

# THEME 1

## THE MINISTERIAL ROLE OF THE PRESBYTER

### WORD, EUCHARIST, AND COORDINATING MINISTRIES

*This testimony of Fr. Fernando Domingues on his experience in Kenya highlights some characteristic elements of the ministry of the presbyter serving in the context of evangelization ad gentes.<sup>1</sup>*

**The Word at the center.** The Council decree on our life and ministry as priests (*Presbyterorum ordinis* 4) presents the preaching of the Word as the 'first duty' of priests as collaborators of bishops in fulfilling their mandate to "proclaim the Gospel of God to all" (cf. 2Cor 11:7). Personally, I have often and, I believe, progressively lived this task as a real privilege: having theoretical instruments to deepen the Gospel as a written Word that leads to a vital encounter with the One who is the Incarnate Word, and then having the possibility of transmitting this Word to many others. I was experienced this journey of in depth study and encounter with the Word not only in moments of study and meditation, but especially in moments of preaching, since this too can become a true experience of what is ordinarily called "living in Christ" (cf. Gal 2:20). Listening to the Word together with other missionaries was often an enriching effort. The weekly morning of shared reflection on the readings of the following Sunday made us discover new dimensions in the Word and in our ministry. This ministerial complementarity in listening was not always easy, but often led us to discover in the Word a freshness that meditation from the point of view of the "professional preacher" risks not to grasp.

Yet another significant moment of community listening was the participation, in a role that was not of the presidency, in the weekly meetings of the small Christian communities where we meditated together and prayed the Gospel reading the following Sunday. This often proved to be surprisingly rich, because being done in the local African language, it gave our people a real chance to bring the Gospel into "direct contact" with their daily life in the slum where we lived. Not infrequently I was faced with truly new interpretations for me, for the simple fact that it was not a matter of meditating on the gospel to teach the poor, but of the poor reflecting on the gospel from their point of view, from the concrete challenges they had to face. Moreover, they meditated and re-expressed the Gospel from within their religious experience, always deeply marked by the beliefs typical of traditional African religion. Listening to the Word as a community, both among ourselves and with the local people, seemed to me necessary to avoid falling into "private interpretations" (cf. 2 Pet 1:20), often partial, in response to situations, cultures and religious traditions, which a person alone, moreover a foreigner, is never able to know with sufficient depth. Experience confirmed what we believe by faith, namely that all the baptized receive from the Spirit the light that enables them to understand the Gospel of Christ and to see how to live it in their concrete reality. This is even more true when listening is done in a community context of prayerful reflection and study with a view to a more authentic following. The Word heard then becomes Word preached, both in the liturgical context of the homily and in the various catechetical activities, in the visit to families, in the encounter with the sick and those who care for them, but also when "preaching without words", that is, in the concrete exercise of the various activities of charity and solidarity, as in the various projects of human promotion. In any case, the Word heard in the concrete context of the people and together with them, easily becomes dialogue with their lives in which the Risen Lord responds in the present to their concrete need for salvation.

***Animator of ministries.*** Closely linked to the ministry of the Word mentioned above is the presbyter's service of coordination and animation of ministries in the Christian community. The community born from listening to the Word feels from the beginning the imperative to live it in all dimensions of existence by giving a credible witness to others (cf. AG 6). From this reality, the Spirit arouses a plurality of ministries. Some of these are already established by the Church's centuries-old tradition (catechists, assistance to the poor, the sick, ministries connected with the celebration of the Eucharist, etc.), others arise as a response to local needs such as the ministry of reconciliation in areas of latent or active conflict, specific services in areas affected by the AIDS pandemic (prevention services, physical and spiritual assistance to the sick, their families, care for orphans, etc.).

It should be noted, by the way, that the various ecclesial ministries that serve the seriously ill are inseparable from their spiritual assistance in a context where illness is always lived as an expression and consequence of a moral and spiritual evil, one's own or others'. The presbyter has to set in motion and coordinate, in the local community, the process of discernment of the ministries necessary for the life and service of the community. Some of these ministries serve the functioning of the community, while others express the service and witness of the community *ad extra*. Of course, it often takes a good dose of imagination to create paths of basic and ongoing formation for new ministers, especially when it comes to creating new ministerial expressions; some areas that have required a special effort of discernment and formation of new ministers are: unmarried mothers, youth gangs, orphans, garbage collectors. Much of the time and energy of the presbyter is spent in the work of animation and coordination of these ministries, so that all members serve in harmony and complementarity that serves the growth of the one ecclesial body (1Cor 12, 12f.). A Church that is born and grows in listening to the Word as a community, easily develops ministerial dynamics at every level of her life so that each member becomes a minister. I remember that, on a feast of Pentecost, during the celebration of the sacrament of Confirmation, I invited, in accordance with local custom, everyone who had just been confirmed to declare before the community the concrete service she assumed among the many possibilities that already existed; even a seriously ill young woman barely leaned on two rough crutches came forward to commit herself to a ministry: "I will suffer for you all and especially for our priests". She had understood the meaning of an entirely ministerial Church. I found it particularly gratifying to see people whose hidden talents were discovered and developed precisely in the context of these ministries, often leading the person to find a new sense of his or her human and Christian dignity.

***Presiding over the Eucharist.*** It is in the Sunday Eucharistic celebration, presided over by the presbyter, that the community celebrates its life as the body of the Risen Lord and thus a sign and instrument of the concrete action of His Spirit in the concrete context in which it lives.

Again, it is up to the presbyter to ensure that in the celebration of the Eucharist, the concrete life of the Body of Christ as he lives 'here and now' is celebrated and made visible in all its richness. Since it was necessary to manage the time in such a way that the celebration did not last longer than the hour and a half allotted, an attempt was made to distribute the manifestation of the most important aspects of ecclesial life lived locally during the celebrations of the liturgical year. The celebration of the sacramental Body of Christ in the signs of bread and wine is inseparable from the concrete life of the local community, the Body of Christ in history. Hence the constant need to activate and coor-

dinate the necessary and inevitable process of inculturation in the liturgy. The two coordinates to keep always in mind were the real communion of faith and of ritual with the 'universal body' of Christ and, at the same time, fidelity to the concrete life of this same 'body' in its local expression. But the presbyteral service of presidency cannot be reduced to the organisational strategies of the celebration; at the heart of this service lies the fact that the presbyter presides in persona Christi; in his concrete person, consecrated by the sacrament of Order, it is Christ who manifests himself and acts as the head who offers his life on the cross for the life of his whole ecclesial body (cf. Col 1:18 ff; Eph 5:23 ff).

**For personal and community reflection:**

- What strikes me about this presbyter's experience? Why?
- What does this experience evoke in me? For what reason?
- What does it say to us as a community?

<sup>1</sup>**Source:** Domingues, F. (2006). "Presbitero e missione", in *Ministeri per la missione*, Redemptoris missio: rivista di pastorale e formazione missionaria, Nuova serie, anno XXII, N. 2 luglio - dicembre, pp. 20-29.