

Robert Schreiter: Reflections at the Pastoral Conference

Robert Schreiter was invited to support the pastoral conference by providing a theological framework for the process (see report: ‘A time to be still, a time to talk’). He proposed to do this along three lines. Firstly, to offer some theological grounding to what we do in pastoral ministry, so that we remain connected to our faith and our values. Secondly, to share some reflections on a spirituality to nurture and sustain us. Thirdly, considering the joys, hopes, fears, and anxieties we all have, to indicate the kinds of support structures and processes which can help us to work with integrity.

The Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*’s second chapter entitled “The People of God” begins with baptism. (The chapter on the hierarchy is the following chapter.) It is in the second chapter that the baptised are described as a holy priesthood. In fact, there are three dimensions to the gift and call that insertion into Christ confer on us – that of the priest, the prophet, and king.

1) Priest

Paragraph 10 of *Lumen Gentium* states “Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men, made the new people ‘a kingdom and priests to God the Father’. The baptised, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvellous light.”

The one particular priest, Christ, is the one who makes the connections between this world and the spiritual world. Christ helps people to see the significance of their lives. Bob suggested that for us as Catholics the spirituality of this connectedness is to be found in the sacraments. We are all priests in our baptism. However, if we are losing hope we cannot fulfil this ministry of making connections. Bob illustrated his point through a story of a group of missionaries in a fractured and dangerous context. On reflection they realised that they would actually be endangering others by continuing to stand up for justice while they themselves were losing hope. What had kept each of them going was sharing with each other one good thing that had happened each week to sustain their hope. 'Celebrating the little victories' became very important to them.

We too need to maintain hope if we are going to make meaningful connections between life and faith, both for ourselves and for others. We need to pray together. We need to read scripture together - see who Jesus connects with and who connects with Jesus: Martha and Mary, the Syrophenician Woman, the woman at the well, the woman who washes his feet. These are all priests.

So what kind of support systems are there for people in ministry? There should be the regular possibility for people in ministry to gather, reflect, connect, and hear each other's stories. People in ministry must not become disconnected. There is loneliness in ministry but we must not sink into isolation. We cannot live sacramentally if we live out of communion.

2) Prophet

God speaks through us. Look at 2 Cor 5:17-20 "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." We are called to be prophets and God speaks to us in the ministry of reconciliation.

Our wounds are part of us and part of our history. God speaks through them too. We can consider our wounds as poisonous or toxic or we can consider them a blessing for others. There is a sense of vulnerability amongst those in ministry. Some may even feel the need to speak but are very aware of the consequences – "will I lose my job if I say this?" St Paul was sometimes autobiographical in his letters and speaks about doing God's work. While he was still on the road to Damascus Paul, the apostle of reconciliation, would surely have been considered an unsuitable candidate!

So how do we sustain our prophetic role? Through deep communion with God. Look to the scriptures. Jesus retires to pray. He goes to the mountain top. Luke tells us that "he went to the place where he was accustomed to pray." Like an athlete, he was preparing for confrontation. Look at Jeremiah feeling unsuitable for his role and the reluctance of Jonah. We have to have the possibility of going to pray, apart to pray, even though we have the pressures of family, jobs, and ministry.

3) King/Ruler/Leader

Jesus said “I have come to serve and not be served”. This is a leadership of service.

Moses was a reluctant leader – and he was not a good speaker. Under his leadership the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness. Again, consider the two disciples on the road to Emmaus – and ask: how are we to lead when we do not know where we are leading? How can you lead people to a place you have not yet been? These considerations bring into focus the need for spiritual direction and supervision.

Through such processes, we may gain essential insights into our own journey, so that we can lead with greater freedom and confidence. These structures have to be in place for those in ministry. Bob said “It took God one day to get the Israelites out of Egypt but forty years to get Egypt out of the Israelites.”

When asked if he could expand on the leadership model. Bob reflected that grasping the implications of our ‘kingly’ role is still a work in progress. Models of leadership which do justice to a vision of servant leader which is gospel based and focused on the kingdom have yet to be fully grasped and articulated. In our time, operative models seem to fluctuate between extremes. What must be upheld at all times is that ministerial authority is rooted in baptismal identity.