

INTRODUCTION

The title of this work is “The Church ministries in the first century”. By “Church ministries” we refer to the functions of apostles, bishops, presbyters, deacons, prophets, and teachers. In Greek: *apostoloi*, *espiskopoi*, *presbyteroi*, *diakonoi*, *prophetai* and *didaskaloi*. Our intention is to explore these ministries in the context of the Books of the New Testament and in the Christian writings from the first century.

Such a question seems to be purely historical; indeed, it is historical but at the same time it is very contemporary because in the Church of our times there are several kinds of ministry. The most important are the ministries of bishops, presbyters, and deacons; we call them all together the priesthood. Recently, priesthood has been a largely discussed subject. In the context of the Synod of Amazonia (6 -27 October 2019) Pope Francis made an appeal to the Universal Church to reflect and discuss the question of the Church ministries and especially of priests’ or presbyters’ life and ministry. In this sense, the question of Church ministries belongs to main questions of our time. The Post-Synodal Letter was signed on 27 October 2019; there are 33 pages, 5 chapters and 120 paragraphs. Pope Francis approved it and granted permission to publish it in many languages. The question of priesthood and other Church ministries was discussed within the Synodal Way opened by Pope Francis on 9 October 2021 in Rome. This work can be considered a small contribution to the great debate on Christian ministries.

It is evident that our subject will not bring new discoveries, because the functions of bishops, presbyters and deacons have been known in the Church since apostolic times, though the role of prophets and teachers has not been very clear. However, it seems useful to undertake such research because in our time the old Church ministries are, once again, being discussed. We are conscious that some people have problems with order and authority. In the context of the desire for personal freedom and individual independence, difficulties inevitably arise when it comes to the doctrine and hierarchy in the Church. Certain theologians, appealing to contemporary sensibility, try to present simplified theories about Christian ministry. Some people do not sufficiently distinguish between the sacramental action of the priests and their administrative activity. It is not always easy to distinguish the priestly ministry in the Catholic Church from the task of pastors in other Christian communities. The aim of this work is to enable the readers to better understand the priestly ministry (bishop, presbyter, and deacon) and the pastoral ministry rendered by different people in the Christian community as teachers or preachers or perhaps as prophets.

Since Christianity has a very long Tradition, it is useful to look back to the past, especially to post-apostolic time, when discussing contemporary questions. The Church of today has much to learn from the Church of the first centuries. Therefore, the study of the literature of early centuries very is important for the theology of today. Patristic theology is studied in all the Faculties of Theology. The Vatican Council II (1962-1965) emphasized the value of Christian Tradition: “Therefore both Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence” (*Dei Verbum* 9). The Congregation for Catholic Education underlined the importance of the Tradition with the following statement: “The study of the Fathers has brought forth some great scholars who are truly erudite and intelligent. They have shown the vital link that exists between tradition and the most urgent problems of the present moment. With such access to the sources, the long and tiring task of historical research has not remained set on the mere investigation of the past but has influenced the spiritual and pastoral direction of the present-day Church”¹.

This work is inspired by the Church declarations quoted above. Indeed, exploring of the Bible and of patristic sources allows us to deepen the understanding of many theological questions, *inter alia* the question of the institutional and hierarchical structure of the Church. It is indisputable that Jesus wanted to preserve His teaching, i.e., the Truths that He proclaimed about God when He had come into the world. Besides, He wanted to perpetuate the sacramental means of His work of salvation and to share His life with those who followed Him. He desired that access to His Divine life would be possible for people even after His activity on earth. Thus, He established a community headed by the twelve apostles (Lk. 6: 12-16; Mt. 10: 1-10). Peter was granted a special place in this community. As we remember, to these men, Jesus entrusted the His message. He taught them and gave them authority to perpetuate His sacramental presence. These men proclaimed the faith to others for their sanctification and they governed the affairs of the young community. This community was called *ekklesia* – Church. As more people were added to the group of believers, the apostles, their successors, and all those who served the community, worked to ensure that there would be no deviation from Jesus’ message and His will.

In our dissertation we study three kinds of sources. The first: The Holy Scripture of the Old Testament; the second: the Holy Scripture of the New Testament; we read them in English

¹ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests*, Rome on November 10, 1989, from: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/priesthood/priestly-formation/upload/fathers.pdf> (May 16, 2020).

looking for the key terms such as *apostoloi*, *espiskopoi*, *presbyteroi*, *diakonoi*, *prophetai* and *didaskaloi* in the Greek version. We use “The Catholic Truth Society New Catholic Bible, Standard Edition,” which was published in the United Kingdom in 2007. For the key terms in Greek, we made use of the Septuagint version online: “The Greek Word: The Greek Old Testament (Septuagint), Elpenor's Bilingual (Greek/English) Old Testament, English translation by L.C.L. Brento”. For the Greek New Testament Bible, we mainly used “Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece (NA 28), The Greek-English Interlinear ESV New Testament, edited by Drayton C. Benner, Illinois (Crossway in association with The German Bible Society), 2018”. The third kind of sources are the Christian writings of the first century such as *Didache*, *The Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians*, *The Letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians* and the book by Hermas called the *Shepherd*. According to scholars, the book of Hermas in its present form was written at the beginning of the second century, but we explore it in our work because Hermas speaks about the problems which appeared at the end of the first century; he refers to Pope Clement (91-100). It is said that Hermas applied ante-dating: living in the first part of the second century, he gave the impression that he was living in the second part of the first century. The above mentioned ancient Christian books can be read in English in the series “Fathers of the Church,” which is available at NewAdvent.org website.

This dissertation is composed of three chapters. The first chapter concerns the principal terms of our work as they appear in the Old Testament (in Greek version) and in the Hellenic literature. In the second chapter we explore the fragments of the New Testament where our key terms can be found, and we try to present their meaning in early Christianity. In the third chapter we shall quote and analyse these terms in the writings of the first century as we have mentioned them above.

We shall apply the traditional method for the work of this kind. Firstly, we shall undertake an inquiry into the key terms in our work as they appear in English and in Greek. Then, these terms will be analysed in their context, as it is necessary and important to establish their precise meaning. For example, we shall look at what the essence of the ministry of bishops, presbyters and of deacons is. It is equally necessary to see the place of the prophets and teachers in the first century. For better understanding of the selected fragments from the Bible and from the patristic writings, we refer to contemporary publications indicating them with footnotes.

It seems that our study can be used for debates on the priesthood within the Catholic Church in our times; it can also be used in discussions with persons representing other Christian denominations. Perhaps this work will inspire some