

The Roman Catholic Priesthood and Bahá'í Administration – A Dialogue by Kevin Brogan

Abstract

One of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith is that in this dispensation there is no longer a need for a professional priesthood. One might therefore ask how there could be any reason to deal with the issue of Roman Catholic Priesthood in the context of Bahá'í Administration. This paper examines the three elements of Roman Catholic Priesthood – Leadership, Teaching and Sacrament – in an effort to explain to Bahá'ís the theology of Priesthood and to demonstrate to Roman Catholics how many of the functions pertaining to the role of priests are being fulfilled in Bahá'í Administration. This issue is pertinent, considering the level of criticism of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy in recent years. There is a lot of misunderstanding surrounding the meaning of priesthood, and the paper sets out to answer the need for a greater understanding of workings of the Roman Catholic Administration.

Introduction

Growing up in the Irish Roman Catholic tradition, one cannot forget the hierarchical influence of the local priest in the Church. The true meaning of Church as the 'People of God' is often lost on many Roman Catholics, and many would say that this is due to the influence of a Hierarchy which is seen to impose its teaching on the laity. The priest, "acting in 'persona Christi,' feeds the flock, the people of God, and leads them to sanctity."¹ How is that role played out in the parish? The Roman Catholic doctrinal tradition describes the priest as teacher of the Word (Scripture), minister of the Sacraments and leader of the Christian community entrusted to him (his parish). In the context of the Bahá'í Faith, the priest performs the functions of both the appointed arm and the elected arm.

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to examine each of these three priestly functions – teacher, minister of Sacraments and leader² – and how the role of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy contrasts with the leadership model evident in the Bahá'í Faith.

One might question the relevance of such a study as Bahá'u'lláh has told us that in this Dispensation there is no need for priesthood, as it exists in Christian religious denominations. This, however, does not diminish the relevance of such a comparison between the leadership model of the Bahá'í Faith and that of Roman Catholicism. The relevance of such a study is that it sets out to enable Roman Catholics to understand the reasoning for not having a priesthood while at the same time allowing Bahá'ís to understand the theology behind Roman Catholic priesthood.

The Church Hierarchy and its Teaching Role in the Christian Community

The missionary activity of the Roman Catholic Church – or pioneering, as it applies to the Bahá'í Faith – is “incumbent primarily on the College of Bishops presided over by its head, the Successor of Peter”³, while the “priests ... are collaborators with the Bishop in virtue of the Sacrament of Orders, and are called to share responsibility for the mission.”⁴ As a result, the Church Hierarchy holds the ultimate responsibility for spreading the Word of God, a role which in the Bahá'í Faith is the challenge facing each believer. However, lay teachers are also employed to carry out this task, but in all cases under the auspices of the local priest or bishop. This authority is given to the priest by virtue of his sacred ordination.⁵ This is not meant to be an issue of power. This monopolisation of the teaching of the Word of God stems from the belief that the priest in his parish has a theological training and knowledge which is greater than that of the laity.

The argument may be put forward, as it is in the Bahá'í Faith, that people have benefited from the advances of

widespread education, which challenges them to seek after truth. However, it remains the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that the priest is the primary teacher of his flock. This is despite the fact that lay people now have sufficient education to be able to make informed decisions about interpreting how the teachings of Jesus can influence their individual lives. In the Bahá'í Faith, the believers are encouraged to read the writings and reflect on how they can lead them to God: “Man should know his own self and recognise that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty.”⁶ One must earnestly seek after truth with a pure heart and a mind free of prejudice.

Therefore, as a Roman Catholic, one is expected to follow the teachings of Christ as recorded in the New Testament and interpreted by the Hierarchy as well as the teachings from suitable books⁷ and “approved writers in theology”⁸, while also adhering to the teachings of the Vatican as they have evolved over the last two thousand years. The authority for such teaching lies in the hands of the Pope and his College of Bishops, which constitutes an infallible authority because they are direct successors to the apostles and the Pope is a direct descendant of St Peter, the first Pope. It is interesting to note that the doctrine on Papal Infallibility was not drafted until 1869 and in response to the unification of Italy where Papal authority was confined to the present-day Vatican; according to Cardinal Manning of England, at the time, “European powers are dissolving the temporal power of the Vicar of Christ.” This Papal primacy, or infallibility, means that the Pope, when teaching matters of faith or morals for all the faithful, cannot err and is to be obeyed.

It might be said that the absence of a professional clergy in the Bahá'í Faith poses a greater challenge for the individual believer. In Roman Catholicism, the individual has been encouraged to rely on the Hierarchy to teach, although there has been some effort to involve laity in this task because of the fall-off in vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

However, each individual Bahá'í is encouraged to participate in teaching the faith: “It is the individual who manifests the vitality of the Faith upon which the success of the teaching work and the development of the community depends.”⁹

The Priest as Leader in his Parish

The administrative structure described above has served the Church of Rome quite well throughout its history, even if there is less loyalty to it in today's society. Because it was necessary to protect the faith from heresies and to maintain the purity of the teachings, such a leadership was centralised, with authority and power resting in the hands of a small group of individuals headed by one person who was seen as “Christ's Vicar” on earth. Such a leadership – called the Church Magisterium – had to be authoritarian and to “preserve God's people from deviations and deflections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error.”¹⁰ Out of this need grew a professional clergy, which served the faithful and who were largely uneducated and needed to be told what was right and wrong, what was sinful and what was not, what was Church teaching and what was heresy. The Pope is still seen to be the “perpetual and visible source and the foundation of unity both of the bishops and of the whole community of the faithful.”¹¹ As Vicar of Christ and as “pastor of the entire church, he has full supreme and universal power over the whole church, a power he can always exercise unhindered.”¹² Likewise, when Christ appointed Simon Peter as the head of the Church (Matthew 16:18–19), He also, by extension, appointed the Apostles to work with Peter to lead the Church. Today the bishops of the Church live in “communion with one another and with the Roman Pontiff in a bond of unity, charity and peace ... Together with their head the Supreme Pontiff, and never apart from him, they have supreme power and authority over the Universal Church.”¹³ In addition to this, the individual bishops in their own dioceses “exercise their pastoral office over the portion of the People of God assigned

to them”¹⁴, while at the same time have consideration for the needs of the whole Church as part of their participation in the College of Cardinals. The bishop is the authentic teacher of the faith in his diocese, and exercises power in accordance with the whole Church under the guidance of the Pope. For example, it is Church teaching that the bishop is the primary religious education teacher of all Roman Catholic children in his diocese. He rules with the same authority and sacred power in his diocese as the Pope rules the whole Church. Likewise the priest in his parish has the same power and authority as the bishop has in the diocese.

Such an infallibility also exists with the Bahá’í Universal House of Justice¹⁵; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that the members of the Universal House of Justice “have not, individually, essential infallibility: but the body of the House of Justice is under the protection and the unerring guidance of God: this is called conferred infallibility.”¹⁶ Likewise the Spiritual Assemblies – both at national and local level – set out to “dispel all the doubts, misunderstandings and harmful differences which may arise in the community of believers.”¹⁷ In the same way that the bishop has complete authority in his diocese and the priest has similar authority in his parish, it can be said that the National Spiritual Assembly and the Local Spiritual Assembly have authority when they meet and make decisions.

However, one major difference exists in that National and Local Assemblies and, indeed, the Universal House of Justice are elected authorities. A convention takes place each year at national level where delegates appointed by the believers in each local community meet to consult on issues pertaining to the believers under the jurisdiction of the National Assembly, while the members of the Universal House of Justice are elected for five-year terms. Bahá’ís are encouraged to inform their Local Assemblies of issues concerning the local community, and the members of the Local Assemblies consult on these issues. Such a process is not as strong within the Roman Catholic parish. Within the Catholic Church, priests

and bishops are appointed and the faithful have no vote or say on their appointment. Likewise each parish is expected to have a parish council made up of the faithful who meet to discuss issues concerning the parish:

The individual layman, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which he may employ is permitted and sometimes even obliged to express his opinion on things which concern the good of the Church. When occasion arise, let this be done through the agencies set up by the Church for this purpose. Let it always be done in truth, in courage, and in prudence, with reverence and charity towards those who by reason of their sacred office represent the person of Christ.¹⁸

However, lay involvement is organised by the local priest and the laity can offer opinion which will support the priest in his threefold mission of teaching God's word, sanctifying others by his gift of sacrament and sacrifice and leading others to God's promise of eternal life. But this body is not legislative and cannot make policy or issue decrees. It is a consultative body, whereby the priest consults with the faithful and yet has the final decision. By the authority vested in him in the Sacrament of Holy Orders, he decides what should be done. The parish council does not therefore administer the parish: its role is to help the priest in his leadership role, advising him on the needs of the parish while affirming his indispensable office as the laity's mediator with God and his tangible link with his bishop and the rest of the Church. Many would say that because this authority is vested in one individual who is not elected by the faithful and is often a stranger, such an authority lacks credibility. Indeed, in light of the recent allegations and exposure of the sexual abuse of children and young people perpetrated by priests in Ireland and North America, this authority has been significantly eroded.

The leadership of the Roman Catholic Church operates a hierarchical model of administration, with the Pope having supreme power and authority and jurisdiction over all the Church. While the Bahá'í Administration in the form of the Universal House of Justice, along with National and Local Assemblies, has the same power and authority, it is an elected authority made up of believers “representative of the choicest and most varied and capable elements in every Bahá'í community.”¹⁹ It is important to point out that there is also an appointed arm of Bahá'í Administration. This institution is the International Teaching Centre (established in 1973), which is given the task of promoting the expansion of the Bahá'í Faith and defending it against external and internal attack. The International Teaching Centre is based in Haifa in Israel, and it supervises Continental Boards of Counsellors, whose responsibility is to promote and defend the Faith in their respective continents. Counsellors are appointed for a five-year term. They in turn appoint Auxiliary Boards for Protection and Propagation in each of the countries, who in turn appoint assistants to help them. The Counsellors, Auxiliary Board members and their assistants “are responsible for stimulating, counselling and assisting National Spiritual Assemblies and work with individuals, groups and Local Assemblies.”²⁰ While the Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board Members outrank the National and Local Assemblies, they do not interfere in the conduct and administering of Assemblies' plans. Therefore the elected administration in the form of the Assemblies has autonomy to deal with the issues pertaining to their communities. Unlike the parish council in the Roman Catholic tradition, which is established to advise the priest, the National and Local Spiritual Assemblies are actively involved in serving the needs of their respective communities. Both the appointed arm and the elected arm of the Bahá'í Faith operate out of a servant model of leadership, where “the functions, procedures between the agencies of the Bahá'í Administration are meant to canalise, not obstruct the work of the Cause ... these aspects of

the administration will properly be viewed in the context of humble service to the Blessed Perfection [Bahá'u'lláh], which is the loftiest objective of all who are gathered under the banner of the Most Great Name.”²¹ This approach challenges the believer to play an active part in his or her Faith, whereas in Roman Catholicism the faith of the people depends on the structures rather than on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and on one's ability to make an informed decision having read the Scriptures. By virtue of the conferral of Holy Orders, the Pope, bishops and priests have the sole right to speak in Christ's name officially, while the part played by the laity is limited to an advisory capacity and to be consulted when the need arises.

The Sacramental Ministry of Priesthood

The Bahá'í administrative system is not an ecclesiastical one, as already mentioned. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh tells priests to leave their ministries: “O concourse of priests! Leave the bells, and come forth, then, from your churches.”²² It is the Bahá'í belief that a sacramental theology as taught by the Catholic Church had its importance in history and that there is now no need for such rituals to help the faithful adhere to their faith. This includes the sacrament of Holy Orders, which is taken by the priest and gives him the power to lead his flock. In turn the priest is the chief celebrant for the other six sacraments – Baptism, Penance, Eucharist, Confirmation, Marriage, and the Sacrament of the Sick (Extreme Unction). This sacramental dimension of the church celebrating “privileged moments in communicating the divine life to man, are at the very core of priestly ministry.”²³ The priest acts in the person of Christ, and because the sacraments “have become the only effective moments for transmitting the contents of the faith”²⁴, the priest is seen as the prime instrument of passing on such a faith. Central to this is the Eucharist or Mass: “No Christian community can be built up unless it grows from and hinges on to the celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist ... For in the

most Blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church”²⁵

Comparable to this in the Bahá’í Faith is the celebration by the community of the Nineteen-Day Feast. Unlike the Mass in Roman Catholicism, however, there is no celebrant. ‘Abdul-Bahá tells us that the Feast should be conducted in a manner where the responsibility of all participants is to bring about “knowledge, understanding, faith, assurance, love, affinity, kindness, purity of purpose, attraction of hearts and union of souls”²⁶, where the owner of the house hosting the Feast serves the participants. Feasts are also held in Bahá’í Centres, and one of the believers or a family acts as host. “If the Feast is arranged in this manner and in the way mentioned, that supper is the ‘Lord’s Supper’, for the result is the same result and the effect is the same effect.”²⁷

Also absent from the celebration of the Feast is an overemphasis on ritual. The Guardian wrote specifically on the use of rituals that “Bahá’u’lláh has reduced all ritual and form to an absolute minimum in His Faith”²⁸, and goes on to state that Bahá’í teachings “warn against developing a system of uniform and rigid rituals incorporating man-made forms and practices, such as exist in other religions where rituals usually consist of elaborate ceremonial practices performed by a member of the clergy.”²⁹ The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, places the priest centre-stage: “The priest has a mission to promote the cult of the Eucharistic presence ... thereby making his own church a Christian ‘house of prayer.’”³⁰

Conclusion

This paper has examined some of the issues surrounding the paradigms of administration found in the Roman Catholic Church and in the Bahá’í Faith. At first sight there appears to be a great difference between both administrations. The Roman Catholic tradition is governed by a clerical leadership, which seems to wield a strong control over the faithful, as is the case

in most religious traditions, both Christian and non-Christian. It is hierarchical by nature, with authority being administered from the top. The Bahá'í Administration has pronounced democratic features, is not clerical and operates out of a servant model of leadership with a strong emphasis on consultation and decision-making in the community. However, the threefold role of the Roman Catholic priest – Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments, and Leader of the Community – has some elements also in the Bahá'í Administration. The difference is that in the Bahá'í Faith, these roles are not confined to a special group of people who undergo intensive training at the end of which there is a ceremony or ritual and they become life-members of a priestly group. In the Bahá'í Faith, each believer is challenged to undertake these tasks – for example, teaching the Faith. While there are no sacraments or Mass in the Bahá'í Faith, believers are encouraged to participate in and to host Nineteen-Day Feasts and devotional meetings. Likewise the believer is encouraged to participate, if elected, in the consultations of the Local or National Spiritual Assemblies, and, if appointed, to serve as a Counsellor, Auxiliary Board Member or assistant for the protection or propagation of the Faith.

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