

**APOSTOLIC RIGHT / APOSTOLIC CHARGE;  
THE EXODUS CHURCH AND THE EXILED CHURCH  
(SCHILLEBEECKX' *Ministry* & RADFORD-RUETHER'S *Women-Church* REVISITED)**

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During the twenty-first Century, will the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of ordained ministry remain unchanged? Male, patriarchal and clerical? 'Yes,' unless Roman Catholic communities themselves -- such as the (US) *Catholic Organizations for Renewal*<sup>1</sup> -- respond to the Spirit's empowerment. How? As Edward Schillebeeckx suggests: by restoring through Christian praxis Scripture's primacy of the entire community's apostolic right over the exclusive male apostolic charge (as 'church order') with its attending 'apostolic succession' (as "the Christian episcopacy ... seen primarily as priestly, with an indelible ordination that assures a tactile descent of the power of the Spirit going back to the apostles").<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I suggest that, based on recent theological views (with an emphasis on those of Edward Schillebeeckx), both the apostolic charge and

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<sup>1</sup>Groups that belong to *Catholic Organizations for Renewal* (COR) include: *CORPUS*, *Dignity*, *The Women's Ordination Conference*, *Network* and *The Association of Catholic Priests* (*National Catholic Reporter*, 11/20/92, p. 3).

<sup>2</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel Day Williams, *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1956), pp. 75-76, quoted in Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 289 (note 5).

succession give rise, not to a male/clerical priesthood,<sup>3</sup> but to the apostolic right of the Christian community, female and male; namely, the right of the Christian community by itself to do everything necessary to be a true community of Jesus<sup>4</sup> despite interference from clerics who give primacy to church order.

### **The Apostolic Right & Charge**

Recent ecclesiologists have made the point that the 'apostolic charge' as a personal charism -- such as exercised today in the ordained priestly function -- was neither on Jesus' mind nor on that of the 'Apostles.' For example, after a comprehensive critical study of apostolic authority, Hans Von Campenhausen concludes that what constitutes the church as apostolic is the church's awareness of the Gospel, not the privileged divine-right position of certain individuals. "The emphasis on the special character and unique importance of the original apostolic office and testimony for its own sake," wrote Von Campenhausen, "is completely post-Pauline."<sup>5</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx goes even further:

For the New Testament [including the post-Pauline period, which Von Campenhausen excluded], apostolicity is in the first instance a distinguishing title for the Christian community itself on the basis of the 'gospel of Jesus Christ' which was proclaimed to it by the apostles [The Twelve, other apostles, including women, and the prophets], i.e., the gospel of reconciliation and the forgiveness of sins . . . ."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Radford-Ruether sees clericalism as "built upon patriarchalism." She wrote: "The basic symbol and mode of the cleric's relationship to a layperson is that of all-knowing father over a helpless child" ( p. 76).

<sup>4</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Ministry*, pp. 78.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 53. [Italics are mine.]

<sup>6</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Ministry*. [Within the quote, the material between brackets refers to p. 7 in *Ministry*.]

In his study on the origin of the ordained ministry in the church, Schillebeeckx claims that even the laying on of hands (ordination) -- traditionally, in the Churches, a male event -- is "an institution of the church. . . but we can hardly appeal to the New Testament and to dogma in order to make it a *sine qua non* for all time in which the ministry is actually to function in the Church."<sup>7</sup> On his part, Karl Rahner wrote: "The transition from the concept of the apostles and The Twelve to the concept of the priest (and bishops) in the [1976] Declaration [against women's ordination] is too simple to fit in with our present-day knowledge of the origins, structure and organization of the primitive Church."<sup>8</sup>

Another contemporary ecclesialogist, Yves Congar, firmly believes that the priesthood of all believers (which relates to Baptism and celebrates worship primarily as life) essentially defines all Christians specifically whereas the ordained ministry (which relates to Orders and constitutes one as presider at the liturgy) simply particularizes one's way of being a priest.<sup>9</sup> In fact Congar has stated to me personally: "There is no sacrament of priesthood, except Baptism. There is, however, a sacrament of Orders."<sup>10</sup>

In this context of the primacy given to the life of the Christian community over

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<sup>7</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Ministry*, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Rahner, *Concern for the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 40; and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Twelve," in Leonard Swidler and Arlene Swidler (Editors) *Women Priests* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), pp. 114-122.

<sup>9</sup> In a personal letter from Congar, dated January 11, 1973. See also Richard J. Beauchesne, "Worship as Life, Priesthood & Sacrifice in Yves Congar," *Église et Théologie* 21 (1990), especially pp. 92-96 & p. 100.

<sup>10</sup> In a personal letter from Congar, dated October 17, 1971.

Orders, Schillebeeckx speaks of the apostolic right of the Christian community and defines it as ". . . the right of the Christian community by itself to do everything necessary to be a true community of Jesus and to be able to develop itself intensively, albeit in connection with and in the light of mutual criticism from all other Christian communities, [for example with] . . .the right to the Eucharist, . . [and the right] to have leaders."<sup>11</sup>

Schillebeeckx further shows that the apostolic right of the Christian community has priority over church order (for example, over the church's criteria for admission to the ordained ministry, be it that of the 'baptized male only'). He states that "[in] one form or another church order is part of the specific and essential manifestation of the 'communities of God', the church. However, this church order is not an end in itself. Like ministry, it too is at the service of the apostolic communities and may not be made as end in itself, or be absolutized."<sup>12</sup>

In fact, there is an intrinsic and essential relationship between the apostolic right and charge on the one hand, and the Christian community on the other, "[for] the New Testament, apostolicity [from which the apostolic right of the Christian community is derived] is in the first instance a distinguishing title for the Christian community itself on the basis of the 'gospel of Jesus Christ' which was proclaimed to it by the apostles, i.e., the gospel of reconciliation and the forgiveness of sins (see II Cor. 5.17-21; Matt. 18.

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<sup>11</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Ministry*, pp. 78. See also *The Right of the Community to a Priest*, 133 (New York; The Seabury Press, 1980), pp. vii-ix & 95-133; and "The Teaching Authority of Believers," *Concilium* 180 (Edingburg: T & T Clark Ltd., 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Ministry*, p. 75.

15-18; John 20. 21ff.)"<sup>13</sup> Moreover, regarding the apostolic charge specifically, and its succession, Schillebeeckx affirms that "[the] prime concern is with an unbroken succession or continuity, less in the ministry than in the apostolic tradition or content of faith."<sup>14</sup>

### **The Exodus Church and the Exiled Church**

Thus according to recent theological discussions, what arises from the apostolic charge -- Jesus' charge to his followers to be faithful to his good news -- is not at all male ordination (selective right): the right that empowers males only to lord it over the church community; but ecclesial ordination, female and male (universal right): the right that empowers the Christian community itself to do all it can to remain faithful to Jesus' good news. Even if it means for the Christian community to structure itself anew: to resist oppressive structures that are set in the name of a patriarchally interpreted apostolic charge, and to precipitate and restore, as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls it, the church of the discipleship of equals.<sup>15</sup> Quite forcefully, Radford Ruether describes *Women-Church* as an intermediary exodus church calling forth the patriarchal and hierarchical Church in exile to join it:

We flee the thundering armies of Pharaoh. We are not waiting for a call to return to the land of slavery to serve as altar girls in the temples of patriarchy. No! We call our brothers also to flee from the temples of

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<sup>13</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Ministry*, p. 8. (The emphasis is mine.) The material between brackets summarizes pp. 33-37, esp. pp. 34-36, numbers 2-5 *Ministry*.

<sup>14</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Ministry*, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist and Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), pp. 97-241.

patriarchy; [Radford Ruether names several Catholic bishops] we call our brothers Maurice Dingman and Frank Murphy and George Evans; Raymond Hunthausen and Charles Buswell and Tom Gumbleton, and even our brother Karol Wojtyla [Pope John Paul II] and all our fathers and sons and husbands and lovers, to flee with us from the idol with flashing eyes and smoking nostrils who is about to consume the earth.<sup>16</sup>

Exodus communities in themselves are transitory churches that are called to lead us to a co-human church: "a community engaged in liberation from patriarchy."<sup>17</sup> As proposed by Radford Ruether, a transitory church is not a sectarian group, but an ecclesial exodus community from patriarchy, which calls forth to brotherhood and sisterhood the exiled patriarchal church -- an exodus church which is both within and on the edges of existing church institutions.<sup>18</sup> Exodus communities are not schismatic churches. Radford Ruether explains:

One must refuse the institutionally defined options either of continuing on its terms or of cutting off all connection with it and becoming sectarian and hostile to those who are working within established institutions. This sectarian closedness, while it may appear "more radical," is actually the flip side of the demands that one stay in the institution on its terms. Both of these options are intended to cut off the creative dialectics between the exodus within and the exodus beyond the borders that can create real transformation and can, in effect, redefine the boundaries and the content of what it means to be Church.<sup>19</sup>

### **Pastoral Examples**

Several examples are given by Giovanni Franzoni where Italian Christian basic communities have had recourse to their apostolic right by challenging

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<sup>16</sup> Radford Ruether, *Women-Church*, p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Ruether, *Women-Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> Ruether, *Women-Church*, p. 62. [Italics are mine.]

hierarchical mandates. For example, there is the case of the striking workers of La Vingone who sheltered themselves in the church at Isolotto and were told by their bishop to vacate the church because its sacred character did not allow it to be used for political purposes.<sup>20</sup> The strikers kept on occupying their local church. Franzoni observed: "One might say that, as Italian bishops see things, God gives the bishop the power to transmit both the grace and the ministries to the people; according to the mind of the people of the community, the Lord gives the grace and the Gospel to the People of God and the latter creates for itself the historical forms which the ministries and the sacraments take."<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, another Italian community, that of Peretola, has celebrated the Eucharist without an ordained presider. A report from that community states: ". . . we considered that the validity of the Eucharistic sign . . . was linked to the prophetic position of the community [in Radford Ruether's word, an exodus from a patriarchal church toward a cohuman church] to its straining towards a certain type of proclamation and experience as well as towards a particular type of struggle; it was argued that when this tension is realized in the community, then and only then does the body and blood of Christ become a present reality."<sup>22</sup> That same community added: "Even at the risk of coming into conflict with the existing ecclesiastical authorities, it is necessary to 'immerse' the ministries in the general context of the

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<sup>19</sup> Ruether, *Women-Church*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>20</sup> Giovanni Franzoni, "An Account of Experiences in Italy," in *The Right of the Community to a Priest* (Edward Schillebeeckx and Johann-Baptist Metz / editors), p. 17 (cited above).

<sup>21</sup> Franzoni, "An Account of Experiences in Italy," p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Franzoni, "An Account of Experiences in Italy," p.21.

community in such a way as to abolish the priestly caste by neutralizing its authority ...."<sup>23</sup>

### **Conclusion**

For Roman Catholics what does it mean to abolish the priestly caste by neutralizing its authority? It means to respond to the Spirit's empowerment. It means to restore through Christian praxis Scripture's primacy of the community's apostolic right over an exclusive male apostolic charge and church order, and to build the cohuman church free from patriarchy via intermediary and egalitarian church models that call forth to brotherhood and sisterhood the exiled patriarchal church: intermediary ecclesial communities that are 'exodus' churches which remain both within and on the edges of the institutional church,<sup>24</sup> not churches in exile, but churches in exodus.

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<sup>23</sup> Franconi, "An Account of Experiences in Italy," p.20.

<sup>24</sup> Ruether, *Women-Church*, pp. 57-74.