

LEADERSHIP AND MINISTRY

An extract from notes provided to Guides at York Minster, issued November 2016

In popular parlance, the word **priest** is often used to describe almost any religious leader, even when the person concerned would *never* use it! Both Methodist Ministers and Muslim Imams, for example, are sometimes referred to as “priests” in the media, though neither Methodism nor Islam claim to have a “priesthood”. Within the Church of England, the word (though officially sanctioned) has been deeply controversial ever since the Reformation. Broadly speaking, “Low Church” Anglicans (whose theology and style of worship is essentially Protestant) reject the term in favour of **minister**, whilst “High Church” Anglicans (whose theology and style of worship is essentially Catholic) use it readily.

Protestants generally (including “Low Church” Anglicans) are suspicious of the concept of priesthood, because of its Old Testament associations with sacrifice. A priest, they argue, is someone who intercedes between God and Man; a function rendered obsolete by the “supreme sacrifice” of Jesus himself. Individuals may indeed be ordained (set aside) for positions of leadership and authority, but since this is “ministry”, the term *minister* is regarded as more appropriate than priest.

Catholics and Anglo Catholics, however, always call a church leader who has been ordained to the *eucharistic* ministry (ie allowed to celebrate Holy Communion) a priest, on the grounds that it powerfully recalls the sacrificial nature of the death and resurrection of Jesus. (Protestants do not *reject* the sacrificial nature of the Crucifixion of course, but *do* question the extent to which it is replicated in the Eucharist.)

Ironically, the word “priest” does not in itself carry any doctrinal bias: it is simply an Old English rendering of the Greek “presbyteros”(presbyter) which translates as “elder”. This term was used in New Testament times and in the Early Church to mean more or less anyone whose Christian experience and exemplary lifestyle qualified them to lead worship and organize the faith-community. It is not at all clear how soon these elders became associated with sacramental duties in particular, but certainly by the early Middle Ages the term “priest” had come to mean someone who had been quite specifically ordained to the eucharistic ministry. Some churches, such as the Church of Scotland, are deemed “Presbyterian” because they still use “presbyter” in its original sense. (Logically, therefore, they *could* call their ministers *priests*, but don’t!)

The terms **deacon** (servant) and **bishop** (overseer) also occur in the New Testament. Deacons were originally responsible for the physical welfare of church members, with a particular duty to provide for the poor, widows, and orphans. Today, in the Church of

England, becoming a deacon is the “first step” in the process of becoming a priest. A deacon is ordained to lead worship and preach, solemnize marriages, take funerals etc; but may *not* celebrate Holy Communion or pronounce absolution. Many non-conformist churches, however, elect deacons from the congregation to assist the minister in various ways – usually on a temporary or fixed-term basis.

A **bishop**, of course, is a senior church leader, with pastoral authority over all the churches in his diocese. The role of a bishop in the Church of England is exactly the same as in the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. These churches all recognize the historic “**threefold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon.**” but Anglican and Orthodox bishops, of course, are not subject to the authority of the Pope.

Some non-conformist churches, (including certain branches of Methodism outside the UK) *do* use the term bishop to describe a minister with administrative authority over a geographical area. Generally speaking, though, it doesn’t carry the same connotations of hierarchy and succession: such bishops tend to be “elected” from below rather than “consecrated” from above.

So what about **Vicar; Rector; Curate; Pastor; Padre and Parson?**

An Anglican “parish priest” is usually known as a **vicar** or a **rector**. Historically, there was a complex distinction between these titles, relating to how the post was financed via the old tithing system. Today, most parish clergy are paid directly by the Church Commissioners so this distinction is to some extent redundant, but both terms survive. These days, a rector is often the leader of a “Team Ministry”, or the incumbent of a large parish containing several churches, or a *group* of parishes. But even this explanation is not definitive; it does not necessarily follow that a rector is “more important” than a vicar. There has never, in fact, been any difference in the degree of spiritual authority held by either.

Curate, too, is a word which has changed its meaning somewhat. Originally, *all* parish priests were termed curates because they held the “cure of souls”, or responsibility for the spiritual well being of everyone resident in their parishes. They still do, of course, but the term is now much more commonly used of a newly-ordained deacon who has been placed in a parish to assist the vicar/rector for a year or so: in other words, a *trainee priest*. Once “priested”, a curate may well remain in post, or assist in another church for a while, before being offered his/her own parish.

Pastor - literally “shepherd” – is a word which can be applied to *any* leader of *any* Christian church, whether locally or nationally. In Britain and America, it is more commonly associated with Protestant non-conformity, but is not totally unknown in the Catholic and Anglican traditions where it is more usually applied to bishops, because of

their obviously *pastoral* role. In the Lutheran churches of Germany and Scandinavia etc, the term Pastor is the standard equivalent of vicar/rector.

Padre is simply Spanish/Italian for “father” and is therefore the normal way of addressing a priest in Southern Europe or Latin America. In Britain, it is used by members of the armed forces to describe their chaplains. This has been the case since at least the mid-nineteenth century, but nobody is exactly sure why! The word has no legal definition in the Church of England, and can, of course, be used of a chaplain representing *any* denomination.

Parson is an old spelling of “person”. However, it did once have a specific connotation in the Church of England. The “parson” was the “person” entitled to the full revenue generated by the parish; in other words, the rector. By about 1800, however, the term had come mean any parish priest, whether a rector or a vicar. Though no longer in common use, the word is still quite familiar, thanks to the popularity of writers such as Jane Austen etc.

All ordained ministers of *whatever* rank, in *any* Christian church may be described as **Clergy** or **Clerics**. This recalls the time when, by and large, only churchmen were likely to be able to read and write. To this day, an Anglican Priest is still legally referred to as a “Clerk in Holy Orders”. *Cleric* is increasingly used in the English speaking world to describe leaders of other faiths; especially Muslims, for whom it is a far more acceptable term than “priest”.

NB: Contrary to popular assumption, the administration of baptism is **not** restricted to clergy. In an emergency, *anyone* who has been baptised in the Name of the Trinity may baptize someone else. Broadly speaking, all mainstream Christian denominations recognize baptism as a sacrament held in common. There is, of course, a potential difficulty for *Baptists* - and some others - who do not recognize *infant* baptism ... with opinions varying from congregation to congregation as to whether new members who were baptized as infants into other traditions need to be re-baptized. (This has been a deeply contentious issue since the Reformation itself.)