

The times in which we live: a historical-theological reflection

Listening to History and Reality

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For the Church, and in particular ordained ministry, what does it mean to be in the world but not of the world? Precisely because of being 'mission', God's people cannot not be in relationship with the world according to the customs and language of each historical era. It is an adventure – filled commitment that leaves little room for rigidity, closed doors, or antiquated methods, but at the same time requires a careful discernment process in which the relationship between ordained ministry and laity is fundamental. The author is a professor of systematic theology.

Faced with the reality of today's world, I will try to discern and offer here – as much as possible with 'eyes fixed upon Jesus' (cf. Heb 12:2) -- a few reflections on the exercise of ordained ministry in society today and in the life of Christian communities.

Time and Place

In particular, I address my thoughts to 'secular clergy' within the wider context of the people of God. Taken literally, the word 'clergy' means 'a section (*kleros* (gr) lat, *clerus*) of God's people living in the world'. The Latin adjective '*saecularis*' specifically refers to bishops, deacons and priests who live 'in the world', not 'outside' it.

Similarly, 'world' translates from the Latin word, '*mundus*'. In John's Gospel, '*mundus*' represents the vital environment in which the Word of God finds his dwelling place, his tent, his space (Jn 1:14); it is the same space in which his disciples live and into which they are sent, whilst not being 'of the world'. (Jn 17:16,18).

A *saeculum*, on the other hand, refers to *time* in the sense of duration, of occurring during a period of history.

To sum up: bishops, deacons and priests live in the world together with the whole people of God, fully conscious of the epoch in which they are living. The identity and mission of ordained ministry can only be understood in the light of these two Cartesian axes: time and place.

1. Church-world relationship

Sixty years ago, Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council with the clear intention that the Church correspond more fully to the Gospel within the changing historical context in which she found herself. He called this process of making the Gospel relevant, '*aggiornamento*' (updating).

If we wish to look for the *golden thread* running through the Council, we need to retrace our

steps in order to follow the turbulent relationship between the Church and the world over time. It is not by chance that the last Constitution to be approved was the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, which saw the most contentious discussions of the Council despite it being closest to the original inspiration of John XXIII.

Pope Francis appears to be following in the footsteps of his predecessors. The extremely polarised reactions that his pontificate provokes need - in my modest opinion - to be brought back to this ardent, much needed and unwavering choice. It is not a coincidence that recurring accusations in recent debates betray a certain fear, if we are not careful, of slipping into becoming disciples 'of the world' rather than 'in the world'. In fact, we often hear of the damage caused by *secularism* and *worldliness*, and the risk of it causing an indiscriminate easing of the believer's conscience towards all he or she is presented with.

Pope Francis has never been afraid to hide his concern regarding the risks posed by our relationship with the world. He sees the dangers of Gnosticism and Pelagianism as a threat that can result in a loss of faith. On a pastoral level, he has always warned against *spiritual worldliness* and *clericalism* (hierocracy).

2. Discernment

If we take as our starting point the Word made flesh, then we can safely conclude that *mundus* and *saeculum* form part of God's salvific plan in Jesus.

However, this does not prevent all sorts of tensions - and even real 'spiritual conflict' - to arise between *mundus*, *saeculum* and the 'believer's conscience'. With utmost patience and prudence, Christian tradition constantly invites us to extricate ourselves from our everyday, existential condition through 'discernment'. In this way, we become better able to distinguish between the 'spirit of God' and the 'spirit of the world' (I Cor 2:12).

At an ecclesial level, this signifies an ability to 'scan' the signs of the times and, as a community, interpret them in the light of the Gospel as Jesus invites us in Mt 16:2-3. This *evangelical, ecclesial discernment*, practised together in a synodal style, requires care and humility; acceptance and conviviality, listening and dialogue.¹

Thus, we cannot limit ourselves to studying the *mundus* and *saeculum* as phenomenon, or only collecting statistical, sociological and psychological data. Something or Someone -- without whose help we would surely die of 'over-diagnosis' - is missing.

"Because there is a danger", affirms Pope Francis, "to think, today, that making a synodal journey or having an attitude of synodality means to sound out peoples' opinions, what this or that person thinks, and then to hold a meeting, to agree....[...] If there is no Holy Spirit, there is no Synod. If the Holy Spirit is not present, there is no synodality."²

3. A contemplative gaze

Every religion has its so-called 'traditionalists' who believe in the immutability of the words and actions of their founder or the members of their own community. Instead, for Christ's disciples, it is essential to learn to 'read' the signs of the times - *tempus* - in the Spirit of truth,

or rather the *Kairos*, this moment we are living with others and with God in the Risen Jesus.

It is imperative to see the world with '*a contemplative gaze*', a faith-filled gaze capable of discovering a God who is Gold and Light under all things: in our cities, homes, streets and squares. "He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth and justice.", writes the Pope in *Evangelii Gaudium* [71], "This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered." Yet we must not stop at the discovery of the Risen One present in the world; we must show Him, make Him visible to everyone! But in what way?

Responding to urgent questions

The nature of our experience, language and ecclesial configuration depends on getting the relationship right between the Church and the world.

1. Experience and Language

When the Church's missionary mandate begins to fade, one of the consequences is a language that is repetitive, stereotypical, suffocating, and irrelevant. We hide behind past formulas in order to hide our inability to re-enter the game in the present. How many times do we hear others say they are tired of hearing the recitation of antique formulas, with little relevance for everyday life?

It is not by chance that the late Bishop Klaus Hemmerle invited the youth of his diocese to speak with him a number of years ago: "Teach me about your life, your thinking, speaking, being, and your questions, so that I might learn new ways of communicating the message entrusted to me."³

Young people, above all, wish to see, feel, touch and taste how wonderful it is to be together and follow Jesus. They want to experience a spiritual collectiveness that embraces all 'five senses' externally, while simultaneously igniting their inner, spiritual senses. Pedagogically, at the heart of our catechesis and works of formation aimed towards everyone -- children, young people, adults -- do we offer the gift of our whole selves like burning incense in the fire of reciprocal love in order to 'see, hear and touch' God present in our own lives and in the historical reality of today's world?

2. Separation within the Body of the Church

A weakening of the Church's relationship with the world also has another consequence: The separation among members of the Body, which is the Church. Since the time of Constantine, many outside, worldly influences *reinforced* this within the ecclesial Body, one of separation between bishops, priests and monks on the one hand and laity on the other, bringing an ever-widening gap between the church and the world.⁴

And so, continued use of earlier categories and models drawn from the experience of the earliest communities which came to know the gospel (Greeks, Romans, and German peoples ..) began to build a vision of the Christian society (*societas christiana*) which was unitarian, organic and hierarchical and to which the Ordained Ministry (*Ordo*) in particular

belonged to. "There are two types of Christians.", wrote Graziano at the beginning of the XII century⁵. Differences grew into separation; the two 'orders' ('ordines'): social status (clerics and laity); leaders (priesthood and political government); jurisdiction (human and divine); states of life (spiritual and carnal).

In a reaction to the Reformation, the post-Tridentine Church adopted a 'pyramidal' vision for which it soon became renowned through such texts as: *Status o Respublica* (J.A. von Ickstatt, 1731); *Societas Perfecta* (J. N. Endres, 1751); *Societas Inaequalis* (J. P. von Riegger, 1758). Authority and delegation of power rested with the Primate. Clergy were considered superior to the faithful, as the head is in respect to the body. Just as Christ is the Head of the Body (cf *Col. 2:19; Eph. 4:16*), so, too, clergy possessed all the riches of the gift of salvation and were tasked with communicating these riches through doctrine and the sacraments. The only right of 'the flock' was to believe, obey, financially support, and . . . pray!

Facing such a vision as the Church entered the modern era, A. Rossini (1797-1855) denounced the 'division between clergy and people in public worship' as one of the *Five Wounds of the Holy Church* (1848). He instead affirmed: 'Within the Church, all the faithful, both clergy and lay-people, represent and form a beautiful unity of which Christ spoke when he said "For where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18, 20); and elsewhere, addressing himself to the Father: "I have given them the glory you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one" (Jn 17:22) (I, 15).

It is not until the Second Vatican Council that God's People, in their entirety, would be finally presented as priestly, prophetic, and royal through participation in the Messianic ministry of Christ (LG 31). All (bishops, priests, deacons, religious and laity) are first and foremost the *christifideles* who follow Jesus, putting God in the first place, placing their gifts (affections, goods and gifts of ministry) before the Giver . . . and even their lives!

Perspectives to deepen

The Post-Vatican II Church rests on two fundamental pillars:

- The outward sign and instrument (*sacramentum*) of Christ's presence does not belong exclusively to the hierarchy but to the whole community, to the 'People of God', which by means of *sensus fidelium* enjoys the gift of infallibility.
- All believers - clergy and laity (L.G. 32) - are equal in dignity. Their Christian identity lies in fraternity: all are brothers and sisters in Jesus. This is the fundamental 'state of being' of every baptised person upon which charisms and ministries flourish, serving to build up the Body of Christ which is the Church.

1. Ordained Ministry

With these two premises, how then should authority be exercised both in ordained ministry (*potestas ordines*) and in jurisdiction (*potestas jurisdictionis*), so that the sacrament of Holy Orders remains one of service, of ministerium?

I will limit myself to two key points.

The service asked of them is *not* one of mediators between God and the People. The Latin word *medium* signifies 'centre', 'that which is in the midst'. *Who* is at the centre of the Church? The Word of God clearly tells us: God alone is Shepherd, present in the midst of His People.

So, how can a priest, deacon, or bishop successfully place Jesus at the centre, in the midst of the people, without tarnishing or even substituting Jesus himself? How can he manage to 'un-centre himself' in order for the community to focus on the singular Person of Christ? The priest, according to Saint Catherine, identifies himself fully with Jesus on the cross, becoming, like Him, the 'bridge'⁶, and making himself 'nothing'. A priest or deacon's life in one lived out between this *being* and *non-being* (total gift of self).

2. *Our brother or sister - 'sacrament' of God*

But what does it mean to be people of God, to be a part of God's people? Our common belief is that our exterior life flowers from our interior life. Gregory the Great used the metaphor: "First, God planted the root of our love towards Him in the soil of our hearts which then grew into love towards our brothers and sisters."⁷

With her spirituality of communion, Chiara Lubich helps us discover that the opposite is also true. If we look closely, our inner life is also nourished by our exterior life. In the same way that God lives in me, he lives in every person in the great garden of the Church. If, therefore, I look upon another flower 'outside' myself, I am certain of finding in him or her the same God who lives in me. Chiara wrote: " Thus it is not enough that I love him only in me. If I do, in my love there is still something personal and, considering the spirituality that I am called to live, potentially self-centered: I love God in me, and not God in God, while perfection is: God in God. Therefore, my cell, as the souls intimate with God would say, and my heaven, as we would say, is within me and, just as it is within me, it is in the soul of my brothers and sisters. [...] Yes, you should always recollect yourself also in the presence of a brother or sister, but not avoiding the person, rather recollecting him or her within your own heaven and recollecting yourself in the heaven of the other."⁸

The Risen One is alive in the world (*mundus*) and era (*saeculum*) of today. He is my true reality and the reality of the person next to me. The measure in which I love my brother or sister is the measure in which God will enter within me. In this way - wherever we find ourselves and whatever our vocation - each of us can become the mediator between God and one's neighbour, the 'sacrament of God', the sacrament of God's love, for every person we encounter along the way.

It is in this reality that ordained ministers celebrate the Liturgy, not as an end in itself. In a Church turned outwards, the celebration of the sacraments, the proclamation of the Word, the shepherding of the community share one goal: to build the family of God, the icon of the Trinity that manifests to the world the Presence of the Risen One in the midst of a community of men and women, young and old, healthy and sick.

Within the Church, love (*agape*), which has its root in God, is not directed *ante omnia* (cf I *Pet.* 4:8) to good works, but rather to reciprocity, to unity which makes the Risen One 'visible', and for whom all things are possible. This is the Church of the Second Vatican

Council: "It is by your love for one another that everyone will recognise you as my disciples" (Jn. 13:35).

- 1 Cf. M.G. Masciarelli, *Sinodalità e Spirito Santo. Alla scuola del Maestro interiore*, in «L'Osservatore Romano», 1 settembre 2019, p. 6.
 - 2 Francis, *To Bishops of the Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church*, September 2, 2019.
 - 3 K. Hemmerle, *Was fängt die Jugend mit der Kirche an? Was fängt die Kirche mit der Jugend an?*, in «Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift» 12 (1983) p. 309. Cf. N. Sarthou-Lajus, *L'arte di trasmettere*, Qiqajon, Magnano (BI) 2018.
 - 4 Cf. P. Siniscalco, *Frammenti per una storia del laicato. Rivisitare il passato, interpretare il presente e discernere il futuro*, in «Ekklesia» 2 (2019/3) n. 4, pp. 13-18.
 - 5 *Decretum*, p. II, Causa XII, q. 1, cap. 7: PL 187, 884-885.
 - 6 Cf. Caterina da Siena, *Il Dialogo della divina Provvidenza*, G. Cavallini (ed.), Cantagalli, Siena 1995, p. 61ss.
 - 7 Gregorius I, *Moralium Libri, sive expositio in Librum B. Job*, Lib. VII, cap. 24, 28: PL 75, 780D.
 - 8 Il testo completo, datato 6 novembre 1949, si trova in: AA. VV., *Guardare tutti i fiori. Da una pagina del '49 di Chiara Lubich*, Città Nuova, Roma 2014, pp. 9-13.
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