



CLERICALISM IN THE CHURCH

By Fr. Ronald G. Schmit

My first pastor after my ordination would occasionally say, “The worst thing that ever happened to the Church was Constantine.” The German Redemptorist moral theologian Bernard Häring said something similar in a book he wrote shortly before he died, *Priesthood Imperiled*:

“In the fourth century when Constantine, a “convert” to the faith, was crowned emperor by the bishop of Rome, drastic changes took place. While it is true that the Church was freed from bloody persecution, it quickly became evident that she was also greatly hampered in her quest to follow in the footsteps of Jesus the Servant. Accommodation of, and subservience to, civil authority...unfortunately became a reality in all parts of the Church. All too many bishops either succumbed or came close to the fate of becoming ‘priests of the king.’”

Clericalism is how the Church drifted from discipleship and servant-leadership to defining ministry in terms of power or authority. Pope Francis has identified clericalism as a sickness.

As the Church became mainstreamed into the empire of the Greco-Roman world, it often was coopted by that culture. Families of the Mediterranean world were an ordered hierarchy and patriarchal society. At the

top was the *paterfamilias*, the head of the household, in the *ordo* (rank) of the family. He held special legal powers and privileges. He had jurisdiction (*patria potestas*) over all the members of the family from slaves to adult male sons, their wives and children, and even married daughters.

The empire was also hierarchical in nature. Categories were established by birth—patrician or plebeian. The patricians were the small ruling elite. They traced their ancestry back to the

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first Senate. They controlled political power. The plebeians were the rest of the citizens. Women and children were not citizens. They derived their social status from father or husband. Patrician women and children were granted

rights not available to women and children of the plebeians.

Rank was based on wealth and political privilege. The highest levels were the senatorial and equestrian orders which were above the ordinary citizen. Attainment of honors could elevate a plebeian to *Novus Homo* or “New Man”. This would make his family *nobilis*; they became “noble plebeians.”

This Greco-Romanized Church took on hierarchical order and adapted theology to this world. It is when the Church took the idea of *ordo* that we see the terms “clergy” and “laity” as categories. The Latin word “ordinare” (from which we derive the word ordination) means “to designate.” In other words ordination designates rank in the Church.

Franciscan Friar Kenan Osborne in his book, *Ministry: Lay Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church: Its History and Theology* writes, “There would have been no ordination in the Christian community if there was not an understanding of church leadership as an *ordo*, both in the society called church and eventually in the society called empire.” One does not find the terms “clergy,” “lay” or “ordo” in the New Testament. These terms came to the Church from the culture of Roman antiquity.

There is not a problem with the Church recognizing structure or order. Nor is there a problem in using the word ordination (*ordinatio*) to describe

the recognition of public persons in the Church as leaders of the Christian community. Problems arise when the orders or ranks of Christian society were given the “status” similar to the socio-political world of Constantine.

Osborne writes, “The concern arises when the ordination ritual is interpreted to mean: a) a conferment of sacred power, b) based on a conferment of an ontological repositioning.” Ontological repositioning means that the ordained have become a new type of being. When the ordained have been perceived as given a power to become a “new man” or separate caste, a chasm opens between them and the laity. This is reinforced with symbols that separate out the ordained: wearing clothing outside the liturgy that indicates social status, living apart from the laity, and mandatory celibacy. These symbols are designed to say the clergy are on an ontologically different level from others.

Theology then turned from the New Testament understanding of discipleship and sought models for ordination in the hereditary priesthood of the Old Testament. In the New Testament the only priests are the Jewish priests; Jesus, solely by analogy (and only in Letter to the Hebrews), and all the baptized are referred to as priests. As Christian leadership came to be seen as a different rank apart from the baptized, Old Testament patterns were applied to the ordination rites. They looked to the priesthood of Aaron. The ordination of Aaron involved two rites: he was clothed in rich liturgical garb and he was anointed. He was thus consecrated for cultic service. These rituals were added to the Christian ordination rituals. Ministry slowly became defined as a cultic priesthood, that is, the power to perform sacred rituals. Under such a model, ordination became one-sided, static and a personal power.

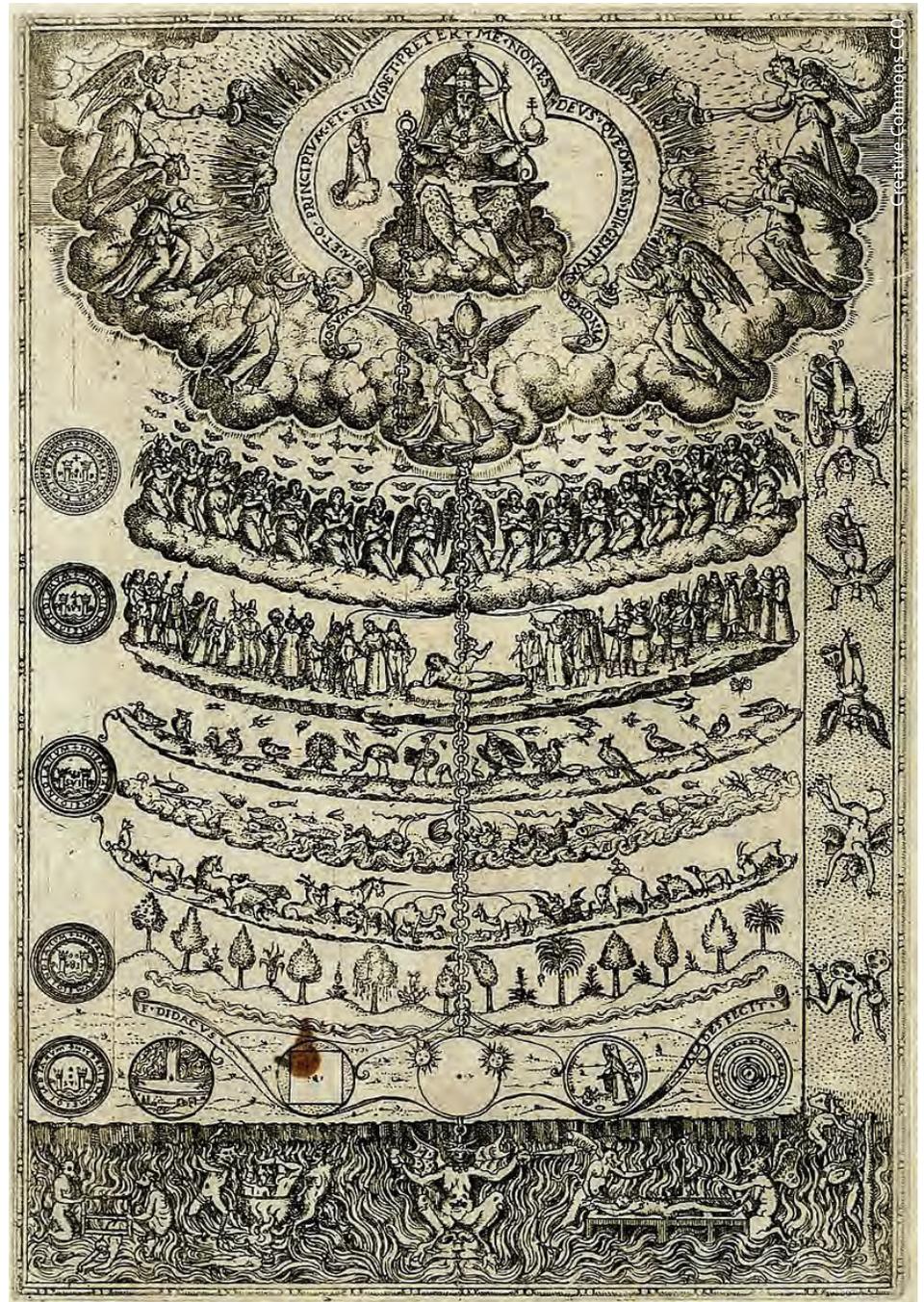
After this ontologizing of ordination, the Church began to create a theology of rank. It adopted Greek dualism which saw spirit superior to matter. Creation is ranked by the amount of spirit it contains. The more

spirit the higher it ranked. Rank moved upward from inanimate objects, plants, animals to humans. In humans, men were seen as superior to women. Above humans were the spiritual beings, angels, with the Source of all being, God, on top.

This theology expressed itself in a spirituality of ascent. The more you left behind matter the higher you ascended in the divine order. The “dominion” that

humans were given in creation, originally meant “to manage,” devolved into “domination.” This dualism created a two-level society. On a higher level were the dominant culture, men, clergy and celibates. On a lower level were different cultures, women, laity, and the married.

Clericalism is the shadow side of this system. It is to see oneself as belonging to an exclusive rank. Membership is restricted. The ranking is rigidly hierar-



The Great Chain of Being, Fray Diego de Valades, *Rhetorica Christiana*, (1579), representing a medieval hierarchal understanding of the structure of all of creation.



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Pietro Perugino, *Baptism of Christ*, Fresco, 1481-1483, Sistine Chapel, Vatican

chical. It is closed and secretive. This is a system of privilege, deference, and power. The clerics have a monopoly on information and access to others with power. Members maintain their status at all costs. The system believes in accountability, but the accountability is only upwards never downward. The ordinary members do not have to be consulted, and indeed, they rarely are. There is no time or need for dialogue or debate because the elite hold all decision making power.

Pope Francis says that when clericalism infects the Church, the Church does not come out of itself to proclaim

power held by an unaccountable few is ending. As this Church dies a new one is being born. The new Church is re-centered in the Paschal Mystery. It is a discipleship rooted in the Servant Jesus, it is for the whole body of believers and all are accountable to one another. This Church cares for the least and protects vulnerable children.

All ministry is rooted in Jesus and his ministry. Jesus proclaimed a new world where the merciful justice of God would reign. His Kingdom turns the hierarchies of this world upside down and inside out: "If anyone wishes to rank first, he must remain the last one

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the Gospel. Then the Church becomes inward looking and self-referential, obsessed with its own image rather than looking after those who are the most vulnerable and suffering. In the abuse scandal hierarchs became more concerned with protecting institutional power than with protecting the abused.

This crisis of abuse and its cover-up is the death throes of the imperial Church. This hierarchal system with

of all..." (Mark 9:35) Ministry is a personal call from Christ to announce the Good News.

The Second Vatican Council redefined the Church not as a hierarchical order with rulers over and above the ruled. Rather, it defines the Church as the whole "people of God." The Risen Christ is the light of all humanity and the mission of the Church is to reflect that light to the world. In *Lumen Gentium* the Council teaches us that all

the baptized "share a true equality common to all the faithful." All share "in the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the body of Christ." (#32) All share "in the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world." (#31)

The source of ministry and discipleship is not by delegation of the clergy but is a responsibility that arises from our Christian initiation (Baptism-Confirmation-Eucharist). These form us as the people of God and part of the priesthood of believers. They call us to serve.

In the New Testament, the ministry of Jesus is reflected in three specific ways. Christ is revealed as prophet, priest and king. *Lumen Gentium* tells us that all the baptized share in these roles of Christ. (#31) As prophet Jesus teaches us about the compassionate justice of the Kingdom of God. As priest, Jesus offers the self-gift of love to bring people holiness. As king, the Good Shepherd leads his flock into peaceful unity. All are responsible for his mission of teaching, sanctifying and unifying. Ordained or not, we have the same mission as Jesus the Servant who invites us to wash one another's feet.

The best way to end clericalism is a change of consciousness. We must assert the dignity of the Sacraments of Initiation as foundational to our mission as Church. All the baptized are empowered by the Spirit to bring healing to the world. The ordained should be formed as servant-leaders. Seminarians need formation along with all the baptized, not in isolation. We should lose the titles from the imperial Church which reflect privilege, e.g. Monsignor, your Excellency, Eminence, etc. We must see the work of the Church as collaboration among all the people of God. A quote from St. Augustine provides the correct balance, "With you I am baptized, for you I am ordained."

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