

The captivity of sacraments

by Wesley Frensdorff

The sacraments are the lifeblood of the Church, but the present system gives their control to **potential** leaders rather than to established leaders. It is [also] largely true that the availability of money controls the availability of eucharistic and sacramental leadership for most local congregations.

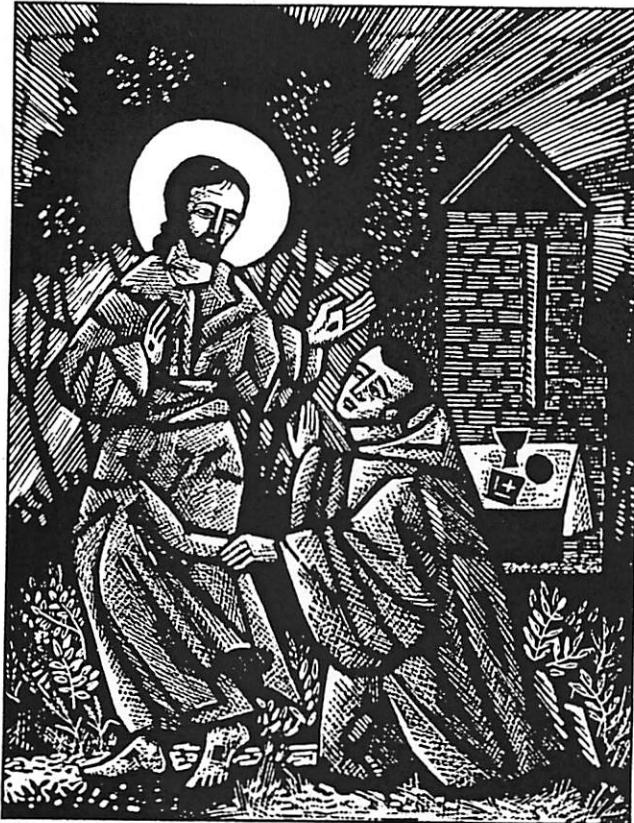
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In my mind, there are two basic systemic problems, which are interrelated. One of these deals with our ministry delivery system, and the other with our system of leadership and governance.

Our ministry delivery system, the delivery of service in the name of Christ, is basically the English village model, but in overload. That model is centered and heavily dependent on the "cleric," who at one time was the most educated person in the village and thus also the primary teacher. This model tends to create vicarious religion, centered on the priest as the holy person, in whom is focused the religious power and knowledge. It also tends to create dependence, rather than interdependence. If the priest is "father," church members are children,

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who never reach sufficient adulthood in Christ to exercise much of their ministries. If the priest is pastor, members are always sheep intended to follow, not lead.



"Come, follow me."

credit: Lavrans Nielsen

Furthermore, this ministry delivery system is highly professionalized; at the center stands a professional with professional training. The model is highly hierarchical, and economically dependent in that it cannot function in its presently accepted traditional form without money. Furthermore, as a result of setting priesthood in a professionalized and economically dependent ministerial system, we have created a "sacramental captivity." Sacraments are primarily available where

a professional, stipendiary priest is available. This clerically-centered model of congregational life and mission increasingly limits both ministry delivery and the sacramental life of the Church.

Importing leadership

But this system is also tied up with our governance system. It has separated, or at least created a distance between, the

Church's primary leadership and the community of faith. As far as the local congregation is concerned, the primary leadership, by design, is **imported**.... The exercise of leadership takes second place to that of the imported leadership of the priest. Both systemic problems — leadership and ministry delivery — create much discomfort because they are basically inconsistent with our faith convictions. As Christians we are committed to a basic view of life that has interdependence at its heart.

In order to understand these systemic problems more clearly, it might be helpful to look at a bit of history.

From itinerancy to cures

Bernard Cooke, in 1983, pointed to three major shifts or movements that occurred in the first two centuries of the present era. These shifts so far have not

been reversed, but in some cases heightened as the centuries progressed.

First, he pointed to the shift from itinerant ministry and leadership to resident ministry and leadership. Jesus was itinerant, and he demanded the same from his followers. In the early Church, leadership ministries were also itinerant but many soon settled down. While there has always been some itinerant ministry, for example through missionaries, most primary leadership in the Church has been

“settled” since those early centuries.

From gifts to sanction

The second shift to which Bernard Cooke points is one from charismatic to official leadership. The early leadership patterns were based on gifts given to individuals, because of which they were then called to carry on certain functions. Paul has a number of these lists. But soon the needs of the institutional leadership tended to shape these functions into offices. This shift, Cooke points out, was heightened by the second-century gnostic crisis. In the face of these challenges, both the ministry of prophesy and the ministry of teaching had their autonomy diminished, almost eliminated.

Setting the Church apart

The third shift, from “secular to sacred,” is “the key element in the process towards attributing sacrality to official Church leadership; the shift towards contributing to such leaders sacred power by virtue of which their ministerial activity is salvifically effective.” Here are sown the seeds of what later developed into a view of actual superiority of the clergy by virtue of ordination.

In contrast, Cooke points out, primitive Christianity “really saw its own existence with that of Jesus as ‘secular.’ They believed that a radically new form of sacrality had entered the picture with the advent of Jesus, and above all with his death and resurrection. This new sacrality had nothing to do with some special realm of sacred religious activity. It dealt with the sanctifying presence of God’s spirit in Jesus and thereafter in the Church. It was this Holy Spirit that made Jesus the new and definite “holy of holies” and the Christian community the temple in which God dwelt....The entire community was believed to be empowered by Christ’s spirit and empowered to share in the ongoing mission of the risen one.”

By the end of the first century, all of

this was beginning to change. There was a shift to the sanctuary with images of priesthood praising God on behalf of the people. In the second century “the sacred character of the **Episcopos** and the sacred nature of his role are explicitly and consistently mentioned.” This appears to reverse earliest Christianity’s reluctance to apply sacred terms to any individual in the Church. “From the third century onward we can speak of holy orders in the life of the Church.”

If we are going to free the life and mission of the Church from clerical and sacramental captivities, we must understand our history, disentangle the issues, and reform the systems.

Priests as first-class Christians

Edward Schillebeeckx points out that the trends Cooke identifies reached new heights in the Middle Ages and that we are still stuck with them. Schillebeeckx goes on to point out that at that time the shift from leadership rooted in community to leadership with “private” power came to new fulfillment.

Our theology and tradition still claim the first picture while our practice and ecclesial culture point in many ways to the second. While the Reformation sought to make basic changes in some of these areas, it was largely unsuccessful. Aidan Kavanagh puts the matter as follows:

The upshot of all this is that the Western Churches in the first half of this present and perhaps most egalitarian of centuries found themselves with a highly undiversified ministerial structure focused on a...group of people who were

now regarded by many as ‘first-class Christians,’ a church of the chosen within a far larger church of the unchosen who constituted a baptized proletariat of Christians of the second, third, or even fourth kind. The effects of this are presently all around us.

The other Christian ministries, where they survived, have been presbyteralized, and the rest of the Church has been deministerialized. Charisms have not been restricted by this situation, for the Spirit persists in blowing, disconcertingly, where it will. But there can be no doubt that this constricted ministerial situation has made it all the more difficult to discern diaconic (i.e., service) charisms when they occur, and made it all but impossible to recognize them publicly and employ them effectively to the Churches’ good.

The most significant thing to recognize is that in this process the ordained offices have been uprooted from the community. They are privatized and clericalized. Equally important, sacramental power now leads to leadership. In the earliest Church tradition, a leader was identified, called, and then given sacramental responsibility. Now, because of these shifts, in our practice, someone offers himself or herself to the Church and, if affirmed, is trained. Then, through ordination, sacramental authority is given; only after this comes the call to specific leadership. The primary criteria are leadership potential and intellectual ability, rather than already established leadership in the community of faith.

If we are going to free the life and mission of the Church from clerical and sacramental captivities, we must understand our history, disentangle the issues, and “reform” the systems, in order that every community of laity, in Schillebeeckx’s words, “may have a full ecclesial life.” Only then is the Church truly empowered for mission. 