

Don't tell the pope

Nicole Sotelo | Jun. 11, 2009

Pope Benedict has declared June 19 as the beginning of the Year of the Priest. He has proclaimed that "without priestly ministry, there would be no Eucharist, no mission and even no church." I hate to be the one to inform him, but Eucharist, mission and church existed long before the rise of priesthood.

According to the Gospels, Jesus was not a priest, nor were his disciples. We do see reference to Jesus as a priest in the Letter to the Hebrews. The author uses the word to refer to Jesus as the *new and last* "High Priest," ending a long line of Jewish leaders. The author claims that priests are no longer necessary because no more sacrifices are needed. Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice and is our final high priest.

Perhaps the pope has forgotten that Jesus was not focused on priesthood. He was focused on ministry. He called people to minister alongside him, regardless of their status in society. He called out to fishermen and tax collectors and the woman with seven demons. Everyone was responsible for engendering the kingdom of God.

All were invited to minister and they did so with various titles given to them by the community based on their gifts. Some were called prophet, others teacher and still others apostle. It was only later that we begin to see the emergence of a formal ministry structure and corresponding terminology as the followers of Jesus were influenced and integrated into the Roman Empire. It is not until 215 A.D. that we have evidence of an ordination ritual for bishop, priest and deacon.

The emergence of the clerical structure eventually led to a division of the Christian faithful into "clergy" and "laity." In the early years of Christianity's emergence, however, Paul reminded Jesus' followers, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

After the rise of ordination and priesthood, there develops a hierarchical order among the faithful. The word "ordination" derives from the Latin "ordinare" which means "to create order." It developed from the Roman usage of the words "ordines" that referred to the classes of people in Rome according to their eligibility for government positions.

The laity became "dis-ordered" from the clergy. The word "laity" originates from the word "laikoi" that referred to those in Greco-Roman society who were not "ordered," or "ordained" within the established political structure. The word "clergy" comes from the word "kleros," meaning "a group apart."

While many Christians continued to minister within the church and even some women carried the titles of deacon, priest and bishop, most carrying this title were part of a limited group of men commissioned within the context of a particular socio-political and religious order.

This endured until 1964 when the Second Vatican Council reminded the church that the role of minister, or priest, was not limited to the ordained, but was a call to all the baptized. The document, *Lumen Gentium*, proclaimed that the laity were "made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ; and they

carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world? (31).

Priesthood, which arose out of the foundation of the early ministries of Jesus? followers, was now returned to all Jesus? faithful. All people are called to ministry again. All Christians are meant to share in the prophetic, sovereign and, yes, even priestly roles within the mission of the church.

So while the pope is exhorting ordained priests to reflection in this Year of the Priest, the call goes out to all of us to reflect on how we are living out our ministry in the church and world.

I wouldn?t worry about telling the pope that Eucharist, mission and church existed long before the priesthood, nor that the Year of the Priest should really be a year dedicated to all the laity. Instead, we need to understand this ourselves.

The Year of the Priest is an opportunity for the entire Christian faithful to reflect on priestly ministry, and in so doing, to claim our own.

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