

The Pastoral Area: Pointers Towards a Theological Rationale

A Pastoral Area is a group of parishes committed to the long-term relationship of collaboration in planning and providing for spiritual, sacramental and pastoral needs within their respective communities. It involves the sharing of personnel, resources, programmes and facilities, so that the needs of the constituent parishes or communities can be addressed without straining the resources of individual parishes. It strives to strengthen rather than diminish the life and ministry of each individual parish or community, so that these can be sufficiently confident in themselves as genuine agents of evangelisation.

Current pastoral realities are challenging parish communities to discover the real practical, spiritual and theological value of working in collaboration. A number of foundational theological issues ground any ecclesial collaborative activity. These include the image of God as triune; the Church as a communion; the co-responsibility of all the baptised for the well-being of the Christian community; ordained priesthood as a service of God and of God's people; and a spirituality of communion that grounds all personal, ministerial and community relationships.

Images of God

Our images of God influence how we structure our lives and relationships. Older generations often imaged God as distant, authoritarian, all-knowing and all-powerful, a presider in judgement over the affairs of the world and its people. These images somehow conveyed the idea that God was dispassionate, totally rational and uncontaminated by the emotion that seemed to mar human interactions. Recent decades have seen a much more biblical approach to imaging God and this has led to a greater appreciation of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Any language about God is inadequate. However, the New Testament gives us the least inadequate language to describe God when it says: 'God is love'. Love is a dynamic between persons in a

relationship. It suggests mutuality, reciprocity, vulnerability, goodness, truth and integrity. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, then, is an attempt to capture something of these characteristics as they pertain to God. Above all else, it is making sense of how God has related to the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God's Word among us. Reflection on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus leads one to see that he embodies in his works and words the compassion of God for humankind, and that his mission is kept alive and active through the power of the Holy Spirit. There is, then, a dynamism of love at the heart of the ministry of Jesus: he reveals the extent of the divine love that is prepared to empty itself in compassion for humankind, willing to embrace even death in the desire to reveal that love as concretely as possible. This divine love is revealed in the full integrity of a human life, without any trappings of what might pass as a show of divine power. Rather, the divine love is given a fully human expression and in turn shows what the human person is capable of when fully responsive to

God's call. The Spirit that animated Jesus in his life is then given to his disciples after his resurrection so that the divine love can continue to be expressed and experienced by the world until Jesus returns in glory.

An appreciation of the Trinity as a communion of love – a dynamic of mutual relationships – is a reminder of the life of communion to which all people are called. Our understanding of God as triune challenges all systems of dominance, individualism and isolationism. So, if the

older image of God was reflected in a rather monarchical approach to Church structures, a consideration of God as triune demands a much more relational and participative approach to ecclesial relationships, to ministry and to governance. The Church, even in its most local expression, is called upon to mirror the life and love of the Triune God. In the context of the new Pastoral Areas, people and their ministers are called to be more collaborative, more inclusive and more trusting of one another beyond the familiar boundaries of their own parish communities. They will be called upon to show more openness in sharing their gifts, both in giving



and receiving, than may have been their practice in the past. In this context there are new and exciting challenges.

God's love, experienced in liberation from slavery, for instance, and continuously made known to the Chosen People of Israel by the prophets, has been fully revealed in Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God come among us. By both his deeds and words Jesus Christ reveals to us the inner life of God lived in Trinitarian love: one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The gift of Jesus ... is the greatest expression of God's love for humankind: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16). Jesus also discloses the fullness to which every human person is called. In Jesus, God speaks to us and we speak intimately and personally to God, newly revealed to us by Jesus, as 'Abba', our loving Father: 'Just as God in Christ speaks to humanity of himself, so in Christ all humanity and the whole of creation speaks of itself to God – indeed it gives itself to God' (John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente*).

Share the Good News, 26.

Images of the Church

Just as people have recovered a better appreciation for the Trinity in recent decades, so too has their understanding of the Church been enriched. Since Vatican II, the Church is presented more as a communion of communities than as a universal, monolithic, static institution. It is the outcome of the activity of the Triune God: the creation of the Father, the embodiment of the Son's own mission, enlivened and empowered by the life-giving Spirit. The images used to describe the inner life of the Church also reinforce this understanding. They are taken from the life of the shepherd or the cultivation of the land, from the art of building or from family life and marriage, suggesting growth, development, imagination, creativity and a network of close interpersonal relationships. Probably one of the richest images of the Church was that offered by Blessed John Paul II, when he said: 'It is the community of the disciples, each of whom in a different way – at times very consciously and consistently, at other times not very consciously and very inconsistently – is following Christ. This shows also the deeply "personal" aspect and dimension of this society ...'³

Vatican II speaks of a communion of life which is grounded in the heart of the Trinity and which finds genuine expression in the concrete life of the Christian community. The Church is to be the sign and instrument through which the Spirit effects the union of all people with God and of all people with one another. The Church is a kind of sacrament, alive with an inner life given by

³ *Redemptor Hominis*, 21.

God, and this is expressed concretely in a community of people who strive to be the contemporary disciples of Jesus.

As the Church faces new demands and challenges it has to make adaptations to the circumstances in which it finds itself, like any living organism adapting within its environment. Old and familiar structures and patterns of action will no longer be adequate to the changing situation in which we find ourselves. Many aspects of the parish structure and its ways of ministering will have to change. Among those changes is the formation of new Pastoral Areas. Their newness and the opportunities that they present are a sign of the vitality of the Church and its ability to read the signs of the times and make appropriate adaptations. The new structures are not ends in themselves, but pastoral responses made by a living, dynamic community of people anxious to witness to the Gospel amidst change and development. The changes are always made with a view to living the Gospel as credibly as possible and in faithfulness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Images of Priesthood

If previous generations laboured with an image of God as one who was aloof and isolated, this was mirrored in the popular perception of the ordained priest. Vatican II helped to retrieve an understanding of the priesthood of all the baptised, and situated the ordained ministry within this context. The ordained priest enables the priestly people of God to respond to their baptismal call to offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God in a life of worship, which finds its 'summit and source' in the Eucharistic celebration. While the priesthood of the faithful and that of the ordained ministers differ, they are nevertheless intimately connected. They are not set in isolation from one another. So, when we come to consider the best pastoral responses to make in our changing circumstances, we need to ask: how can the priestly people of God be best empowered to exercise their mission to give praise and thanks to God? This is a different starting point from one which begins with the ordained ministers and their needs. Greater attention then, needs to be given to the ways in which the priestly people of God can most fully exercise their baptismal calling, not just in the world of work and family life but also within the liturgical life of the Church. These considerations are already beginning to command attention in parishes where there is no longer a resident ordained priest. The formation of new Pastoral Areas demands that our ways of understanding the priesthood within the Church are kept under constant review.

It is important, too, to note that Vatican II stressed the collegial nature of the diocesan priesthood. It stated that: 'priests are bound together in a close fraternity, which should be seen spontaneously and freely in mutual help both spiritual and material, both pastoral and personal, in reunions and in the fellowship of life, work and

charity'.⁴ Priests are also called 'to unite their efforts and combine their resources under the leadership of their bishops'. *Christus Dominus* states: 'Moreover, all diocesan priests should be united among themselves and fired with enthusiasm for the spiritual welfare of the whole diocese.'⁵ Traditionally, priests could work in a certain isolation from one another, this is no longer accepted as good practice nor as true to the nature of the ordained ministry. The development of the new Pastoral Areas is a fresh opportunity for priests to exercise their ministry in a much more collegial fashion, under the leadership of the bishop, and in a way that is more consistent with the vision of Church and ministry expressed by Vatican II.

A Spirituality of Communion

The ecclesiology of communion guides the spirituality of all those who are engaged in ministry, not just those in the ordained ministry. All ministers are called to act in a collaborative fashion because, by its very nature, the Church is a community of disciples of Jesus graced with a variety of complementary gifts so that all may grow in unity and charity (1 Cor 12). To be a member of the Church is to be part of an interdependent community of people, where the bonds are both spiritual and concrete. St John speaks eloquently of how one's love of God has to be expressed in the quality of interpersonal human relationships in the community. He says that there is little point in speaking of one's love for God unless one is showing signs of that love in the way one relates to those with whom one lives and works (1 Jn 4:20-21). The New Testament is probably much more helpful in providing a spirituality for ministry than providing clear guidelines for how it should be structured. In this respect, too, it is more concerned with a spirituality for communal living and ministering than in providing a spirituality for the individual. One could say it is quite clear, then, that in the New Testament the call to holiness is not a private affair but a call to be in relationship with God through a pattern of loving, respectful relationships with all those in the community.

A spirituality of communion, therefore, is one that has to be nurtured in the context of restructuring parish life within new Pastoral Areas. All those who are involved, those in leadership and the faithful in general, will have to work more consciously in developing bonds of communion among themselves, both within existing parishes and among the new networks of parishes being put in place. This means setting aside what might appear as neighbourly rivalries and working more collaboratively to support one another in being true communities of disciples, united in the one Body of Christ.

⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 28.

⁵ *Christus Dominus*, 28.