

EUROPA FORUM 2006 Saarbrücken

Priests and Lay people together as People of God

Birgit Lechat

As I begin this brief sharing with you, I would like to underline that I am not a theologian. My approach is exclusively from my experience as a woman committed at various levels in the Church. The first level, and from far the most important, is the one of the parish. Unfortunately, my experiences are more negative than positive, but as much as I can I will try to remain objective. I hope that in the discussion that will follow, you will be able to contradict me by bringing positive experiences of collaboration in the Church.

There are of course several ways to approach the question of the relation between Priests and Lay People. I would try to remain in the frame of “together as the people of God”.

I divide this talk in four points:

- **The people of God**
- **The priesthood of the Priest**
- **Priesthood and leadership**
- **Formation**

The people of God

Go in a parish on a Sunday, and ask the participants what the expression “People of God” means... it’s worth it! Left alone to talk about “The common Priesthood of the people of God”¹ This expression comes from the quotation of the Apocalypse: “Christ, from the new people has made a kingdom of priests for God his Father.”²

For the ordinary catholic, the expression “priesthood” does of course strictly refer to the ordained faithful. Why is this wonderful notion, that the Council of Vatican II brought back to light, such well kept secret? Did you ever hear a sermon on that subject? Of course, for the priests it is a risky matter to talk about it in those terms. And yet, for me personally it is there that my commitment in the Church is truly rooted. First of all, we are all baptised people, called by Christ to form his people in the Church and in the world. In this people of God there are of course different charismas. Unfortunately, the present situation, with the so called lack of priests, mixes things up. To coop with emergencies one has now quickly started to engage lay people for positions traditionally reserved to priests. I have here in mind the tasks of formation and administration in the Church. There are people, often highly

¹ Lumen Gentium 10 & 34

² Ap. 1,6 ; 5,9-10

qualified, perfectly up to their role, but who have reach those positions 'for lack of anything better', ie because of the shortage of priests. I don't know how it works in your local churches, but with us, it too often happens that crises situations bring about that sort of decisions which could have been consider earlier as part of a program of sorting out the charismas in the Church. In Swedish we talk about "brandkår uttryckning", (fire brigade intervention).

How could we today rehabilitate this beautiful notion of 'People of God' and concretely give its full sense in our local Churches? How to recover the meaning of the community that was so vital for the first Christians? Community suppose service, diversity of gifts. Too often in the Church today we are confronted with a consumerism mentality: "Mind you! Priests don't do the funerals anymore" or: "There are no more masses during the week"... Meanwhile, as it is in France, a single priest has to take care of a dozen of parishes. Yes, to rediscover this notion of the community of the people of God is the only way to come to a real collaboration between lay people and priests.

The priesthood of the priest.

I am thinking here of the priesthood of the priest in regard of the universal priesthood. Naturally, I don't have the time neither the competence to deliver a lecture on the nature of the priest. Endangered species, or a chance to recover the essential role of the function? Function, role, nature, place... which word is the most appropriate? The nature goes beyond the function. For me the function is not an aim in itself. Why and how does one become a priest? Again, I would like to concentrate my reflection on the idea of the priest in relation with a community of believers. I truly think that this is one of the big problems of today. One becomes a priest outside a community. When I talk about community, I don't mean a religious community but a local community where all the people of God meet: children, elderly, youth, married and single. In the first centuries of the Church, small groups of believers got together, wanting to live from the Eucharist. Therefore, they needed a minister of the Eucharist which they designated among themselves. There wasn't of course no question of six years of study of theology or celibate men. One can also ask oneself the question if really there has never been a woman fulfilling that role. For me, the primordial role of the priest is to preside the Eucharist. Simply to re-enact the Supper of Jesus and to give to eat and to drink to the people starving for the Bread of life. Is this not a need as real and acute today? Is it therefore necessary to wait that a sufficient number of men chose to live as celibate and to do six years of studies? Is this not a today's reality, not only in Europe but also Asia and Africa? How do we obey the command of the Lord: "Do this in memory of me"?

Priesthood and Leadership

You will say: "The priest is not only saying mass". Yes of course, there are the other sacraments which are important. There is also the entire ministry of teaching, for which one could ask if it as to be exclusively reserved to the priest. The reality is that in most of the cases the priests are the head of local communities and parishes. It's there that the best example of collaboration can be found but also the worst conflicts. Unfortunately all that is often bound to the personality of the priest (*and to the way he has been trained*). If at his best he has a genuine vocation of pastor, he doesn't necessarily have the qualifications of a bursar, or personnel manager, or building engineer. Should the priest have a combination of about ten trades? Is this humanly possible? Personally I see the priest as the gatherer, the one who

sees the gifts of others and can call them forward, inspire confidence so that they could feel belonging to the community. This requires good self confidence in order to dare passing on responsibilities to other members of the community. Accept that things will not always been achieved in the 'usual' way. In our parishes, we more and more meet believers coming from different cultures. Instead of considering that as an impossible challenge, let us see that as a chance that could positively mark the life of the community, giving it more flexibility.

This supposes the priest to be a free man, capable of leaving space to others in the way the parish is organised. In return, I believe he could benefit of a precious support for his sometime very exposed life.

Formation

I think one of the big questions for the Church of today is the recruitment and formation of the priests. Who are the candidates for the priesthood? There are sure differences among the motivations. Unfortunately several experiences around me give me to think that it is not always the more mature and well-balanced men who go to the seminary. The vocation to priesthood has to emerge from a community of believers. Allow me to dream for a moment... That parish in a little town, at about sixty km from the capital, is only visited by a priest once a month... In that little parish community there are several men and women, well rooted in their faith and who carry the life of the community year after year. Why could the bishop not ordain one of those persons so that that little community could celebrate the Eucharist regularly? This situation is not unique in my diocese and in many others. This is my reality: to travel a hundred km, whatever the weather, to go to mass or else?... Of course those people who the community would call to preside the Eucharist would need a minimal of formation. But that would not rule out that some other priests could feel attracted by deeper studies. The community needs also good male and female theologians.

Another solution would be to start the formation for the priesthood in a parish, to be confronted with the daily reality of the small and big conflicts of the life of a local community. After that period of time in the parish, the Bishop could then reconsider with the candidate if he truly feels called to a pastoral life and if the community recognise in him a potential pastor for the future. In the ritual of ordination, the bishop raises the question: "Is the candidate worthy (and capable)?" When will we see the parish community answer that question?

Formation in close-up seminaries has disappeared in many countries, for shortage of candidates but it still exists. Is it wise to pull out those young men from the reality of life and later confront them with so many difficulties?. Young shoots growing in greenhouses have it hard to resist abrupt changes and one can rarely replant them in outside ground.

To be honest, one must also address the question of formation to celibacy – if it is to remain the norm. It is a serious matter where the good of all is at stake, the good of the priest as well as the good of lay people. What are the chances for celibate men – often of a certain age – to understand for instance family life and all it's problems? I say no more, that question by itself is a vast subject.

I am thinking as well of another reality: more and more is our clergy international. In Sweden half of the priests come from Poland, but we also have Africans and Indians. In the past, when European missionaries were going to Africa, a minimal of enculturation was expected from them. In reverse, the same duty should be expected as well. It's not just a question of language but of culture in order to live a proper relation with people. What is the daily life of an Indian priest living on his own in a small parish in the north of Sweden? It's far from

straight forward. Would it not be more appropriate to ordain a mature man from the parish rather than exposing this Indian to realities beyond his grasp? And I don't just talk about the climate.

Conclusion

I am well aware that I have more questions than solutions. Local situations vary. Maybe did I hurt some of you? I did it a bit deliberately to open a debate. To end up I would say: let us not talk in dualist terms: priest-lay people, man-woman, child-adult. Let us consider the people of God in it's wholeness and it's sacred mission in history. Let us rediscover the pillars of our ecclesial life: Koinonia, martyria, liturgi and diakonia. There everyone find it's place, each Christian has his/ her proper and unique vocation. No one can take another's place.
