention, with the result that they feel rootless even while remaining physically in one place. The fresh and exuberant lives of young people who want to affirm their personality today confront a new challenge: that of interacting with a real and virtual world that they enter alone, as if setting foot on an undiscovered global continent. Young people today are the first to have to effect this synthesis between what is personal, what is distinctive to their respective cultures, and what is global. This means that they must find ways to pass from virtual contact to good and healthy communication.

– POPE FRANCIS, *Christ is Alive*, (Dublin: Veritas) p. 35.