

# The Role of the Teacher in the Church

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Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of workings, but the same God, who works all things in all (1 Cor 12 4-6).

St. Paul's words, fresh in our hearts from the liturgy of several Sundays ago (10th after Pentecost), remind us of two important factors in the assessment of the role of the teacher in the Church. First, and most importantly, unity. As there is the same Spirit but one Lord and God, there is in the Church but one Teacher or Master. "Neither be called master; for only one is your Master, the Christ" (Mt 23:10). But there is also diversity in unity; varieties of gifts, ministries and workings, and those who enjoy these gifts, ministries, and workings, having different functions to perform.

## Patriarchs

It might be helpful in discussing the renewal of Christian education to take a brief look at the various kinds of teachers in Israel; the analogies drawn to our present situation may at times be rough but hopefully intrusive. The first teachers we encounter in the Old Testament are the patriarchs. Pere de Vaux tells us that "from the time of our oldest documents ... the Israelite family is patriarchal." So it was in our own lives; our first and probably our best teachers were our parents. Pius IX makes the same point in his encyclical *Os Christian Education*. Although both Church and state have a legitimate interest in the education of their members and citizens, it is the parents to whom God has given the first and natural right.

Religious education in Israel began with familial life. It was the father who marked his son with the sign of the covenant, circumcision (Ga 17:12; Lv 12:3; cf. Lk 2:21). And whatever part Temple-worship may have played, the greatest feast, the Passover, was a family festival kept in every home (Ex 12:3-4.46). Pere de Vaux tells us a bit more about patriarchal education, some of which may serve as an examination of conscience for parents.

It was the mother who gave her children the first rudiments of education, especially of their moral formation (Prv 1:8; 6:20). She might continue to advise her children even in adolescence (Prv 31:1) but as the boys grew to manhood, they were usually entrusted to their father. One of the most sacred duties was to teach his sons the truths of religion (Ex 10:2; 12:26; 13:8; Dr 4:9; 6:7; 20; 32:7.46) and to give him a general education (Prv 1:8; Sir 30:1-13).

In fact, the paternal role in education was so important that it explains why the priests whose mission was to teach were called "father" (Jhs 17:10; 18:19).

In such perspective, the teaching vocation of Christian parents makes some exacting demands. For one thing, we have all heard of widespread and widely lamented failures on the part of parents in giving adequate sex instructions. And while on the subject, there are murmurs about “momism” from the psychiatrists which makes us suspect that the devout feminine sex may be overdoing its influence and the father falling down on his vocation. In his day, St. Thomas argued that education belonged more to the father, since maternal education concerned the infant stage, while it was the business of the father to bring his child to maturity, to instruct him for his entire life. Granted that this was in the context of an apologetic for monogamy, it offers a challenge to the Catholic father to picture himself along the lines of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Which brings up another question. Sometimes, fathers – and mothers too – are too concerned with the child in the world, with food and clothing in infancy, later with educational opportunities and social advantages (often very expensive) so that the major thrust of the parental effort is for more money for their children. That portion of the Sermon on the Mount in which our Lord tells us to seek first the kingdom of God should be applied not only personally but to the deep and ultimate concern of the parents for their child (cf. Mt 6:25-34).

Lucille Hatley writes humorously of the new authority in the home when the child goes to school. That authority is “Sister says.” This could be a reminder that parents are no more the exclusive educators of the child than the patriarchs were in Israel. A child is a gift from God and its horizons are beyond the home, in fact out of this world entirely; they are in God. Sometimes possessiveness makes this a sad lesson to learn. And without of course imputing any fault to the Mother of our Lord, there may be consolation in her lack of comprehension of her Son’s vocation, of His Father’s business (Lk 2:46-50).

## Prophets

After the patriarchs in Israel, there were the prophets. It is important to disabuse ourselves of the notion that prophets are only soothsayers, people who foretell the future; they were that at times, but they were much more the interpreters for Yahweh, that is, they had a vocation from God which was a mission to teach. Vawter calls them troublers of the conscience of Israel. Their status was not that of the priests whom we shall consider later; their situation was more charismatic than hierarchical. Teach indeed they did; in fact, they may have been the best of all Israel’s teachers. Their teaching proceeded from some experience of God, it would seem, and their teaching was often accompanied by the oddest examples.

Would it be possible to see some connection between the prophets of Israel and religious in the Church? While perfectly aware that prophecy is a charism, and that the religious life is a state, is there not some parallel in their vocations, their way of life, their mission? If this seems entirely too fanciful, perhaps there is at least as much confusion about the familiar figure of the sister as there is about prophets. This confusion has introduced some unnecessary complications in the construction of a theology of the laity. A recent attempt in this direction uses the word laity in contrast to religious, when actually the distinction should be in opposition to clergy. This may seem but a matter of

words; still it causes obscurity in grasping the role of the religious teacher even for religious themselves. Some people think of sisters, for instance, as female clergy, at least deaconesses. Cardinal Suenens has reminded them of their maternal role in the world, and rightly so. But the problem becomes immediately evident when you transpose to the brother, who is often enough annoyed by people asking him when he is going to be a father as if a monk were some sort of retarded soul who hadn't gone the whole way to the priesthood.

The answer is that, just as prophets were by no means necessarily priests, neither is the religious. The religious life, as a distinct institution, seems to have had its origin in the Egyptian deserts in the middle of the third century. There is some evidence that, once the age of persecution was over, the monk was seen as a successor to the martyr. The virgin by her special consecration was likewise apparently viewed as a living eschatological ikon, that is, a living symbol of the kingdom of God in which "they neither marry nor are given in marriage."

In these early stages of monastic life, brothers and sisters were ordinarily not teachers; in fact, any presumption to prophecy some of them might have indulged was sternly rebuked by the Church. However, in a later development, religious – or many of them – did begin to teach. The struggle this occasioned has been recorded in *St. Thomas' Apology for the Religious Orders* in which he fought vigorously for the right of religious like himself and his fellow friars to teach in the universities along with secular masters. Finally, at the beginning of modern times, there is the foundation of great congregations of teaching brothers and sisters. Brother Michel Sauvage has argued in his *Catechese et laicat* that the Church, in approving the rules and constitutions of such communities, was in effect giving them a commission to teach.

Is there, then, something beyond sentiment in the hope that a religious habit will strike the same awe in the heart of a child which makes Catholic parents desire sisters and brothers teaching their children? A classical defense for celibacy has been that it makes one more apt for spiritual parenthood. It also gives the liberty which is often needed for contemplation. Contemplation in its turn provides something like the prophetic experience of God, making one who has some such experience especially fit to teach divine things. While contemplation should certainly not be restricted to the formal exercise of meditation but applied to any pursuit of that "full knowledge of the truth which is according to piety" (Ti 1:1), there may be some limitations. St. Thomas, who fought for the right of religious to teach, was still of the opinion that "it is not becoming to religious, whose whole life is devoted to the service of God, to seek for other learning, except insofar as it is referred to the holy teaching. Would he be able to see in our modern religious studying mathematics, physics, etc., some ordering to sacred doctrine?

Actually, this raises an acute question for the contemporary religious. At the very time that they are being urged by some like Cardinal Suenens to do more in the world, other teachers are saying that the world is the distinct province of the layman, not the monk. The really primary question is not what a religious should do but what he is. For the moment, our concern is with Christian education in its most obvious sense; and in the

examination of the role of the religious in it, some questions about religious life are being raised. It has been pointed out that most of the teaching congregations reflect the age of their foundation, that these foundations were made during the Church's state of siege. The Bible was suspect because of its use by the reformers; liturgy was decadent and appeared to the zealous founders as a series of endless Offices which would impede apostolic activity. In an age of Renaissance conduct books, detailed legislation on daily life seem needed to insure the religious spirit of devoted teachers. Now when religious life itself is a matter before the ecumenical council, it may be asked whether some changes are not in order. Everyone talks of obvious modifications for the apostolate in the modern world; a more penetrating discussion could take up the prayer life of religious. Would not a rethinking of the means of contemplation in terms of a better biblical foundation and a more liturgical expression be in order? In our context, the emphasis would be on better provision for the religious' "prophetic" role in teaching sacred doctrine.

### Sages

After the prophets come the sages of Israel, the authors of what is now called the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Current biblical scholarship has shown that these sages derived much of their wisdom from Egyptian court proverbs and Babylonian folklore, and there is a lesson in this. In the return to the sources of sacred doctrine in the Bible, there is some danger of holding in contempt the instruments of human wisdom. If God Himself inspired these ancient sages to utilize the secular, humane learning of their day in the service of divine Wisdom, it is important for the Christian teacher not to retire to a ghetto of pure Bible, but to speak to modern man in terms of his own learning. Now this has been said to be an area where the layman most properly speaking exercises a peculiar competence. Pere Congar sees the Christian layman as one who considers things in themselves, who recognizes secondary causes, whereas clergy and religious are concerned with first cause. Some priests and religious may be experts in fields of secular learning, but this is by way of exception, some fathers are psychiatrists and some mothers are dieticians, but it is not the ordinary state of affairs. So today a layman often asks for a more relevant theology, one which will tell him how to live a good life amid the complex problems medicine, business and atomic physics pose for him. Really what he is asking for is a sage, and he himself is in the best position to be one, to obtain specialized knowledge by his professional life in the world and to communicate Christian doctrine in an apostolate of like by like.

### Division of labor

What this all comes to, then, is that Christian education involves a division of labor with cooperative effort toward a common end. Fr. Egan of St. Mary's School of Theology proposes what he calls a "pluralistic" faculty for the college sacred doctrine department, that is, he wants it composed of clergy, religious, and lay people. Since this is the early stage of Christian education with which I am really familiar, I enthusiastically second the motion. The layman whom I have called the sage has a special interest, although of course parents are also laity and so are many religious. Not only may the married layman be more knowledgeable about his state of life, but he knows a great deal more

about real moral problems and actual life situations. It would seem that theologians accept commonly the use of philosophy in the penetration and unfolding of the divine message, but perhaps this interpretation of that instrument of sacred doctrine which is reason may be given too narrow a range. The holy teaching uses the metaphors of poetry as well as the principles of philosophy, which, after all, belongs to the few who learn it over a long period with much admixture of error. Nothing human is completely alien to theology, and whatever new discoveries are made in the arts and sciences may be of assistance in the understanding and imparting of Christian revelation. While every effort must be made to feel the biblical milieu in which God gave the message, the entire spectrum of human knowledge must be used to convey that message to the man of today. Here the lay sage may excel. For instance, a theologian may discourse on the nature of worship and the Church, but it is the architect, sculptor and musician who must transpose these ideas to the concrete reality of worship.

### Priests

Finally, there is in Israel the tribe of Levi, the priests given over to the service of divine worship both in the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, the priests were guardians and teachers of the Torah. A prophet spoke of the: "For the lips of the priest are to keep knowledge, and instruction is to be sought from his mouth, because he is the messengers of the Lord of hosts" (Mal 2:7). The priest's business in life is primarily liturgical; it is precisely because he has a sacred character, which is a power over the Eucharistic Body, that he has a derived power over the Mystical Body. His main task is to give worship to God for the people: "For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in the things pertaining to God that he may offer gifts and sacrifices for men" (Heb 5:1). Because he speaks to us from the heart of the liturgy, because his daily prayer is the official prayer of the Church, the priest has his own peculiar competence as a teacher of sacred doctrine. We ask of him that his teaching as his life be priestly, that, insofar as obedience and the exigencies of life permit, he give himself to priestly work.

Actually, as discussion may bring out, there is much overlapping in the work of patriarch, prophet, priest, and sage. Possibly, a better realization of the distinctive role of each might, by division of labor, give greater chance of maximum success. However all these teachers, and indeed even the high priest who is the bishop (who oversees all and is the teacher in the Church par excellence), are not to be called rabbi except in dependence on the one teacher, Christ (Mt 23:10). All teachers in the Church have a limited task not only in the fulfillment of their distinctive kind of teaching, but in what they can do. All teachers in the Church should propose the teaching of Christ as accurately, enthusiastically, splendidly as they can. But the assent to that teaching happens in the mysterious recesses of the human heart, a sacred sanctuary into which no merely human teacher is permitted to intrude. Even though miracles were worked in support of our teaching, the inviolability of human freedom prevents any forcing. Not only the beginning but the entire progress and indeed the consummation of the Christian life depends on the Master who not only preached long ago in Galilee but who moves the hearts of His disciples from within, then and now. "For by grace you have been saved

through faith; and that not from yourselves, for it is the gift of God; not as the outcome of works, lest anyone may boast" (Eph 2:8-9).

In conclusion, then, it is only necessary to recall our Lord's commission of the apostles to teach: "Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15). Just as the apostles enlisted the support of other prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, so today their successors, the bishop enlists as assistants in their work of Christian education new patriarchs, prophets, priests, and sages. And with the same intention: "in order to perfect the saints for a work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the deep knowledge of the Son of God, to perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:11-13).

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