

Richard John Neuhaus

PASTOR AND PEOPLE: THE HOLY MINISTRY AND THE MINISTRIES

I have problems with the theme of this Institute, "Church and Ministry". It is the *and* that troubles me. From that theme one would possibly infer that the church *has* a ministry, and that we have and in some sense are had *by* that ministry. I'm intrigued by the work of Stanley Hauerwas, a brilliant ethicist at Notre Dame. Hauerwas says that the church does not *have* a social ethic: the church *is* a social ethic. Similarly instead of the church *and* ministry, I would like to explore the possibility of the church *as* ministry, because the church *is* ministry.

This is not without its problems. It sounds very functional, and a functional definition of church and ministry raises many questions. In the past those who take the functional view of church and ministry have, generally speaking, taken a low view of church and ministry. In Lutheranism, most recently in the Lutheran Church in America's statement on ministry (which is not the worst, but far from the best way of viewing ministry), the implication, along functional lines, is that sometimes you are a priest and sometimes you are not a priest. You pop in and out, depending upon what function you are performing at the moment. Most of us, quite rightly, find that objectionable. The alternative to a functional definition of church and ministry is a substantive or sacramental view; the emphasis being upon office rather than function, upon institution rather than event. But I would like to suggest that if we have a fuller understanding of the function, understood as the purpose of the church, it can very adequately do justice to the catholic and communal nature of the mandate that we bear.

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If we ask, "What is the church for?" I would answer: "The purpose of the church is nothing less than the salvation of the world." And salvation is to anticipate the rule of God over all things; or, in biblical language, to anticipate and thereby to participate in the kingdom of God. I have elsewhere written at length (some people would uncharitably suggest at too great a length) about the ways in which that anticipation takes place: that the church is to sight, to signal, to support and to celebrate the coming of the kingdom of God. The church *sights* this coming in the teaching of the life, the death, the resurrection, of the one whom we call the Christ. The church *signals* this coming in proclaiming what it has sighted, and also by being the community which embodies the meaning of the one whom we call the Christ. The church *supports* the coming of the kingdom of God by perceiving in the world those points at which there are, so to speak, cracks in the cosmos through which the kingdom may enter into an otherwise resistant universe: especially in service, and especially in service to the victims, to the vulnerable, to the marginal of society who live along the fault lines of reality where it is most probable that the judgment of the kingdom and the promise of the kingdom will appear. And above all the church *celebrates* the coming of the kingdom of God. Here all the other functions, if you will, come together in the eucharistic presence of the future.

Keeping the focus then on this purpose, one is keenly aware, even painfully aware, of the distance between church and kingdom. You know the nineteenth century historian who remarked that Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God, but what appeared was the church. The disappointment was understandable. We must never get over the disappointment. Indeed, our purpose in our ministries is not to relax the sense of disappointment, but indeed to intensify it, in order thereby to intensify the yearning for the coming of the kingdom of God, which is the future of the whole world. In this way of thinking then, we perceive the church quite simply as that part of the world that is ahead of time; that part of the world that is doing now what one day, whether it knows it or not, the whole world will be seeing and doing. We are saying now what all will say when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The focus on this function is distinct from the focus on the institution of church and the institution of ministry as such. I say that not because I am sympathetic to a pervasive anti-institutional bias in church and culture --not at all. Institutions are essential to anything of perduring social importance. I say that to keep the focus on the purpose in order to hold the institutions accountable; otherwise all of our talk about church and ministry plays into the hands of the institutional managers.

That touches on another place where one could begin to think about church and ministry. One could begin, as sometimes Christians have begun, by looking to the personally embodied leadership of the church. It is very hard for us to say that today. (Well, maybe it is easy to *say* it, but it is very hard for us --or anybody else-- to *believe* it.) Once bishops were teachers of the church, joining apostolic order to apostolic doctrine. But that is not true among us today. There is not to my knowledge a bishop in American Lutheranism, or for that matter the head of a diocese (at least in Roman Catholicism) distinguished chiefly as a theologian or a teacher of the church. Once bishops were pastors, not simply *pastor pastorum* as we talk about it today. Within any company, any business corporation, *pastor pastorum* can well be subsumed under the category of personnel management. Rather, bishops were real pastors to all the people in their churches, intimately engaged in the sacramental life. That is not true today. Once some bishops were even saints; and there *may* be bishops today noted as teachers, or pastors, or models of spirituality and radical devotion. There *may* be such bishops (I do not wish to be too harsh); but if so, they are not (you will perhaps agree with me) conspicuous.

What *is* conspicuous is a managerial style that is deadly to the church as ministry. The fault is not, let it be understood, simply with individual bishops; they are, for the most part, admirably suited to the structures they serve. They are the facilitators of and, more often than not, the ciphers within the flow charts of dull efficiency. The function of the church and the functions of management are in unavoidable conflict. In the coming of the kingdom that conflict will one day be resolved. But by all indications that day will not likely be any time soon.

One difficulty we have then in being pastors among our people is that the leading pastors of the church are not pastors. It is worth pondering that in this century at least a frequent exception has been the bishop of Rome. One can debate whether that is due to the charism of office or the charism of the person or both. Our busily preoccupied bishops, when challenged by his example, might claim that John Paul's duties are not as onerous as theirs. Of course he has time to think, to pray, to teach, to preach and to be pastorally present to the people of God. Our bishops might claim that it is easier to be accountable to the church of Christ than to the headquarters office --and perhaps they are right. But this is a problem we will continue to have. It will not be resolved by adding the appendages of catholicity to our present leadership. Miters, crosiers and copes cannot transform a job description into a vocation to spiritual leadership.

It is possible, of course, that some greater catholic substance may be desirable. I suspect that somewhere along the way toward Lutheran-Roman Catholic reunion, for example, the question of episcopal succession will have to be faced. At that point, while it is difficult to deal with the particulars of reunion, I would imagine there will be a rite along the line of that employed by the Church of South India when it came together in the 1950's. I suspect that hands would be laid on all around with deliberately diverse and ambiguous intentions. That may be necessary. Some problems are so deeply rooted in historical tragedy and polemic that they can only be resolved by a modicum of ecumenical fudging. (Ecumenical fudging is not unlike forgiveness, in some circumstances.) But my point is that we may dress and address the upper management executives of Lutheranism as we will; but for the foreseeable future, pastors will not find in them models for leading, in the words of I Peter, "God's own people in declaring the wonderful deeds of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light."

It is rather from our very personal and very painful wrestling with the purpose of the church that our ministries must be made free to minister. It is a question of knowing who we are in an *ordered* way: to know that we are first of all human beings, then Christians, then western Christians, then western Christians pledged to the catholic tradition, then Lutheran or Episcopal or Roman Catholic Christians,

and way on down the line, Lutheran Church in America, American Lutheran Church, Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, Missouri Synod, or whatever. This placement of ourselves within the universe, this coming to terms with the unsatisfactory particularity amid infinite hypothetical possibilities --*this* is the beginning, and this for most of us is and should be the daily beginning of renewal in ministry.

We find ourselves in a company --sometimes a genuine community (not often enough)-- of shared commitment. To be catholic is to be comprehensively ecumenical. A catholicity that is comfortable only with the catholic-minded is but another form of sectarianism. Our community includes the full spectrum of theology and taste and opinion: from Jerry Falwell to William Sloane Coffin, from the Church of Rome to the Church of the Nazarene. There are differences, no doubt, in the depth of our sharing; there are differences in our patterns of cooperation; but our ministry is finally one with all who share, however inadequately, a common contention for the coming of the kingdom of God.

In this company of sometimes half-hearted faith, ours is the *ordered* ministry --which immediately raises the problems accompanying the distinction between clergy and laity, problems that will continue until we are all put in our place in the kingdom of God. Clericalism's pretensions and anti-clericalism's resentments are inescapable. They can be contained, but not eliminated. In part this is because we and our people persist in confusing the church with the kingdom of God. And so it is thought that the higher seat in the synagogue is closer to the throne of God.

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." One need not rehearse all the tragic misuses to which the notion of royal priesthood, universal priesthood of believers, has been put in our history and in the history of many other Christians. John Hall Elliott, a good friend and acknowledged authority in First Peter, writes at length about the mistake of thinking that this passage deals with the notion that everyone has the same authority or responsibility. The purpose, writes Elliott, is to lift up the election and the holiness of the believing community. Similarly, Krister

Stendahl writes that election in Christ not only constitutes a new society; its meaning is to be found *in* the new society, and not in the status of individuals.

We need to lift up our people with passionate urgency. I think the only effective antidote to the incipient and sometimes raging anti-clericalism which we encounter is forcefully to proclaim (which means, genuinely to believe) that this is a people --*our* people, of infinite dignity by virtue of baptismal grace --a dignity which cannot be superseded by any other sacramental or quasi-sacramental action. We must deal with each person as a very important person; and demonstrate that we believe they are worthy of respect, --no indeed, *reverence*-- as the bearers, the vessels, of the Christ. The notion of royal priesthood is not a leveling notion or an egalitarian notion; it is an *elevating* notion. It is even, if you will, an *aristocratic* notion.

The church's vocation is not to put one vocation against the other. The church's vocation is rather to sustain many vocations. We must teach and preach in such a way that helps our people participate in the excitement of *leitourgia* as the work of the people of God --never to be attending *our* show. We must preach to our people with such sensitivity and with such respect for their piety that in our preaching they recognize the faith to which they aspire --they recognize when it is expounded, that *that* indeed is what they believe. (A mid-west LCA bishop recently said to me that in his many years he had never once known a pastor interested in liturgy who was a good preacher. I argued with him on that, and I'm sure he's wrong. But there is an element of truth: no stereotype is sustained without an element of truth. Few things would so accelerate sacramental renewal among us as a surge of great preaching among its advocates.)

There is a fallacy that afflicts us and there is a sin that afflicts us. The fallacy is a zero-sum mentality: the notion that every benefit that one person has is at the price of someone else's loss. Ours is not a zero-sum God; his grace is infinite. Just as we discover in loving that there is always more love generated by the giving away of love, so also in the lifting up of our people, the care and nurture,

the stroking even, if you will, we discover that we can never lift someone up but that we and others are lifted with them.

Then there is the sin of envy that afflicts us. The sin of envy, mixed with the confusion of church and the kingdom of God, results in what we see again and again: our people believe that the dignity of the clergy is somehow taken from them, and therefore they must reclaim what they believe was stolen by getting a piece of the pastoral action themselves. We must preach and teach in a way that convinces our people that at least *we* are convinced that church work is the people of God at work in their myriad ministries. Our need for committee members and for so many other forms of help in our parishes tends to override our theology on this point. We tend to lift up --do we not?-- those who are doing church work in the sense of institutional engagement in the numerous tasks more than those who, perhaps because they are more serious about their ministries, are out there doing *the* church work, which is the church at work, the people of God at work.

Now I believe --and I would not wish to mislead you here-- that it is very difficult to say that every vocation sustained by the church's vocation is of equal excitement to me. I believe this holy ministry, this office, this task, this priestly imperative, is the noblest vocation in the world. I cannot honestly say (nor would I be believed if I did say) that being a policeman, or a corporate lawyer, or commissioner of water works would seize my imagination and devotion as fully. But that is because this is *my* vocation. It is not necessarily the leading part, unless I again, confusing the church with the kingdom of God, limit my vision to simply what goes on within this little world called church, where indeed it might be the leading part. But within the whole of God's economy, the whole of the audacious project of the salvation of the world, it is not necessarily the leading part --but it is my part, and your part to play. We play it well as pastors, if we help others to play their parts well. To be in ordered ministry is, to be sure, to be possessed of a distinctive authority. But that authority is chiefly defined in terms of duty. All Christians *should* be exemplary of the communities' faith and life. But the pastor *must*

be. There is wisdom that talks about this office as the *public* ministry. We proclaim not our private musings, but assert the community's truth to which we are pledged. It is, if you will, our *role*. Now role has all the negative connotations of role-playing, except that our role is caught up in a greater drama, a greater reality. Even when we are pretending, God is participating. He takes our games more seriously than we do, turning our gestures into effective signs of his grace --that is to say, into sacramental grace. Ministry is devastated when we try to free ourselves --presumably our authentic, our real selves, it is said-- from our roles. We find ourselves in playing our part. Ministries are devastated when we want a part that is not ours, an authority which we have not been given. And that is usually where tensions between pastor and people arise, is it not? When we find ourselves quibbling over authority, we have already lost authority. We must learn not to assert our authority, except by the doing of our duty. If we, with radical devotion, focus upon that for which it is recognized by all we do indeed have authority --namely to preach and to teach and to preside, and lovingly to care for these people-- then we will never have to assert our authority; it has been asserted in the doing of our duty. Every contest a pastor wins by explicitly asserting his rights, he loses. The people will show deference to devotion. If there is not the deference we desire, it is likely because there is not, on our part, the devotion that God demands and our people rightly expect.

For several years of my life it was one of the great graces of my existence to have worked closely with Martin Luther King as a liaison between his Southern Christian Leadership Conference and various parts of the anti-war movement. Dr. King used to say again and again, "Whom you would change, you must first love." Every good teacher knows that, every good parent knows that, and every pastor should know that. The changes we want to work in our parishes (and God knows most of them need a host of changes) must be worked by love. Even what is called the prophetic word or the critical word must always be an exercise in love, never in contempt.

The great sorrow afflicting so many ministries is that pastors are

perceived as being contemptuous of their people's piety, aspirations and fears. Whether it be in the area of liturgy or in any other area, "Whom you would change, you must first love" --which means to perceive in them a good upon which change is building. Change is never destroying. What is not good will eventually be removed, not because it has been assaulted, but because it has been displaced by a loving better. The prophets understood that whom you would change, you must first love. Hosea, Jeremiah, and all the prophets of the Hebrew Bible could of course use scathing language with regard to the people of God: fat cows, terrible swine; dreadful things they called them! But always in love, because they perceived that indeed these people were the people of God. They perceived in these people a dignity, a vocation, an aristocracy which the people did not perceive in themselves. We must always, like the prophets, think more of our people than they think of themselves. And every change is to call them to be more fully what they are called to be and therefore in fact really *are*: a royal priesthood, a chosen race, a holy nation.

One of the great tragedies of the church's involvement in social change in the 1960's in which of course many of us were intimately engaged, was that those who saw themselves as the advocates of change permitted the symbols of communal loyalty and love to gravitate to the opposition, until we arrived at a sick point in our common life in which simply to wear the American flag on one's lapel was to identify oneself as an opponent of the changes that most of us thought imperative. We reached the point, you will remember, in which patriotism became (perhaps still is for many) a dirty word. I recall well a mobilization in Washington D.C. with Norman Thomas, one of the great men of this century in my view, and socialist candidate for president many times over. At one of these mobilizations where the American flag was burned, Norman, then an old man, said with tears literally running down his cheeks, "Richard, don't they understand that our purpose is not to burn the flag but to cleanse the flag?" No people, whether we think of a society or whether we think of our parishes, will take their cues from those who are perceived to be contemptuous of them. If they do not follow, let our first question be whether we are loving them into trusting our leadership.

Everything comes back to and moves forward from the Eucharist. It is, as the fathers said and as Vatican II emphasized again and again, "the source and the summit" of all of our thinking about the church as ministry. Let me rehearse very briefly the five-fold way of understanding the eucharistic action articulated by Brilioth in his classic, *Eucharistic Faith and Practice: Evangelical and Catholic*, and then picked up by Louis Bouyer and developed in *Liturgical Piety*: thanksgiving, communion, commemoration, sacrifice, mystery. Let us see how these distinctions illuminate our understanding of church as ministry.

Thanksgiving

--To see in this Eucharist the primordial statement of grace: that everything we do is responsive to that which has been done, to the gift that has been given. --To see the radicality of the statement, "This is my body, This is my blood" --that objectivity that carries all of our ambiguities --the objectivity of the promise upon which our whole life is premised --the objectivity and even the particularity to the point of triviality of the promise: every sparrow that falls, every hair that has fallen from your head (and some of us have more reason than others to look forward to the fulfillment of that promise), the littleness that is encompassed in the greatness of the promise that there is, especially among the vulnerable and the victims, the handicapped, the unborn and the dying, at the entrance gates and the exit gates, where the objectivity of this promise now proleptically present sustains the ambiguities of our ministries. There is no conflict we can have in our ministries that is definitive, that is do or die. The definitive conflict, the do or die confrontation, is already past in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The worst has already happened and therefore we can live in thanksgiving --eucharistically.

Communion

--Communion with Christ and through Christ by the power of the Spirit with God. --Communion with the church catholic. --Communion with all of those who have shared and who share with us the audacity of this

ordered ministry, what Brilioth called the absurd possibility of bearing *for* our people and *with* our people the actions that bear the Christ. Ignatius and Ambrose and Augustine and Francis Xavier and Charles Wesley and William Loehe are all cheering us on in this communion and all anxiously watching, I am sure, to see what we do with the mantle we have received from them. This communion which is, in the eucharistic action, also a political statement --a statement of the new politics of the right ordering of the world; a dramatization of the breaking down of all the barriers of class and race and nation and sex, which will one day become the beloved community and in the eucharistic action is already to be seen. This communion signals, whether the world knows it or not, the future of the universe when God finally succeeds in bringing to completion the project of history which he so absurdly, which is to say, so much in love, began.

Commemoration

Commemoration for some means backward looking, and it does have a backward-looking meaning. But when we look back, if we know what to look for, we are looking ahead, for our future is in our past. We are reminded, by looking back, at the radicality of that future as it appeared in our Lord's triumph over death; that it is this history, which is much more marked by the quotidian and the dull and the uneventful than by the "great acts of God", that is both the object and the subject of God's redemptive purpose. We are reminded in commemoration that our ministries are not, as some Christian ministries unfortunately do, to call people *out of* history, or to provide an alternative to history in which the hope is that we are raptured away, so to speak, to escape the travail. Rather our ministry is to call our people confidently *into* history, to embrace it in all of its smelling, itching, unsatisfactory particulars, knowing that this is precisely where God is to be discovered: among the least.

There was a book some years ago published in Lutheran circles called, *From Tradition to Mission*. What absurdity. In our devotion to tradition we are most radically in mission, for we are devoted to a

radical tradition. Catholicity is not nestling down into the security of the past but discovering that future and the imperative implicit in that future in Jesus' death and resurrection, and being impelled by that into ventures of the present. We are responsible for that radical tradition, for better and for worse, for sustaining it and for shaping it and for reshaping it in our times --we especially who bear the public ministry of the church and all that bears in upon us when we think of the Eucharist as commemoration.

Sacrifice

The great controversies of the past, especially the Reformation era (but today it is understood, I think in a marvelously ecumenical way by our Roman Catholic friends), proclaimed with a lucidity and persuasiveness that is seldom to be found in our circles how this sacrifice is indeed all the grace of God. Today, by the grace of God, we agree with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers on the grace of God. We agree particularly that sacrifice is not so much our offering him, but his joining us to his offering; that there is not a repeat of the sacrifice, but one sacrifice --a sacrifice that continues in the cruciform shape of a history in which we are emboldened to face up to the horrors because we face up to it in the company of him who has already faced it and assures us that at the heart of the horror there is hope. This is our ministry: to lead others to let go and to join him at the heart of the horror --the horror not only of headline proportions of Cambodia and concentration camps and on and on and on, but the horrors in the intensive care units, in the broken families, in the broken hearts of our lives and the lives of our people.

And yet there is also a sense in which we do offer him as well, in the sense of our presenting and pleading his sacrifice. Strangely enough some of the most moving expressions of this pleading the sacrifice of Christ come from the pen of Martin Luther, who for understandable reasons could not relate it as today it is possible for us to relate it to its eucharistic context. We present, we plead, we demand, we insist on the basis of his shed blood. *The Lutheran Hymnal*

and the *Service Book and Hymnal* had, "Do this in remembrance of me." Wonderful it is that the *Lutheran Book of Worship* has, "Do this for the remembrance of me." As Jeremias says, it suggests that we are reminding God like the importunate widow before the judge; we will not let God forget the promise that is implicit in the life and death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Do this, our Lord says, so that God will not forget; so that my Father will not forget all that I, on his behalf, have declared to you that he is going to do. It had not then been done; and today it has not yet been definitively done. The kingdom of God has not come in its fullness, or else we would not daily pray --indeed with our every breath pray-- "Your kingdom come." We have to take God more seriously on his promises. During a great persecution in the little village of Lotz the Rabbi and the congregation gathered. The Rabbi cried out, "O God, send us our Messiah; we have no more capacity to suffer. If you do not send us the Messiah, then we are no longer your people, and you are no longer our God." In another village they gathered and passed a formal resolution forbidding God to let his people suffer any more. We do God no favors when we let him off the hook. It is like a friend who would say to you that she was going to do some extraordinarily difficult thing, and then she tries and she tries and she is not very successful at it. After a while she is very disturbed about it. She is still in there trying, but you say, "Oh, come on, it's okay, you don't have to do it." She says, "No, no; I said I'm going to do it and I'm going to do it." And if we take her seriously, we do not do her any favors by letting her off the hook. God said he was going to do it and it is our duty to insist that he do it. He wants us to insist, to lift up. This is the great misfortune in our parishes, whether Lutheran, Roman, Episcopal or whatever; that in the doing of the Eucharist that importunity does not come through. If someone saw our people doing their *leitourgia*, they would not sense, they would not see, they would not hear the yearning *maranatha*, that dimension of the sacrifice which is our demand to God at the same time that it is God's gift to us. This needs to be urgently revived, I believe, in our doing of the liturgy.

Mystery

Today it is easier to talk about mystery; there is a great deal of talk about the mystical and about spirituality. Spirituality has become a kind of new "hot-tub" for a lot of people in which we get together and center in on ourselves and feel good. But mystery, as turned to God, is the very opposite of that kind of thing. It is the intensification of our yearning for that which is not yet and somehow, so enticingly teasingly, is already present. Mystery that turns toward God is an opening to the transcendent --as Peter Berger says, "An opening of the windows of the universe." As Francis Thompson said, "Thou canst not stir a flower without troubling a star." It is that everything is related to everything else, and that we have the audacity to say, "This is, this really is." It is that we have the audacity to resist those who say that what we are doing there is not related to the real world. We resist them by challenging their definition of the real world and say this *is* the real world. It is by *this* world, by *this* interaction, by *this* promise, by *this* hope, by *this* preaching, by *this* faith, by the new politics of *this* community gathered that all the rest of reality is to be understood.

Where does one begin with the construction of reality? One begins at that point where promise is most powerfully present in the eucharistic action. The gestures and the furnishings of solemnity are, of course, important to underscore this mystery. But it is finally not the gestures and the furniture of this liturgical action, but the scandalous simplicity of the present Lord simply saying, "Fear not, I am with you; and I am with you for others. Fear not, it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

The church *as* ministry because the church *is* ministry. We do not first decide what the church is and then ask what the church does. No, the being and the doing come together. The church is the church most fully actualized when it obeys the command, Do this. Do this that sins may be forgiven. Do this that the gospel be proclaimed. Do this that hearts be lifted on high. Do this that lives may be empowered for tasks below. But above all, do this

that God may remember him; that the covenant may at last be consummated; that our ministries and all ministries --indeed, that the church itself, indeed that Christ himself-- may at last and in the eyes of all be vindicated. Even so come Lord Jesus.