

## Thornton – Pastoral Area Reflection Day – 9<sup>th</sup> March 2019

Have you ever had one of those moments which for some strange reason remains etched on your memory? Thirty years ago I was asked to give a talk to the parish group of the Union of Catholic Mothers. I can't really remember why I was asked to speak or what my topic was BUT I do remember (and this is the memory etched on my brain) that I said in years to come the fundamental pairing in the church would no longer be clergy and laity but ministries and community. For centuries we have always worked with that fundamental pairing of clergy and laity as being the bedrock of Catholic life, but things were changing and new ways of understanding the life and mission of the Church were emerging. Coming to a deeper understanding of ministry and its role both in the Church and beyond was shaping something new.

I don't know what impact my talk had on those worthy ladies of the St Joseph's UCM group but as I thought about today's gathering that fundamental pairing came back into my mind. In fact I was able to track down the article that the idea came from – I have to admit and I hope I did to my original audience – that it wasn't an original idea!

The article was written by an American Jesuit and was called a Theology of Ministry\* and in it he contends that the theology of ministry is fundamentally a theology of grace. The kingdom of God is the source, the goal of ministry. The presence of God in our complex world enables ministry, gives ministry its life and freedom. Ministry is a grace and gift of God's spirit to the Church: it is inward in that it enlivens our communities of faith but also outward because we are called to share the Good News! Some will respond through the ordained ministry – deacon, priest, bishop – others may be married but the list of ministries could include ministries to marriage, social justice, spiritual guidance, the sick, marginal and alienated Catholics, an expansion of the broad ministries of healing and teaching. Writing in 1985 the author says 'neither decline nor shrinkage but an extraordinary explosion of ministry typifies the time in which we live.' Hope filled words which we need to hear over and over again.

Like most priests of my generation, I suppose that is what I have been trying to do over the last 30 odd years of my ministry, to fan into a flame that baptismal calling so as to help the faithful understand the charism given to them through baptism and confirmation so that they can truly play their part in building the community of the Church and witness to Christ in the world. Down through the years there have been some powerful advocates of the same thinking. In *Christifidelis Laici* (1988) Pope St John Paul II states that lay people must make their daily conduct a shining and convincing testimony to the Gospel. Our own Bishops in 'The sign we give' (1995) describe particular ways of working and patterns of ministry which bring together lay people, religious, bishops and priests.

In recent years, this whole process has been enlivened through the ministry of Pope Francis as he challenges us to be missionary disciples and to live and share our faith knowing that we are called and gifted. Some commentators\*\* say that this comes from his direct experience of being a priest and bishop in Buenos Aires. The Jesuit College where he was rector was slowly surrounded by new suburbs of the city into which flowed thousands of

people from different parts of the country looking for work and a better life. Fr Bergoglio sent out his students to these people: they visited, listened, prayed with those who would welcome them into their homes. When they returned to the college they shared their memories and experiences: the people they visited were 'the poorest of the poor'; the Church was not very important to them, but they did not feel abandoned by God. As one of the students reflected: in going out as missionaries they had been missioned to. No wonder the Pope has coined those challenging phrases of taking on the smell of the sheep (a challenge not just for pastors but for every disciple) and describing the Church as a 'field hospital after battle'. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he says 'An evangelising community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others' (#24)

As we have already seen such changes to our understanding of ministry and mission will not happen immediately – there still a distance to travel. But part of the purpose of today is to move further along, to enthuse you as individuals and in your pastoral areas so that you might encourage everyone to use their gifts and talents to continue the work of the Church and indeed to move beyond it. We need new forms of leadership, new ways in which we can fan the flames, and we are asking PACs to consult locally so as to produce Pastoral Area Mission plans. The next part of this afternoon session is to see how we can do that.

\*The article is 'A Theology of Ministry' –John A. Coleman SJ, *The Way*, Vol 25,no 1, January 1985

\*\* Cf. 'To Discern and Reform' – Austen Ivereigh, *The Way*, Vol 57, no 4, October 2018.