

ALL YE ARE BROTHERS

Some reflections on the Church and the Priesthood

The fatal weakness of the empirical approach to the church and her religion is that one always comes to the data with a prejudice. I do not deny that God is working his purpose out in history, if indeed that is the correct way to describe divine providence. But just what in modern society is the work of the Holy Spirit, and what is the work of that other Spirit in which men have largely ceased to believe? If the civil rights movement is God shoving us in the direction He wants us to go, why not the conservative backlash? If the youth rebellion, why not the Chicago police? If the peace movement, why not the brushfire wars popping up around the world? All are current social phenomena. We always seem to see the finger of God pointing in the direction we want to go.

We need some criterion from outside the data, otherwise we are picking up any old stick from a pile of lumber of random lengths and arbitrarily calling it our yardstick. To judge the church by the standards of the world is precisely what we all promised not to do when we were baptized. What is really irrelevant about today's church is those aspects of her institutional life which became relevant to the Victorian age (and which some folk mistake for the gospel), and to become relevant to today's world is to guarantee irrelevance tomorrow. Somehow I always thought we were to judge the world by the gospel and not the other way 'round.

The Church and the World

Man is always trying to make God in his own image. And he is always trying to make the church over in the image of society. Sometimes this has profound and long-lasting theological consequences, which may be why Jesus asked us to be in the world but not of it.

This error was largely avoided in the infant church, perhaps because of the hostility of the world. The martyrs and confessors were not likely to apotheosize the system that was persecuting them. But with the conversion of Constantine all that changed. The church could no longer sit in its ghetto and damn the world. It now had to wrestle with the problems of practical politics in a system that did not recognize God's absolute claims – how do you make the darn thing go? Obviously there was much good mixed with the bad in the pagan world. In time there was a relaxing of the church's discipline and a tendency to conform to the world. It is extremely doubtful that the papacy would have developed in the way it did if there had not been an emperor.

The military society of the Middle Ages left a still visible mark on the church, which became the Church Militant, an army engaged in warfare against the forces of Satan. The hierarchy was a chain of command. The bishop was a general, the parish priest a company commander. Lay-workers in minor orders were non-commissioned officers. Discipline was strict (I wonder if St. Timothy took a vow of obedience to St. Paul). There were manuals with exact job descriptions called rubrics. The diocesan office was a headquarters concerned with strategy and tactics. The bishops became feudal lords, with near fatal results.

The congregational form of Protestantism reflects the democracy of the free cities, with their charters of independence outside the feudal system. It was born of the bourgeoisie and still retains much of the bourgeois flavor. Its polity is the autonomy of the cities. Religious individualism reflects the bourgeois freedom from authority -- salvation is not through (feudal) channels but involves a freely accepted fealty oath made directly to the Christ/King. The minister, like the burgomaster, is elected from among the citizenry (laity) and working, thrifty, sturdy, honest, practical middle-class merchant and workingmen. Bishops (feudal lords) we can do without.

A political society, with an established church, would visualize the church in political terms. Parishes and dioceses would be like counties and states. The hierarchy would be public officials and would be given civic tasks outside their strictly religious duties. If one knew the right people and could pull the right strings he would advance in the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. They called it preferment. Eighteenth century England found its bishops sitting in the House of Lords and turned them into politicians.

You see what trouble you get into when you get relevant? It is the residue of so many previous and contradictory relevancies that is causing so much conflict and confusion in the contemporary church.

In a business oriented society we tend to think of the church as a large corporation, like Sears-Roebuck or General Motors. The comparison is obvious -- and odious. The parish church is a retail outlet; the parish priest is a store manager. The diocesan office is a regional office, the bishop a regional manager. The national church headquarters is the home office, the Presiding Bishop is the company president. We have departments for accounting, advertising, and sales promotion (we call it evangelism). In the parish lay workers are employees, the other laymen are customers. (When the laity comes to think of themselves as customers we've had it.) We are concerned with statistics and charts and balance sheets, like any well-run business, and we measure success in terms of growth and income. We think of the ministry as a career (God help us!) and seek to move the bright young prospects who show promise of success up the company ladder to more responsible executive positions. We are alert to employ for the church the latest gimmicks that have proved effective in business. We are bound and determined to find some way to use the computer for God, and when we do we will doubtless feel that the Kingdom of God has taken a giant step forward. In modern America we turn our bishops into corporation executives.

In a moment I shall suggest an alternate image a little closer to the gospel conception of the church, and one which would be universal in all societies. But first I would like to reconstruct a bit of probable history. I say probable, because the data is scanty, and because I am not an historian, but I think the picture is fairly accurate.

Christianity was born out of Judaism, and Jesus was emphatic that He was not making a fundamental break with the Old Testament religion. In Judaism there were required twelve adult males to start a synagogue, doubtless because the synagogue was a microcosm of Israel and there were twelve patriarchs. This is probably the reason Jesus chose twelve Apostles, and why upon the decease of Judas the church promptly elected a replacement.

Early Christianity organized itself like the synagogues. As the church spread into the gentile world it drew its first converts from the Jewish synagogue, and from the gentile

God-fearers who attended its services, so it was natural that it should repeat the pattern of the synagogue in its own life. There were sectarian divisions among the Jews, each sect having its own synagogue. Christianity was the sect of the Nazarene.

Now the synagogue was not simply a church. It was the whole Jewish community in one place organized not only for worship but also for all the other social and community functions and activities that made Judaism viable in the gentile world. It provided for education, health services, alms for the poor, and numerous other kinds of mutual self-help.

The synagogue and its affairs were presided over by a committee of elders, a kind of little Sanhedrin, under the presidency of one of their number, the chap referred to in the gospel story as "the ruler of the synagogue." The elders were called in Greek presbyteroi, The president or ruler (overseer) was episkopos. Nothing is more probable than that the first Christians kept virtually the same type of organization in their communities. The episkopos and the presbyteroi were all elders and members of the council of elders, differing from one another somewhat as the chairman of a committee differs from the committee members. (This is a possible explanation of the New Testament confusion of the terms bishop and elder. Since the bishop was a member of the council of elders he was an elder too. And since the council collectively had the oversight of the congregation each elder shared the episcopal responsibility. The episkopos was a kind of primus inter pares.)

As the church moved northward among the Germanic people the term episkopos evolved into piskop and biscop and finally bishop. In the same way the term presbyteros evolved into prester (as in Prester John) and finally into priest. It is entirely arbitrary that in English the word priest is held to be the equivalent of sacerdos. The terms bishop and priest (overseer and elder) referred originally to offices in the ruling body of the synagogue and designated their pastoral and administrative functions in the congregation.

The organization of the primitive church was remarkably similar to that of the contemporary American parish. The vestry, under the presidency of the rector, would be the counterpart of the council of presbyteroi under the presidency of the episkopos, and together they have responsibility for the total welfare of the congregation. The rector, however, as seems to have been the case with the episkopos, alone has charge of the liturgy, and for this work he associates with himself acolytes or servers (diakonoi), the counterpart of the early deacons. It is a commonplace of early church history that the deacons were more closely associated with the bishop than were the presbyters, and for several centuries was more likely to be chosen from among the deacons than from the presbyterate, just as today it is more often the acolyte than the vestryman who will feel a call to the priesthood. The obvious difference is that in the modern parish these offices are not holy orders held for life.

The development of the present diocesan system was the church's response to growth in numbers. In the very early church, and for several generations, especially in the smaller towns and cities, there would have been only one congregation of Christians in the community, organized as a synagogue of the sect of the Nazarene. Worship was held in someone's house, usually that of the bishop. As the number of Christians became too large to be accommodated in one place of worship, the congregation would

be divided and some of them would meet at the home of one of the elders, but they continued to think of themselves as one congregation.

With the multiplication of chapels (as we'd think of them today) the bishop would take turn about visiting first one and then another of the houses in which his congregation worshipped, but gradually the elder would come to be thought of as the normal celebrant of the Eucharist and the pastor of that portion of the flock meeting in his home. It was during this transitional period that there arose the custom of sending the *fermentum* from the bishop's celebration to all the suburban chapels, as if they were not entirely certain that the elder's celebration was valid by itself.

One finds during the first several centuries a gradual transfer of episcopal functions – the celebration of the Eucharist, preaching, pastoral care, the administration of discipline – to the elders. That portion under the administrative and liturgical oversight of the elder, as it grew, began to assume more and more the nature of an autonomous congregation with an absentee bishop. The diocese is an expanded parish; the parish is a mini-diocese.

This account of the transition from the parish to the diocese would explain the lingering nostalgic memory of the priests as a council of advice to the bishop, a function more and more difficult to perform as the elders became absorbed in the administration of the parish, and the bishop was pushed into becoming the administrator (rather than the pastor) of a group of congregations. It would also explain why even now, if one wants to be technical, the term pastor is appropriately applied only to the bishop.

In the Mediterranean world the principle of one congregation under one bishop in one town continued to hold. Doubtless as the populace became more Christianized, small suburban communities acquired their own bishops, perhaps with one or two congregations under their care. In the larger metropolitan centers the bishops would have scores of congregations, and perhaps the suburban bishops evolved into something like auxiliary or suffragan bishops, as in the See of Rome today, or in the larger dioceses of England. But the geographical limits of the diocese would be small.

When the church spread northward into barbarian lands she found the people organized tribally and territorially, rather than in cities. Bishops became bishops of whole tribes scattered over vast territories, with the people settled in small agrarian communities not unlike our pre-Civil War southern plantations. The bishop would locate his see in the village of the tribal chief and appoint elders to minister to the relatively small number of families on the plantations.

Centuries were to pass before very many of the villages grew to city size, and when they did the diocese was already established as a geographical territory of considerable extent, with the bishop functioning as a feudal lord comparable to the count or baron. It was this large territorial diocese, (as in England) which was transplanted to the infant church in America, which never thought of having more than one bishop in each state.

For all practical purposes the rector of a parish today exercises the same functions as the bishop in the early church. Our vestries function as a council of elders, and our acolytes are our deacons. Is it any wonder that we have such a hard time understanding the role of a deacon in the modern church and search in vain for a primitive model for his office? Is it any wonder that we are so hard put to justify bishops to those churches with

a congregational polity? Those who hold to the doctrine of the parity of ministers are right, except that the minister is the bishop, who now delegates his functions to the elders. The Congregationalists are right; the primitive polity was congregations, but the congregation was the diocese. The non-episcopal churches look askance at our bishops and wonder if they are worth the bother of taking on. They seem to see the office only as administrative, and not a single administrative advantage attaches to having bishops. The Baptists, with a completely congregational polity, cooperate very effectively to support schools, seminaries, charities, publishing houses, and foreign missionaries, and for all our centralized authority we still haven't come up with a uniform graded series of Sunday School lessons.

The Church as the Family of God

The root cause of much of our modern difficulty in all areas of the church's life is our legacy from previous ages of renewal and relevance, and our tendency to treat the church like a spiritual Sears-Roebuck. There is no way we can make it work. The church is not an army of occupation holding a conquered territory for God against the counter-revolutionary forces of Satan. It is not a democratic association of free citizens. It is not a political society. And certainly it is not a business corporation. The church is the family of God, and the image of the family is the one most likely to serve the gospel truth about God and man. There is good warranty for this both in the scriptures and in the church's tradition. It is not idle that the only title of address for a minister found in the Prayer Book is: "Reverend Father in God."

We might as well pause with that tired old objection, "but doesn't the Bible say 'call no man father?'" No, it doesn't – not if you read it carefully. The passage occurs in the 23rd chapter of St. Matthew's gospel. Jesus here actually does seem to forbid the honorific title of "rabbi" and "master." The verb form is passive. "Be ye not called rabbi," and "be ye not called master," for, he says, "all ye are brothers." And shifting to the active voice, he continues, "Call no man your father on the earth, for ye have one father which is in heaven."

It is a bit tricky, but if we accept the principle that the scriptures are to be interpreted consistently, we find that Stephen in his speech to the elders addressed them, "Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken, etc.," and St. John in his epistles addresses himself to some group whom he calls simply "fathers," and he may or may not, but seems to be, addressing the officials of the church. But hear St. Paul. To Timothy he says, "Rebuke not an elder, but entreat him as a father." And to the Corinthians he says, "I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you, for though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me." And in his first epistle to the Thessalonians he says, ". . . we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father doth his children . . ." And there are many other passages of similar import. If it was Christ's intention to forbid the honorific title of "father," the New Testament writers were a bit careless.

I would suppose that "Call no man your father on the earth" goes with "all ye are brothers," and should be read as parallel to Christ's other statements such as "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." It is evident that the early Christians did indeed regard themselves as a supernatural family, loyalty to which superseded the ties of the natural family. Water is thicker than blood if it is the water of

baptism. They called on another brother and sister, and seemed to have no hesitation about referring to their spiritual leaders as fathers. It was our father on the earth, our natural father, to whom Jesus was referring in the passage in Matthew. He was aware that he was breaking up the natural family ties. "I came not to bring peace but a sword, for I am come to set a man at variance against his father . . . and a man's foes shall be they of his own household." The old family relationships were being replaced by another family, in which all are brothers. The church is a family. We do not join it; we are born into it at baptism. The nuptial/filial image is constantly employed throughout the New Testament. St. Paul says, "I have espoused you as a chaste virgin to Christ," and after describing the husband-wife relationship, he says, "this is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church." He speaks of "my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds," when he is writing to Philemon, whom he calls "brother."

If we need a better image than the corporation in terms of which to think of the church (and surely we do), we find one provided to hand in the scriptural image of the family. The local parish congregation is the place where this family image and feeling is most readily achieved, and thank God there are numerous parishes which actually achieve it.

The Priest in the Parish

The parish is the only place where the church becomes visible, tangible, real. Everything above the parish level is an abstraction. When you ask, "what is a diocese?" you discover that it is a number of parishes. The church is the family of God gathered about God's table. It is the synagogue of the sect of the Nazarene. It is the place where my neighbor, whom Christ commanded me to love, becomes all too terribly real in his unique strangeness, so that I notice how much he differs from me. The church is the parish, a community of Christians organized for worship and mutual love.

And what is it for? What, in short, is the mission of the church? About once every decade the church, in its search for its identity, in its effort to justify itself and explain itself to itself, come up with a new catch-phrase. The current one is "mission." You hear it over and over again. It is one of those words we use to keep from having to think. Everybody uses it, but nobody bothers to define it. Just what is the church's mission? "Well, ah, you see, the church's mission is to perform the church's mission." The term certainly has evangelical overtones and is probably derived from "the great commission" to go into all the world and preach the gospel – and baptize. Very well, then, just what is the gospel? What is the church's mission?

Anyone familiar with classical Christian theology would pick it out at once as the last sentence in the last paragraph save one. The church is a community of Christians organized for worship and mutual love. The mission of the church is to obey the first and second commandments, on which hang all the law and the prophets. The mission of the church is to be the church, and the church is a community of love. The church's mission is to be a theophany of the love of God. ". . . ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

To talk about this without exemplifying it is like a bald headed man trying to sell hair restorer, or a fat man recommending a certain reducing diet.

The job of the church is to exemplify an authentic Christian life-style, which is a life of worship and mutual love, the model of which is the Eucharist. The church exists to glorify God, and then to rejoice in loving one another for God's sake, in sharing God's love with one another. It does this preeminently when it gathers at the family table.

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who made a wedding feast for his Son." And the end and goal of all the church's activity is that we may sit down and sup with him in his Kingdom. All evangelism is so that others may share in that love. All social work is so that others may know of that love. The life of the church begins at the altar and goes out from the altar to lead others back to the altar. Our worship is not for the sake of anything else; everything else is for the sake of our worship, and for the fellowship of love and rejoicing that attends it. If we are to go into all the world and preach the gospel (and we must) it is precisely that we may tell men the good news that there is a place for them at the nuptial feast of the Lamb. But notice that it is a wedding feast. The church is the Bride of Christ. She is the family of God. All men are our brothers. This is why we must care what happens to them. They are not black men or white men or rich men or poor men – they are our brothers. The church knows this because she is this; it is her mission to be this, and to invite all men to be this with us.

In recent decades the study of group psychotherapy has led to some most interesting insights. There are three possible ways that we can relate to our fellowman in any human encounter. These are the paternal, the fraternal and the filial relationships of parent-to-child, of brother-to-brother, and of child-to-parent. Every human contact falls into one or another of these patterns. A mature, well-adjusted personality is one that is flexible enough to move freely back and forth through these relationships in response to the reality of the situation. Most of our personality problems involve our being unable to accept one or another of these relationships.

In group psychotherapy, and in fact in every group activity, the leader (whether official or not) becomes a father surrogate. The group in its collectivity becomes a mother surrogate. And the group members become sibling surrogates to one another. The secret of the success of group therapy is that in an honest and non-judgmental (that is, loving) group, people are able to work their way through their hang-ups and discover and develop new and effective attitudes in all three of these relationships.

It cannot be accidental that nearly two thousand years before Freud the church was calling its pastors "father," was speaking of "mother church," and addressing one another as "brother" and "sister." Not only is the church a family, but it would seem that every other group is also. But not every group is a therapeutic group. Not every family is a redemptive and reconciling family. Some part, at least, of the mission of the church is to function as a therapeutic group, in which broken relationships may heal in a context of love. This is a good part of the reason for the success of Alcoholics Anonymous. In the love of the church, man experiences God's love sacramentalized. I know that God loves me because my brother in Christ loves me. The church is God's children loving God together in community, and loving one another for God's sake. And once more, it is at the Eucharist that this love becomes visible and is sacramentalized.

The parish priest is not just the leader and administrator of a congregation; he is not just a teacher; he is the head of the local and visible unit of the church as Christ is the head of the whole church and as a father is the head of the natural family. Whether the priest knows it or likes it or not, as the authority figure in the parish he becomes a father

surrogate, "the express image of the Father." Every priest has had the experience of having some three-year-old point to him and ask a parent, "Is that God?" Every child's attitude toward God is conditioned by his experience of his natural father. If that goes sour there is a chance to correct it through his experience of his priest. If that goes sour, God help him. And God help the priest. He stands in a paternal relationship to the parish. He may be a good father or a bad father, but he is a father, for the church is a family and he is its head. People form their impressions of the church's God through their experiences with the church's priests. He sets the tone for the parish family's life-style.

I am a Rogers. My wife's maiden name was Jones. When she married me she changed her name to Rogers. Why? Because (supposedly) when she married a Rogers she adopted the Rogers life-style, the Rogers values and attitudes and customs. And the children bear the Rogers name because they too (supposedly) will reflect in their personal life the Rogers life-style.

The priest as father is the author of the family's distinctive life-style within the context of the Christian tradition. He and the members of the parish grow together into a realization of their own unique expression of the Christian way of life. Priest and people interact upon on another and modify each other's personality and character, and the result is a unique blend, the style of that particular parish, a distinctive thing found nowhere else in Christendom.

Because the parish is a family and the priest is father, certainly the normal tenure of the pastoral office should be for life. This is a functional correlative of the indelible character of the priesthood. A priest is a priest for life. But the priest is the organ of a body. Priesthood does not exist in a vacuum. Except in emergency to confect for the sick, the priest does not celebrate the Eucharist by himself. A priest without a congregation is as anomalous as a congregation without a priest. The priesthood exists in relationship to the laity. There is no fatherhood without children.

There is a lot of talk these days about the growing importance of new forms of ministry, meaning mostly a non-parochial ministry. There is doubtless much need for this kind of ministry, but it must not be cut loose from parochial ties. Every non-parochial priest (or should he be a deacon) ought to be related to some parish. If the rector *is* "father," then the other clergymen attached to the parish would, I suppose, be "uncle," members of the parish family, the father's brothers, with an honored place at the family table. With several such priests (or deacons) working out of a parish at whatever non-parochial ministries, there would be something approaching the primitive council of elders with the rector as president. With the parish family as a base the non-parochial priest would have a community of love into which to bring people, a fold to which the lost sheep could return. And he would have the back-up support of the laity to assist in his specialized ministry. The laity also are called and are entitled to share in the church's ministry to the world.

The non-parochial priest, if his ministry is at all fruitful, will become the nucleus of some kind of community, and he will wish to celebrate the Eucharist with his friends. And since the church is the family of God at God's table, he will have himself a parish of sorts. It may be a small evanescent, temporary community in some institution or ghetto neighborhood, in the army or on the campus, in industry or in prison, but for a short while at least there is an incipient family community of love to provide healing and

reconciliation for its members. It is his parish and he is its father. If his ministry does not issue in community it is not a Christian ministry, for love seeks union with the beloved and forms community. If the circumstances of his work are such that it is not possible to produce such a community, he needs a nearby parish to which to refer people.

There really cannot be a non-parochial priest. He finds himself in the same fix as a non-parochial layman. To absent oneself voluntarily from the family gathering is to dissociate oneself from the church and disavow one's Christian profession, whether one be priest or layman. The Christian in isolation is a Christian in spiritual trouble. We need community for our spiritual health. "It is not good for man to live alone."

The same is true of the unemployed priest. The priest's vow of obedience to his bishop means, primarily, his willingness to serve in whatever place the bishop needs him. The corollary of that vow is the bishop's responsibility to see that he has an altar. To fire a priest and leave him to sell his services on the open market comes perilously close to forcing him into simony. If a priest is unable to function in his office he should be either deposed or else assisted pastorally in overcoming his difficulties. To treat priests as a labor commodity subject to the law of supply and demand, or to regard the pastoral office as a contractual relationship to be terminated according to the advantage of either part, is a denial of the church's nature.

Whenever the pastoral relationship is broken it produces a spiritual trauma in both priest and congregation. Admittedly there arise situations in the natural family so desperate that a separation is the only remedy. And similarly, there arise situations in the supernatural family so desperate that a separation is the only remedy. But in both cases it is a desperate remedy for a desperate situation and can in no sense be called normal. So I have married a wife and we cannot get along. Do I divorce her and marry another? I do not. I grow holy and love her, and her very cantankerousness (or is it mine?) becomes the raw material of our sanctification. To move a priest from one parish to another, or for a priest to resign and seek other "employment" in the church just because he is a square peg in a round hole is to deny the whole redemptive nature of the Christian life. This is why we still speak of being "called" to a different work. Only the conviction that God is telling us to move can justify a separation, and a decision is always weighted in favor of stability.

The priest who skips from job to job, who thinks of his ministry as a career, who is ambitious for personal advancement after the manner of the world, at best misunderstands and at worst profanes the sacred calling of priest. And the church that thinks of her priests in this fashion is in danger of losing her mind if not her soul.

The priesthood is an office, but the priest is a person. It is his function in the formation of the parish life to communicate his own sacralized personality to the community of which he is father, and to absorb into himself the riches of the varied personalities of the members of the parish family, so that he and the congregation grow together slowly into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Is this strange? The Christian life is the life of love, and love is a coinherence, a dwelling in one another, an exchange of being, after the image of the Blessed Trinity. And this cannot be hurried. In the past history of every great parish, the kind of parish that has a strong spiritual personality that makes itself felt throughout the church, you will most likely find that some priest has gone there and spent years and years and years, he and the people ripening together, priest and people discovering together their unique vocation to holiness.

God uses the personality of the priest, not just the office. It is often said that the priest ought not to allow his congregation to love him as a man, as if this were somehow inconsistent with the love of God. What nonsense! Jesus himself coupled love of God with love of neighbor. The priest is a man, and is to be loved as a man. As well say that children ought not to love their parents as persons. They will love them as persons or they will not love them at all. For the fullness of the Christian life there needs to be the most intense personal involvement with others. Impersonal detachment, even with the most expert performance of one's duties, is not at all acceptable.

Nor is it necessary for the priest to take off his collar (or leave it on), and insist on being called by his first name, and to behave like "one of the boys," in order to come through to his people as a person. It is a puny conception of love to deem it possible only in the relationship of equality. The priest is not "one of the boys." He is father.

I have six children of my body, and hundreds of spiritual children whom "in Christ I have begotten through the gospel." I can honestly say that there is, as far as I can tell, no difference at all between the way I love my natural children and the way I love my spiritual ones. When there is this kind of close personal love between priest and people, to break the relationship is like a death in the family.

What is there about ordination that confers upon the priest the indelible sacramental character? In fact, what is that character? Obviously it is not moral character. Nor is it something like the "bedside manner" of the physician, that is, priestly character. It is liturgical character, and the priest's place or "role" in the liturgy.

The Eucharist is a piece of abstract theater. It is what today we are calling psychodrama. It is the presentation before God of the entire sweep of sacred history, from the creation to the second coming. It is the dramatic re-enactment of what has gone before, and the pre-enactment of what is expected to come. The inner meaning of this, the mystery, is the truth about history, or what human life really means under God's rule in the world. It includes, of course, and comes to focus on, the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and looks forward to his promised return in glory and judgment. It is the means by which every generation is able to participate in those events which made the first generation of Christians changed men and women. It does this dramatically. It makes contemporary and present, Sunday after Sunday, those critical moments in history which revealed the true character of the universe as a nuptial union of God and creation. It is a drama, performed before God as audience, and it has a cast of characters. This is the "character" conferred at ordination. Any other character – moral character, or the priestly character – is acquired gradually under the grace of God as a part of the economy of our individual salvation, and in this the priest differs not at all from the brick mason or the musician or the bull fighter. When we speak of the character of holy orders we are speaking of the celebrant's (or the deacon's) role in the liturgy. The various functionaries at the Eucharist, including the layman, are the *dramatis personae*, the cast of characters.

And because the Eucharist is constitutive of the Christian community these roles at the Eucharist are the basic and most fundamental distinctions between the otherwise equal members of the community. This is the real difference between priest and the layman.

The Eucharist is not only constitutive of the Christian community, it is also the norm and model for the whole of life. For the Christian, life is liturgical and Eucharistic. So the function of the priest in the Body of Christ, or in the world, is the projection of his function at the altar, for it is at the altar that it becomes apparent that he is the channel through which God makes himself available to man and seeks union with man.

This is the heart of the priesthood. All his other functions derive from this. The priest is not an employee of the church. He is not a professional man with skills and talents useful to the church or society. He is not a career man, or an organization man. He is the father in God's family, presiding at the family table, an *alter Christus*, the stand-in for the Bridegroom at the wedding feast of the Lamb. He is a theophany, the sacrament of Christ's presence, making manifest God's redeeming love for mankind.

The Bishop and the Diocese

In the early church the bishop was the celebrant at the Eucharist. In the contemporary church he is the liturgical officer of the diocese. It is his right to control the liturgy. This is simply a carry-over from the time long ago when he was the ordinary celebrant in the original single congregation, just as in the parish today the liturgical details are the prerogative of the rector, subject to the ordinary.

With the expansion of the parish into the diocese the bishop's role in the liturgy has become obscure. He has been thrust out of the parish and the liturgical life of the church and into an administrative job. It is no wonder that the bishops are always crying "parochialism." They are lonely men, priests without altars, pastors without congregations, fathers without families. The sprawling diocese with a hundred or more parishes is not a family. I challenge anyone to justify it. It is manifestly impossible for the bishop of a large diocese to be a pastor to his people. The intimate, personal, day-to-day care of souls is the work of the priests. The bishop becomes at best a symbol of unity, and a rather abstract symbol at that, since opportunities for close personal contact with him are limited to diocesan officials and a handful of the laity who participate in administrative activities. The pastoral ministry of even a saint and genius like Pope John is but a token pastoral ministry, not to be discounted for all that, but radically different from the episcopal ministry of the early church. We have bishops, and we are determined to hang on to them, because we believe in something called apostolic succession and the validity of orders, but it is apparent that we don't know what to do with them.

There is, however, in the scriptures, an example which might serve to provide us with a model for contemporary episcopal function, and that is the example of St. Paul. He did indeed have "the care of all the churches," and he traveled around from church to church "confirming the brethren," whatever that means. (It certainly does not refer to the modern confirmation service.) He founded new churches, ordained elders (and presumably bishops) in those churches and intervened to settle disputes in local congregations. He kept in touch with the churches by correspondence, and in the process wrote some pretty important theological works. He did this, however, not as a territorial bishop, but by virtue of his apostolic office and as the source and fountain of gospel truth.

There is another example in the scriptures, if we dare, and that is the example of Christ himself, who had a kind of peripatetic ministry, being available wherever there was need,

teaching wherever there was an audience – in the temple, on the lakeshore, at dinner, in the synagogues. “. . . and the people . . . stayed him that he should not depart from them. And he said unto them, I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also: for therefore am I sent.” One might suppose that St. Paul had Jesus’ example before him as the model for his own ministry.

This kind of ministry, or something similar to it, keeps appearing again and again throughout church history. There was Patrick of Ireland, and the Irish and British missionary monks of the next few centuries. There were the mendicant and preaching friars of the Middle Ages. John Wesley had this kind of ministry. Some of our own pioneer bishops had this kind of ministry. And there is the contemporary demand for non-parochial ministries.

The bishop is a non-parochial minister, and he is in theory peripatetic, in sharp contrast to the episcopal ministry of the very early church, or the pastoral ministry of the parish priest. Doubtless the church needs both kinds. The objection most often heard to the ministry of Billy Graham is the lack of any consistent follow up in some local congregation, and in all fairness it should be said that he does try to work with on-the-scene clergymen.

The image of the family will assist in working out a rationale of the episcopal office. You will recall our account of the probable development of the diocese out of the original single congregation. Imagine a father who has a number of sons. As these come of age they set up families of their own. Perhaps there are still several young, unmarried children in the original family. “The family” now consists of several families. Daddy is now grand-daddy, and when he goes to visit in the home of one of his sons he is honored as the father of the clan. At Christmas and Thanksgiving the whole clan gathers at grand-daddy’s house (the cathedral) for dinner (the Eucharist).

The parish is the basic unit of the church, necessarily. It is where the action is. Or rather, wherever the Eucharistic action is, there is the parish. The church is the family of God gathered at God’s table. When grand-daddy comes to dinner at his son’s house he is asked to say grace, to return thanks, to make Eucharist. It is his right as paterfamilias and head of the clan. It is in their relationship to grand-daddy that the sons find their unity with one another.

In the early church, as the parish family grew, they did not pull down their barns and build greater, as is so often the case in the modern church. They did a more natural and organic thing. They split up into additional families, which were the spiritual offspring of the original family.

If the parish is the family unit, then the diocese would be not unlike a clan or cluster of families closely related by blood (the blood of Christ in this case). The bishop becomes the patriarch, not in the sense that we understand (or misunderstand) the Patriarchates of Rome and Constantinople, but more in the sense of the Old Testament patriarch, the revered and honored authoritative figure of “the grand old man.” He is the sheikh, the chieftain, the MacGregor of the MacGregors, or as we’d say today, “big daddy.” The clan is made up of a number of related families. Jacob (Israel) had twelve sons, each the founder of a tribe or family, all finding their unity with one another as “the children of Israel.” This is the unity of the church under its “reverend Father in God.”

The apostolic succession is not so much a passing on of authority in office (like a list of the presidents of the United States), but is rather a kind of family tree, the focus of authority descending from patriarch to patriarch, much as in a Bedouin tribe or a Scottish highland clan. "I am the vine; ye are the branches." When a vacancy occurs in the patriarchal office, what is left is a number of families (parishes) headed by descendants and relatives of the patriarch (priests ordained by him or by his brothers) who are brothers and cousins of one another. There is a gathering of the clan to select someone to fill the vacant office as chief and focus of the tribal unity, and the election is confirmed by other chiefs of nearby clans who also are concerned with the authenticity of the life-style. And so the life of the tribe goes on into another generation under a new chieftain who is a kinsman of the previous chief.

I spoke earlier of the family life-style of the husband and father which the wife and children adopt and exemplify in their lives, and which is passed on from father to son. I am a Rogers. In the telephone directory I find a hundred Rogers, all total strangers to me. The Rogers clan has dispersed; and whatever the original Rogers cultural heritage was, it has been dissipated, because there is no clan chief to whom we could look for an authentic representation of what it means to be a Rogers. There is no Rogers of the Rogerses. We have no bishop.

Nearly two thousand years ago there was a man whom men called the Christ. He begot twelve spiritual sons and sent them out into the world to found families, and they became the tribe called Christian. In order that the clan be not dispersed and the cultural heritage dissipated, they looked to certain patriarchal figures for a guarantee of the authentic Christian way of life. Whenever they had any question about the exact nature of the authentic Christian life-style there was a gathering of the clan chiefs who compared their own traditions with one another, arrived at a consensus, and brought the work back to their own local clans to assure them of the authenticity of their heritage.

The bishop is the authority in the church not only because he is the father and author of the local life-style, but also because he is the one who confers with the other fathers about the nature of the heritage. Neither the authority nor the tradition is handed down from bishop to bishop, as you would pass along an heirloom from father to son. Authority and tradition reside in the whole clan. It is a family treasure to be guarded by every member of the family. The authority and the tradition are organic things, functions of a moral organism, arising out of the life of the body much as the intellect or the power of speech or musical talent relate to the physical body of a man. The bishop is the organ of the body through which the body expresses authoritatively its own spirit, which is the Holy Spirit of God. I think St. Paul would agree with that.

It is not that the original life-style can be kept without alteration. We would not want it that way. Each generation, each new chief, adds something distinctive, a personal flair, a new variation on an old theme, a new arrangement of the original melody. And this is good. As long as the original life-style is not distorted beyond recognition, it is enriched by each new personal contribution to the tradition.

We need not fear that individuality and originality in the expression of the authentic tradition will mutilate or destroy it. The uniformity we seem to desire results from the sterility of error. Truth proliferates with the fecundity of God. The saints are all startlingly unique and individual; they are alike only in their imitation of Christ. No two oak leaves are alike yet each is unmistakably an oak leaf. The more we conform to Christ's

humanity the more we become ourselves, and God has made each of us unique. I may imitate Christ. I may not imitate any other man.

Each parochial, each diocesan, each national expression of the authentic tradition adds a richness and vitality and variety to the heritage, revealing ever more and more of the riches of Christ. “. . . every scribe which is instructed unto the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.”

What about Structure?

I do not know what changes in the structure of the church would be needed to make it function more as a family and less like an army, or a political community, or a corporation. I doubt if changing the structure would accomplish very much unless we also changed our image of the church. But if we learn to think of the church as a family, structural changes may emerge which will express our ideas of what the church should accomplish. However, since I've started I'll go ahead.

A decade or so ago, before we learned to talk of “mission,” the catch-phrase was “redemptive community.” For a parish to function as a redemptive community it must be small enough to provide close person-to-person relationships. Can a parish of a thousand communicants be a family? Can a priest have a real pastoral relationship with a thousand people? I doubt it. If a large parish is to function as a family it must somehow break up into a number of subsidiary communities in which people can be on a first name basis. Where there are multiple Sunday services there is a tendency for each service to become a separate community almost as if several parishes were using the same building. Various organizations within the parish can serve as family communities. In the very early church the solution seems to have been a kind of reduction division by which to growing parish spawned other parishes. Most of the literature I've read recently seems to want to have fewer and larger parishes. I'd say this is moving in the wrong direction. We need more and smaller parishes, although there might be some merit in combining their budgets and having one vestry, at least in urban centers.

I foresee an increase in the number of quasi-parishes, developing around the non-parochial minister, perhaps in institutions. An interesting development is the house-parish with a handful of parishioners, meeting from house to house like a floating crap game, with the priest in secular employment. Such a group can hardly avoid feeling itself to be a family. Or the house-parish may relate itself to the specialized work of a non-parochial priest to provide back-up assistance for his ministry. Its place of meeting might even be the institution in which he serves. Institutional chaplaincies, student centers, half-way houses, neighborhood renewal programs, and other similar specialized works would lend themselves to this sort of development. A group of laymen working with the priest and sharing his ministry would form a natural small family-type parish with a special vocation. This is already happening.

The dioceses ought to be small. How many parishes can a bishop visit in one year? Maybe fifty? And if the bishop is to be a pastor to his priests this is another limiting factor. Certainly the bishop ought to know his priests as intimately as the priest should know his parishioners. Growth in size and real personal involvement seem to exist in inverse ratio.

If there are persuasive reasons for not dividing a large diocese it must develop some way of creating subsidiary communities, or sub-clans. Perhaps we should think about giving suffragan bishops some sort of jurisdiction.

Even in a tiny diocese it would be the local rector, and not the bishop, who would be the on-the-spot pastor of the flock, the effective father-in-God to his people. We are fond of saying that the bishop is the successor of the Apostles. It is certain that the priest is the successor of the bishop. Let us leave the episcopal function (in the classical sense of overseer of the congregation) to the priests, and let our bishops really be Apostles.

If the bishop is to be the voice and the spokesman for the diocese he needs to keep in touch with the diocese. There needs to be some re-thinking of the relationship of the bishop to his clergy along the lines of collegiality. The clergy need to be consulted by the bishop. The image of the bishop should not be that of company boss, or military commander, or monarchical ruler, but more that of the captain of a team. Communication at all levels must be kept open in both directions, between priest and people, between bishop and priests, and between the national church and the dioceses. This would surely improve relationships all around.

I see the office of the bishop held by a man chosen for his sanctity and learning, a man with the gift of prophecy, a man to speak with authority out of the authentic Christian tradition both to the church and to the world. I would like to see the office freed to a great extent of administrative chores, perhaps by transferring a lot of such work to the provinces. Could several dioceses share in the administrative departmental work at the provincial level and reduce the amount of work done locally? I don't know. It might be worth looking into.

The bishop should be the rector of the cathedral parish. The non-parochial high priest needs an altar and a family. The idea of a congregationless cathedral certainly is not primitive, and the father needs a family as much as the family needs a father. This would enable the bishop to keep in closer touch with lay people and would help keep his own image of the church rooted in concrete reality. But let him have a dean and as much staff as necessary so that the bishop would be free, as needed, to spend not hours but days and even weeks in the other parishes of the diocese – which he might do if the dioceses were smaller. If other non-parochial ministries develop they would be an extension of the bishop's own apostolic function. Is this not largely what the diaconate was once upon a time?

Perhaps this is an impossible dream. But with God anything is possible, even (as scripture saith) the salvation of a rich man – and maybe even a rich church. Obviously moving into something like this would entail considerable turmoil and readjustment. It would involve decentralization of some procedures, giving the parishes more autonomy, and perhaps a greater centralization of other procedures, making the provinces more than nominal divisions of the church. It would necessitate re-thinking our fiscal policy, but do you know anybody that is not a bit unhappy about overhead costs? It is opposed to the whole drift of the modern world, but then aren't you a bit tired of being told to get relevant? Wouldn't it be fun to be the church and let the modern world be shocked into re-thinking its assumptions? And it is just possible that if the church were to act like the church we might discover that we have really been relevant all along.

The church should be less monolithic, less bureaucratic, less regimented, less uniform, more varied, more free, more spontaneous, more open to the Spirit. And isn't this what the modern world is crying for – and dying for lack of? Is it not precisely “the Establishment” that is being repudiated” May we not lead for a change instead of follow? Must we always jump on the bandwagon in the last second before it comes to a staggering halt and breaks down? If I rightly read the yearning of the revolutionary spirit it is groping after freedom and spontaneity and personalism. The church above all other social institutions should make personality and freedom and spontaneity paramount. And it would enhance, not diminish, the importance of the bishops as the authors of the distinctive life-style of their clan.

The church split up at the Reformation as a reaction to the over-centralized government of the Mediaeval church. The Reformation was a states-rights movement, and effort to express local character and escape the straight-jacket of imposed conformity. And all the authority of the Pope and the Vatican bureaucracy could not hold it together. I wonder if the same kind of centralized authority can ever put it back together. Of much more value than some formulation worked out by committees and imposed by authority would be the example of a few saints with a powerful charisma, and we ought to be able to expect them to come from the episcopate. We're not likely to find them as long as we force our chiefs to sit behind a desk and juggle figures. Let us turn them loose to walk the earth as awesome theophanies of the living God.

The writing of this paper was undertaken at the request of the American Church Union for distribution at the Special Convention of the Episcopal Church at South Bend, Indiana, September, 1969.

The opinions expressed are those of the author, and the American Church Union is in no way committed to them or responsible for them.

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