

Katnet, Poprad: Saturday April 18, 2015

Are there Apostles Today?

This question is asked today because of the rise of new charismatic churches that claim the restoration of the fivefold ministries of Ephesians 4: 11 (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor – teacher) as a characteristic of the new work of the Holy Spirit in our day. In practice they focus on the ministry of apostles and prophets, maybe especially the ministry of apostles. So my first reflection concerns how we as Catholics should respond to this claim. Here what I say is in fact a description of how I have responded as a theologically-trained Catholic priest who has been studying the charismatic movement for many years.

First, I have tried to discover what is happening. How many groups or networks are there are believe in the restoration of Ephesians 4 ministries?¹ What do they teach? Are they growing faster than other charismatic networks? And in particular what do they understand by apostles and apostolic ministry? In general, the new charismatic churches understand by apostolic ministry a ministry of mission, evangelism and church planting, and subsequent overall coordination. This ministry involves teaching, pastoring – above all pastoring of pastors – strategizing, discerning the major prophetic words.

Secondly, I examine more carefully the biblical teaching and the narratives in the New Testament. First, we note that the word apostle means one who is sent. Here I find that there is widespread agreement among scholars that there is a uniqueness about the Twelve. “He called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles.” (Luke 6: 13). Other people are called apostles, but the twelve play a foundational role that is not transferred to others. This is particularly evident from passages like Matthew 19: 28, where Jesus promises the Twelve that they will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel, and Rev. 21: 14, where the wall of the New Jerusalem, seen coming down out of heaven, has twelve foundations, on which are written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. Here we may note a phrase from the Roman liturgy where in a Preface for the feasts of apostles, the priest prays, “for you, eternal Shepherd, do not desert your flock, but through the blessed Apostles watch over it and protect it always, so that it may be governed by those you have appointed shepherds to lead it in the name of your Son.”

Thirdly, I consider the history of the Church and ask how the term “apostle” has been used and how apostolic ministry has been understood. The most important datum here is the confession in the Creed that we believe in one holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church. This has been a constant element in the tradition, what are called the four marks of the Church: the Church is one, the Church is holy, the Church is Catholic, the Church is apostolic. In the history of Catholic doctrine, the concept of apostolic succession has been important asserting a continuity of the Church through episcopal ordination. We can also note that the title “apostle of ...” was often given after the death of some pioneering missionaries, like St Boniface the apostle of Germany.

¹ Another key passage is in 1 Corinthians: “And God has appointed these in the church: first, apostles, second prophets, third teachers, ...” (1 Cor. 12: 28).

Fourthly, we can ask how the biblical renewal of the Church and in particular ecumenical dialogue have deepened the understanding of apostles and apostolicity. Here we should note that there is widespread agreement today that the four notes of the Church are both goals and foundationally-given attributes. So the Church is apostolic by its nature but it is constantly called to realize this apostolicity. The Church as apostolic is not simply an acquired possession. Catechism.

Lastly, we can ask what the Catholic Church can learn and receive from the teaching on apostles and the practice of apostolic ministry in the new charismatic churches.

An Evaluation of Apostles and Apostolic Ministry in the New Charismatic Churches

Because these churches are first of all movements of life arising from a movement of the Holy Spirit, and because they reject the concept of tradition, they do not have any received theology. The teaching is mostly constructed from the leaders' reading of Scripture and their spiritual insights, and to some extent from reading one another's books. So you will not find much reference to really scholarly works in their teachings and writings.

We have as Catholics to insist on the foundational role of the Twelve. Although the bishops are described as successors of the apostles, this foundational role is not passed on. We can also note that the Israel-relatedness of the Twelve does not appear in the new church teachings on apostles, and I think this is a major weakness. It is however true that some Messianic Jews are aware of this and a few expect the appearance of twelve Jewish apostles in the church of the end-times. As to others named as apostles in the New Testament, the case of Paul as apostle to the nations appears to be unique. There is an interesting passage in Galatians, where Paul writes: "when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles)" (Gal. 2: 7 – 8).

Rom. 16: 7

An important question concerns the ascription of titles as compared with the ministries exercised. Most of those seen to exercise an apostolic ministry in Europe do not call themselves apostles. They teach the restoration of apostles and apostolic ministry. For instance, Terry Virgo, the founder of New Frontiers International based out of Brighton, England, did not call himself an apostle, but taught this restoration and formed an apostolic team under his leadership. When we look at the actual ministries of these men, we can see an element that is like an episcopal ministry but without territorial boundaries; its boundaries are human not geographical, the choice of the leader of pastors for newly-planted churches or the choice of pastors to follow and be taught by this leader. In this aspect of pastoring pastors, I think that Catholic bishops could learn quite a lot from the leaders of these apostolic teams and networks.

It is the aspect of church planting where the evangelistic character of the Church stands out. But in fact, Pope Francis is teaching that the Church is of her nature a missionary body, a body that goes out, that goes out to the peripheries. The Church is not an institution that also

does mission. It is a missionary body or it is moribund. It seems to me here that the nearest things to the new church apostles in the Catholic world are the founders of new communities who then plant new communities across national borders (e.g. Fr Laurent Fabre in Chemin Neuf, Matteo Calisi with the Comunita di Gesu in Italy, Steve Clark in Sword of the Spirit in the USA, Fr Ricardo in the Koinonia Giovanni Battista). This comparison can be helpful, because it deflates exaggerated claims that can be made by apostles in the new charismatic world.