

nity. Mamie was once bent beneath her yoke, made timid by tradition, fear and resignation, but today she stands up straight. She dedicates her life to helping other women to stand up straight as well.

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox and his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing (Luke 13:10-18).

Jesus said to Mamie without hesitation: "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity!" *You are somebody*, he said to her. *You are a child of God. You are a human being, as marvellous and as wise as every other. You are as capable of dignity and fulfilment as anyone.*

Jesus made his way to Mamie, and he touched her. Human contact can make all the difference between an existence bowed with resignation and a life which goes forward, upright and confident. Her body, which was bowed, straightened up. That is what his kind hands could mean to someone.

"She is the daughter of Sarkis," Jesus says to us now. Sarkis's family can count descendants, men and women. *She counts too.*

NOTE

¹ Paulo Coelho, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, tr. Alan R. Clarke, New York, Harper Collins, 1966.

The Meaning of Ministry

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An introductory note by Fr Boris Bobrinsky: For some years, the access of women to certain ordained ministries in the church has become more and more of an issue within Orthodoxy. This is due not only to the indirect influence of other churches, but also to the cumulative effect of the profound changes in the place of women in modern society and the consequent reflection by a number of Orthodox women. Among the most notable of these is Elisabeth Behr-Sigel. In this short essay she offers a remarkable synthesis of earlier discussions regarding the theological meaning of ministries in the church.

To be sure, on this complex topic on which no Orthodox position has yet been clearly defined (because it is a new issue), anyone can have intuitions, convictions and even prejudices – and the viewpoint set forth in what follows is one respectable position among others which are equally respectable. What is important is that reflection is taking place, even if we do not yet know the outcome. The church is constantly being confronted with challenges from the world, and if it is to show itself in its eternal youthfulness it must respond to the signs of the times. Of course this does not mean bending under pressure from the world, but rather, with the help of the Holy Spirit – thus, in the tradition of the church – having serious, profound and creative answers corresponding to the new realities of the human race on its way towards the kingdom of God.

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Ministry, from the Latin *ministerium*, means, according to its etymology, "service". Ministry is the office of one who serves. A minister is a servant. In the ecclesiastical language of today, the semantic field of these terms has come to be limited to the clerical. We speak of the "ministry" of a bishop or a priest, or of a Protestant pastor, a rabbi or an imam. These are "ministers of religion". On the other hand, lay persons who fulfil offices within the church, even if they do so regularly, are not

referred to as “ministers”. Their service is not “ministry”. The royal priesthood of lay believers is recognized by theologians, but they carefully distinguish it from the so-called “ministerial” priesthood, which belongs to the priest.

This semantic evolution has not been innocuous. It is a symptom of the separation which has been instituted and emphasized, especially since the Middle Ages, between those called the clergy, people set apart for divine service, and the laity. Yet, the laity are also members of the people of God: The English word “laity” comes from the Greek *laos tou Theou*, “people of God”. The semantics seem to reveal a cleavage in the social reality of the church. Does this mean that Christianity, which began as a lay movement – a movement suspect in the eyes of the clergy of the time (the priests who pushed for Jesus to be condemned and put to death) – has turned into an institution ruled by the clergy? Is there no place for rethinking and clarifying in the light of the gospel the meaning of the royal priesthood to which all the baptized are called, and that of the specific ministry which has become the province of a few?

From its beginnings the church did distinguish between different offices or ministries. In the most ancient texts, such as Paul’s letters, this appears in connection with the vision of the church as the body of Christ, whose members have different functions, or as a spiritual house being built by everyone and in everyone, with each person participating in the common task according to the charisms which he or she has received as the free and sovereign dispensation of the Lord, through the Spirit: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to... maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-13).

Diversity of ministries is thus part of our divine calling – but diversity in unity: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (1 Cor. 12:4-5). Here the church is understood and experienced as a community, or better, as a communion of persons – in the image of the communion of the Trinity – who are working in a conciliar manner to build up the body of Christ, which is also the temple of the Holy Spirit.

However, over the centuries, through various influences and as consequence of human weakness and sin, this luminous vision was replaced by the image of the church as a pyramid of “powers” in which the distinction among charisms hardened into an instrument of separation and exclusion. In different ways, this overshadowing of the true “ecclesial being” took place in both East and West. A symptom of this can be seen

in the evolution of the iconostasis in the Orthodox churches. What began as a slight and transparent barrier, a stand for the guiding images of Christ and of the Mother of God, has turned into a wall of images, behind which, in a sacred space apparently separate from the people, the clergy officiates.

But such separation of the clergy from the laity has never been a dogma of the Orthodox church and is foreign to Orthodox theology of the priesthood. The consciousness of the royal priesthood of all the baptized is conveyed by the gospel, by the Christian rites of initiation and by the eucharistic prayers, and it continues to exist in the depths of ecclesiastical consciousness – at times, alas, hidden like the talent buried in the earth or the treasure in a field of Jesus’ parables. From time to time prophetic voices are raised to arouse the church and Christians from their numbness. A notable example was St Seraphim of Sarov in 19th-century Russia, who called upon everyone, clergy and laity, men and women, to “acquire the Holy Spirit” and was the mystical inspiration of those who afterwards became the confessors and martyrs of the faith under Communist persecution.

This sense of a common ministry and a responsibility shared by all was manifested in another way during the ordeal of the great Orthodox diaspora of the 20th century. Living in the diaspora has meant for millions of Orthodox a traumatic and at the same time stimulating encounter with the Western world – and for a handful of Western Christians it has meant encountering Eastern Christian theology and spirituality. This situation is producing today – not without resistance – a creative return to the sources of our ecclesiology and of the theology of ministry which is its corollary. From among the several Orthodox theological works which might be mentioned in this connection, I shall draw on only one small work, both synthetic and poetic, clear and profound, by a spiritual leader who was also a great theologian: Father Lev Gillet.¹

The source of all ministry, Lev Gillet affirms, is found in Jesus Christ, who was both servant par excellence, having humbled himself and become a human being (Phil. 2:6-11; cf. John 13:3-16), and the only priest in the full sense of the word, as the letter to the Hebrews forcefully maintains. It is he who is “the Offerer and the Offered”, in the words of the liturgy of St John Chrysostom. Offered to God “once for all” (Heb. 10:10), the sacrifice of Jesus made him “the one mediator between God and humankind” (1 Tim. 2:5). However, Jesus wanted people, human beings, to share in his work of redemption and sanctification. He entrusted tasks to his disciples, he sent out the apostles. This is the foundation of the common priesthood of all the baptized. The words of the apostle Peter are addressed to all Christians: “let yourselves... be a holy

priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... You are... a royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:5,9). What is meant, in a very real sense, is a universal priesthood, the realization of humanity's calling according to Genesis 1 – a calling overshadowed by sin, but never abolished, and brought to accomplishment in the God-Man; a calling in which, in communion with Jesus Christ through the Spirit, all the baptized participate in the church, the womb of the new humanity.

This is the meaning of the chrismation or confirmation of the newly baptized immediately following their baptism: unction – or signing with the mark of the Holy Spirit – of the arms and legs, and particularly of the sensory organs, through which the human person enters into relations with other humans and with the living and inanimate world; consecration of the entire person, called to offer himself or herself and to offer to the Creator all the creation which is entrusted to his or her care (Gen 1:28). "Thine own of Thine own we offer unto thee, on behalf of all and for all" – this is the prayer of the Orthodox faithful during the offertory in the eucharistic liturgy.

In this moment, the divine work of creation reaches its goal and its climax. In this moment we pray for the whole creation, we dedicate to God all human beings and the entire world, we fulfil the office of priest, so that our priesthood may be the ministerial priesthood delegated by the church, or the royal priesthood which the Scriptures ascribe to all believers.²

This priesthood is expressed and given meaning by the prayers and liturgical rites, but all the baptized together are called to live it out in the world, in whatever form their service takes.

However, a few persons in the church are called to be the "ministers" of Christ's mysteries in a particular sense. The mission of bishops and presbyters in the apostolic succession is to be the witnesses of the apostolic faith, the pastors and guides of the local churches for which they are responsible and in which, as such, they preside over community worship. As those who dispense the Word and the sacraments, they are (again in the words of Fr Gillet) "those who speak for and are the external, visible instruments of that invisible priestly grace of which the whole church, laity and clergy, is the depository". Their priesthood, according to Orthodox teaching, is not ontologically different from the priesthood of all the faithful. It is not of "another essence" than theirs. But they are responsible for a particular office, for the fulfilment of which the church, confident in the Lord's promises, prays that they may receive the gifts of the Spirit.

This is the meaning of the blessings which we call "ordinations", conferred on those whom the church has called to the ministries of dea-

con, presbyter or bishop. Ordination does not mean promotion to a higher grade in a hierarchy of which the royal priesthood or the so-called "minor" orders are the lower degrees. Rather, it is the sign of the gifts of the Spirit granted by the Lord – on condition that one be open to his grace – to the servants to whom he gives the task of nourishing and strengthening, in those whom they serve in his name, the calling of all to a common priesthood.³

This theology of the priesthood and of ministries is the context in which the issue is being raised today in the Orthodox church – still very timidly – of the possibility of women's access to the ministerial priesthood. In the opinion of Bishop Kallistos Ware – one of the best contemporary Orthodox theologians – it remains an "open question".⁴

NOTES

¹ Most of Gillet's writings appear under the pseudonym "A Monk of the Eastern Church". The work used here is *L'Offrande liturgique*, Paris, Cerf, 1988, which consists of two studies first published in Beirut for the Orthodox youth movement of the Patriarchate of Antioch: "Notes sur la liturgie" and "Sois mon prêtre". Among other studies are Nicolas Afanasiev, *L'Eglise du Saint-Esprit*, Paris, Cerf, 1975, and John Zizioulas, *L'Etre Ecclesial*, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1981.

² *L'Offrande liturgique*, p.46.

³ Here I would refer especially to the insights of Alexander Boukharev (1822-71), a great Russian theologian who was not understood in his own time. Cf. E. Behr-Sigel, *Alexandre Boukharev*, Paris, Beauchesne, 1977.

⁴ Cf. Kallistos Ware, "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ", in Peter Moore, ed., *Man, Woman and Priesthood*, London, SPCK, 1979; a new revised edition is forthcoming from St Vladimir's Seminary Press. See also E. Behr-Sigel, *Le ministère de la femme dans l'Eglise*, Paris, Cerf, 1987; "La consultation de Rhodes sur la place de la femme dans l'Eglise", *Contacts*, no. 2, 1989; "Femmes et sacerdoce", *Contacts*, no. 2, 1990.