

Reflective Essay: “Church, Sacraments and Ministry: Historically significant times of change in  
the Church examined in three historical periods”

CHANGE IN THE CHURCH’S ECCLESIOLOGY AND MINISTRY AND HOW THIS  
UNDERSTANDING HAS AFFECTED MY PERSPECTIVE OF THESE TWO SUBJECTS

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To restate O'Meara's adage as presented in the Syllabus, "To appropriate history as one's own is to be enabled," empowered to live out life without the stricture of structures (Lee 5). By this, I do not mean a discarding of all structures. Structures are imperative to life on this planet. This appropriation enables one to make decisions without an unhealthy reliance upon the structure. An historical understanding of the history that made the Church what it is today makes it possible for me to live out my faith in the Church, understanding its limitations and its strengths. I will explore changes in the Church's understanding of ecclesiology and ministry by using three of O'Meara's time-periods in the history of the Church: "Reformation of Ministry, Ministry and Baroque" and "Romanticization of Ministry." I will also express how this understanding has affected my own perspective in both areas and compare how my experience either supports or contradicts O'Meara's original statement, "to know history is to be set free" (O'Meara 114-128 and 13, respectively).

The Reformation, or from a Catholic perspective, Revolt, which I will address later inasmuch as it speaks to the subject, was a major watershed for the Church. As the great Catholic historian of England, Hilaire Belloc observed, the Catholic Church has always existed in "perpetual conflict and...peril, humanly speaking, of dissolution. United Christendom" had been growing unstable "between the Black Death and the early sixteenth century, that is between 1350 and 1500" (Belloc 8-9). To illustrate the instability and lack of insight at the end of this period particularly relevant to this event, according to Fr. John Laux, teacher of Church history, "Leo X (1513-1521)...allowed the Fifth Lateran Council that Julius II had convoked in 1512 to dissolve...its last session held March 16, 1517...without doing very much to reform the Church." This was six and

one-half months before the Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, "nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the castle church of Wittenberg" on All Saints Day (Laux 416-417). Events leading up to and occurring at the time were causes that aided in this great challenge of not only Church life, but also political and economic life in the whole of Europe. The instability of a formerly united Christian world working in concert with the loss of most of the inhabitants of Europe in the Black Death, as well as the various thinkers that were soon to come from such a political atmosphere laid the groundwork for these new ideas to blossom. To couple an economically and politically rich and powerful Church with its seeming indifference to the plight of the peasants and those who saw the inconsistencies of the excesses such as the selling of indulgences engendered, made for a very explosive situation. These events are summarized by Belloc succinctly, "The outstanding character of the process that went on for...two hundred years before the Reformation was...the weakening of the moral authority in the temporal and spiritual organization of the Church" (Belloc 15).

The reformation's new paradigm of Church is quite varied and not exactly surprising. Both Luther and Calvin seem to emerge from existential conversions. Luther had his "personal experience of justification by grace through faith," which caused him to change Romans 3:28 by inserting 'alone' immediately following 'grace' as well as to try to discard many books of Sacred Scripture, many of which were rejected by a new generation. Calvin "experienced a sudden conversion," which I understand as a change of his thinking and feeling, meaning an existential occurrence. The two men were distinctly different in their starting points for their theology and in their presentation of it, Luther addressed "polemical issues" and Calvin, in his "systematic treatise, The Institutes of

Christian Religion," provided a well defined perspective (Winters 38). A few of their challenges to the present understanding of ecclesiology and ministry follow.

Calvin's doctrine of four ministries: "pastor (shepherd), deacon, elder and teacher," in the way it was practiced, ended up leaving only one ministry, that of pastor instead of priest (O'Meara 115). I understand the differences of the two in this way. A pastor is one who has people he is responsible to care for spiritually as well as in other ways and is similar to a shepherd. A priest is also like a shepherd who offers sacrifice and ministers to the Lord. Luther believed all Christians are priests"<sup>1</sup> and have the same power, but only those allowed by the community or called by superiors were permitted to use that power. This directly addresses ministry, theoretically opening ministry of all sorts up to anyone of the community, though within a structure. Yet he could not simply "laicize" ministry completely because of his "love of orderliness" (Winters 37). It also affects ecclesiology because the priesthood is critical to the Church, requiring it in order to carry out Jesus words, "Do *this* as a remembrance of me," (Luke 22:19, emphasis added) this being interpreted by the Church, "the pillar and bulwark of truth"<sup>2</sup> (1 Timothy 3:15), as the Eucharist. Luther based his ecclesiology solely on the Word of God, meaning Jesus, not sacred scripture. "Where the Word is, there is the Church." This paradigm makes it possible for Luther to redefine the Church, since this is a very open definition of Church which allows one much latitude in presenting another ecclesiology. One of the definitions of ecclesiology I have used in the past as a Protestant describes the Church as an invisible entity, the Body of Christ, without visible representation. This spiritualizing of the entire concept allows its adherents to ignore the authority of the visible Church's head that occupies the seat of Peter. The Church has always in history

been a visible entity, be it a small, localized phenomena or the highly organized, bureaucratic superstructure it is today (Winters 36-38).

To see the results in practice of Luther's ecclesiology, I would like to briefly examine the difference in titles I mentioned at the outset of paragraph two by contrasting two Church reformers: St. Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther. They were both members of religious orders in the Catholic Church with all that implies. Luther failed to follow his vows and brought dissention into the Church, which effected many divisions in the Church. This dissention has affected the entire Christian world for nearly five centuries after he nailed his points to the door and the results of such have hurt many deeply. I have been touched in this way in my personal experiences in Christian religion. I do not believe that Luther's initial intent was to cause rifts between people, as Winters points out when Luther condemned an uprising of peasants against nobility (36). Luther's direct challenge of the hierarchy was very different from Francis' way of "repairing my house, which...is fallen completely into ruin" (Ramos 80). The strength of Francis' reformation was his obedience to the Holy See and his literal living out of the gospel message, which endeared him to the entire Church and affected the reforms required relatively quickly. Luther's attempt at reform was poorly done because he lacked Francis' strength; in other words, he did not live a life of holiness as set out in the Gospels nor did he follow his own vows as did Francis. They were similar in external life circumstance in that both wanted to serve God through religious life and wanted to reform the Church. This is where the difference ends. Francis received a call and responded to it, living the Gospel simply as a preaching, wandering beggar who started several religious orders obedient to the Church. Luther was an Augustinian monk who had already taken a vow of obedience,

yet instead of doing so, he made specific demands on the Church to reform itself. With the demands not satisfied, he left and worked against the Church. While he might have believed in what he was doing, he was filled with pride in his own understanding and ended up being the spark that lit the flame of open rebellion against the Catholic Church. This eventually created several competing churches, which was to multiply in the next period we will examine. It is for these reasons that, from a Catholic perspective, I call the reformation a revolt. The Church is an organic entity, living and growing, and so it is bound to change as it grows. It seems that in spite of how poorly Luther went about 'reforming' the Church, God used Luther's ideas and the events that are to follow to reform the Church, even though it took several centuries to be realized.

Immediately following this historically is the next period, Ministry and Baroque (1540-1800). As Belloc sensed, the big powerful organic entity of the Church finally felt and saw its moral authority in temporal and spiritual areas slipping away. It seems to have done what might be expected when people are losing control of a situation, it grasped for whatever it could salvage, becoming more authoritarian and very defensive. In describing the Council of Trent, the Acts of Vatican Council I stated, "...the sacred dogmas of religion have been more exactly defined and more fully stated; error has been condemned or repressed; ecclesiastical discipline has been restored and placed on a firmer basis" (Laux 479). The Council never really directly dealt with the issues Luther or Calvin were raising, except to employ anti-Protestant tactics in ignoring the doctrines being expounded upon by them as well as others and defining the faith and its practice in very exact terms, so that the decrees are tainted with an excess of retrenchment (Winters 40). The Church's theologians, when addressing doctrinal errors, did not address these

points to the populace, but only to other theologians. It used the theology of Aquinas, starting with the concept that we are all sinful and need to be redeemed and just about entirely ignored Franciscan theology, which takes its starting point that all God made was *good*, but when God made man and woman, He said we were *very good*. This did preserve Augustine's views on grace, so that even though Catholics and Protestants appeared to be distant on the issue of justification, they were actually very close (Winters 41). As I reflect on Trent's choice of theology, I can see the great wisdom in their choice. One of the ways the wisdom can be shown is in the use of Thomistic philosophical theology because it is so well defined and reasoned which is exactly what they needed when one had a graying of the lines of Church teaching by making fine distinctions which end up breaking down the contiguous whole that the Catholic faith is. Trent made the bishop an administrator and a religious superior of his priests. Priestly education for formation was established in seminaries and the "pastoral oversight of clergy was regularized" (Winters 41). It cemented ministry in ordination so that ministry focused primarily and many times solely on priests and their roles. Even religious were given a back seat. Ministry was reduced to spiritual actions by the ordained minister, a priest. The bishops and priests were charged "to teach the essentials of faith clearly and accurately" (Winters 41). Catholics who were not ordained or did not belong to a religious order were relegated in the society of the Church to that of a child. The parent tells and the children do. Theology was sometimes viewed as too complicated and technical for an ordinary *layperson* to understand, which could stem from the perception that essentials of the faith were lesser than the exalted theology taught in seminaries. Since they used Thomistic philosophy, this is understandable to a certain extent. Because of this disparity in learning

between the ordained and all others and the sacerdotalization of ministry, there was little or no possibility of each person using the charism each one received to build up the Body of Christ in the Church (1 Thessalonians 5:11 and Ephesians 4:4). Church was not a community, but a hierarchical institution from which pronouncements came that had to be followed. Ministry was a life-long endeavor accomplished by professional ministers who were trained and controlled by the hierarchy. The individual lost most of the responsibility and freedom to use their gifts, a responsibility they once had. This had the effect of actually redefining ministry in terms of sacerdotal actions. From the perspective of the Holy Sees, the teaching, authoritative office of the Church needed to be shored up to strengthen ordinary Catholics. People were not allowed to question, as the Church became defensive. As if telling people to ‘stay off our turf,’ unless it was trod on as they wanted. With the creation of the Church as a monolithic structure coming out of Trent, the richness of ecclesiology was buried like a treasure, yet to be rediscovered. It was limited to a hierarchical structure that ignored most of the Body of Christ, so that the head was recognized and theologized about, almost in a vacuum. Trent gave the Church laws and rules that tightened the Church structure and definitions of the faith, almost as if to say this was the final word for all eternity. Practical or lived ecclesiology and the practice of Catholics became regimented in the extremely rigid liturgy it adopted and made universal for the Church in all lands. At the time of these pronouncements, Ignatius of Loyola, Spain, had a tremendous conversion and God revealed to him the Spiritual Exercises. These Exercises allowed Catholics to experience personal conversion and a deep personal devotion to God, motivating one to serve. The Jesuits, as they would be called, defended the faith against the Protestants and became missionaries, converting

many people of varied religious and cultural backgrounds, highlighting inculturation. The Jesuits reflected some of the best of what the Church had to offer the world and added to the Church as people joined in massive numbers in the Americas and other lands while the population of the Church in Europe dwindled, many leaving to join the new Protestant upstarts.

The Romanticization of Ministry period covers approximately 1800-1950. During this period, there was much change in the world. Napoleon made additions to the French catechism and was excommunicated in 1809. As Laux observes, "He remarked: Does the Pope think that the weapons will fall from the hands of my soldiers because of his excommunication? A few years later a report from Russia read: The weapons are falling from the hands of our soldiers." The Papal States were restored, Catholics in the British Isles were emancipated, Belgium became a kingdom favorable to the Holy See, there was a Catholic awakening in Germany, the Oxford movement started in England, and Pope Gregory XVI started the Scholastic revival. Laux further points out, "Pope Pius IX restored the English hierarchy (1850)" and "on the 8th of December, 1854...proclaims the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin a dogma of the Church" (526-536 and 540). Vatican I emphasized monarchical power and defined the doctrine of Papal Infallibility in 1870 (O'Meara 124 & Laux 544). "Europe grew conservative intellectually so as to direct the Church from Rome...from 1831 to 1878" (O'Meara 124). There was an increase of Marian apparitions starting in 1830 and growing exponentially into the twentieth century. There was also the rise of Communism for the first time ever as Russia was plunged into that dark night in 1917. This Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was to threaten the entire world with violence and war. In contrast to all that

above, the nineteenth century denied the supernatural. The laity's talents begin to be used along with the priests. Mysticism and a personalization of grace to an "interior condition of personal life" cultivated ministry. One type of ministry, typified in the Cure of Ars, was experiential and individual. Formation of a plethora of female religious communities and new forms of religious life started up during this period. The Church appears both small and committed, from my vantage point today, while at the same time, clerical privilege increased which gave definition to the role of the clergy and detracted from lay ministry because the Church was on the defensive trying to figure out how it could use the forms of the modern world and remain faithful to the gospel (O'Meara 123-127). Dorothy Day in America was one example of a lay woman doing something proactive to help the less fortunate.

These changes above reflect how quickly the world situation changed. The changes had the effect to start to open up ministry to laity cooperating with the Church and working on their own in redeeming society by living out the new social responsibility being preached by the Vatican with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. As the Church recognized in some way the contributions ordinary people were making to live out the Church's teachings in this way, along with the explosion of women's orders and new forms of religious life, it seems to be unconsciously preparing for what we know as Vatican II. The Protestant missionaries also had a hand in helping the Church to expand its ministries inasmuch as they were the competition and many of these missionaries were converting great parts of Catholic populaces in places such as Central and South America to their factional denominations. The Church simply could not stand idly by while it was being threatened by the violence of Communists<sup>3</sup> and others on the one hand and

Protestant conversions on the other. Even though the Church might not have associated the word ministry with these actions that were in concert with the work of the Church and were being done by spiritual entrepreneurs both inside and outside the Church, simply encouraging the work and calling others to go do likewise within the Catholic world reflects a changing attitude for a Church that had virtually closed off all ministry with very few exceptions to the laity that did most of the living, working, paying and dying in the Church.

As the Church became involved in various projects that it started with its own social doctrine of helping the less fortunate, it could not help but to grow into respecting personal charism to a certain point. The People of God that was proclaimed in Vatican II as the main model it intended to use for the Church had its genesis in these occurrences where the 'rubber meets the road' (Winters 51). The Church was climbing out of the gigantic fortress it had built for itself from Trent onward in reinforcing the bulwarks to fight against the lure of Protestantism and subtle heresy that could lead its sheep away from the truth, of which the Church is the protector.

The journey of this course has been a real eye opener for me. While I have read some Church history, I did not have a handle on how the Church came to be what it is today until I was able to journey this road with my classmates. I have been personally touched by the Protestant Schism started by Luther, that Augustinian monk, so many centuries ago. I left the Church when I was twenty and returned at nearly twenty-four. It was a very emotionally painful journey; particularly when I felt betrayed by my Church for teaching me lies instead of the truth, only to discover later that the lies emanated from the Protestant side. My initial understanding of ecclesiology was that the Church was

definitely the Body of Christ and while I intellectually assented to the Church being visible, my internal understanding was that the Church was an invisible entity and was spiritual, not physical. This would conveniently explain why I saw no visible unity in the Church, but competing factions. This course has directly challenged that by allowing me to examine this issue through history, a first time I had ever examined the issue of ecclesiology in any kind of systematic way. I now find it easier to understand and explain my Catholic understanding of ecclesiology to others.

Ministry is an entirely different area for me. The three and one-half years I was Protestant, I saw ministry as things that I could do as I saw fit. It was not limited to work in the Church at all, but did include teaching Sunday school. There were not as many options for ministry in the Church as a Protestant then as I have now as a Catholic. I have been very active in ministry within the Catholic Church as a teacher of RE (Religious Education), RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults – those considering joining the Catholic Church) and Confirmation, RCIA sponsor, teen retreat work, Lector, LEM (Lay Eucharist Minister – distribute communion at Mass) and was elected to the parish council. Outside the Church, I was a Catholic chat room monitor. These various ministries have taught me that I have certain gifts to share with others in building up the Body of Christ. I have found the more experience I have in ministry, the better I am able to identify the gifts with which I have been blest to help others.

To evaluate my own experiences in light of O'Meara's statement at the outset of the paper, "to know history is to be set free," I have to judge that I am living out his adage. The more historically contextualized my faith becomes, the more I am able to answer those around me and own my faith as a personal possession, not just something I

hear about from the pulpit or Vatican. It goes past simply having a better understanding to affect the way I live and treat people. This is a reflection of the great commandment which is summed up by Saint Paul, "Love never wrongs the neighbor, hence love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10). I am very pleased that this study has had this effect on me because I believe this to be the most important thing I can improve upon in my life. I feel I am more Christian, a better follower of Jesus as a direct result of this study.

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<sup>1</sup> This concept is found in 1 Peter 2:5&9 and in Revelation 1:6. Hebrews 5:6 refers to Jesus as being a priest after the order of Melchizedek, applying Psalm 110:4 to Jesus. This seems to indicate a difference in priesthood between believers and Jesus. Such a distinction makes it understandable when the Church distinguishes between an ordained priest and the priesthood of all believers. All references are from the New American Bible.

<sup>2</sup> It is clear from this passage, among others, that the scriptures are not the pillar and bulwark of truth, but the Church which interprets sacred scripture, as opposed to many Protestants who mistakenly believe the scriptures are the preserver of that truth. This is a ludicrous idea. The written word requires an authoritative interpreter and defender and those who might believe differently need to be reminded it was the Church who selected scripture, not the other way around.

<sup>3</sup> One of the known tactics of the Communists was to subdue the people with violence. If one received a beating in one's own home, when they returned, the one beaten would most likely submit instead of receiving another beating.