

MINISTRY OF A PRIEST-PASTOR IN A CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

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Theological Foundation of Ordained Priesthood and the Church

Just as all who are in full communion with the Catholic Church, a priest is a member of the people of God through the sacrament of baptism. Therefore he collaborates with lay people of the *charismatic church* who exercise the gifts of the Spirit to serve the common good of the community. Without forfeiting the birthright of his baptism into God's people, a priest is also a member of the clergy through the sacrament of Orders and collaborates with deacons, priests and bishops of the *hierarchical church*. He administers the mysteries of the Catholic Church through sacramental liturgies, and preaches and teaches faith and morals to God's people by virtue of his ordination. The priest through his sacramental identity of Holy Orders acts "in the person of Christ" (*in persona Christi*) when he does what the Catholic (universal) Church intends.

All of us are created in the image and likeness of God, laity as well as clergy. We all have a common identity through the initiation sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. However, the identity of a person beyond these initiation sacraments also makes us different from each other. The sacramental identity of those married (husband and wife) is clearly different from the sacramental identity of those ordained (deacon, priest and bishop). The married clergy live out both sacramental identities.

Sacramental identities are not mere role differences. These differences of identity are who the person has become and who that person now is by virtue of the sacrament of marriage or ordination. In this sense, God treats people differently by giving them the particular graces that they need for fulfilling their specific sacramental identity and ministry. There is nothing unusual about this when we consider how differently God has treated the Blessed Virgin Mary from all of the rest of us. Although she shares our common human identity as child of God, the grace of the Immaculate Conception is singular to Mary's identity as Mother of God. However, the identity differences of the Mother of God, the married and the ordained, do not prevent them from exercising some common roles. For example, they each are given the grace to nurture and to protect their families. The Blessed Virgin Mother is graced to nurture and protect the incarnate Son of God, all married persons are graced to do the same for their human family and the ordained person, especially a pastor, is graced to nurture and protect his parish family. Thus, we all have particular graces suited to our unique identities and graces we share in common because of our complementary roles. Consequently, while some roles may be shared or similar or even interchangeable, identities are not.

The particular graces suited to one's sacramental identity do not negate our common identity. If we have been created in the image and likeness of God, each person has an inherent human dignity, and all the baptized have their rights and responsibilities. These are irrevocable. On the other hand, the equality of persons cannot create a false sense of egalitarianism that would obliterate differences in the sacramental identities of persons, the laity and clergy, and the *charismatic church* and *hierarchical church*.

All of these are essential to the unity and communion of the one Church. We are all in communion with each other. To reduce Church to the charismatic form of laity only would be tantamount to flattening the body to the single horizontal dimension of congregationalism. On the contrary, a hierarchical form of clergy alone would define Church as the single vertical dimension of a head without a body. The whole Body of Christ, head and members, has at least three dimensions: one Church, one God, and all of the identity differences of the one people of God. All dimensions are necessary. Egalitarianism that would falsely promote a reductionism of the Church to either its *charismatic* or *hierarchical* form, either laity or clergy, would be an equivocation of these different dimensions of the Church and of the different sacramental identities that define individual members of the Church. Religious sisters and brothers are not ordained clergy, but laity consecrated to God and the Church through the vowed life.

Pastor of a Parish from the Perspective of the Catholic Church

Beyond such a false sense of egalitarianism that does not acknowledge the differences between the charismatic and hierarchical Church or between the laity and the clergy, each of us is called to love and to respect both in the one Church. I myself try to keep a careful balance without reductionism or equivocation. For example, I respect and love the *charismatic church* of God's people too much to allow their/our needs to be overlooked. I am continuously searching for ways to serve the various populations of our parish. Input from individual staff persons, our parish consultative councils, and surveys of those in the pew are invaluable sources of information for my discernment as pastor. Having a listening heart to the pastoral and spiritual needs of others is a pastoral gift. As a pastor, I am called to shepherd all of the people in the parish by being responsive to these needs. I prefer to take an approach of "both/and" rather than "either/or." Some express the need for more popular piety since it leads them closer to the Lord. Others also want more social activities that emotionally bond them more closely to Christ and his Church. Both are important. At the same time, I also respect and love our communion with the *hierarchical church* too much to allow ourselves to become divided. The integrity of our communion, both laity and clergy, lies in our middle stance which embraces both. Therefore, I strive earnestly to avoid deliberately creating polarities that would destroy our unity and our communion.

As a priest and pastor, I am a public person who represents the Church. Therefore, my concern is not to promote my personal opinions or to take a stand for the views of the "right" or the "left," "liberals" or "conservatives." I find labels very distasteful. St. Thomas Aquinas said that virtue stands in the middle. I am not called to take sides or to give political answers to religious questions. Even political questions deserve Gospel answers. My ministry is to preach the Gospel faithfully and to teach the faith and morals of Christ's Church. Teaching authoritatively what the Catholic Church teaches, authentic catechesis at every level of our parish, and building consensus between staff and people based on our Catholic Tradition is the servant leadership that I seek. Endless confusion, questioning and dissent that serve to destroy our faith are fruitless. "There are many theologies, but one faith." Searching for the Absolute Truth of God cannot be reduced to the relativism of "My opinion is as good as yours."

Truth finds expression in the Scriptures and in the Tradition of the Catholic Church. Absolute Truth is a lifelong search that culminates in our face-to-face encounter with God. On earth, our journey of faith matures as we seek the literal intention of God's Word, not the literal interpretation of the Bible. That would be fundamentalism. My ministry is to preach the Word and prayerfully guide us in discerning the truth of how Scripture and Tradition interface. Christ is always "the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

The Mission of the Holy Spirit in the Pastoral Ministry of the Catholic Church

After the Resurrection and Ascension, the Father and Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to be the animating presence of Jesus in the Church and to remind us of Jesus' teachings. All authoritative teaching of the Catholic Church seeks to faithfully apply the Gospel principles to a world and culture that continues to evolve and develop. Consequently, many moral issues that emerge in each successive age were not even questions during Jesus' earthly life. Yet the Church must still apply the Gospel principles authentically to each new situation and era. Christian Scriptures were formed from oral tradition: the lived experiences of Christ, the Evangelist writing the Gospel, and the Community for whom each Evangelist was writing. Therefore, the Gospels include the concerns of Jesus, the Evangelist and his Community at the time of their preaching and writing. These Scriptures are truly the Book of the Church and its first Catechism. But the Church and its lived oral tradition antedate the finished compilation of the Scriptures. Thus, the Holy Spirit is actively inspiring and guiding the Church, its Tradition and its Scriptures. Jesus, through the Spirit, continues to be with us until the end of time.

We can see the mission of the Holy Spirit at work in the Acts of the Apostles, guiding the Church at the Jerusalem Council to resolve the circumcision question at that time. The same Holy Spirit continues this mission today through the Church, its Synods and Councils. In addition, early Church writers have provided us their written accounts of the Church as authentically developing from its apostolic beginnings. Sacred History gives form to the Tradition of the Church. From their writings, we can see how the Church was applying the Scriptures and its teachings to new situations encountered in those earliest stages of Church growth. Thus, the Tradition of the Church continued even after the Christian Scriptures were first written. Just as Scripture took written form after oral tradition, so did the continuing Tradition of the Church. First lived and later written, oral tradition became the written Christian Scriptures and likewise the living experience of the Church became its written Tradition. Therefore, not to be aware of this early history as well as the Word of God is to miss how Tradition and Scripture inform each other. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Scripture and Tradition have been guiding the pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church in every age. Understanding both Tradition and Scripture, early history and the Word of God, will also help us to avoid falling into fundamentalism. We need this balance in our lives, a balance that is founded upon Scripture *and* Tradition. These also form the theological foundation for an authentic pastoral ministry. Enthusiasm for Sacred Scripture and the Tradition of the Church is a gift of the Holy Spirit that motivates, energizes and sustains pastoral ministry today. With the Holy Spirit always in the lead our pastoral efforts need to be directed toward the greater vision of the reign of God for our parish.

The Church exists not for its own sake, but to further the reign of God in our midst. This is the Church's mission—our mission. Our pastoral ministry must be passionate and inspirational, prayerful and compassionate. I want to lead us by example in these areas so that our Catholic Community will continue to grow in holiness together. As your pastor I rely upon the Spirit's gifts in order to provide our parish with oversight responsibility. The Holy Spirit offers direction and guidance with divine imagination. This is what gives me energy and drives me forward in my pastoral ministry.

Pastors are the guardians of the Eucharist and of the celebration of the Sacraments. In addition to sacramental liturgy, preaching and teaching, what do people look for from their pastor? The sense I have is that most expect the pastor to be their spiritual father who walks with them on their faith journey. This involves my being available during your celebrations and struggles whether that is a home visit, hospital visit, office visit or email responses. This may seem to others like so many interruptions, but to me it is a generous dose of pastoral ministry. And, I love it because being a priest and your pastor brings me happiness! A shepherd is present to his people. If I were to estimate my time commitment, it is about 90% presence to you and about 10% administration. I learn so much more from you when we meet in your homes informally and in social situations. It is important for me to hear your opinions, the pros and cons; learn about your neighborhoods, your schools and your children; receive your best advice; and to encourage the hopes, dreams and visions you have for your families and your parish. What better way for me to get your ideas than to keep in touch at the grass roots level? You help me to get the bigger picture I need for prayerful discernment, staff consultations, setting priorities, pastoral decisions and building consensus. You make me aware of the holes that we still need to fill in to make our community complete.

Some Final Thoughts

Above all, how can our community ever be complete until everyone who has not been invited or who still feels unwelcome is brought home? There can be no room for nay-saying, cynicism, judgment or condemnation. The Good Shepherd is our model. As your shepherd, I cannot rest until I seek out all and bring them into full communion with the Catholic Church. To be Catholic is a universal welcome to all! For me to do otherwise would be to abdicate my pastoral responsibility of compassionate service and unconditional love for all. If I have failed you in any way I ask your forgiveness. But let each one of us accept the challenges and opportunities that lie before us. Let us work together to serve and to love everyone in our community and beyond. If the Church is everybody, then the reign of God is big enough to embrace all of us with all of our gifts and ministries. Let us trust in God's grace to empower us for our mission.

A Franciscan friar-priest-pastor-colleague's needs:

- As friar, I need time for fraternity with other friars.
- As priest, I need time for camaraderie with other priests.
- As pastor, I need time for prayer, study, reading and reflection.
- As colleague, I need your trust in my pastoral abilities and experience.