

Parish Communities in a Time of Epochal Change

Pastoral Ministry as a Synodal Vocation

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Ľudovít Pokojný, a parish priest in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, reflects here on how the Church's synodal journey can be a grace for increasing parish vitality, creativity, and relevance in today's rapidly changing world.

Pastoral Ministry Today

By 'pastoral ministry' we mean 'the service of the shepherd' fulfilled in parish and diocesan life, as the Code of Canon Law¹ explains. Then, beyond this, there is also what is called the lay apostolate, and that is expressed in various forms². Thus, in speaking about pastoral ministry, the role of laity cannot be overlooked. They should not be considered mere collaborators with clergy, but people who are co-responsible for the Church's actions and her being, as Pope Benedict XVI once made clear³.

This collaboration between shepherds and laity must — as the recent Synod emphasized — be marked by 'relationships founded in the Trinity',⁴ and oriented toward what the Apostle Paul summarizes in the words, 'God all in all' (1 Cor 15:28), a goal which consists in the realization of Jesus's prayer: 'that all may be one' (Jn 17:21). In these years after Vatican II, it is no coincidence that pontiffs consistently reaffirmed not only the necessity of parishes, but that they must be an expression of renewed outward dynamism, to avoid closing in on themselves, becoming self-referential,⁵ and thus failing to sustain the faithful in their daily lives.

Pastoral Ministry as Synodal Vocation

To understand the synodal vocation of pastoral ministry, it is useful to recall that the term 'parish' comes from the New Testament and is found in the First Letter of Peter. Peter addresses Christians, by calling them 'foreigners' and 'pilgrims' (1 Pt 1:1,17; 2:11). Using the Greek terms *paroikoi*⁶, from which 'parish' derives, and *parepidemois*, he indicates those who inhabit a particular place not only as passing pilgrims, but in a life dynamic expressed with another word Peter uses to define the Church, *adelphotes* (brothers and sisters, fraternity)⁷.

In reading the Letter to Diognetus (among the earliest Christian writings), the Christian community is described in a manner that could serve as a reference point for today's

parishes as well: 'Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, or language, or customs. They do not inhabit certain cities, nor use strange language, nor adopt special ways of living.' Christians are people like all others. Yet they possess 'a secret' that allows them to exert a profound influence on society, becoming its soul, as it were.

The Divide Between Gospel and Daily Life

Pope Paul VI spoke of the divide between the Gospel and the daily life of the people⁸ as the drama of our age. Then, Pope John Paul II, too, invited everyone to 'open themselves to Christ', aware that it is in and through Christ that this 'divide' is healed. Pope Wojtyla spoke not only of the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius in central Europe, but of their educational approach, which succeeded in transmitting both ontological and existential principles, according to which God's love unites created reality and God⁹. This communal approach to both a celebrated and a reflective faith is a true pastoral model, in a synodal style.

Moreover, John Paul II repeatedly warned against the danger of European Cartesian rationalism, from which nihilism and consumerism arise as consequences of the impossibility of seeing created reality in its unity with God. In that passage of Western culture, he discerned an epochal and collective dark night¹⁰ – a night of injustice, marginalization, meaninglessness, absurdity, indifference.

Outward-Focused Pastoral Ministry

Pastoral ministry must be rooted in proximity, solidarity, concrete care, and deep, respectful listening. There is the need to make space within oneself for the other, following the model of the *kenosis* of Jesus crucified, who received the other freely, as they are without judgement, and guiding them - without forcing them in a predetermined direction. Where this freedom is experienced, a person's often burdensome life encounters the very Love of the Father, of which we have the gift and responsibility to be bearers. In this way, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are given the possibility of creating a sense of 'home,' beauty, and love for all, as the person of Mary mystically represents.

Since the nature of mutual love is 'to reveal itself,' our life will manifest God. The life of our communities and our groups will speak of God according to the word of Jesus: 'By this all will know that you are my disciples: if you have love for one another' (Jn 13:35). And is not this the real meaning of pastoral ministry?

It is a striving for the spiritual renewal of people and uniting them with one another and with the Triune God, so that God's life and light may shape their actions and thoughts. I have seen this many times when people come to our parish church for Sunday Mass or a funeral, or a baptism. I recall a gentleman who was passing by on the street and came in by chance. He remained amazed by the relationships and atmosphere in our community that he experienced during Sunday Mass, so much so that he later came all the way again from distant Moravia. On another occasion, visitors from a distant city attending a child's baptism, later asked the sacristan: "What a special atmosphere you have here! We do not have this where we come from. How do you do it?" And this life also draws young people: after a high school religion class in which I tried to explain faith as a relationship between

God as Love and our daily life, some students asked to go to confession, a sacrament that they had not participated in for years.

Allowing for Surprises

It is good to be surprised by our faithful and simple people, so often tested,¹¹ to whom we are called to draw close. I have discovered in pastoral service that people long for the joy of faith and meaning that it is to be found in the Gospel. Yet many times, we priests do not know how to show the way to reach this. I believe that with this paschal dynamic of fraternal love, which is a true mysticism for today, this joy can be transmitted to many – even to those who no longer find reasons to believe in God and the Church, as they have known them before.

¹ Code of Canon Law, can. 519 and 255.

² Cf. especially the Second Vatican Council, Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, and John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*.

³ Benedict XVI, Message to H.E. Msgr. Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, on the occasion of the International Congress "Co-responsibility in Evangelization", 23 August 2012.

⁴ VI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, n. 34.

⁵ Cf. Congregation for the Clergy, Instruction *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community at the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church* (20 July 2020) nn. 12, 18, 123.

⁶ Those who set up the tents and dismantle them: *para* – presso, *oikos* – house, therefore *stay near the houses*.

⁷ At the end of the first century A.D., Saint Clement I wrote to the Corinthians: "The Church of God (*ekklesia*), which is a parish (*paroikusa*) in Rome, to the Church of God (*ekklesia*), which is a parish (*paroikusa*) in Corinth".

⁸ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), n. 20.

⁹ John Paul II, Encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli* (2 June 1985). Cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013) n. 229.

¹⁰ John Paul II, Homily at the Celebration of the Word in Honour of Saint John of the Cross, Segovia, 4 November 1982.

¹¹ Francis, Letter to the Priests of the Diocese of Rome, 31 May 2020.