



**Every community
its own
ordained Elders**

A picture book for discussing
the ordination of local leaders

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The purpose of this picture book

About half of the roughly three thousand bishops of the Catholic Church have indicated that they foresee the need to ordain proven local leaders. They cannot, however, cast a vote toward taking this step unless it is clear in what way it would be implemented and whether or not it will endanger the life of the Church. The details of such ordinations have to be spelt out first, before a decision is possible. This is why we have to discuss these details.

Most discussions about the shortage of priests usually end after merely a few comments. Depth is lacking in those exchanges, details are lacking, as well as precision. People find it difficult to imagine what exactly is needed in order to solve this problem and what the implications are if it were solved. It is not one single problem but a whole bundle of intertwined problems. Many give up too easily when trying to foresee what could happen.

Because of this problem this booklet uses illustrations in order to stimulate the imagination. We are, of course, aware that every parish situation is different and that the cultural and sociological background is not the same. Yet, our mind automatically forms images when we discuss the problems surrounding the shortage of priests. Seeing a picture will help us draw another one in our mind, one that may be more like our own particular situation.

We may assume that sometimes it is one person alone who ponders about these questions. On many other occasions it will be two or three friends who want to discuss what is at stake. Graphics may encourage them to point out the weaknesses of certain proposals, and make suggestions as to how overcome them. Small groups, too, may find it easier to discuss this bundle of problems if pictures are used. The illustrations of the book can easily be photocopied and enlarged for such groups.

During the past decades Parish Pastoral Councils and Diocesan Councils have presented proposals for overcoming the shortage of priests. Councils of Priests and Diocesan Synods have also passed resolutions about it. These suggestions were often unrealistic and lacked a consideration of the many implications of such ideas. Again, what is needed is a more detailed and more realistic vision of the future of the ordained ministry. This publication is designed to stimulate discussion about such details.

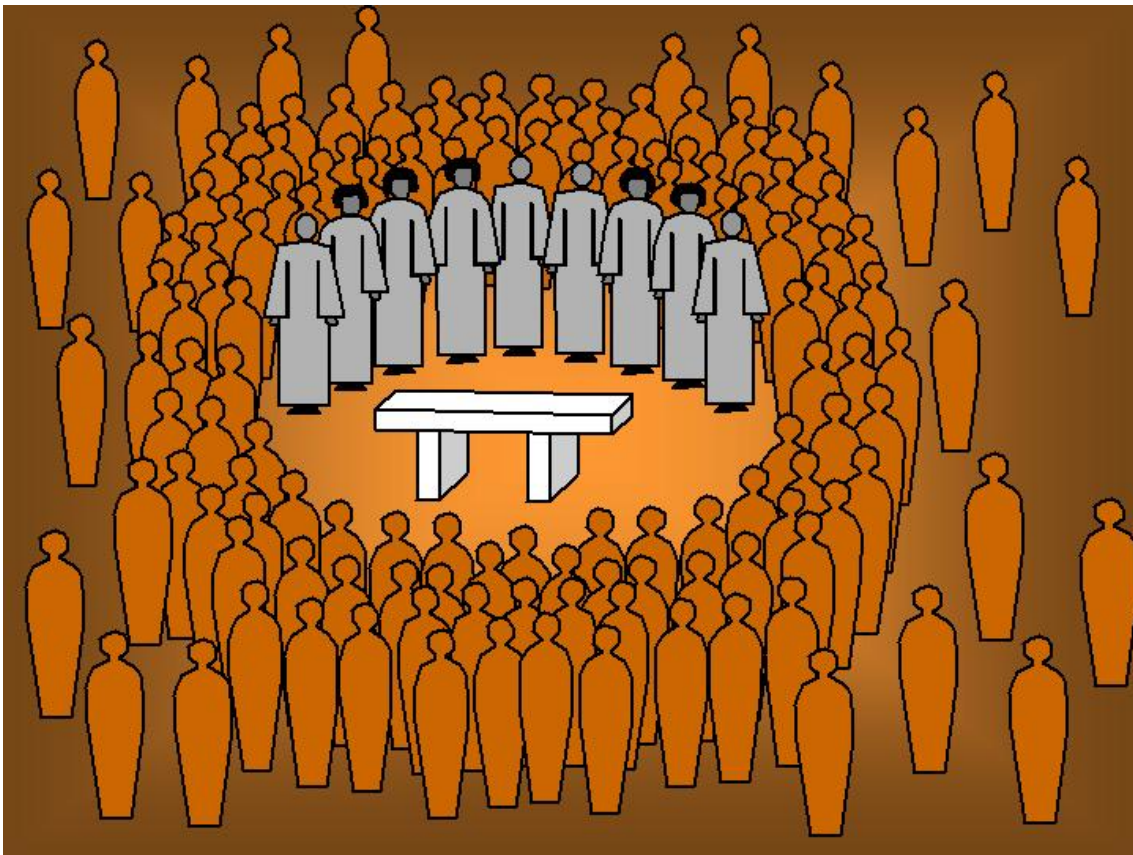
The author has several times published proposals for the ordination of local leaders¹. The present suggestions are identical with them in content but are now presented in the form of illustrations and of reflection questions.

¹ Cf. "Like his brothers and sisters", Claretian Publications, Manila 1998; "Priests for Tomorrow", Manila 2004; "Teams of Elders", Manila 2007

Every community its own Elders

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One big problem: the empty altar



The altar is empty. The faithful assemble on Sundays for the Eucharist, but there is no priest. It is a big problem.

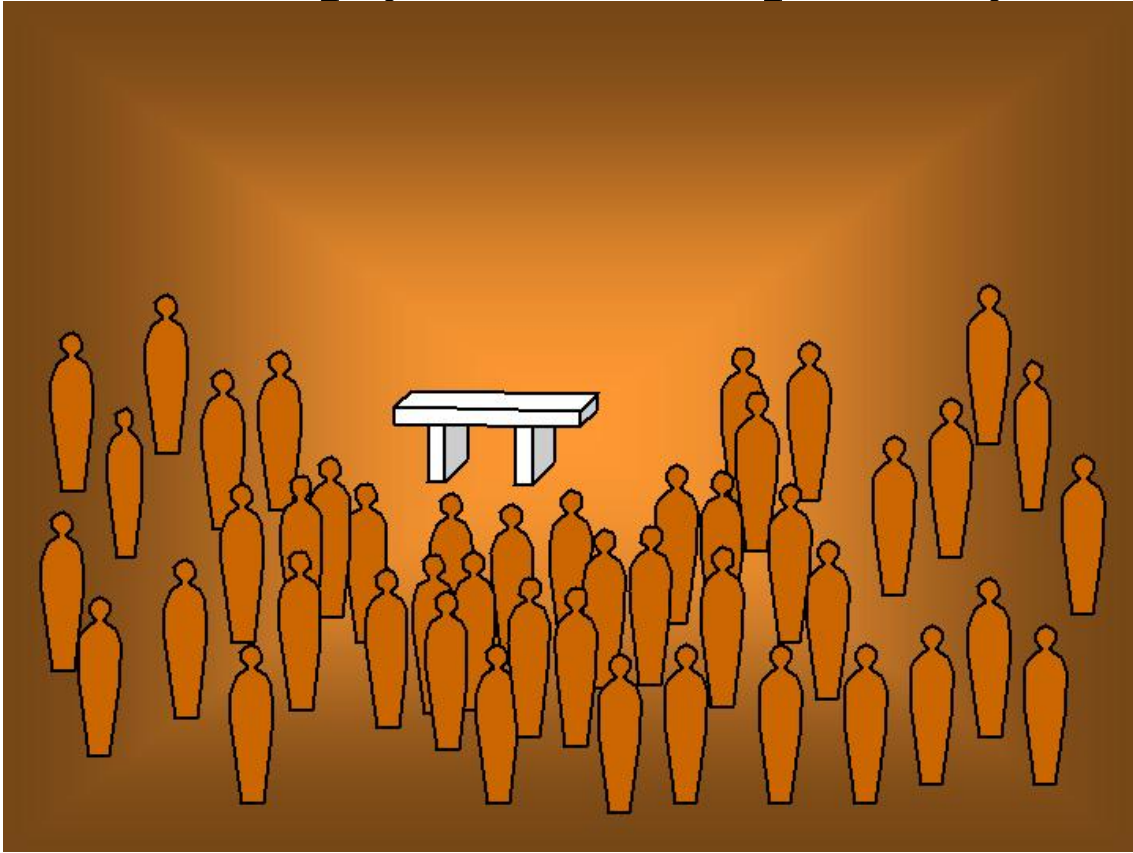
But look at the way they have placed themselves around the altar! It shows they are a community. They want to be near to the altar and near to each other.

Our drawing also shows a group of local leaders, men and women, who have been trained for fulfilling various ministries for the community. They were selected by the community, were trained, and were authorised.

They have a big problem but they are ready to do something to solve it. They are not waiting to be served but are ready to serve. They are ready to use their charisms.

We reflect: Let us list the many negative consequences (not just one, but many) of the shortage of priests...

Two big problems: the empty altar - and passivity



There is more than one problem here that has to be solved. Besides the problem of the empty altar there is also the problem of a passive congregation which seems to lack a community spirit.

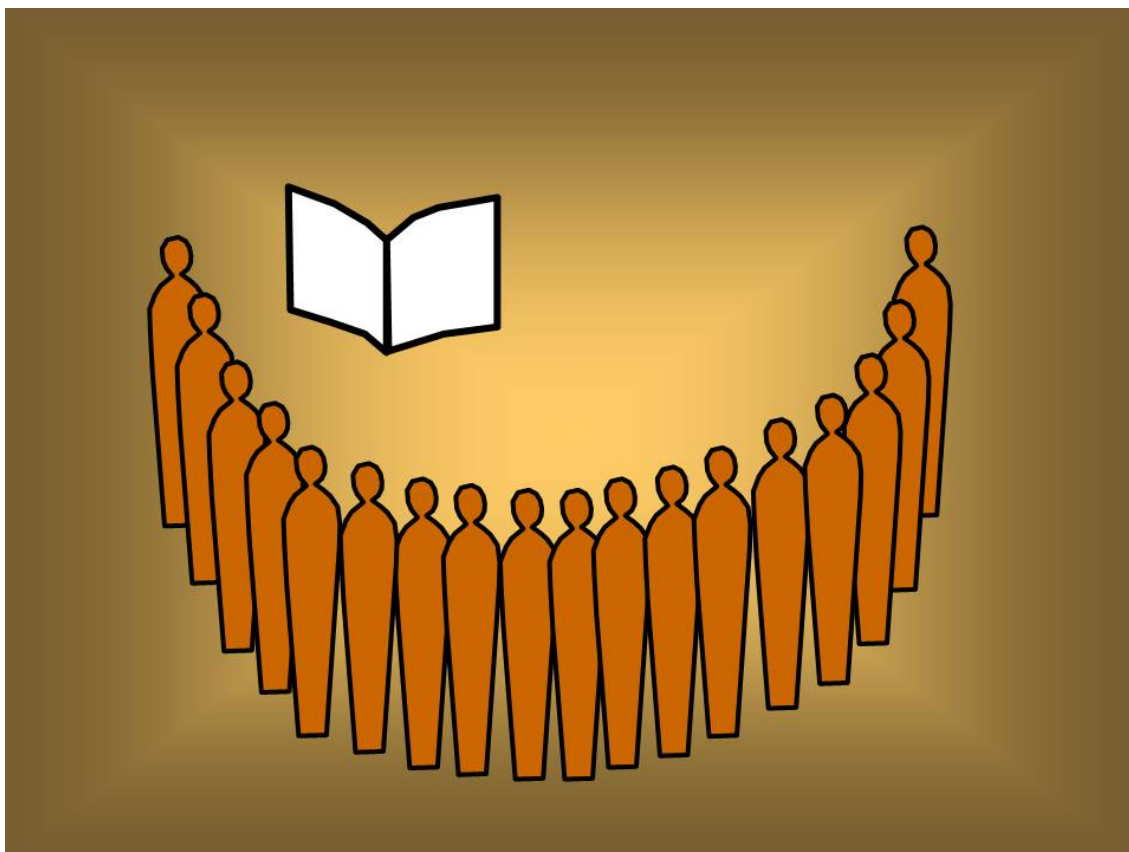
Besides these two big problems there might be more, e.g., the faith might not be relevant to their lives. This could be caused by the fact that they expect the priest to do everything. Even social action might be left to the priest and he cannot be aware of all social problems. There might also be the problem of a lack of spiritual formation of the faithful.

We reflect: Let us list the many negative consequences of these problems.

We reflect: How did these problems arise?

We reflect: In such situations there are surely also some sparks of hope. Let us list some of these...

The Lord's Day - - celebrated in an incomplete way



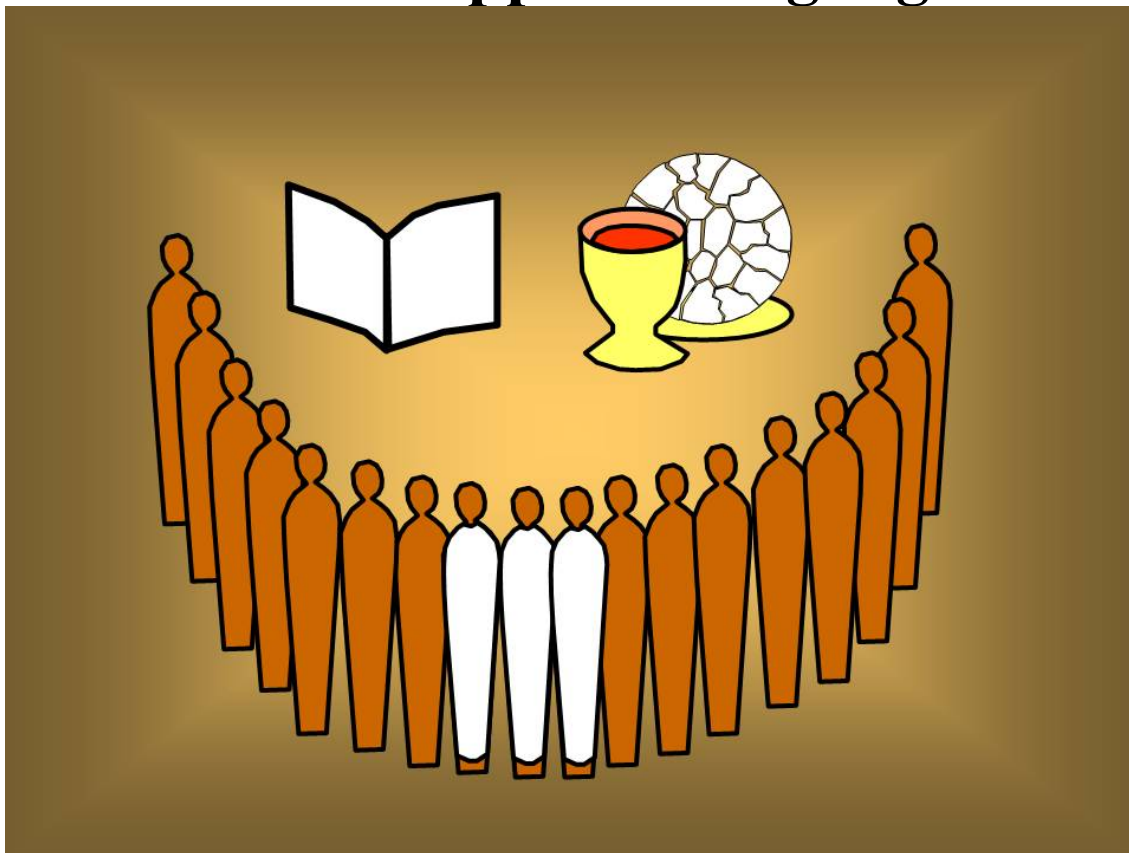
The faithful of this congregation know that the priest cannot come on this Sunday for the celebration of the Eucharist, but they assemble nevertheless in order to keep the Lord's Day. The Lord is present whenever two or three gather in his name, and we know that he is present at such a Service of the Word although it is an incomplete way of keeping the Lord's Day.

We praise the members of this community, for even if the priest cannot come for many Sundays they do not stay at home. We also praise them for having received training for conducting a Service of the Word.

However, this picture also makes us very sad, because in our days, on any given Sunday, thousands of Catholic communities, about half of all Catholic communities, can only assemble in such an incomplete way. It is not right that they remain limited to such an incomplete faith life. Although it is already several decades that this has been happening, we should not accept it as something we cannot change. It must be changed.

In the bible we read: "On the first day of the week we met to break bread."(Acts 20,7) and in our catechisms it is emphasised as a strict rule that we should celebrate Holy Mass every Sunday.

The Lord's Day and the Lord's Supper belong together



The Lord's Day and the Lord's Supper belong together. They should not be separated. Why? Because the Lord's Day is the day of his resurrection, – and the Lord's Supper is the celebration of his resurrection.

From the beginning of the Church the way of celebrating the Lord's Day has always been the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

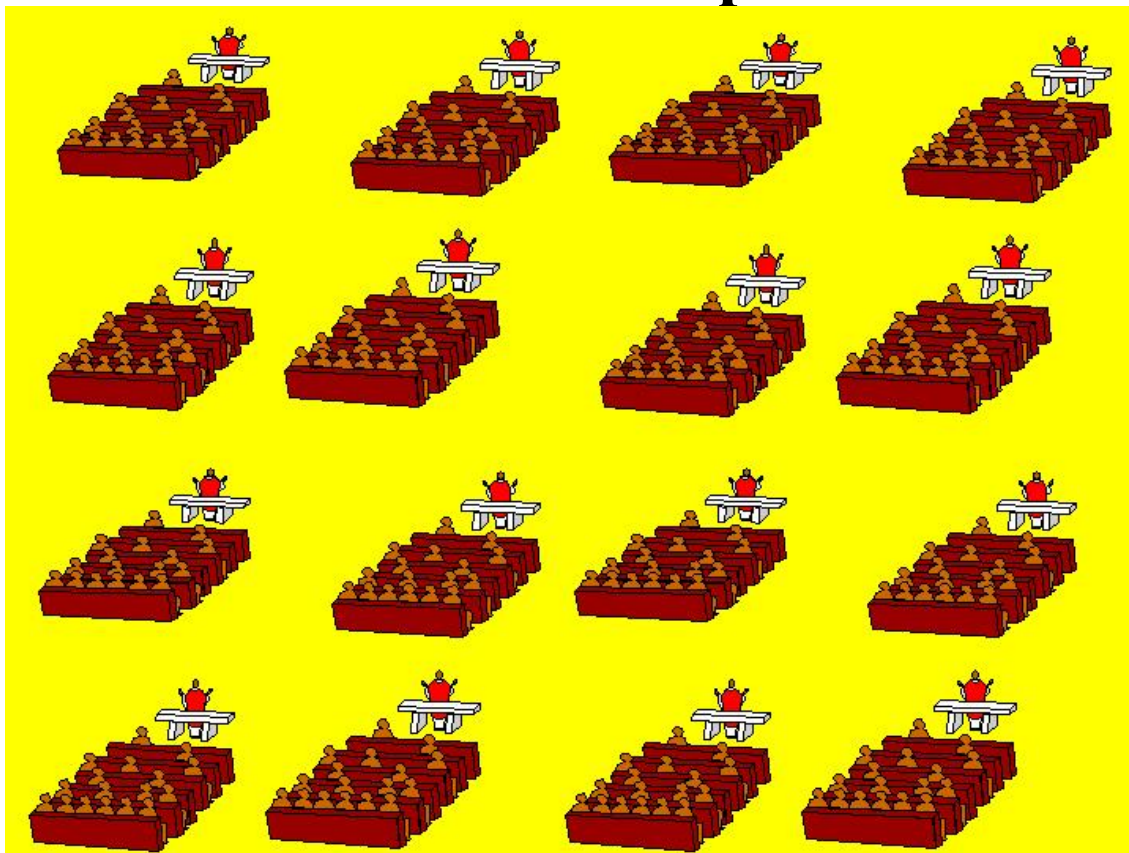
We must not get used to the sad fact that an immense number of communities cannot have the Eucharist on Sunday because they have no priest. We should not consider it as something that cannot be changed and therefore must be accepted. We should rather make great efforts to find ways of helping all communities to celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday.

We reflect and list many reasons why Sunday and Eucharist belong together.

Have we noticed that some Catholic communities have become so used to having only a Service of the Word on Sundays that they no longer deplore this fact? We share our experiences.

What can be done to remind ourselves that Sunday and Eucharist belong together?

Yearning for the “good old times” will not help



“Each congregation its own priest”: this is how we could call the above picture. Many of us were brought up in such a situation. In each parish there was a church and a presbytery where the priest resided. If the parish was big, there was even one or more assistant priests. The priests provided for all the religious needs of the people.

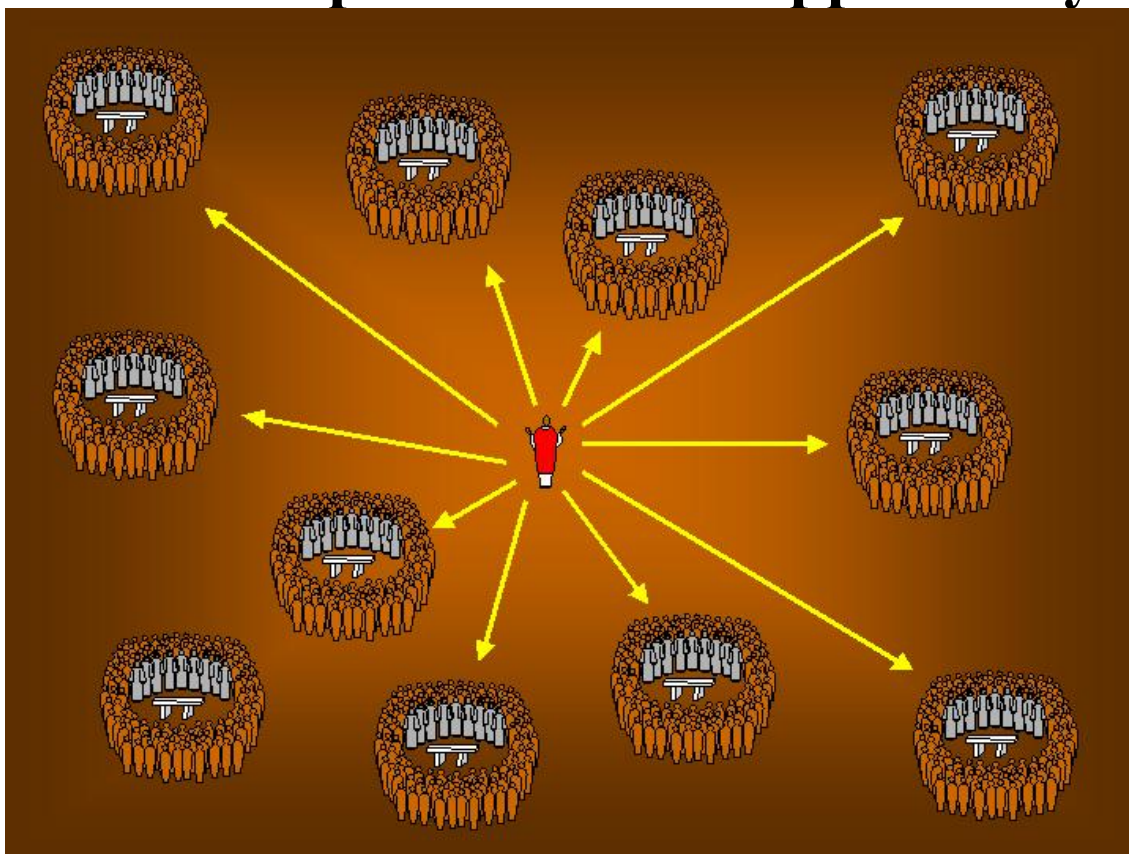
Many others have never lived in such a situation. They cannot even imagine that this would be possible.

We reflect: We list the many positive consequences of this situation.
We also list the many negative consequences.

We are constantly praying for more priests. What exactly are we praying for? Are we praying for the return of a situation similar to the one depicted above?

We know that it is impossible to return to the situation depicted above. Let us therefore try to make another drawing which depicts the situation for which we are longing and which is possible today.

Could this problem be an opportunity?



In many areas of the Church of today a priest is serving a large number of communities and this means that on many Sundays the altar remains empty for many of these communities. In some areas such a cluster of communities is not served by one priest but by two or three who live together at a central place but then they serve an even bigger number of communities and many altars still remain empty.

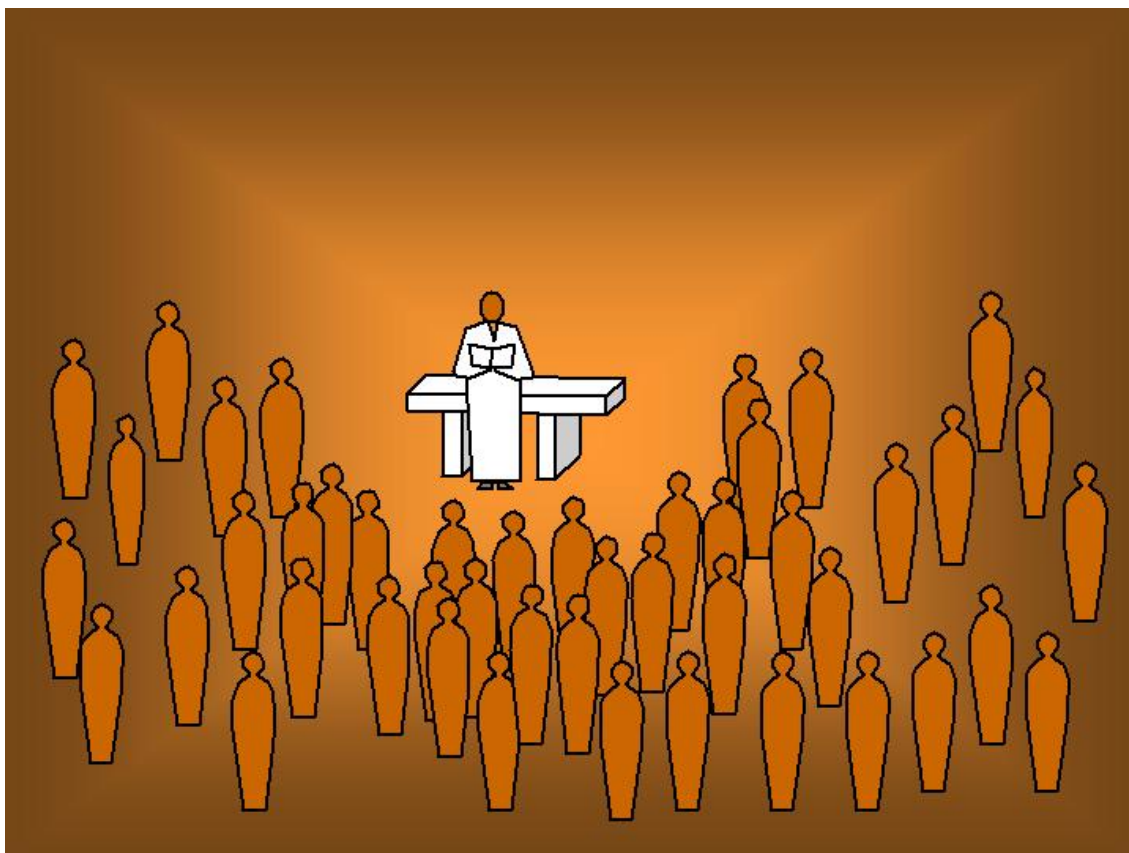
We reflect: Many have said that this shortage of priests is “a blessing in disguise”. Do you agree? Give many reasons for your answer.

We reflect: Why can we not allow this situation to continue? List many reasons.

We reflect: Although we are still a long way off from a solution to these problems, there are several things we can do immediately in order to make the best out of this difficult situation. List several of these.

The above diagram correctly depicts what is happening in about half of the Catholic Church of today. In Latin America, in Asia, and in Africa, most of the parishes are living in this way. The diagram shows the immense number of trained lay leaders in those priestless communities (indicated by grey garb). The proposals outlined in the following pages are based on the existence of this great number of lay leaders. They do exist. They are ready to take on even greater tasks. What is presented here is therefore not a theoretical idea but a proposal that is already partly implemented.

If *one* of the faithful conducts a Service of the Word...



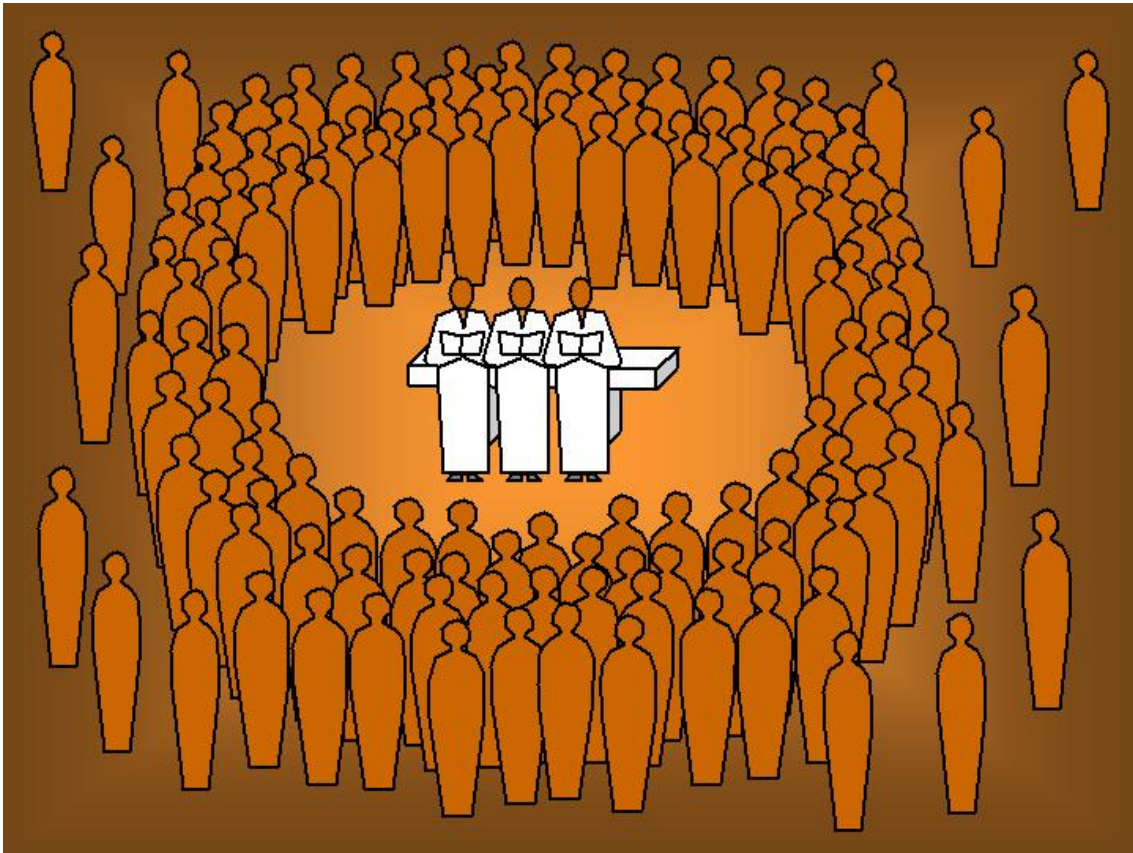
The congregation is grateful that one of their ranks has agreed to conduct a Service of the Word on those Sundays when the priest cannot come. If they cannot celebrate the Eucharist, they can at least pray and listen to a sermon. They are surely grateful to that person for rendering this service week after week.

But there are still some problems.

We reflect: List several problems arising from the fact that the same person conducts this service week after week.

We reflect: On this page the faithful are shown in a way different from that on the opposite page. Why?

If a team conducts...



In this community it is always three leaders who conduct the Service of the Word on Sundays when the priest cannot be there. Besides the three main leaders who are vested, there are still others active during the service, such as readers, those who give witness, and others who lead the singing. Furthermore, next Sunday there will be a different team that conducts the service. The community actually has not only three but ten to fifteen trained leaders who take turns in their work. In the diagrams of the previous pages we have indicated this larger number of trained leaders of each community by showing them in a grey garb.

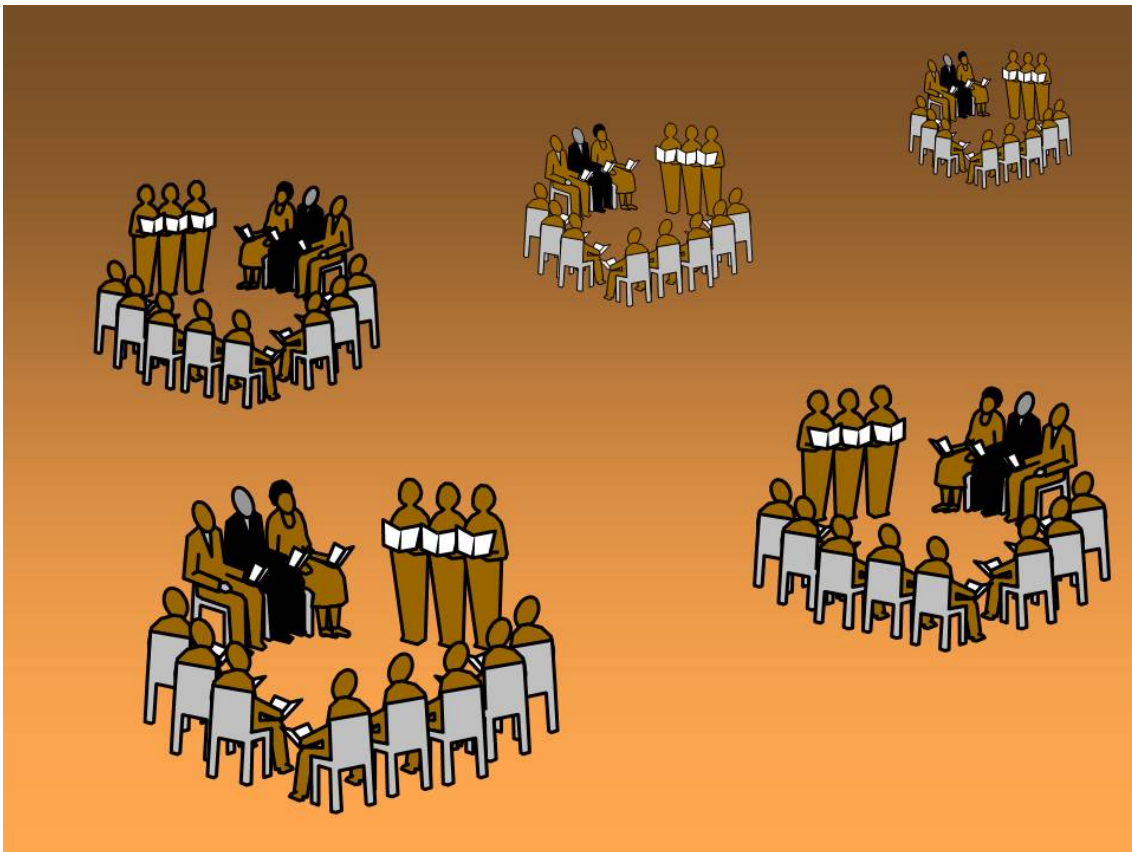
We reflect and list several reasons why the leaders themselves should continually rotate in their work.

We also list several reasons why the rest of the community should have an interest in the rotation of their leaders.

We list several advantages of having liturgies and other tasks conducted by a team rather than by one individual.

Why are these advantages most apparent among voluntary workers?

The parish priest as trainer



This priest serves several communities. In each of these communities there is a number of leaders who conduct the council sessions, the Service of the Word, the catechumenate, the visits to the sick, the funerals, social action and youth ministry. The whole parish may thus have hundreds of leaders.

It is the priest himself who is the main formator and trainer for these many leaders. The training sessions take place either in each community or in neighbouring communities or at the parish centre. Only rarely can the leaders go to training sessions in the diocesan training centre.

The diagram shows two experienced leaders who assist the priest in conducting the training sessions.

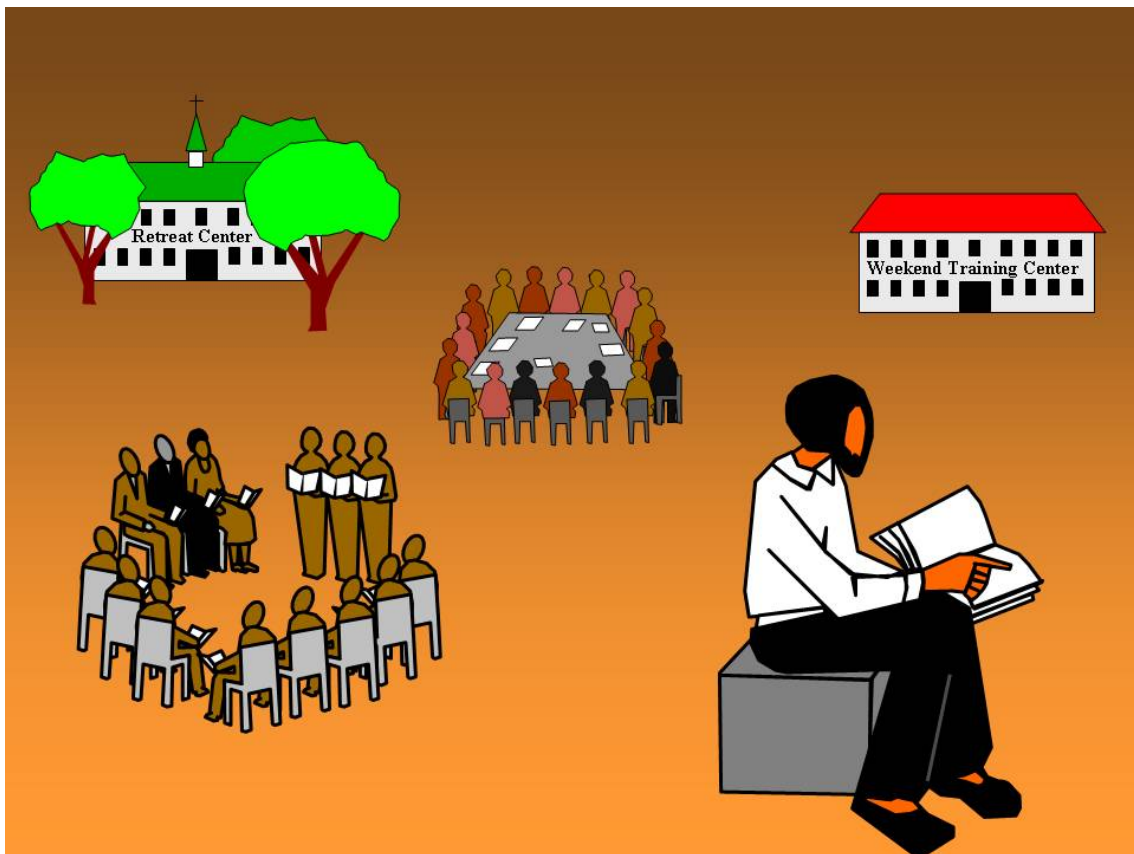
In this way the priest has assumed a new role: the role of the enabler or formator.

We list many reasons why the training of leaders by their own priest:

- is good for the leaders,
- is also good for the community,
- is good for the priest himself.

After observing many parishes and after careful enquiry we estimate that about two thirds of all priests do have the ability to conduct training sessions for their local leaders.

Ongoing, unending in-service training



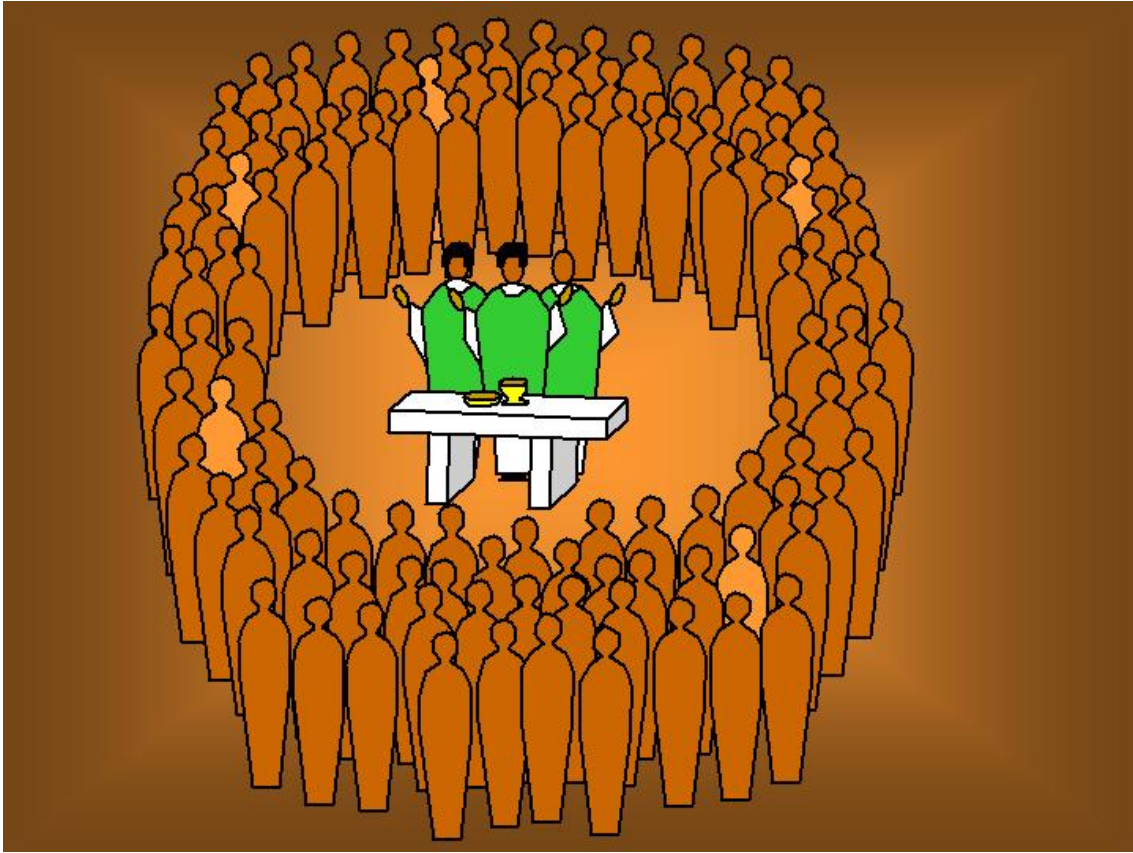
In thousands of parishes it has become a firmly established principle that the local lay leaders are not just receiving their initial training but continue to receive formation and training. There is no end to formation and it is offered while the leaders are exercising their tasks. It is in-service training.

This unending formation may take several forms. Most important are the formation sessions conducted by the local priest. Many of the council meetings and of other meetings also serve as formation. Private study is of course essential. Spiritual formation is a central part of formation. Weekend formation courses at a diocesan centre are offered if possible.

We reflect. Why is ongoing, unending formation also important for deepening:
the bonds between the leaders,
the bond between priest and leaders, and
the bond between the Diocese and the leaders?

Why can we say that a community that has many continually trained leaders has reached a certain maturity?

Each community its own Team of ordained Elders, -



In each mature community a small team of three, five, or more could be ordained to preside over the life of the community and over its liturgies.

The Eucharist would be conducted not by one of them but always by two or three of them, while the other Elders would mingle with the rest of the community (in our picture five more can be seen among the congregation).

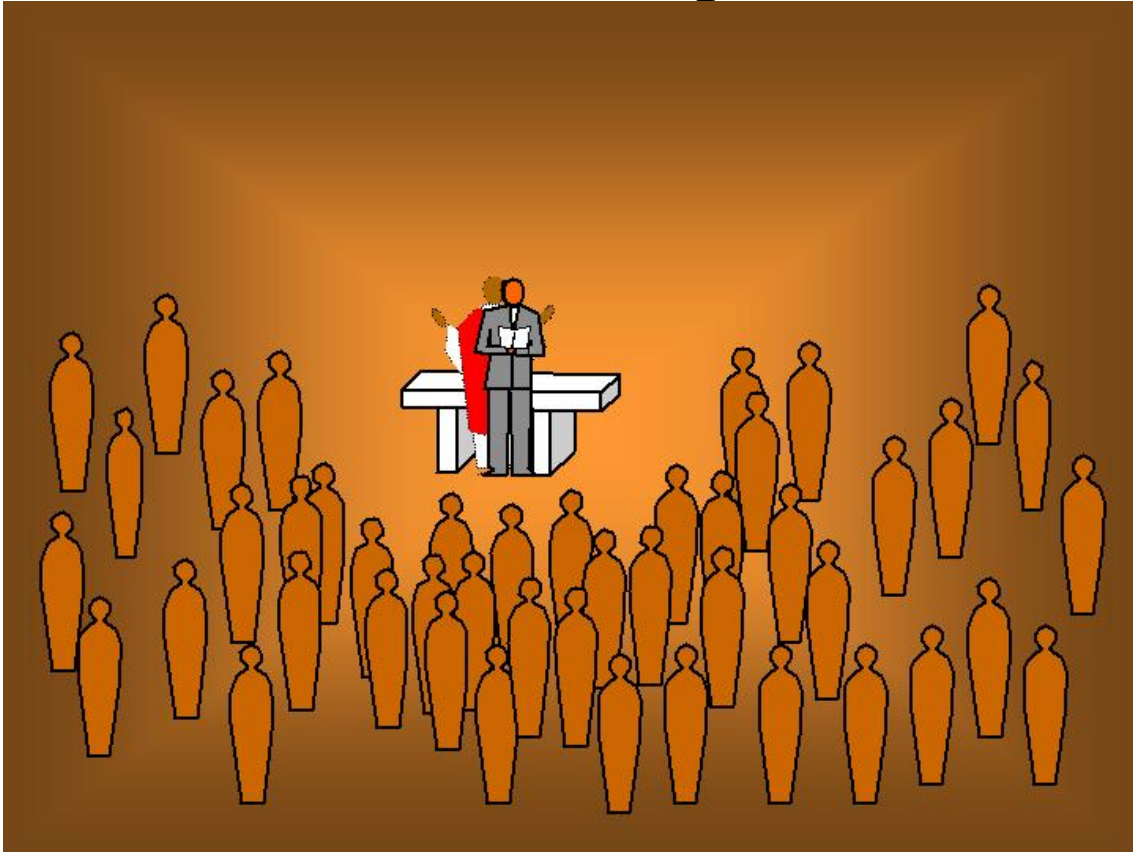
All those ordained will continue to live their daily lives as before. They take turns in order to avoid overburdening anybody.

The full-time priest who lives in this area, and who until now was the only one who could administer the sacraments, will continue to visit this community in order to conduct formation for leaders, and ongoing formation for the Elders.

We reflect: what must happen in a community before some of its members can be ordained as Elders? We list several such preconditions.

Why can we say that the ordination of a team of Elders is not just an emergency measure but should be the desirable aim for all communities?

- not substitutes for the former priest!



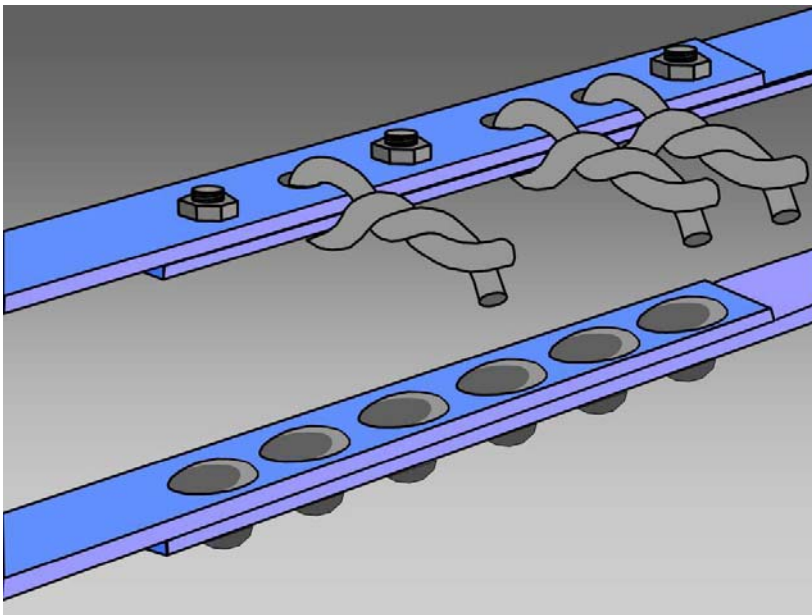
Passive congregations often attempt a very different solution. Since they can no longer have their own resident priest, they often look for a kind of substitute for him, a Religious Sister, a reliable woman, a reliable man, a volunteer, a remunerated highly trained person. That substitute is appointed to lead the community, to conduct a Service of the Word on Sundays, to conduct the funerals and to supply other services formerly rendered by the priest.

Such congregations also long for a regular celebration of the Eucharist. They therefore wonder whether it would be possible to ordain that person.

Several problems have been pointed out against the idea of appointing such substitutes and against perhaps ordaining them: they may be regarded as second-class, will face impossible expectations, may become a financial burden, will tempt people to remain passive, etc.

We compare the two facing pages and reflect: What are the deepest differences between the two proposals? When can we truly speak of “a substitute” and when not?

Not a temporary stop-gap measure -



A good friend will tell you: “If you don’t have enough bolts to fix the two plates together, don’t use wires. People will look down on such emergency solutions. Avoid them. Look for a proper solution such as riveting the plates together or welding them.”

We should avoid temporary emergency solutions also with regard to the ministry in Christian communities. We should rather look for permanent solutions.

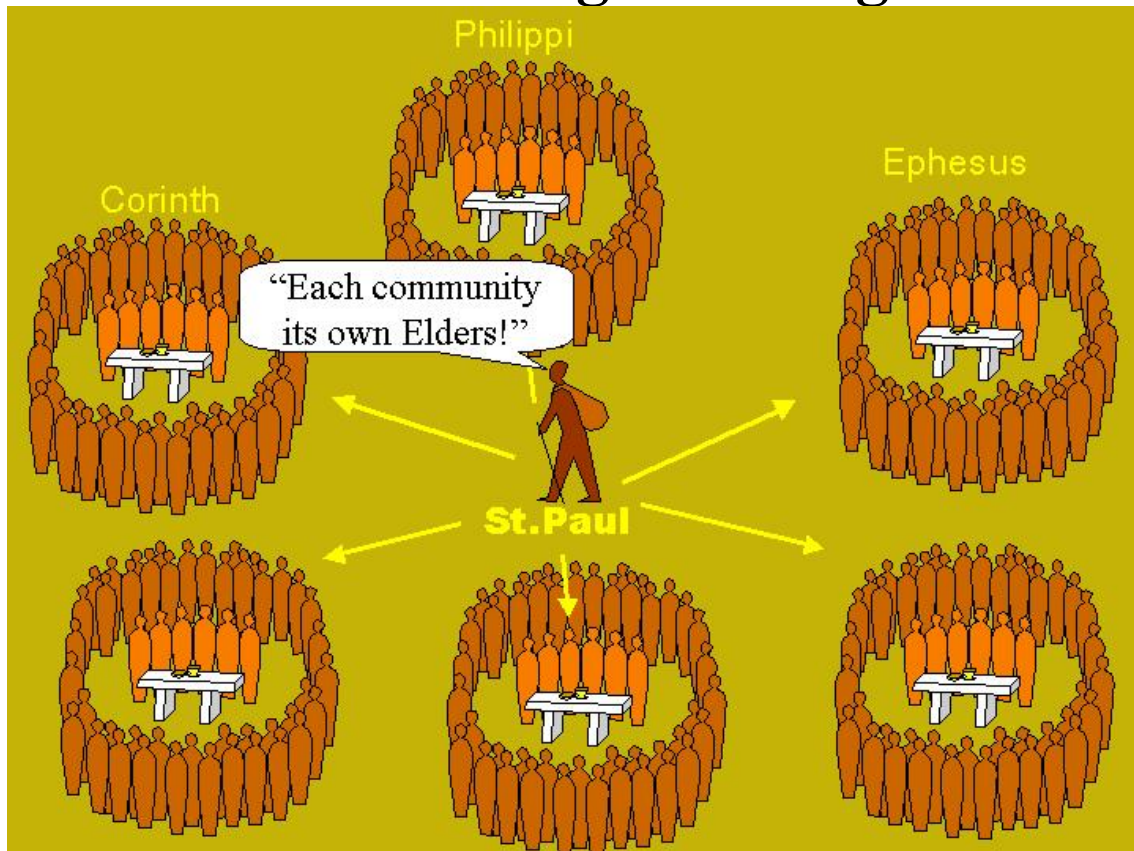
Some people have suggested stop-gap solutions such as importing priests from other countries, or ordaining pensioners. The problem with such substitutes is that they are never as satisfying as the original. We look down on them. And as soon as the original is available again, they are discarded.

People do not want to be used as a temporary “stop-gap”, because others may soon make jokes about them and call them names such as “imitation priests”.

What is proposed in these pages is not an emergency solution. It is the original design that we were given in the bible, the model we were told to follow. Having a presiding team in each community is not something temporary that will be shelved again one day.

We reflect: which solutions to the shortage of priests have we heard of?
Which of these can be regarded as temporary solutions? Why?
Which other solutions can be considered permanent solutions?
Why?

- but the original design



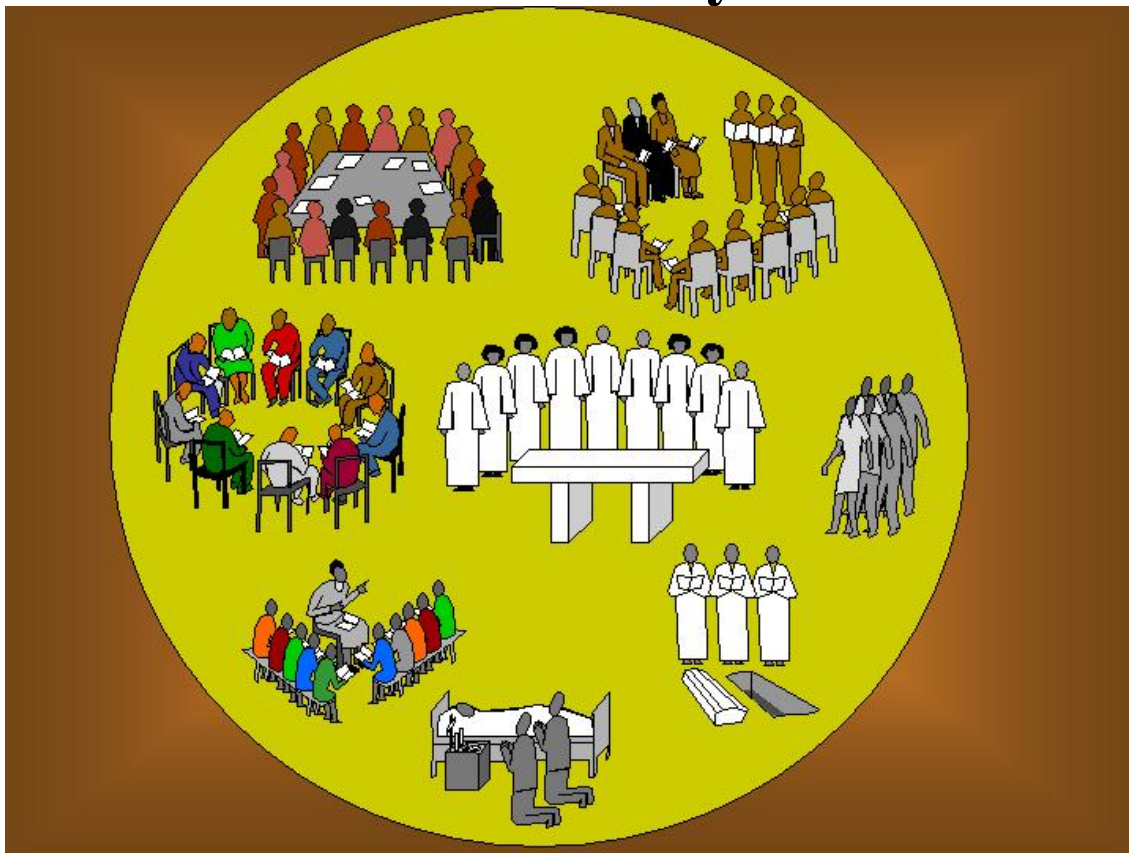
Our motto "Every community its own Team of Elders" follows the original design. This is what St. Paul did when he founded new Christian communities. He gave each community its own team of elders: "In each of these Churches they appointed elders" (Acts 14,23). He subsequently went around to visit these communities and their elders, to encourage them and assist them.

The reason why the Early Church designed the life of Christian communities in this way was not because it was at that time impossible to send to each community a presbyter from somewhere else. The reason was rather that each community should use the charisms which the Spirit had given to their own members.

If we today consider returning to that original design we do so for the same reason. It is not merely a temporary emergency measure. We do not want to abandon this design again. Even if one day there were to be many vocations to the priesthood, we would assign other tasks to those vocations and would not remove the ordination of local leaders from the communities.

We reflect: in the above picture what was the different task of St. Paul, of the Elders, of the members of the communities?
If Elders were ordained in our times, what would be the task of bishops, of priests, of Elders and of lay leaders?

Step 1: becoming a self-ministering community



Long before a community can even begin thinking of having a Team of Elders ordained, it must learn to understand itself as a self-ministering community. This is the indispensable Step One.

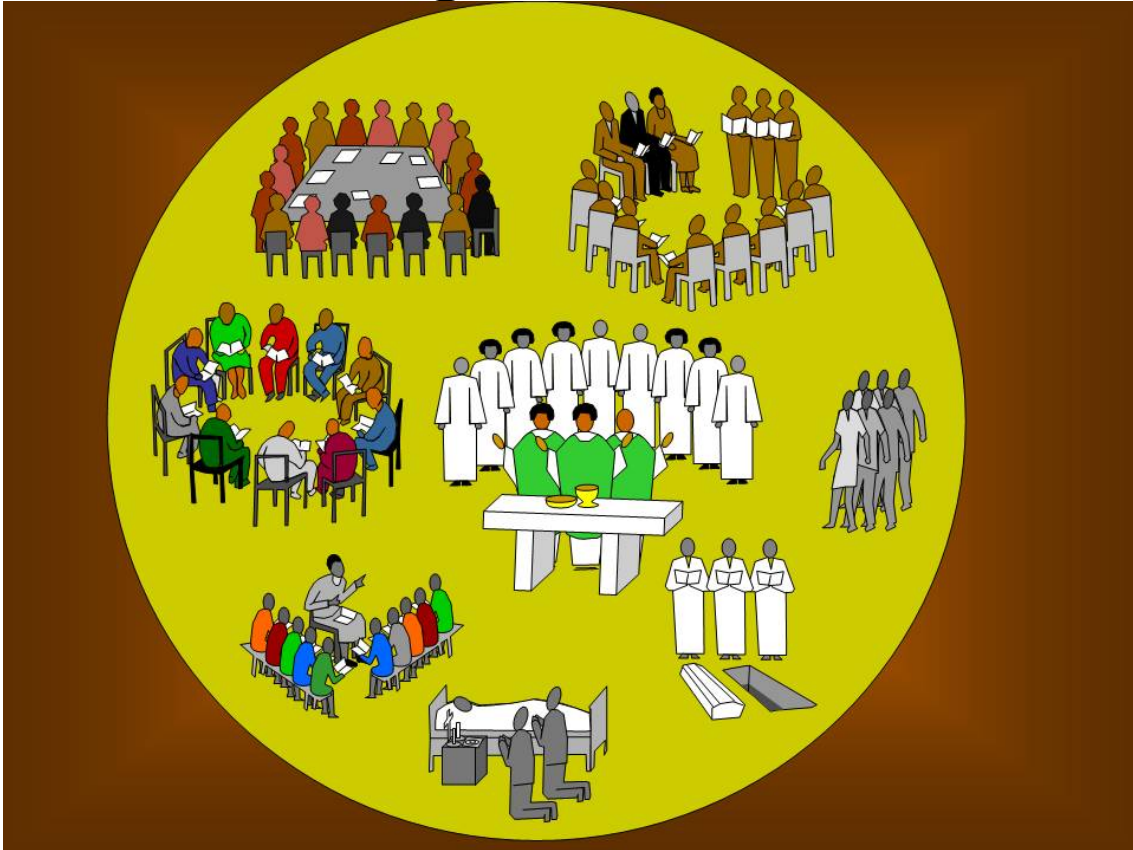
The faithful do not only *have* a parish council but take an interest in it. They need to have many Small Christian Communities with gospel sharing and neighbourhood tasks (Our diagram can only show one of them). They need to have a large team or several teams for leading the liturgies, as well as catechetical leaders, youth leaders, and several other ministries.

All this flows from the consciousness that “we together follow Christ”, that “we together serve the community and the world around us. We are not waiting for somebody coming from outside to do all this for us. We together are continuing the Mission of Christ.”

This means that the majority of the members have overcome the stage where they prefer to be served by a priest who comes to them from outside.

Of the total number of all the parishes in the world we can estimate that about half of them have already become such self-ministering communities.

Step 2: Ordaining a Team of Elders



Step Two, the ordination of a team of local leaders, can thus only follow when several criteria have been fulfilled:

The faithful have become a self-ministering community, and have proved to be such for a number of years.

The priest has become the animator of the communities and the formator of the local leaders.

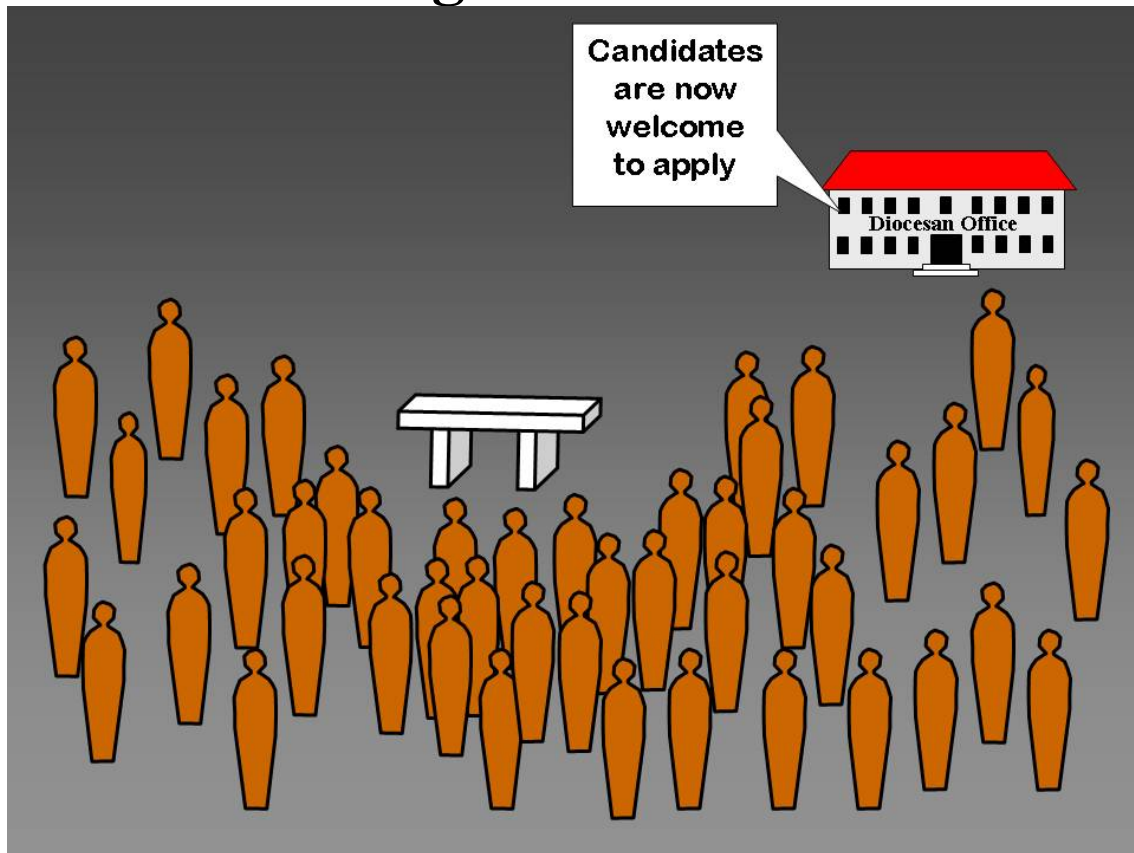
The leaders and the priest have accepted the principle of unending, ongoing formation.

The bishop and a great part of the diocese have become convinced of this development.

We reflect why local leaders can only be ordained when these preconditions are fulfilled. Are there still are other preconditions?

We consider: when comparing the two diagrams of Step 1 and of Step 2, there seems at first to be little difference between the two. Why is there nevertheless a deep and essential difference?

A First Step that is premature: looking for candidates



Two problems are experienced here: there is a shortage of priests, and there is no community spirit. The diocesan authorities are anxious to solve the shortage of priests as quickly as possible. They issue a circular in which they invite applications for somebody to be ordained for this community in order to fill the empty place at the altar.

What will be the consequences of this kind of an unprepared invitation of applications? We collect many replies.

What will be the effect on the talented, humble personalities in the community?

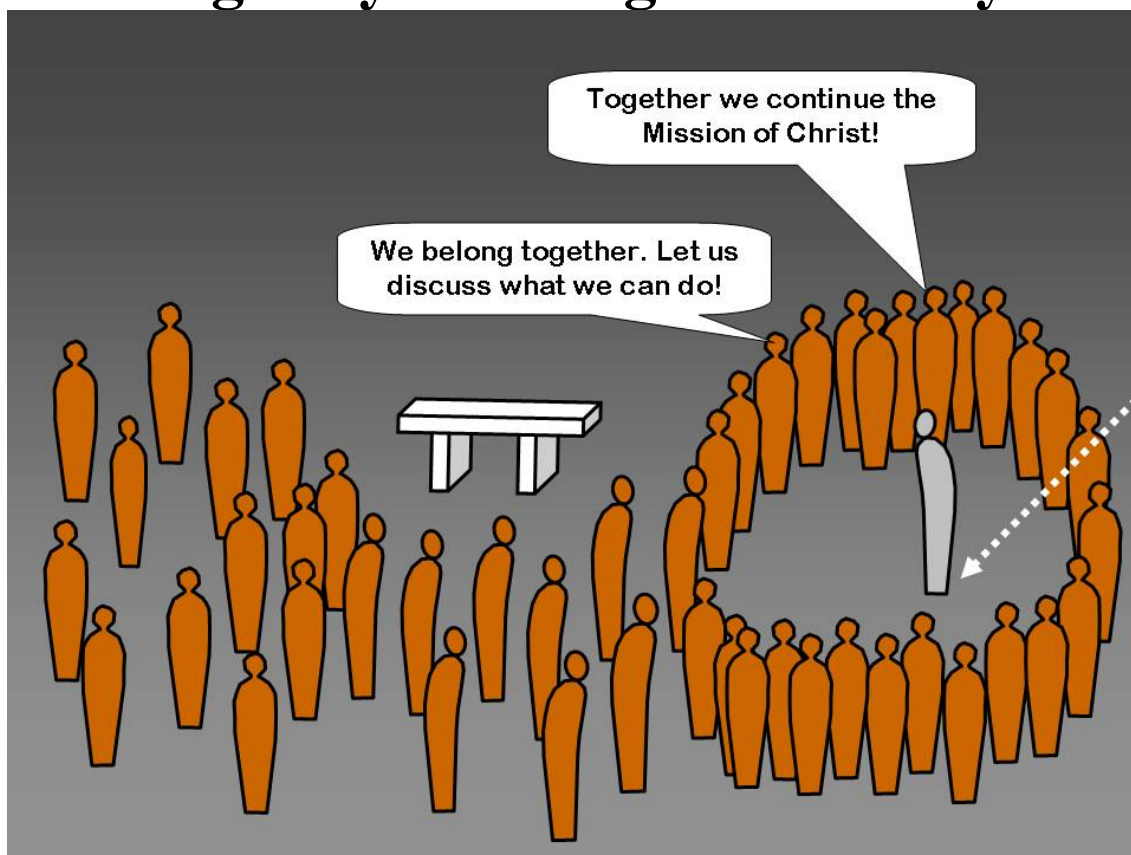
What will be the effect on the strong, status-seeking characters?

If one or two of the community apply to become candidates in this way, how will the other people of the congregation react to them?

What will be the effect on the priest of that area?

Other comments on this approach....

The right kind of a First Step: begin by building community



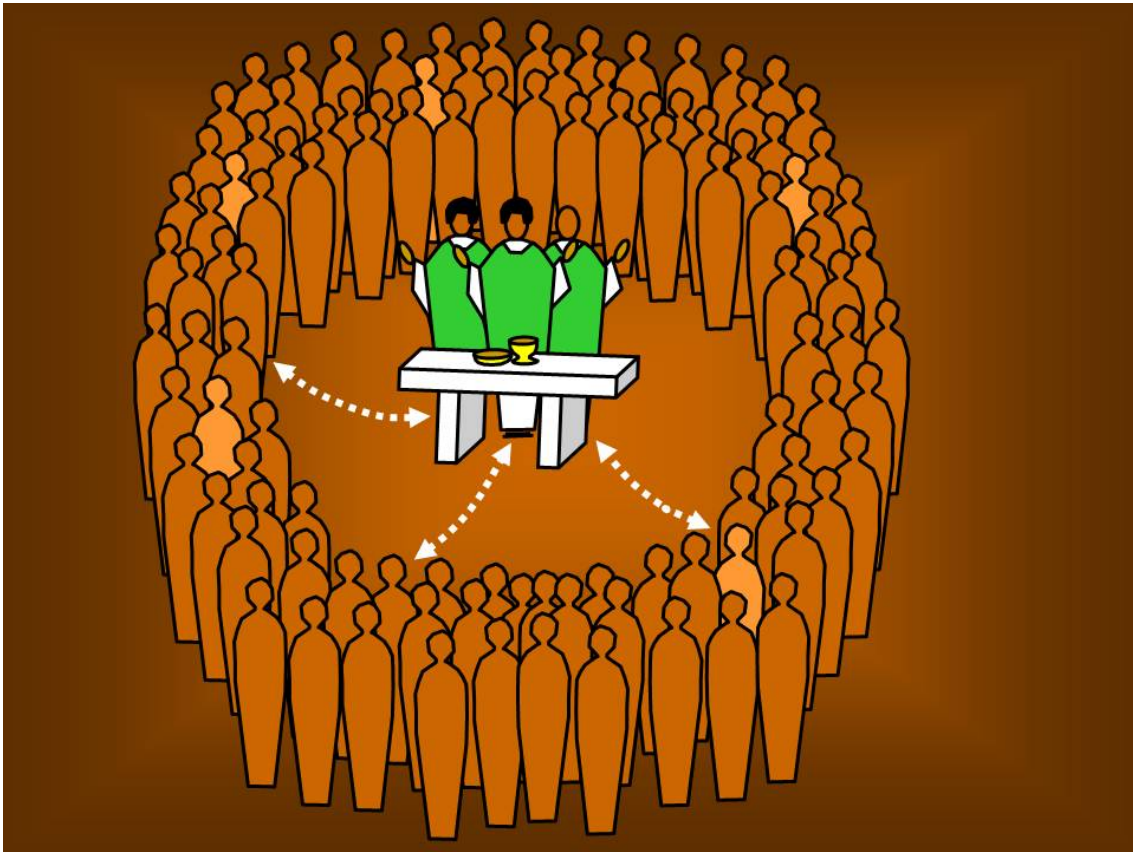
In many parts of the world, when the shortage of priests had become severe, the first step taken was to discuss the problem with the people. These discussions were usually convened by a priest, or by a Religious Sister, or a small diocesan team, sent by the diocese. The aim of these discussions was to help the congregation to discover by themselves that they belong together as Christians, and that they are able to begin by doing a few simple things together. They are helped to become aware that their faith unites them and that they possess a number of talents. This constitutes a change of consciousness. During this conscientization process there is no mention of candidates to be ordained as Elders.

The first activities they can do together are simple things, such as gospel sharing in their neighbourhood, visits to the sick, simple forms of catechesis. After some time they may be trained for conducting a simple Service of the Word on Sundays.

Only some years later will it be possible to discuss the choice of candidates for ordination.

Why is it advisable to follow such a slow process of community building?

Why ordain a team?



In the discussions about the possibility of ordaining local leaders many are surprised why we emphasize that it should always be three, four, or even more who are ordained as a Team.

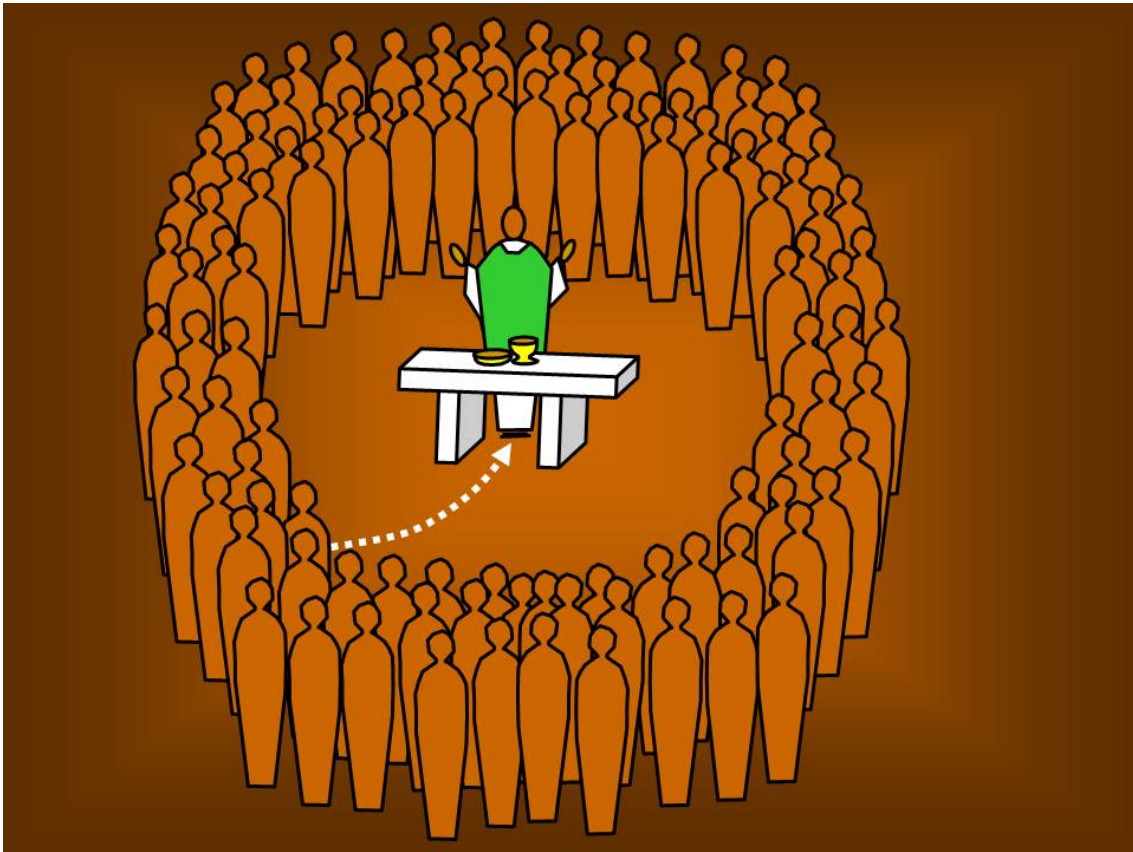
In the above depicted community we see a team of three Elders at the altar, while five other Elders can be seen among the people this Sunday (indicated by a lighter shading). Three of those others will conduct the Eucharist next Sunday. They rotate in their tasks.

The main reason for this insistence on a team is that Elders are voluntary workers, not full-time priests. This means:

- Good voluntary leaders do not want to be exposed to being alone.
- Voluntary workers should not be overburdened.
- Good voluntary leaders do not want to be too different from others.
- There is more variety if liturgies are led in rotation by different persons.
- A team attracts community-minded candidates, not dominating ones.
- A team can include younger candidates.
- A team can adjust to the changing times more easily than one person.
- When somebody becomes less suitable, that person can step back.

We reflect: Which of these reasons are the most convincing?
What other arguments come to mind?

Why not just one person?



This community has only one ordained Elder. Every Sunday it will then be the same person who presides over the Eucharist.

We note with surprise that very often people argue that only *one* voluntary local leader should be ordained in each community. Why only *one*?

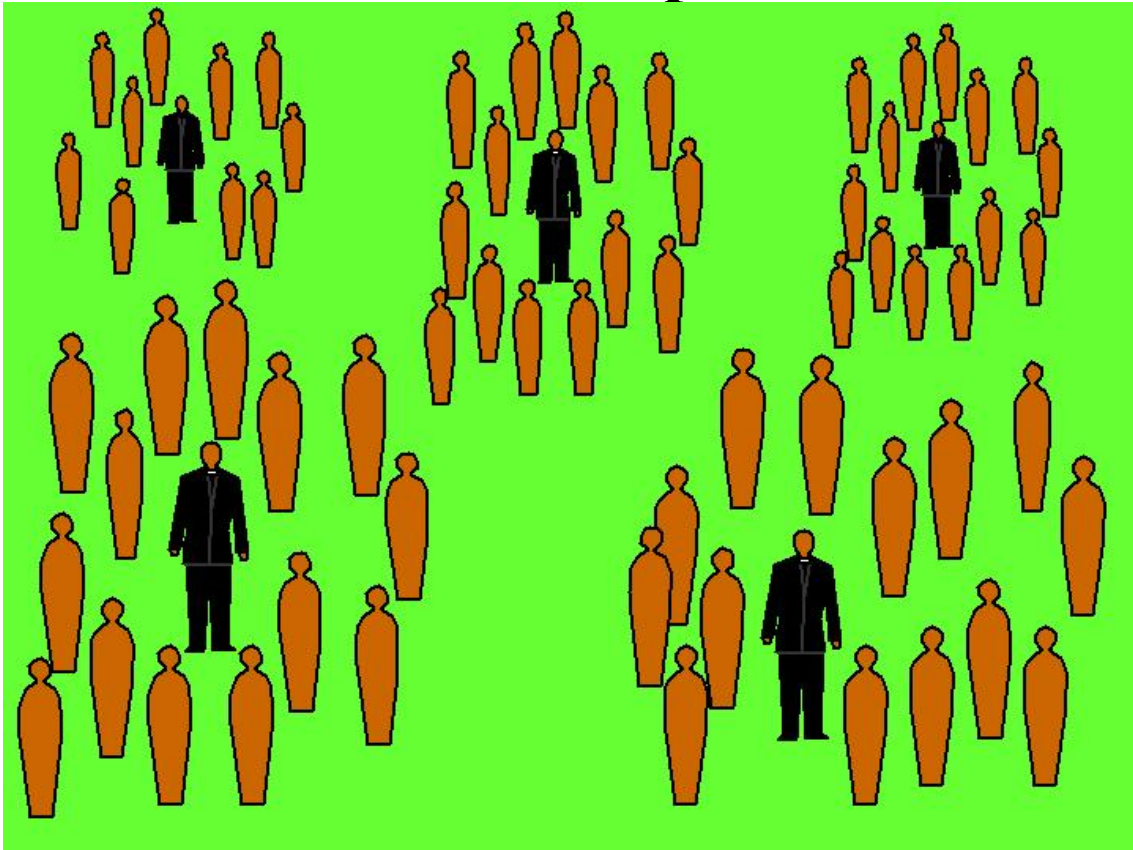
Probably it is because we have for centuries always seen only *one* priest at the altar. This picture of one person at the centre is too deeply impressed in our minds: the priest is alone at the altar while the faithful kneel far away in the pews.

Some people may too easily say “There is only one Jesus, and therefore there should only be one presider at the altar”. Careful: at the Last Supper Jesus did not sit isolated and alone but invited the others to gather closely around him at the table. And when the disciples later celebrated the Eucharist, they surely did what Jesus had done. Each community of that time had a team of Elders, not only one Elder (cf. Acts 14,23; 20,17).

We reflect: We have to choose between the original pattern of having a team at the altar and the pattern of only one person – what reasons do we have for our choice?

Are there other arguments in favour of seeing a team at the altar?

Not “imitation priests” -



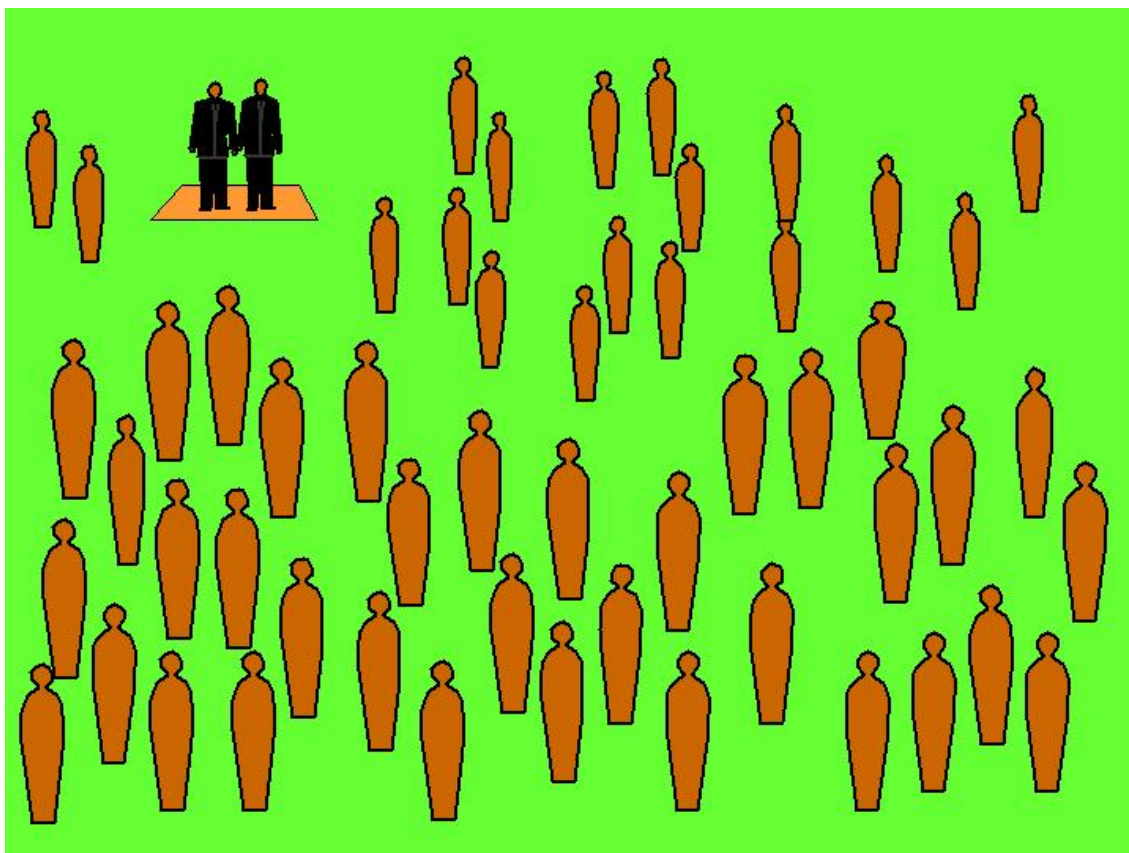
In the above diagram we see five priests. Of the five two are full-time celibate priests, three are part-time, voluntary priests with a family and with a secular profession. We cannot distinguish the part-time priests from the full-time ones because the part-timers try to imitate the full-timers as much as possible.

Nowadays, when people discuss ways of overcoming the shortage of priests by ordaining married candidates, the question arises as to how they should appear outwardly. Should they try to make themselves similar to the full-time priests or should they rather be similar to the rest of the community?

For many centuries we have known no other form of priesthood than that of the clergy as we know them today. Clergy remain celibate, were trained for seven years in a remote seminary, follow no secular profession, are fully employed by the Diocese, live separately in a presbytery or a monastery, and are considered “set apart”. Many of us will therefore find it difficult to accept the idea of a new kind of ordained persons who are very similar to the rest of us.

What do you yourself feel? Which arguments speak in favour of ordained Elders making themselves similar to the full-time priests, or for making themselves similar to the community?

- but a genuinely new kind of ordained leader



In our picture there are again five who were ordained. Two are formator-priests who live at a spiritual centre, three are Elders living among the people. These three Elders cannot be recognized among the others because outside the liturgy they appear and behave like anybody else. People do not refer to them as “Father” but speak of “one of the Elders”. They are addressed as “Mr.N” like all other people, without any special title.

If this proposal is eventually accepted, many may feel uncomfortable about it. They will remember vividly that the person at the altar was always different from the rest of the congregation. He came from somewhere else, he lived a celibate life, he did not run a business, did not deal with earthly things.

In future we want to combine the work of full-time priests with the work of Elders. The two forms will be purposely different and will complement each other. The principle should not be “As similar as possible” but rather “As different as possible”. The ordination will be identical, the appearance will be different.

We reflect: what hesitations and doubts will come to people’s mind about this dissimilarity? How can we respond to them?

No need to imitate the priests



There is of course a difference between those who have received the sacrament of ordination and others who have not received it. The question is when this difference should be outwardly visible.²

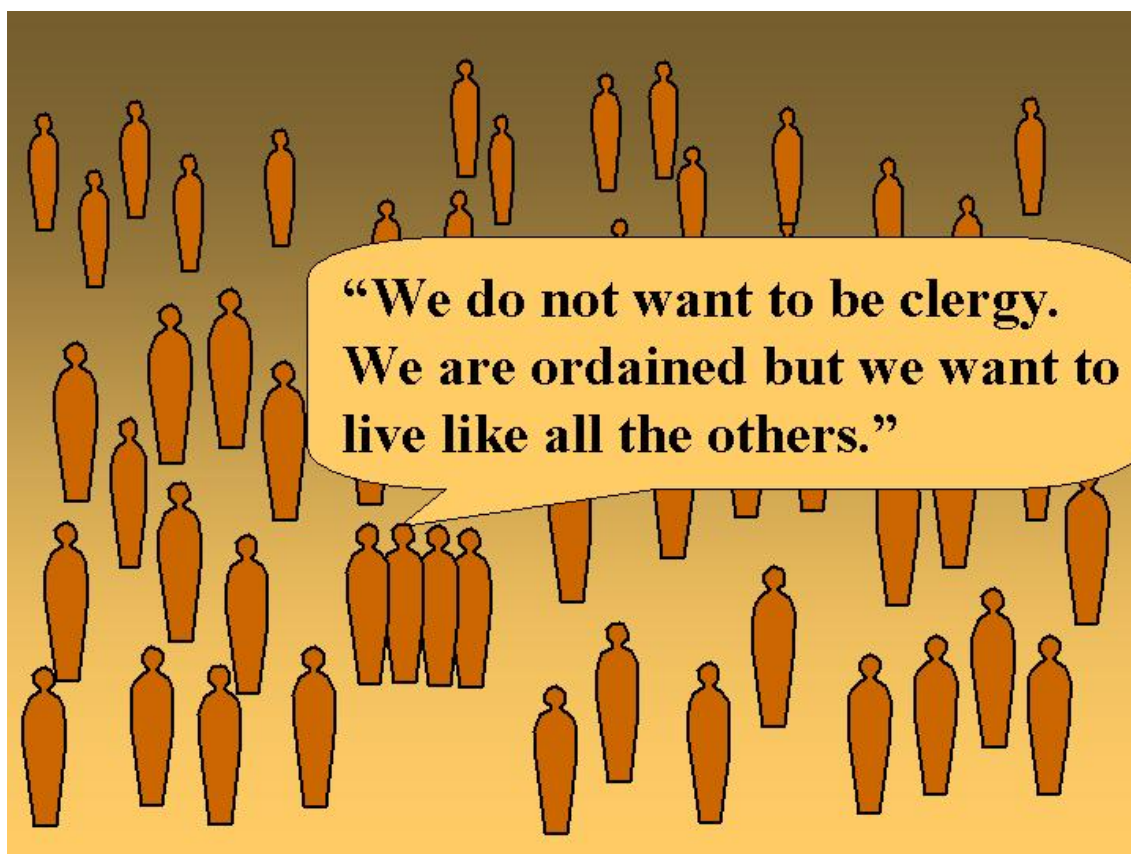
The practice of ordained persons wearing a different garb did not exist in the beginning. Jesus dressed like anybody else, and the apostles did the same. Even for the liturgy they originally did not dress differently. It was only many hundred years later that a special liturgical dress was introduced. This became necessary when big churches were built and when those who presided over the large liturgies had to be recognisable. The liturgy became more solemn and there was a need for more solemn vestments.

Centuries later, when the priests were taken from the ranks of the monks, it was understandable that they had to wear special garb even outside the liturgy. They led separate lives and this difference had to be visible.

We reflect: if the Church would introduce the ordination of Teams of Elders it is clear that they will wear liturgical vestments during the liturgy. And how should they dress in daily life?

² The reader may be surprised that so many pages are devoted to the question of the status of the ordained local leaders. The reason is that the experience of some other churches has shown that the desire to imitate the full-time ministers has often prevented the ordained local leaders from developing their own image as a permanent local ministry. By trying to imitate the full-time ministers they saw themselves as substitutes for them. Their quest for status also harmed their good relations to the rest of the community.

“Like his brothers and sisters”



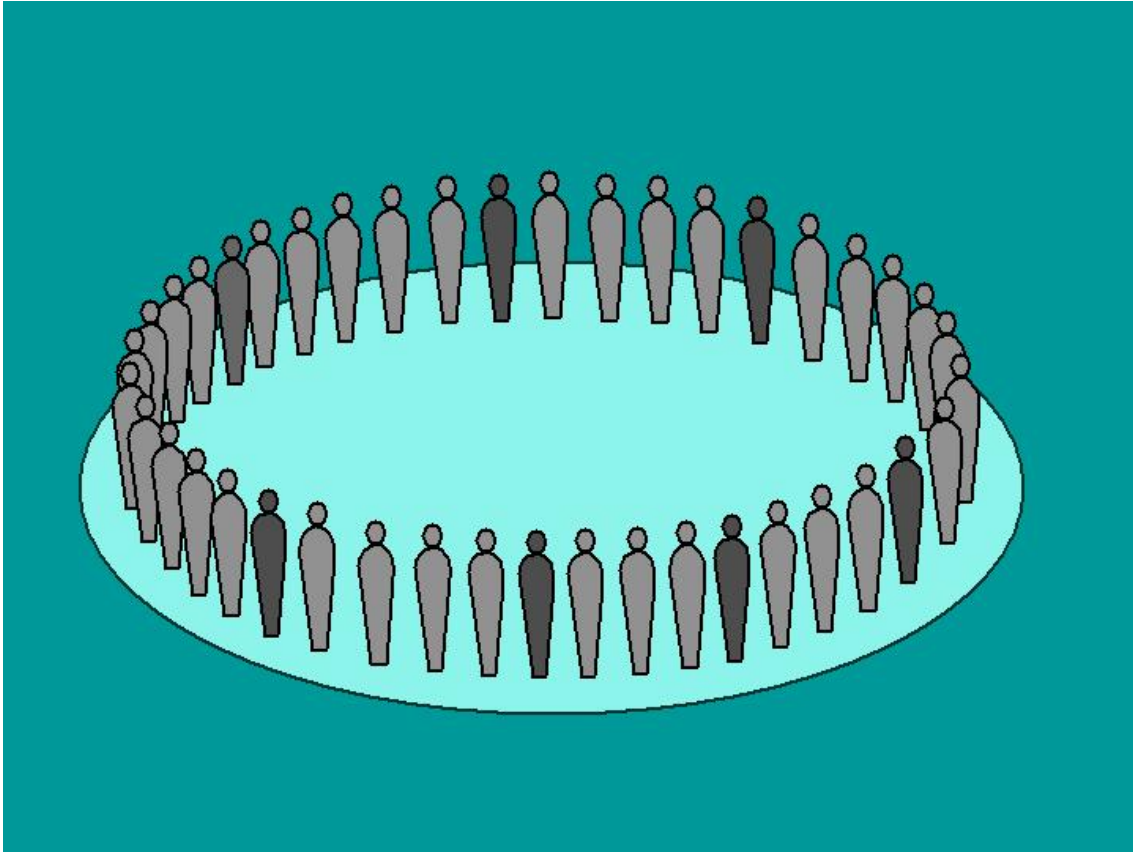
In our diagram we sympathise with the four Elders who want to live among the rest of the community as before, as equals among equals. We also sympathise with the people in the diagram on the previous page who dislike it if the Elders exaggerate their new position by wearing clerical garb even outside the liturgy. We admire the spirit of the community where togetherness is regarded as a high value.

The present law of the Church regulates that those who are ordained but retain their secular profession (such as part-time deacons) need not wear clerical dress (cf. canon 288).

It was important for Christ to live and to appear “like his brothers” (Hebr 2,17) and therefore it will also be important for the Teams of Elders to remain similar to the rest of the community. They should not try to imitate the priests. We do not introduce Elders as substitutes for the missing priests, but want to establish *a new form of ordained local leaders* with the specific intention that they identify with the local community.

We reflect: how can we help the Elders and the community to maintain this equality and to accept it as a value?

Our motive: God wants charisms to be used -



In this picture the faithful are shown as a community, in a symbolic way. They realize that they belong together as followers of Christ. They also realize that each one should work with Christ who is living in their midst.

This realization of their togetherness helps them to also realize that each one of them has certain “talents”. These talents are given by the Spirit. They are also called “charisms” or “spiritual gifts”.

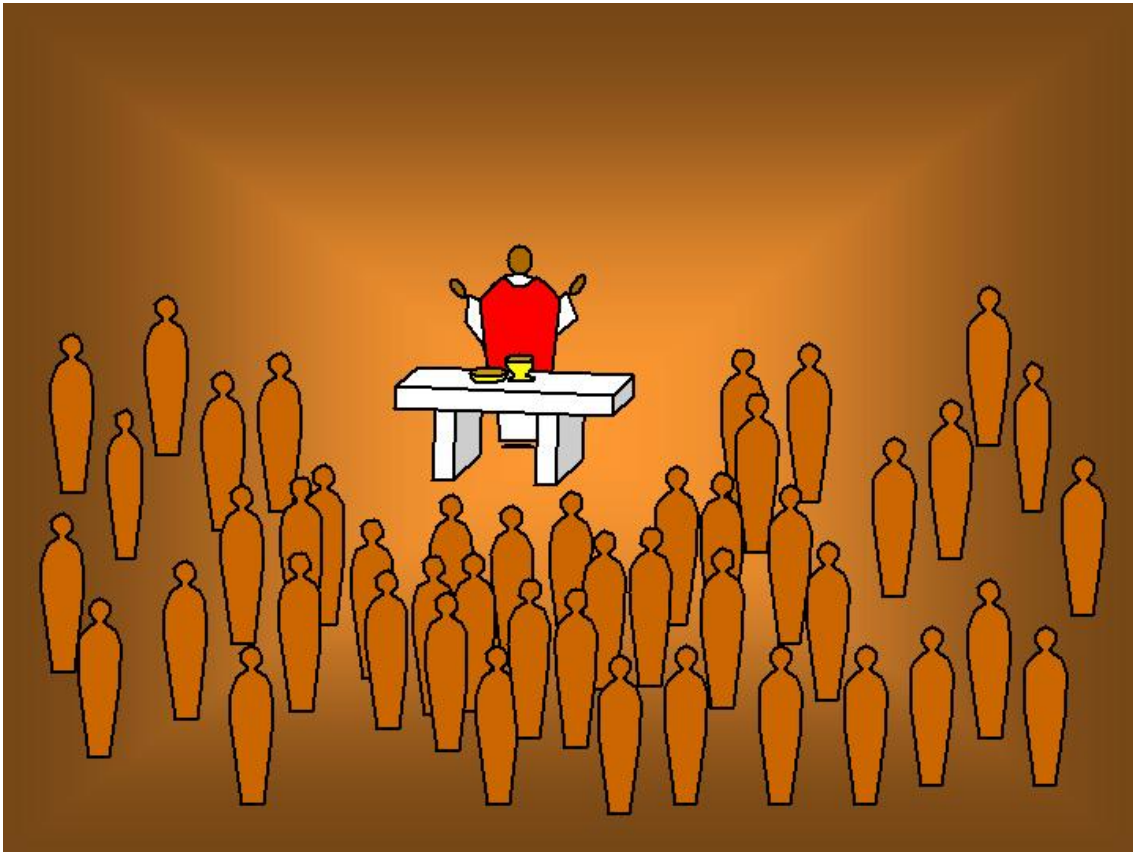
St.Paul says: “The Spirit... gives a different gift to each person.”(1 Cor 12,11) “Do not restrain the Holy Spirit.”(1 Thess 5,19)

God wants these charisms to be used. It is our baptismal duty to use and develop the charisms.

We know that in each community there are also charisms for leading the community and for conducting its liturgies. This is why it is our duty to ordain local leaders even if there is no shortage of priests. Our motive for introducing Teams of Elders should not only be the shortage of priests but the full use of the charisms given by God.

If you agree, say why you agree. If you disagree, say why.

- even where there are enough priests



In the situation depicted by our diagram there is no shortage of priests. Each community still has its own resident priest. Neither the priest nor the faithful feel the need to introduce Teams of Elders. This idea may not even be known in that area.

The Holy Spirit has distributed his charisms to all believers. This means that the same talents and charisms are present among the faithful in the community depicted above as there are in other areas where there is a shortage of priests.

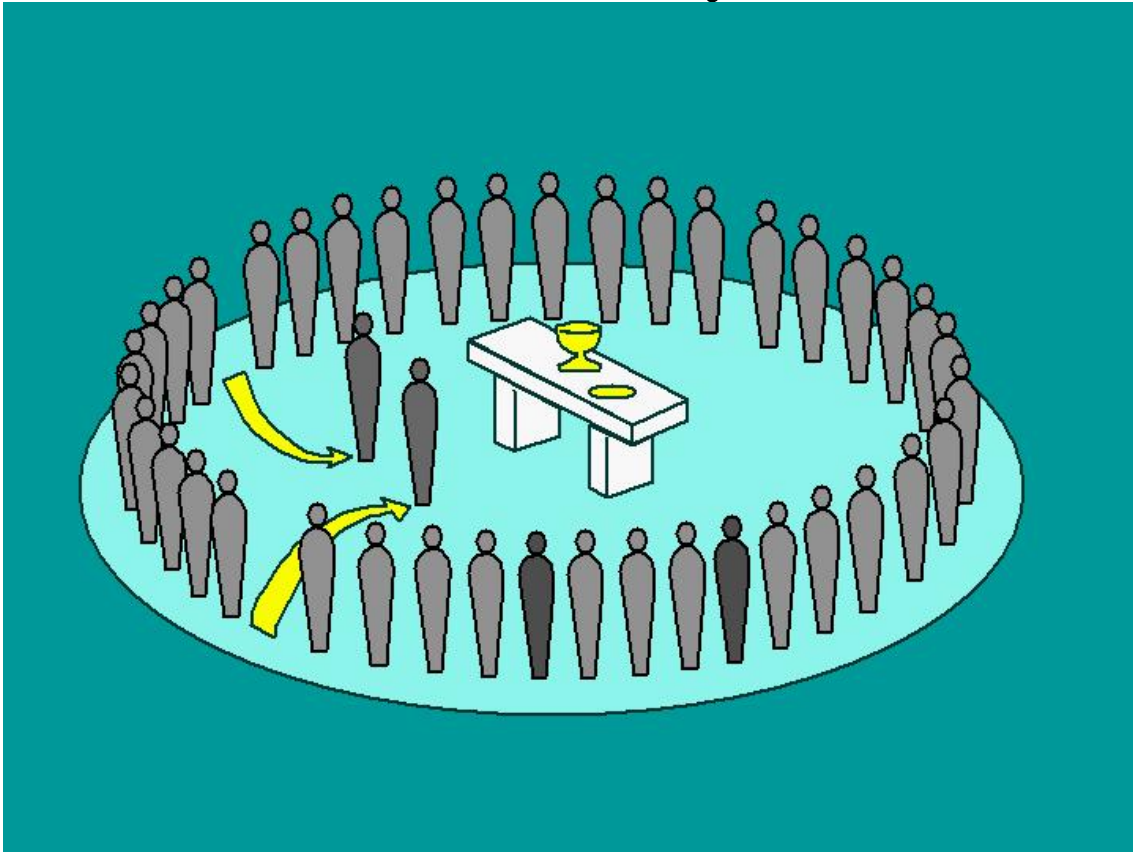
We reflect: Let us compare the above diagram with the one at the left. Why do we have the impression that there are less charisms in the congregation depicted above?

What would be the results if the charisms of the congregation were not to be used? Describe such a situation.

In such situations, what can the priest do? What can the Parish Council do? What can the faithful do?

What very first steps could be taken in order to move towards the proper use of all the charisms?

Our motive: Those ordained should normally come from *inside* the community



During the first centuries of the Church the bishops always ordained some local leaders. They followed the pattern they had learnt from the Apostles. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that St.Paul visited all the young churches and:

“In each of these churches they appointed elders, and with prayers and fasting they commended them to the Lord”
(14,23)

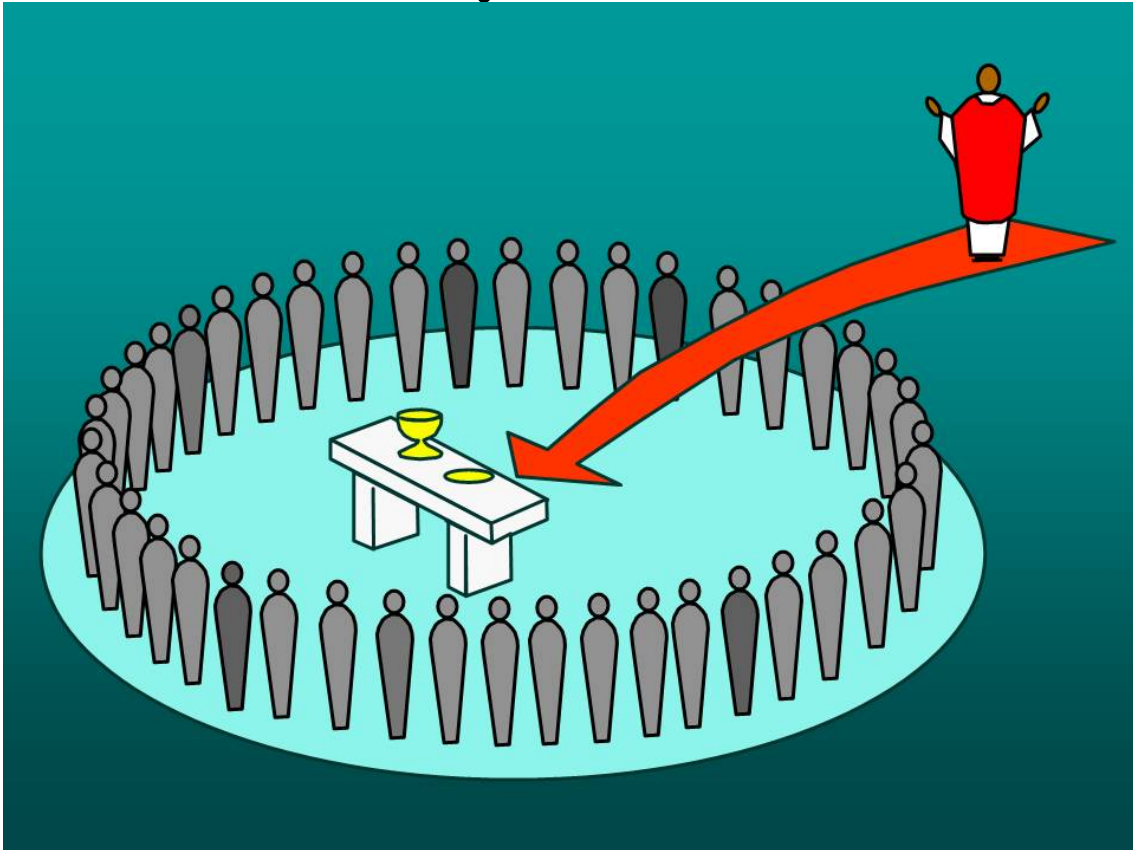
This expresses beautifully that the Eucharist is a word of thanks and should therefore appear as coming FROM us, not only as coming TO us.

We reflect: What are the advantages of having, in each community, a team of ordained leaders who come from the ranks of the community and who continue living from their profession as before?

We list the hesitations people may feel against having priests who come from their own ranks.

We also list other difficulties we foresee.

Not always from outside



We are so used to this picture that many of us cannot even imagine that it could be otherwise. For many hundred years the celebration of the Eucharist was always conducted by a priest sent to the community from outside.

The priest was born somewhere else, grew up somewhere else, was trained far away in the seminary of the bishop, and was then sent to the community. After some years the bishop would transfer him to another community.

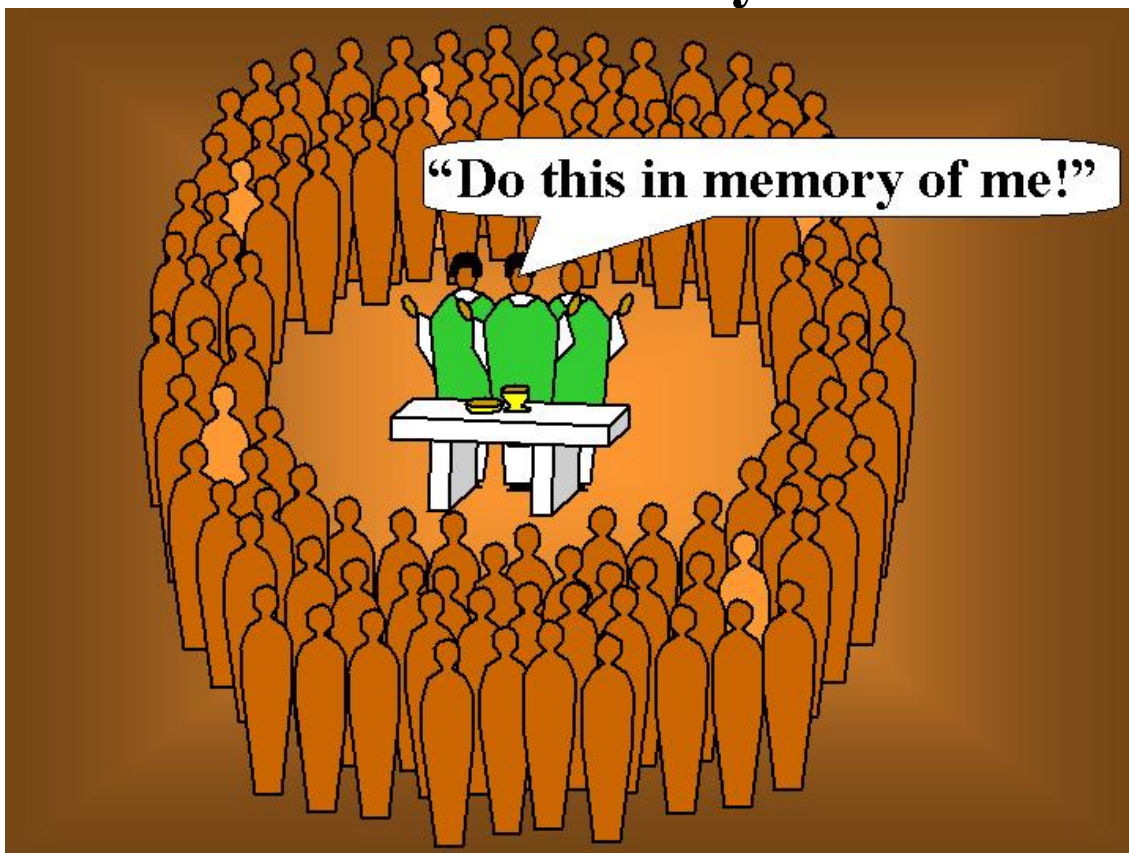
We reflect: Is it possible that some members of our own community have the charisms needed for presiding over the Eucharist?

Although the practice depicted above has been followed for many centuries, could it be changed? If many parts of the Church found it advantageous to ordain some local leaders, should this be permitted? Why?³

It is also possible to have both kinds of priests, some coming from inside the community, others from outside. How would the two kinds work together?

³ The parable of the visitor from Athens could now be discussed. See page 73

Our motive: *We ourselves* should say “Do this in memory of me”



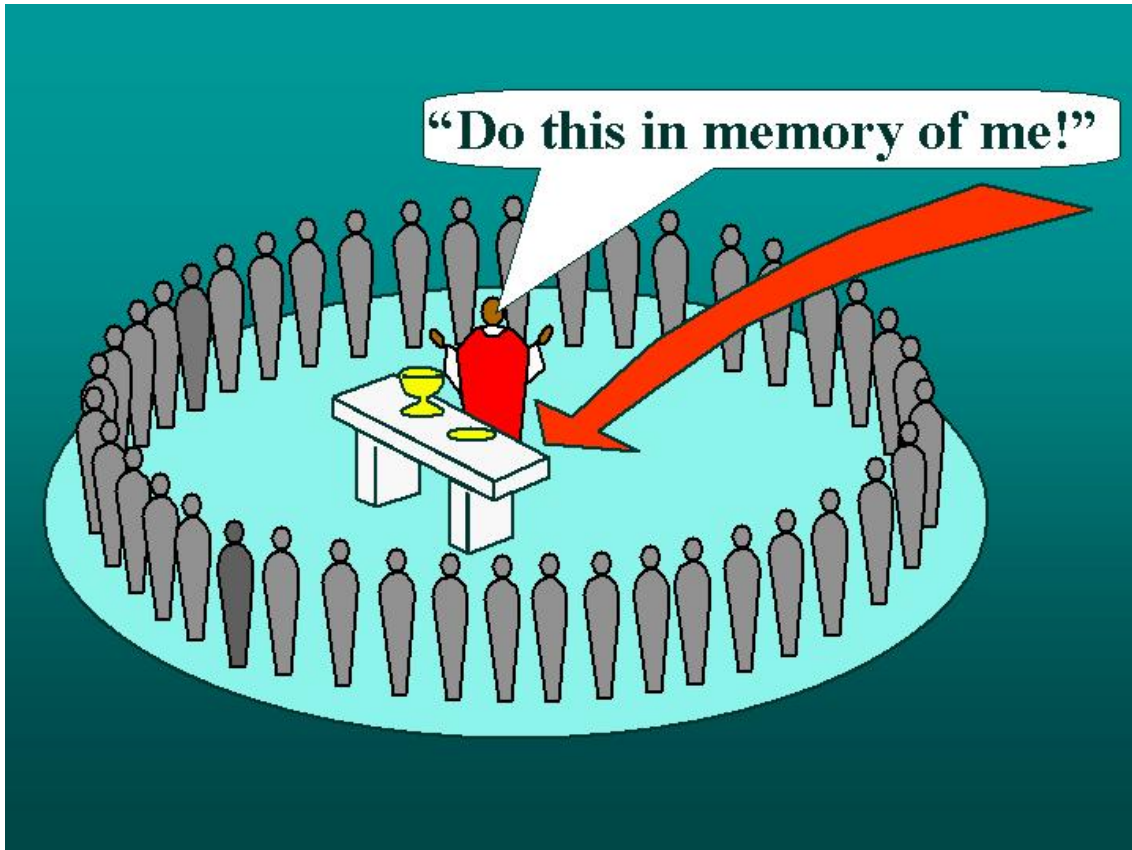
Our motive for introducing Teams of Elders should be to enable each mature Christian community to follow Christ in the most complete way. To follow Christ means to do what he did. We should remember what he did. We should remain inspired to live the same kind of life as he lived.

This is why it is more appropriate that the sacred words of Jesus “Do this in memory of me!” should be uttered by ordained leaders who belong to the local community itself.

The members of the community should hear Christ’s word in their hearts:
Remember that I always took time to speak to my Father in heaven!
Remember that I came to heal the sick!
Remember that I want unity among all people!
Remember that I came to uplift the weak!
Remember the way I lived – so that you follow my ways!

To keep the memory of Christ means to say “Yes” to God. All individual members of the community should say this “Yes” to God in their heart.

In other words: it belongs to the life of a mature Christian community to celebrate the Lord’s Supper with its own ordained Elders.



The words of Christ “Do this in memory of me!” are most fitting for the bishop. He signifies that this particular part of the Church is in union with Christ and in union with the Church throughout the world.

In the scattered parishes the bishop is represented by the priests of the diocese. In our recent past the bishop always chose one of his priests and sent him to our community to represent his unifying presence.

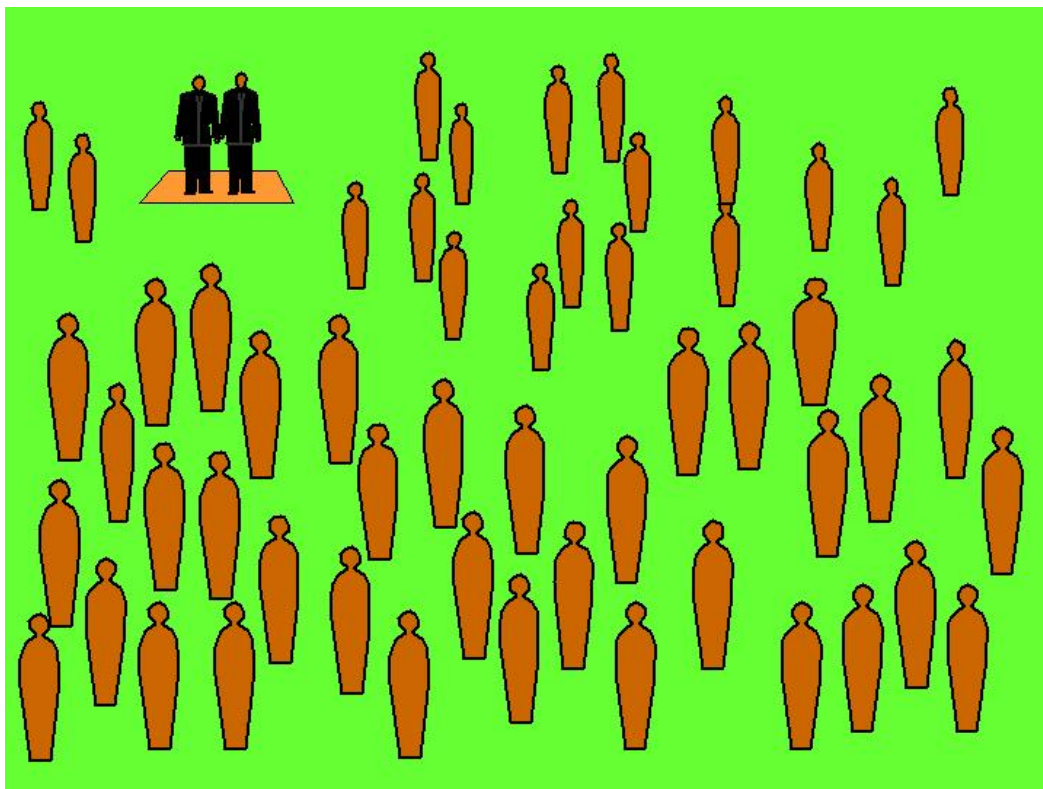
During the first hundred years of the Church’s history the bishop did not send a priest from somewhere else to the community, but he rather ordained the local leaders of each community to represent him. The time has come now for considering the possibility of returning to that original practice. Our motive should be: the community itself should say “Yes” to God. Leaders who come from the community itself should say the words of Christ. The community should not have to wait for somebody from outside to say this “Yes” for them.

We reflect: Nowadays this idea is unfamiliar to our communities. It may appear strange and even unwelcome to many of us.

What can we do in order to become more familiar with this idea?

Let us try to explain to somebody else why it is meaningful that some members of the local community are ordained.

How shall we call those ordained?



In our diagram there are five who have received the sacrament of ordination. The two full-time priests can easily be recognized, but the other three are not recognizable among the faithful. These three earn their livelihood like anybody else, have their families like everybody else, live like all the others. In daily life one cannot recognize them.

When people refer to these three, what word should be used? These three should not be called “priests” or “part-time priests” because people might then have too high an expectation of them which they will not be able to live up to. Thus, we need to invent a new title for them.

It is suggested that we use the biblical term “Elders”, just as the bible says: “in each of these churches they appointed elders” (Acts 14,23).

Theologically speaking, the ordained Elders are, of course, real priests but it would be unnatural to refer to them as “priests” in daily life.

Things are different for the full-time priests. We should continue calling them “priests” and address them as “Father”. At times when a more exact differentiation is needed we will explain that they are “animator priests” or “formator priests”.

Looking at the above diagram we can therefore say that it contains two priests plus three Elders among the many faithful.

Do you like the term “Elders”? Why? Do you dislike it? Why do you dislike it? What term to you suggest? Why?

“Call us ‘Elders’ ”



People will often ask the Elders “Are you a priest?”. The Elders will prefer to reply “we are Elders of the community”. If people want to get a more exact reply they will explain that they have been ordained by the bishop in the same way as the priests. They will add that in their parish there is no longer a full-time priest and that the nearest priest lives far away and can only rarely come to visit the community.

Elders will not like to be called “priests” because people will then expect them to be available to the same extent as the full-time priests were.

Elders will also prefer to indicate that there is not just one Elder in the community but a team of them.

We reflect: How can we explain to others why the name “Elders” will be preferable?

What problems could arise with regard to the terms used for Elders and for priests?

Any other suggestions?

What is an Elder?



As the old man asks what Elders are, he gets short phrases as a reply:

“Elders are priests who live among the people.”

“Elders are ordained but continue to live like everyone else just as Jesus did.”

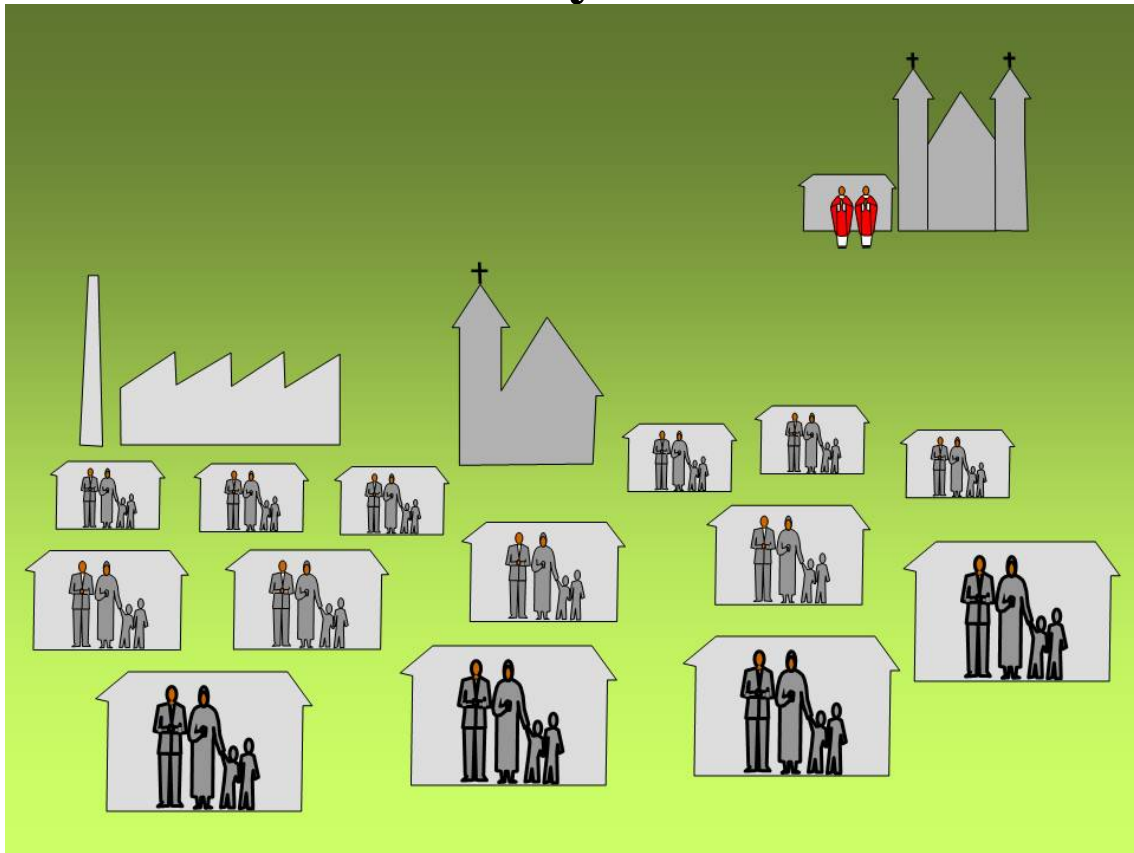
“If you compare Elders with priests, then you can say that priests know the bible more, while Elders know daily life more.”

“Elders live from a job like most other people. They are married and have a family like everybody else.”

“Although they have been trained for their work, Elders do not go away to a seminary like the priests, in order to learn about the bible. Elders learn here in the world how to live the faith.”

We reflect: In what other ways could we ourselves give a short reply?

Elders and priests: similar and yet different



In our diagram we see priests who serve a wider area and reside at a regional centre, and some Elders who live among the local community. Both are priests, but some we call “priests” while others we call “Elders”. Both are ordained by the same sacrament of the ministerial priesthood. Both are proclaiming the gospel in the name of the Church. Both are administering the sacraments. Both are leading the community with and under the bishop. Both are ordained for the whole of their life.

Priests are called to serve the Church by being totally available, forsaking even marriage and family.

Elders are called to serve the Church by being totally immersed in people’s lives, in working conditions and in family life.

Priests live in a presbytery next to the Church, Elders live among the people.

Priests are sent to any of the parishes of the diocese, while Elders will only serve the community where they live.

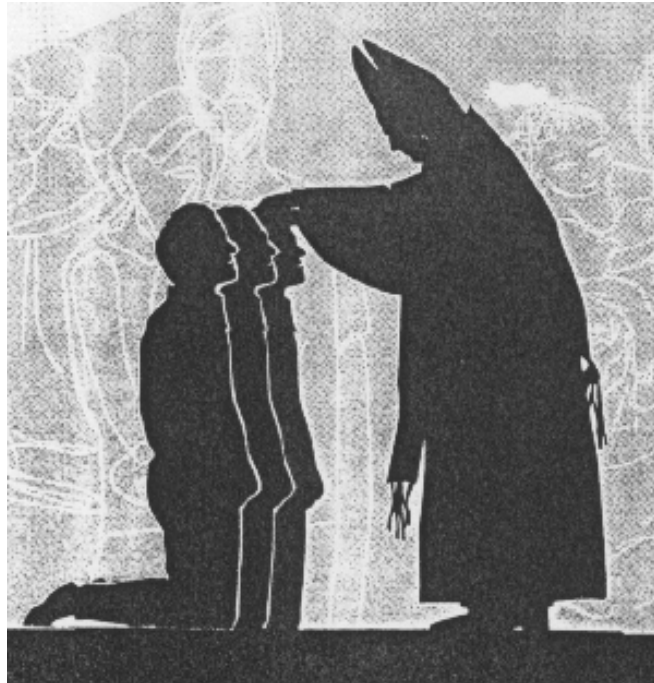
We reflect: in what other ways are Elders and priests similar and different?

The same sacrament of ordination -

Elders are ordained in exactly the same way as all other priests. They receive the same sacrament of ordination although they exercise this same ministerial priesthood in a different form.

This is nothing completely new, since we already have different kinds of priests. We have monks who are ordained, professors who are ordained, chaplains to big hospitals, and parish priests.

We are also used to addressing them in different ways. A priest who is a theology professor is usually addressed as “professor”. In some countries the ordained monks are addressed differently from the diocesan priests.



Elders can be in charge of a parish. They can be jointly in charge or can lead a parish as a group or college, according to canon 517: “Where circumstances so require, the pastoral care of a parish, or of a number of parishes together, can be entrusted to several priests jointly...”

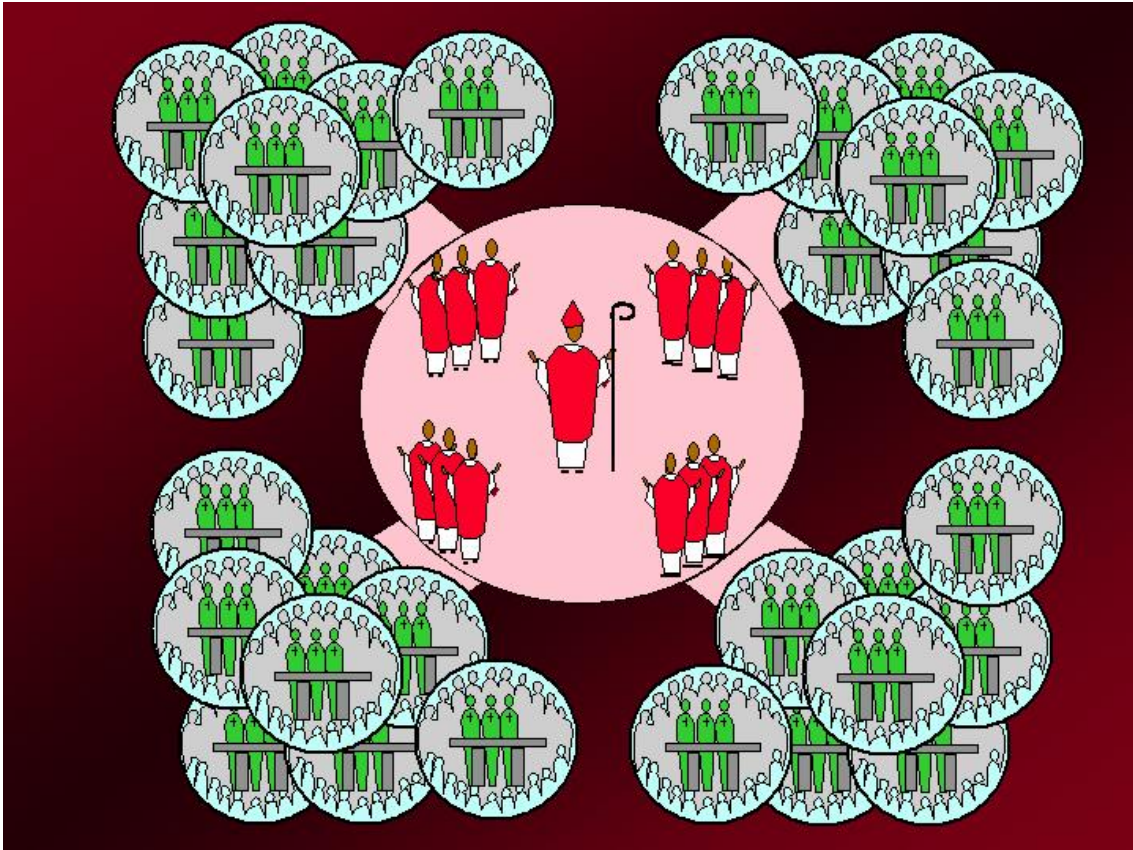
Priests are sent by the bishop to any community of the diocese and they exercise their priesthood in any of the communities to which they have been sent. Elders are different. They are appointed only for the community where they were selected. If they travel to other communities they will not exercise their office there.

Elders have the advantage of knowing their own community very intimately but have less time to meet with the bishop and plan together with him. Priests are more familiar with the plans of the whole diocese but are not as immersed in daily life as are the Elders. The two forms are different and have different advantages and limitations. They complement each other and work in a combined way.

What advantages are offered by the combination of these two forms of the same sacramental priesthood?

Which difficulties can we foresee?

- for two different roles



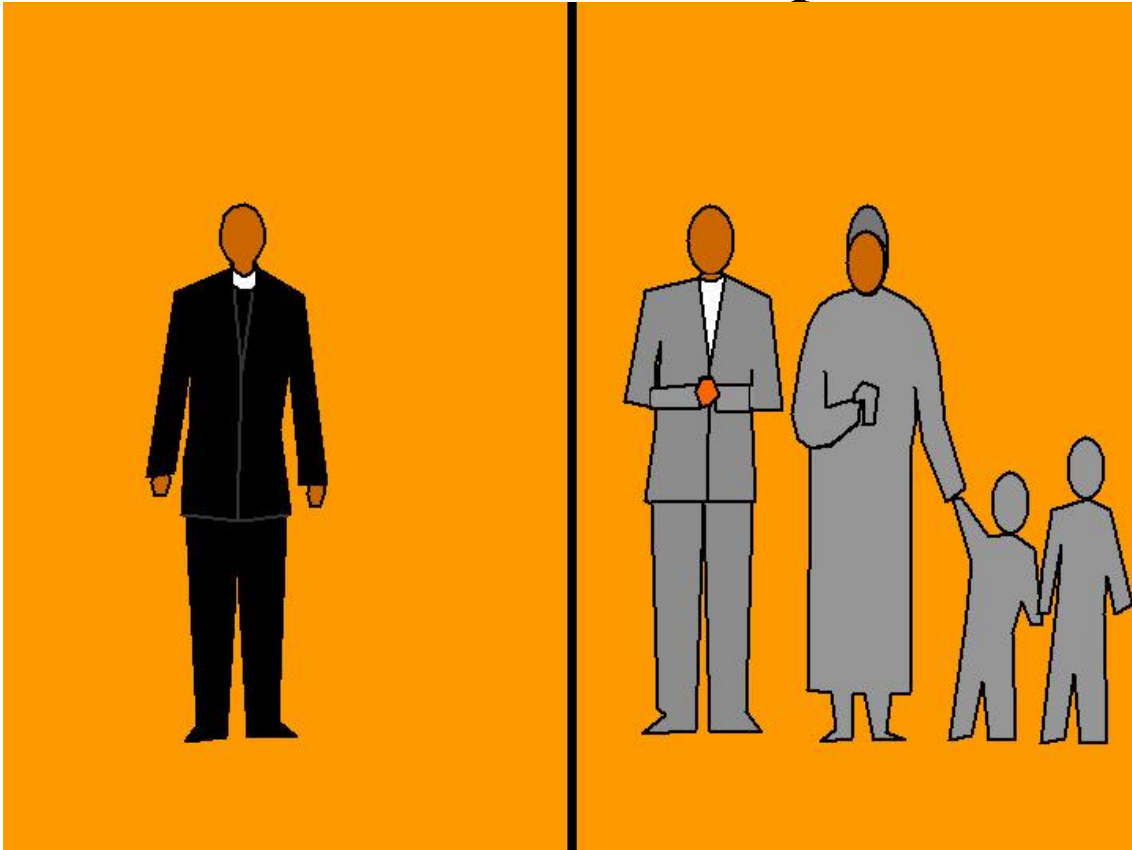
A new vision of Church is at stake. We are dealing with much more than a temporary emergency plan. It is not a transitional measure which we will abandon if one day we were once more to have a sufficient number of full-time priests.

This diagram is also an affirming message to the priests of today. They will not become redundant. They will in future be more close to the bishop but will also remain connected with the communities because they will animate those communities and they will be the formators of the great number of Elders (shown in green in the diagram). The diagram indicates that two or three of the formator-priests (shown in red vestments) will probably stay together at a centre from where they will assist a number of communities.

The diagram shows that we are aiming at a combination of priests and ordained Elders. They will need each other, just as two different partners need each other.

Which hesitations could arise in those who study this diagram? How could one respond to them?

What cannot be compared



Many may find the vision of ordaining local leaders too unusual. They will ask: what do we gain, what do we lose? They may be tempted to look back, and will try to bring back the good old times. They will compare:

The priest of yesterday:

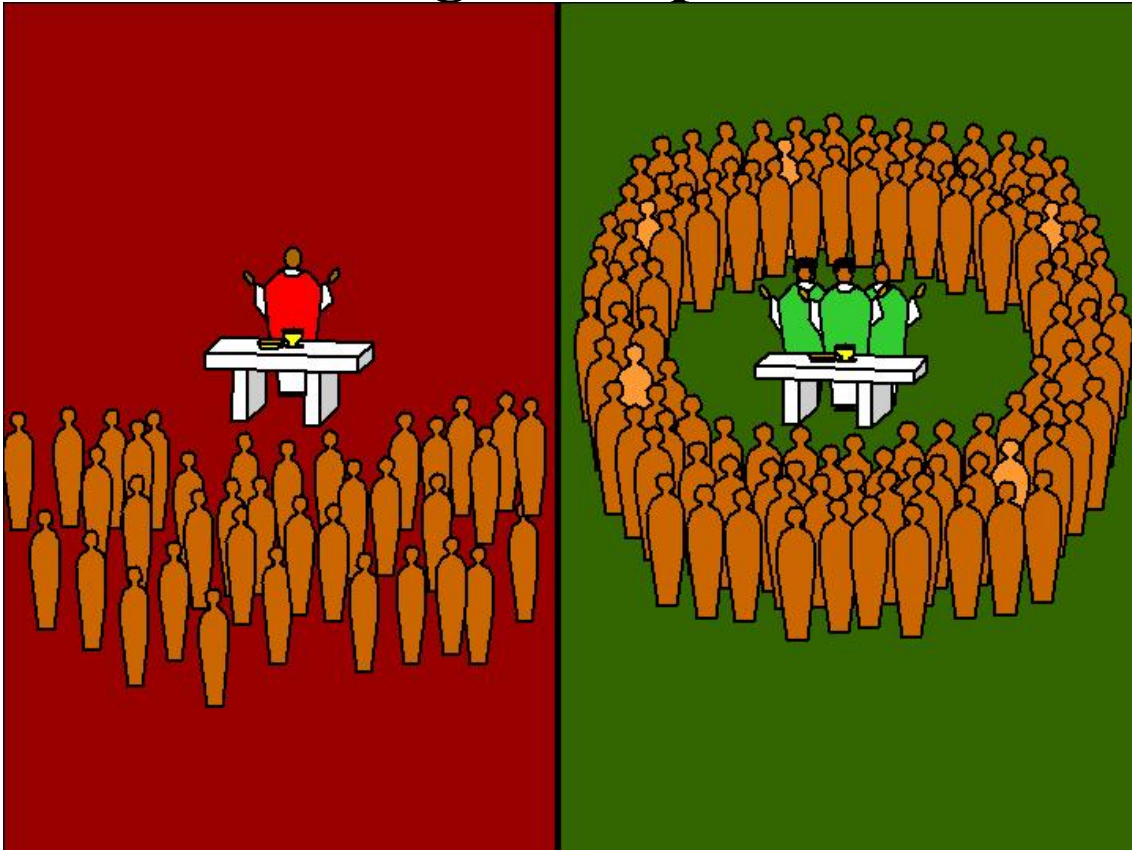
He had time for us, night and day. We could call him any time. He did everything for us. Any rosary was led by him, any Stations of the Cross. He was the centre of our town. We looked up to him as our priest. He was a highly respected figure in town. He often dressed in black. He was a kind of a sacred figure. He was a clergyman and this is what we liked.

The Elders of tomorrow:

They have their families and they have no time during the day because they are employed. They are busy with their main job. We cannot go to their house any time because they have their own family. They are like us, and do not appear like sacred figures. They are not above us but are more like us. We long for the old times. We want priests who are real clergy.

Many will make such comparisons because they do not deeply understand why we should move towards a time when every community has its own Elders. If we ordain Elders, we must try to understand together why we do so. We should reflect about our motives for introducing Teams of Elders. And if we make a comparison we should not, like the above, compare one priest with one Elder. The two cannot be compared. Why not?

The right comparison



If we want to make a comparison, perhaps it is better to compare the old way of parish life with the new one:

Old: Little participation

The parishioners were passive because they knew that the priest would do almost everything for them. They knew little of the various church tasks because they were never trained for them. They had the feeling that “The Church is the priest”. They liked him, they supported him, but it was he who was the Church.

New: Much participation

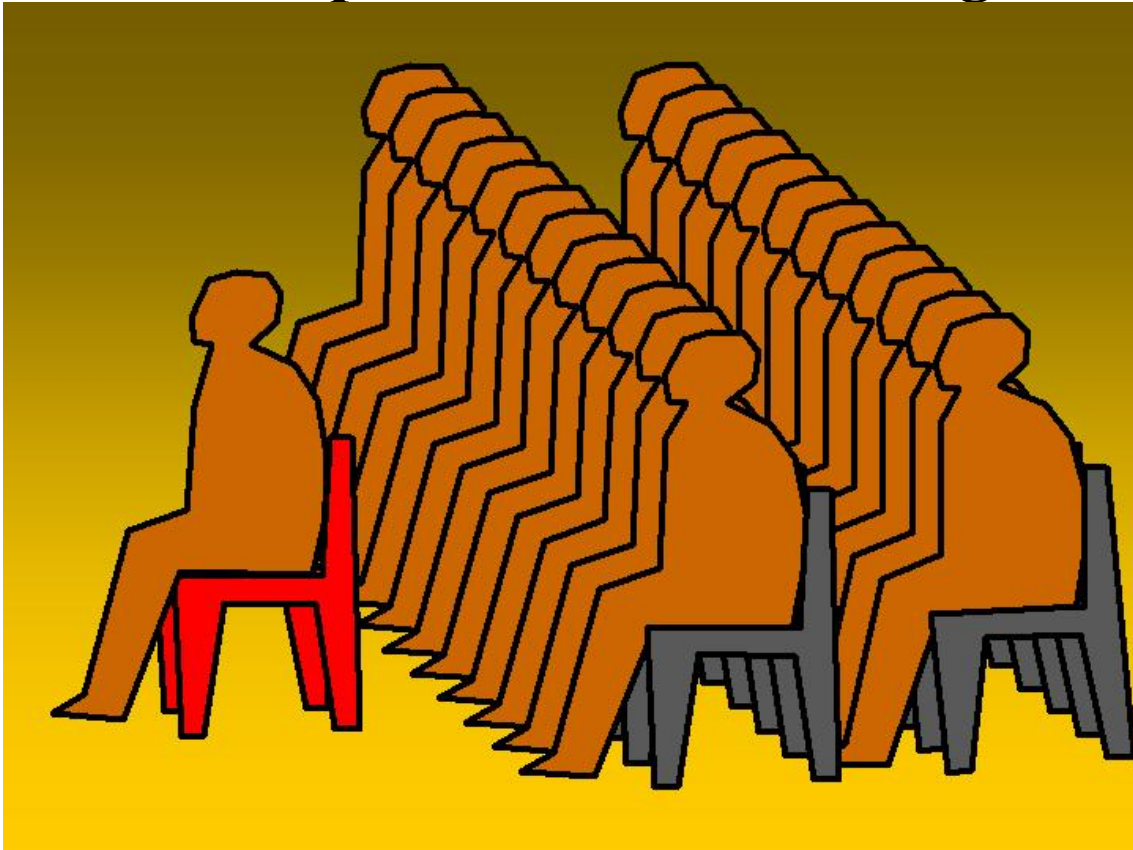
Now they are all involved. Many of them have been trained for all kinds of tasks. They have learnt a lot. They now have the feeling of “We are the Church”. Even if the priest cannot be present, they carry on. If any task arises, they will say “it is our task”.

If we have a deep understanding of the reasons and motives of why we introduce Teams of Elders, then we will no longer say: “Actually the ideal is to have a full-time priest in every community”.

Participation is beautiful but it will remain a challenging ideal. Like all ideals even this ideal of participation will be in danger of losing its splendour. Ideals are like a mountain path, where there is a constant danger of falling down. If we want to maintain wide participation in the community, then we must make constant efforts to keep this ideal alive in us. We must often reflect on our motives as to why we pursue this ideal.

We reflect: what other motives are in our hearts, for either remaining with the old ways or for moving to the new ones?

A temptation: status seeking



Some have warned against ordaining local leaders because ordination is for life and is irreversible. If a local leader were ordained and would then crave for a high status and develop into a dictator, it would be impossible to remove him.

The temptation of status seeking is of course an ever present one, but there are several ways of counteracting it. First of all, we should never present this project as a chance for individual promotion. Further, we should not begin by immediately looking for candidates for ordination, because this is exactly what attracts the status seekers. Rather, we should begin by inviting many people for the normal humble services of the community, because this will keep the status seekers away from the start. When later we have to appoint people for more prominent tasks, we should avoid entrusting them to one person alone and should rather appoint a team. Finally we will never ordain only one person in a community but always a team.

After their ordination it is important to make sure the Elders always preside as a team, not just one Elder presiding alone. We need also to make sure that they rotate and that a single one does not continually preside. The Elders not on duty should mingle with the other faithful in order to continue identifying with them.

In what other ways can we reduce the danger of status seeking?

A status-seeking congregation



A similar temptation will arise within the congregations themselves. They may misunderstand the ordination of Elders as if it were merely an emergency measure for overcoming the shortage of priests. They might keep on longing for the time when they will once again have their own full-time priest.

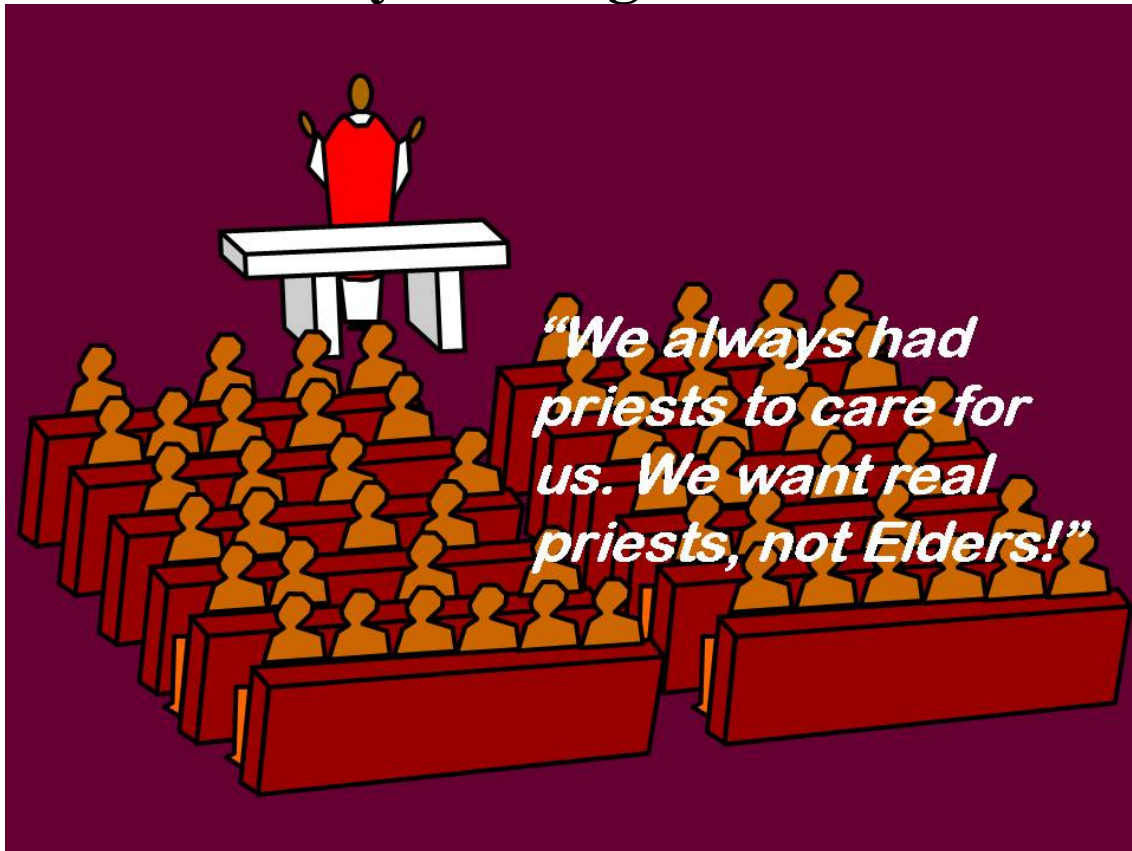
The more wealthy congregations may say "we are able to support a priest. We can offer him high-class facilities. We do not need Elders. We want to be known as a sophisticated parish. We want a full-time priest. We do not want Elders."

This temptation will surely arise. We have to guard against it right from the beginning.

We have to guard against it by reflecting carefully: why did we introduce Teams of Elders? What were our motives? What are our motives today? Do we merely want to overcome a temporary shortage of priests or do we want to become a mature, self-ministering community?

If our motive was to make use of our charisms, if our motive was to overcome the former passivity, if our motive was to assume responsibility for ourselves... then we will not become a status seeking congregation. How do we keep these motives alive?

A temptation: Passively waiting to be served



When living standards rise, when a congregation is no longer financially weak, the temptation will arise to say: "We can afford to pay those who teach catechism, we can afford to pay those who lead the singing, we can afford to employ people for every task.... and we can also afford to support several full-time priests. Let us go back to the old times when the priests did everything for us."

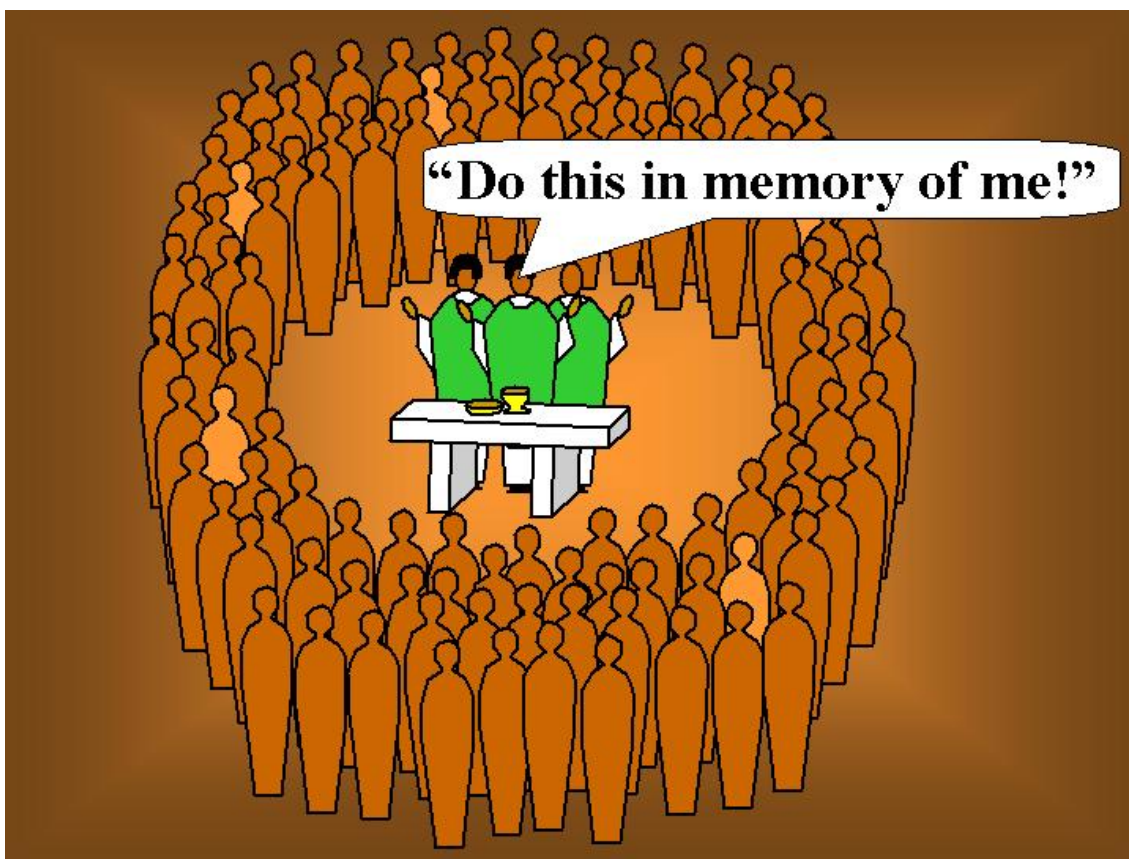
The opening pages of this booklet reminded us that we are not only faced with *one* problem but with two. The second one was the passivity of many congregations. Our task is not only to solve the problem of the empty altar but also the problem of passivity. We are all called to serve. Therefore we should be ready to conduct liturgies ourselves and should not prefer that a priest comes from somewhere else to conduct our liturgies.

In which way can we try and convince our brothers and sisters that we should fulfil many tasks ourselves and should not wait for others do it for us?

Let us list many arguments we could use, many scripture texts we should discuss.

Let us make two lists: tasks which need voluntary work / tasks which need remunerated work.

“Remember: I came to serve!”



This community has reached a great achievement: they now have a Team of Elders. However, in its ranks there might still be some who in their hearts would like to go back to the old times when they had a resident full-time priest who cared for them.

They might have forgotten their original motives for introducing a Team of Elders.

We should not be surprised if good motives are fading and need to be revived. It is a constant task to keep alive the memory of our Founder Jesus Christ. He knew that we need this constant reminder, and this is why he gave us the sacrament in which we, through our leaders, repeat his words: “Do this in memory of me!” This means he is saying to us: “Remember that I myself came to serve others. Remember to do the same!”

Christ said: “No one has a greater love than the one who gives one’s life for others.” (Jo 15,13) At every Eucharist he says: “Remember that I gave my life for others. Remember to do the same!”

We will be glad to celebrate the Eucharist more often in future. How can we make sure that it will be a powerful and inspiring MEMORY?

When we ask people to do voluntary work we should not only use financial savings as the motive. Why not? What other motives could we use?

Many other leaders -



Today most of our Christian communities have a great number of leaders. If the Church should one day permit the ordination of a Team of Elders in the communities, not all of these leaders will be ordained but only three, four or a few more of them. Does this mean that these many other leaders who were trained for conducting the liturgies, will have to withdraw completely? Will the community not miss their valuable charisms? Can these other leaders not bring valuable variety and beauty to the liturgy?

Our diagram shows three Elders in chasubles presiding over the Eucharist but it also shows three lay leaders assisting at the liturgy. We see one of them giving the introduction to the service.

There will be many more ways of including the trained lay leaders, men and women, in conducting the liturgies even after a team of Elders has been ordained. The Parish Council will make sure that they will continue sharing in the many tasks of the community.

We reflect and list many of the tasks which can be given to trained lay leaders, even after the ordination of a Team of Elders.

- besides the Elders

When St. Paul wrote his letters to the faithful in Corinth, in Rome, in Ephesus, in Philippi, he mentioned the various office bearers of those communities. Those communities did not only have elders, but also evangelists, teachers, prophets, deacons and deaconesses, widows and others who helped in the life of the community.

In our communities we should allow a similar variety for this wide spectrum of tasks. When we introduce the new office of Elders, we must not make the mistake of heaping all the community's tasks on them.

To be ordained does not mean to assume all pastoral duties oneself. An ordained person preaches about the God who shares and who invites others to work with him. The sharing the Elders preach to others they have to practise themselves. Ordained persons must give an example of the sharing about which they are preaching.

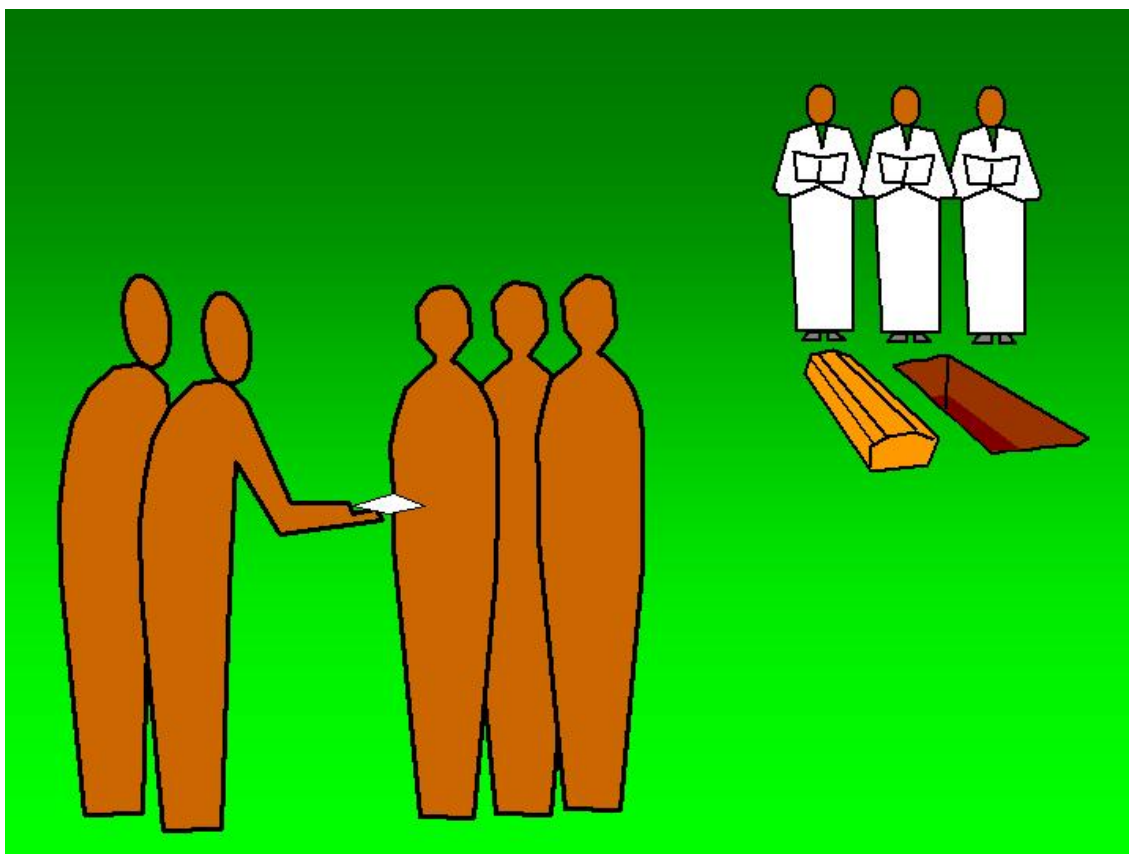
Some have demanded that the Church issue an official list of the duties an Elder would have to do. It does not seem wise to draw up such an official list. It would not be able to suit so many different situations and persons.

The Parish Council or Community Council will be the suitable place to discuss how the tasks can be shared between the Elders, the trained liturgy leaders and others. *The guiding principle should be the well-being of the community.* The guiding principle should not be the definition of each office bearer, e.g., what is an Elder? What is a funeral leader? What is a youth leader? Rather, we ask: "What can this person do for the good of the community?"

The famous Puebla Conference of all the dioceses of Latin America formulated the motto: if God himself is "Participation and Community" then our parish life must also be guided by the same twofold principle of Participation and Community. We will aim at wide participation and we will aim at a high degree of community spirit.

A Team of Elders will always be on the lookout for possible new candidates. Otherwise the team would become outdated after some years. New candidates are best discovered if there is a wide range of tasks and responsibilities in the community. The community discovers the young talents, guides them, gives them more advanced tasks, and in this way will find possible candidates.

Gifts for sacred services?



Our diagram shows quite a natural scene. The relatives of the deceased person feel very touched by the well conducted funeral service and so they want to express their gratitude. They urge the three leaders to accept a gift and it certainly ought to be accepted.

The decisive question is: where will the gift go? The answer can only be that it must be put into the treasury of the community. It must not be regarded as a personal gift, even if the relatives say it is meant as a personal gift.

If the leaders accept such gifts as private gifts, then they will gradually dislike working as a team, because one leader might end up receiving more than the others. The acceptance of personal gifts would also create competition between the leaders for conducting more liturgies than the others. This practice could lead to a sense of greed instead of an attitude of service. It might also exclude new and young additional leaders. The leaders might officiate too long and might become outdated and old-fashioned.

We reflect how gifts and privileges can become a hindrance to community building and to a wide sharing of tasks. How can such problems be minimised?

“Give without charge”

Let us reflect on the reasons why voluntary work is most important in the life of a Christian community.

There is an essential difference between a commercial company and the Church. In a company, when a job has to be done, the company hires a person for it: “The company gives you the pay – you do the job for the company!”

The Christian community is different. It is like a family. If something has to be done in a family, it is done by voluntary work, without payment. Why? Because we are working for ourselves, for our own family. It would weaken the family spirit, if we wanted to be paid for what we do for our own family. It will also weaken the family if some members refuse to do anything for the family and merely wait passively for being served by the others. It will, however, strengthen the family spirit when we see how everybody works together voluntarily.

It is obvious that in the Christian community we should follow the pattern of the family, not the pattern of a commercial company. A Christian community consists of brothers and sisters. God’s Spirit lives in each one of them. The Spirit urges them to use the talents and charisms he has given to each member of the family.

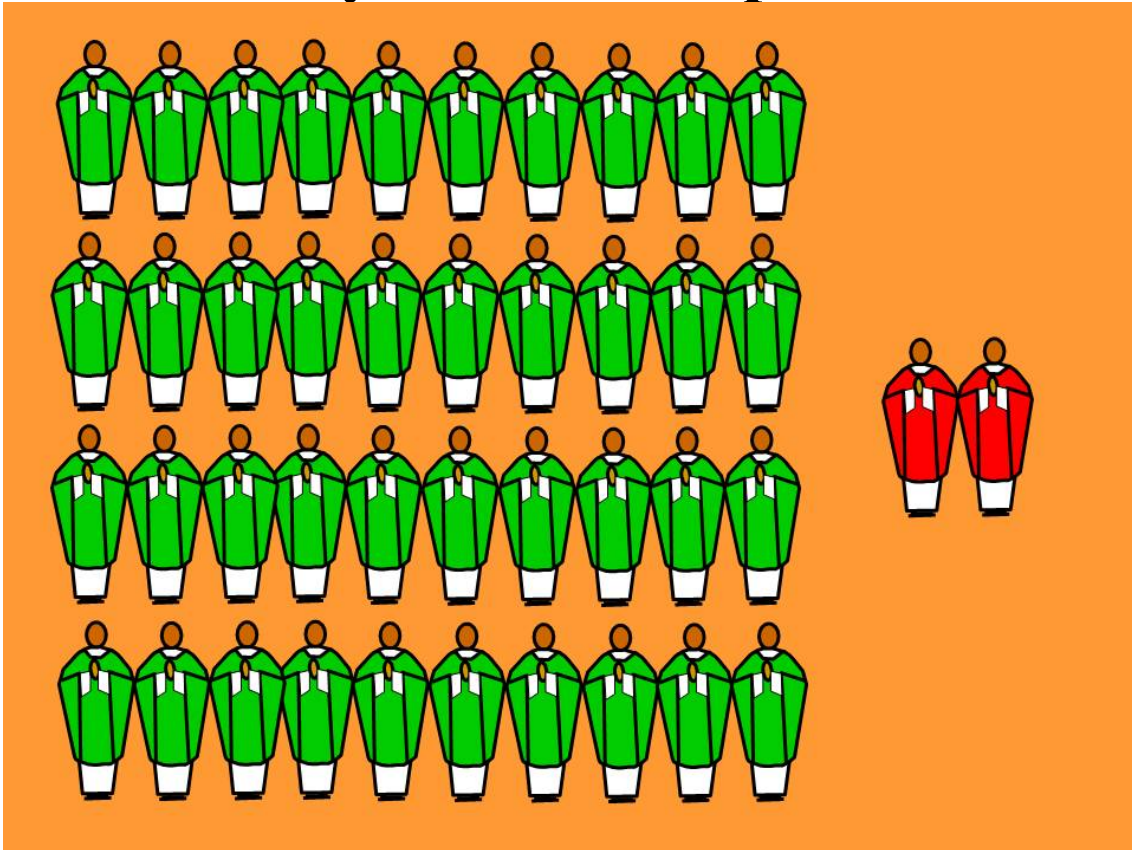
We must, however, distinguish between tasks that can be done in our spare time and other tasks which require full-time work from which a person must be able to live. The former can be done by voluntary work, the latter require remunerated work. We must also distinguish between tasks for which we can be trained in short evening courses and others which require long, residential training.

Considering all these aspects we realize that in the Christian community the majority of tasks can be fulfilled through voluntary work while there are only a few tasks which require remunerated, full-time work.

Let us make two lists: one of tasks that can be done through voluntary work, the other for tasks that require full-time work.

“You have received without charge. Give without charge” (Mt 10,8).

Many Elders, few priests



At a first glance, the above diagram may seem shocking because it shows forty Elders and only two priests. These are, however, the most realistic of figures.

In large parishes of Latin America, Africa and Asia, usually two or three priests stay together at a centre and serve twenty to fifty communities along with their hundreds of trained lay leaders. If in every community three to five of the leaders are ordained, we come to the above ratio of at least 20:1 between Elders and priests. This would be a healthy ratio.

Elders and priests need each other. Elders cannot do what the priests do, and the same is true about priests. Therefore neither Elders nor priests need to be afraid that they will one day no longer be needed. The work of Elders and the work of priests must be combined because they are complementary.

Let us reflect. Let several of us explain in detail:

In what way will the priests be needed by the Elders?

In what way will the priests be needed by the communities?

In what other ways will priests of total dedication and full theological training always be needed?

“Combination” is the motto

The two forms of priests will always need each other. They are like two different partners working together. They differ and this is why they will always need each other.

This partnership will be sound if it is based on a correct numerical relation. In our diagram there are about forty Elders, accompanied by two animator priests, a ratio of about 20:1. This figure is merely a rough guide. In some places it will be 15:1 and in other places 50:1.

The ratio should not be as low as 1:1 and not even 5:1. If the ratio is too low, the priest may not be much occupied by formation work and he will then be asked to do the work of the Elders. There is then the danger that the Elders will be regarded as his assistants. The priest might be regarded as the “parish priest” while the Elders would appear as his helpers.

If the ratio is too low the faithful might soon say “for this solemn occasion we invite the priest to conduct the funeral, or the marriage, or the baptism, or the feast day Mass”.

If the ratio is too low the Elders cannot develop their real role because the priest is too easily available.

Where the ratio is too low the Elders will appear as a replacement for the missing priests, a kind of substitute for them. This will cause an identity crisis for both, because both will ask themselves: “What are we now, since we are performing virtually identical duties?” The healthy ratio of at least 20:1 would make it clear that Elders and priests have different roles. They need each other and complement each other. “Combination” must be our motto, not “replacement”.

In the Young Churches, where priests already today serve twenty or fifty communities, they would continue residing at the same centre where they are living today. In the older dioceses of Europe and North America it may not be wise for the formator-priests to continue residing in the presbytery where they have always lived. It may be wiser for them to create a Spirituality Centre in between the ten or twenty parishes that have Teams of Elders. For those parishes they will conduct retreats, scripture studies, services of reconciliation, ongoing formation and other forms of assistance.

Let us now try to formulate in our own words how these Elders and Priests of the future will cooperate and how they will need each other.

The variety of situations -

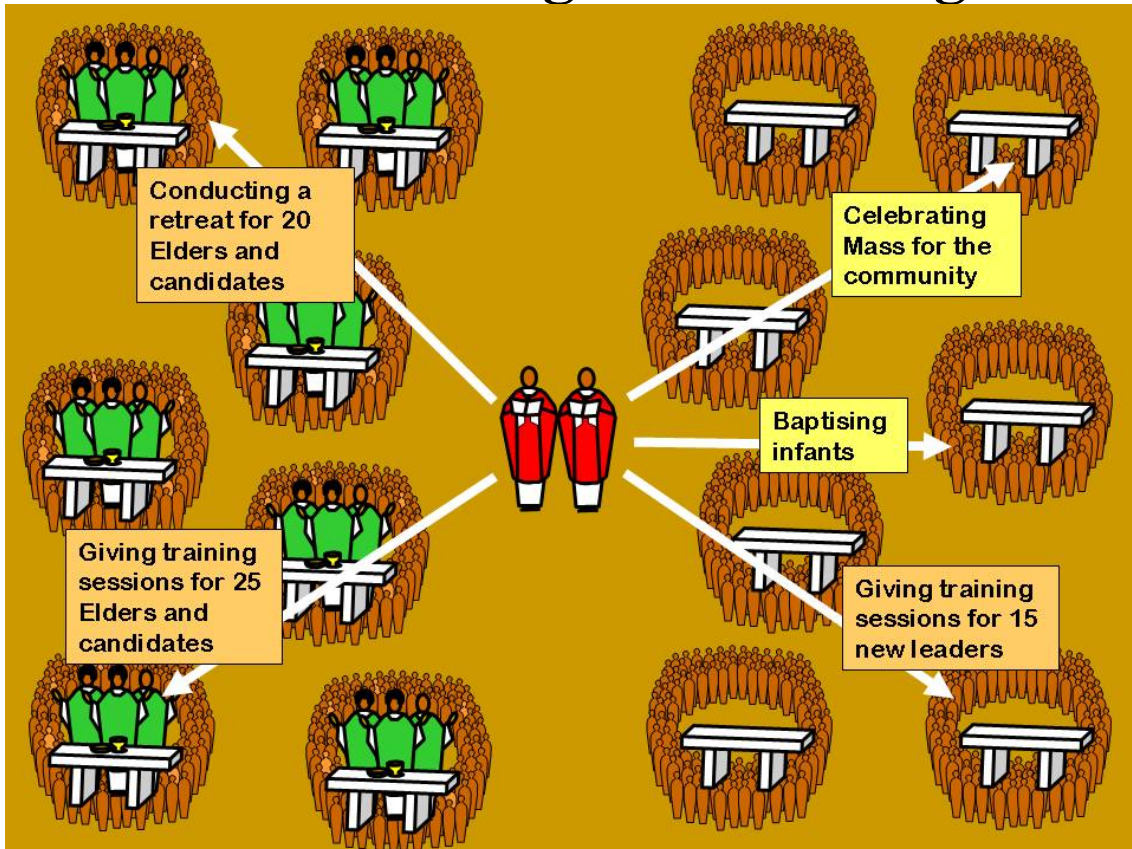


The two priests serve twenty or fifty communities but only a part of these communities will be able to bring forth a team of candidates that can be ordained as Elders. Quite a number of the communities will be too small. They may have no suitable candidate or only one, and we have explained above why we should avoid the ordination of only one person. In other communities the faithful may lack the spirit of cooperation and may be divided into factions, while in again others the leaders may not be regular and reliable in their work. We must foresee that in almost all parishes some of the communities will not have their own Team of Elders.

We will of course emphasise that all Christian communities are called to the fullness of life in Christ and that this means that they should make efforts to celebrate the Eucharist with their own ordained Elders. We will, however, find that some communities will not immediately reach this aim. In those communities it will be the full-time priests who will administer the sacraments.

We share with each other some examples of communities that might experience some obstacles against bringing forth candidates for ordination as Elders.

- will allow a gradual change



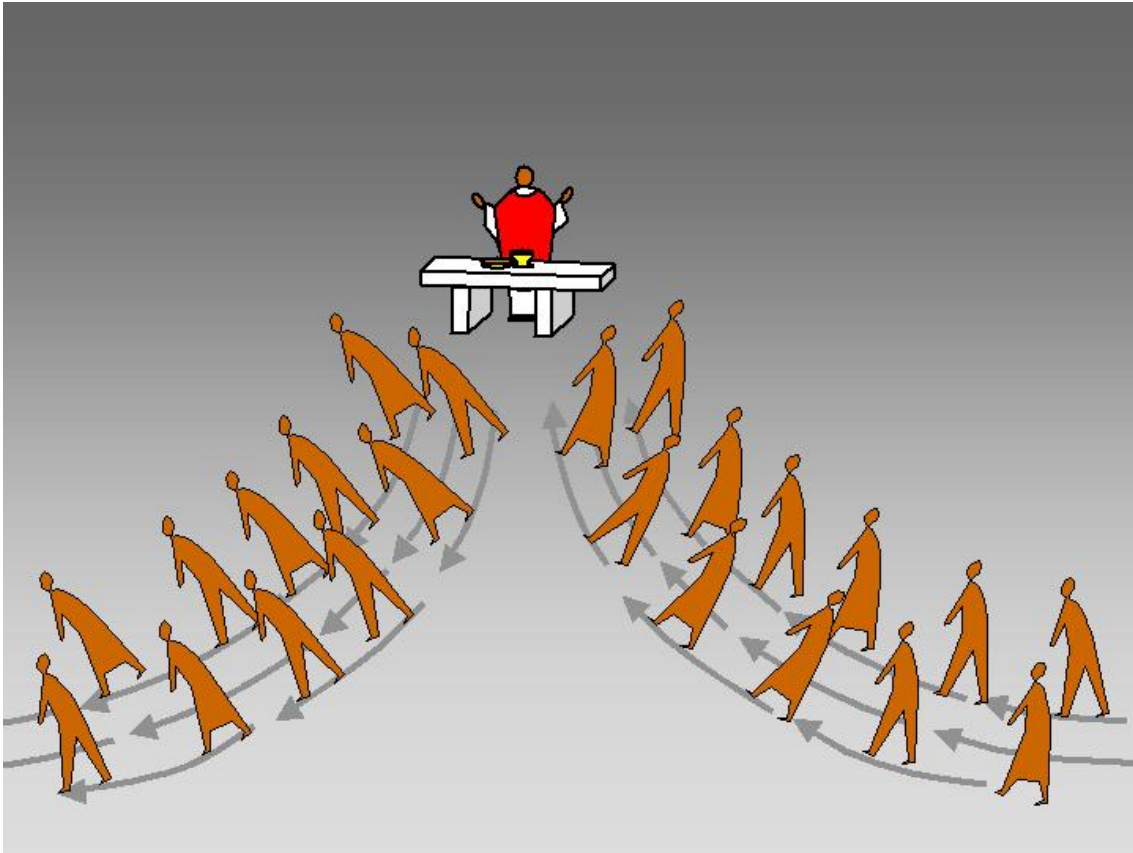
In the above diagram two priests serve a large cluster of many communities but only in half of them is there a team of ordained Elders, while the other communities still depend completely on the priests. For the communities that have Elders, the priests conduct retreats and training sessions; while in the communities without Elders the priests also celebrate the Sunday Masses, the baptisms and the other sacraments, besides conducting the training courses for leaders.

For the two different situations two different kinds of work will be needed. On the one hand this will mean a reduction of the work load of the priests, at least to some extent, because until the ordination of Elders the priests had to administer the sacraments in all the communities; on the other hand it will bring new challenges.

This future diversity in the work of priests will probably be appreciated by the priests. They will not suddenly and totally have to switch over from one type of work to another, from administering the sacraments to exclusive formation work.

We share with each other how priests of our area are already today combining the administration of the sacraments with formation work.

Where community building is impossible -



Our diagram is an attempt to remind us of situations where community building is impossible because people are constantly coming and going. If the training of a few leaders starts, it soon ends again because people move to other places. In some areas mobility is so high that no stable leadership group can develop.

There can also be other reasons as well why community building and the training of leaders do not get off the ground.

It is obvious that even in such situations the faithful need the Eucharist and the other sacraments. Full-time priests are the only ones who can, in such circumstances, administer the sacraments. The ordination of Elders will be impossible in such situations.

We reflect and share what we know of such situations.

We also reflect: what about situations where everybody says that community building is impossible but this is not really true? Can you imagine situations where “it is impossible” is merely an excuse? Tell us about your experience.

- there Elders are also impossible

It is obvious that in places of very high mobility and in places of very high anonymity it is impossible to even talk about the ordination of Elders.

In such impossible situations one often hears that people mention the name of one or two very exceptional Christians and say these would be suitable for being ordained as Elders.

We must, however, remember all we have said above about the need to form teams and to avoid individual Elders. We must further remember that Elders must be attached to some structure. Just as there can be no “freelance priest” there also cannot be any “freelance Elder”. Each and every priest is either attached (“incardinated”) to a diocese, or to a Religious Congregation. The priest keeps contact with those centres, and those centres keep contact with the priests. The same must happen with Elders: each one must belong to (be “incardinated” in) a diocese.

It is therefore not sufficient to point at a very exemplary person and say that person could be ordained. Elders need a community to which they belong. They need a team to which they belong. They need a formation structure through which they keep contact with the diocese.

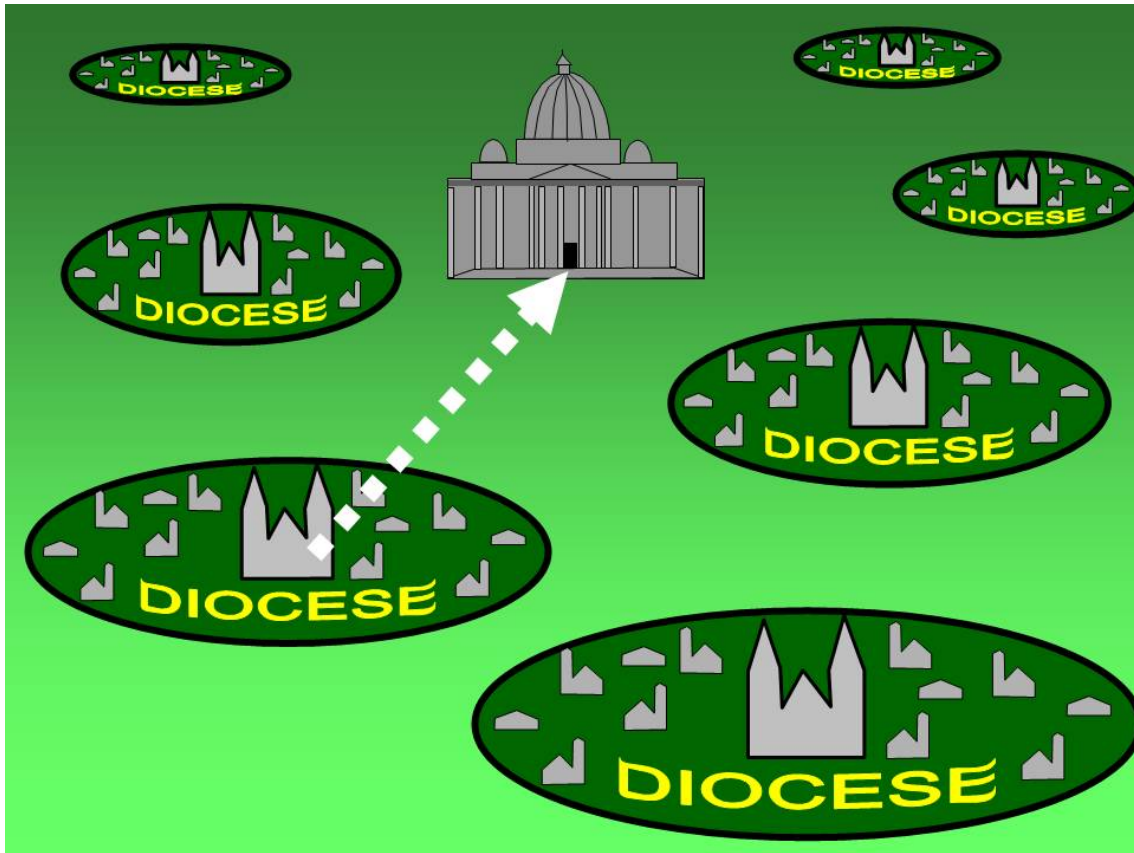
Where such channels are impossible it will also be impossible to speak of the ordination of Elders. In such situations it is better to rather discuss the most simple forms of participation and community spirit.

We should, however, keep in mind:

In the majority of parishes community building is possible

We should not be discouraged by the fact that there are difficult situations where community building is impossible. In most parishes and communities it is possible to build community and to form groups of local leaders.

A diocese can only ask Rome for permission to ordain Elders -

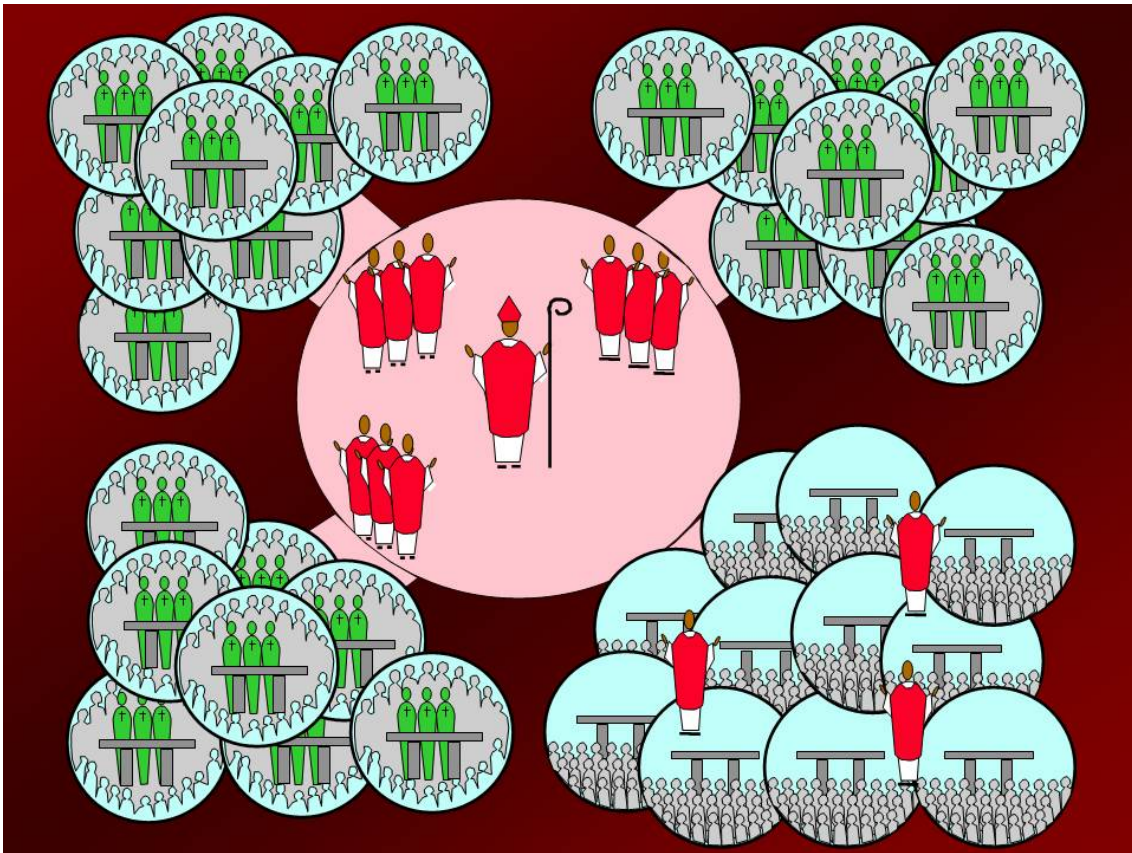


Only the highest authority of the Church can give permission for the ordination of Elders. The ordination of candidates who are married and have not gone through the normal seminary training is not envisaged in our present Church law and therefore needs special permission.

Before a bishop asks the Pope to permit the ordination of local married leaders, he will reflect carefully because this request has often been refused. It was refused because it seemed to solve one problem by creating another one. The absence of the Eucharist would be solved but at the same time the present priesthood would be cast in doubt and might even disappear. The few vocations we still have would be endangered and this would mean great harm for the Church.

Therefore, before a diocese requests the ordination of Elders it would have to prove that such ordinations will not endanger the situation of the present priests. How can this be proved?

- if many of the priests have become formators



As we have seen in the earlier pages, there will be no danger for the present priests if they have already assumed the new role of being formators of the local leaders.

What has to be proved before a diocese asks for permission to ordain Elders is, therefore, that in this diocese a great number of priests are already exercising this new role of formators.

The above diagram symbolises a diocese where three quarters of the priests are formators of the self-ministering communities. Only in one quarter of the parishes are the priests not yet the formators of local leaders but are caring for communities which are completely dependent on the priest.

We have purposely depicted a diocese where some of the priests and some of the communities have not yet reached the stage of working as self-ministering communities. It will never be possible to reach a complete consensus. It is sufficient if the majority has chosen this path.

Fortunately about half of all dioceses do have such a high number of formator-priests, especially in the Young Churches.

How is the situation in your own diocese?

Priests who are formators will feel secure



In the past every Eucharist was presided over by the priests. If local Elders are ordained, then it will usually be these Elders who will preside. Will this not tempt the priests to ask themselves: “do they still need us?”

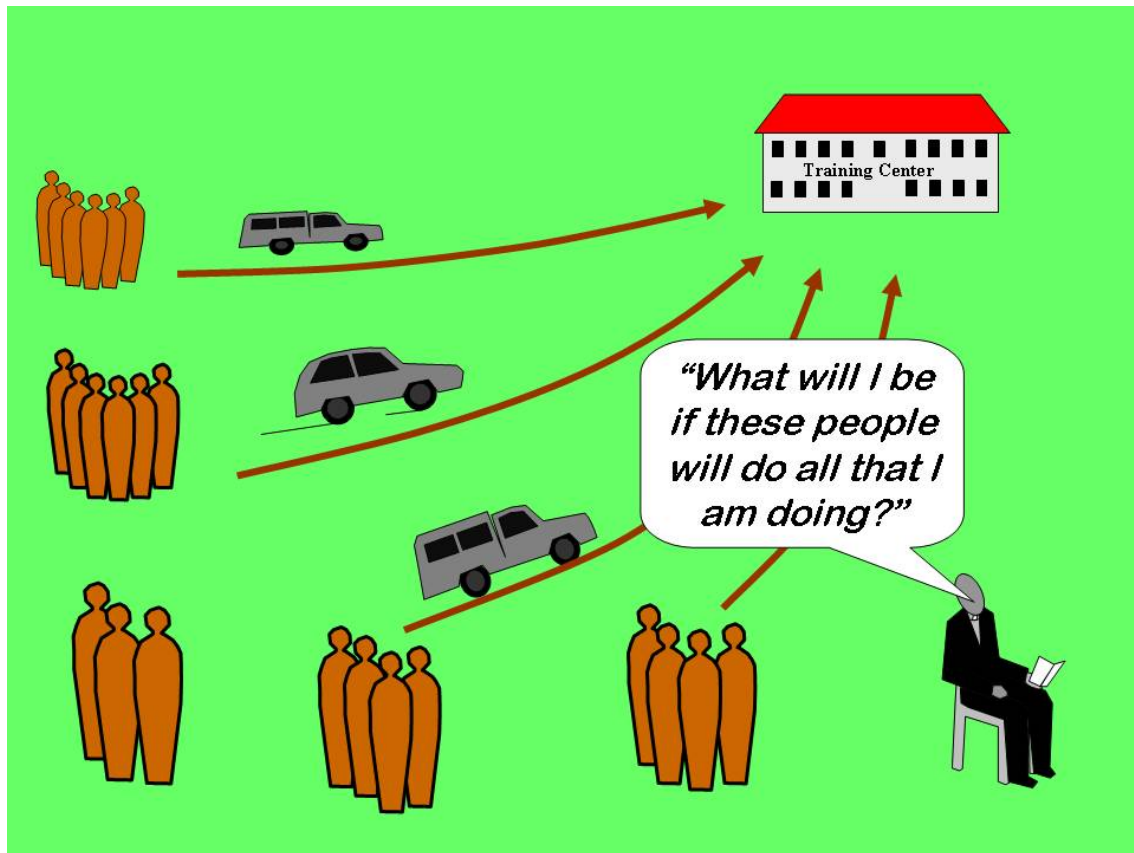
In our diagram we see priests who will not have such doubts. For many years they have been the formators for a great number of leaders of several communities. They know that they will still be needed even if Elders are ordained. The leaders, too, will also strongly confirm that they still need the priests, even after Elders have been ordained.

Before the bishop turns to Rome for the permission to ordain Elders, he will turn to his parishes, to his priests, to the many local leaders, and will ask them:

Have you established ongoing, unending formation of the leaders in your community?

Have the priests fully accepted this new role of being formators?

Priests who are not formators will feel insecure

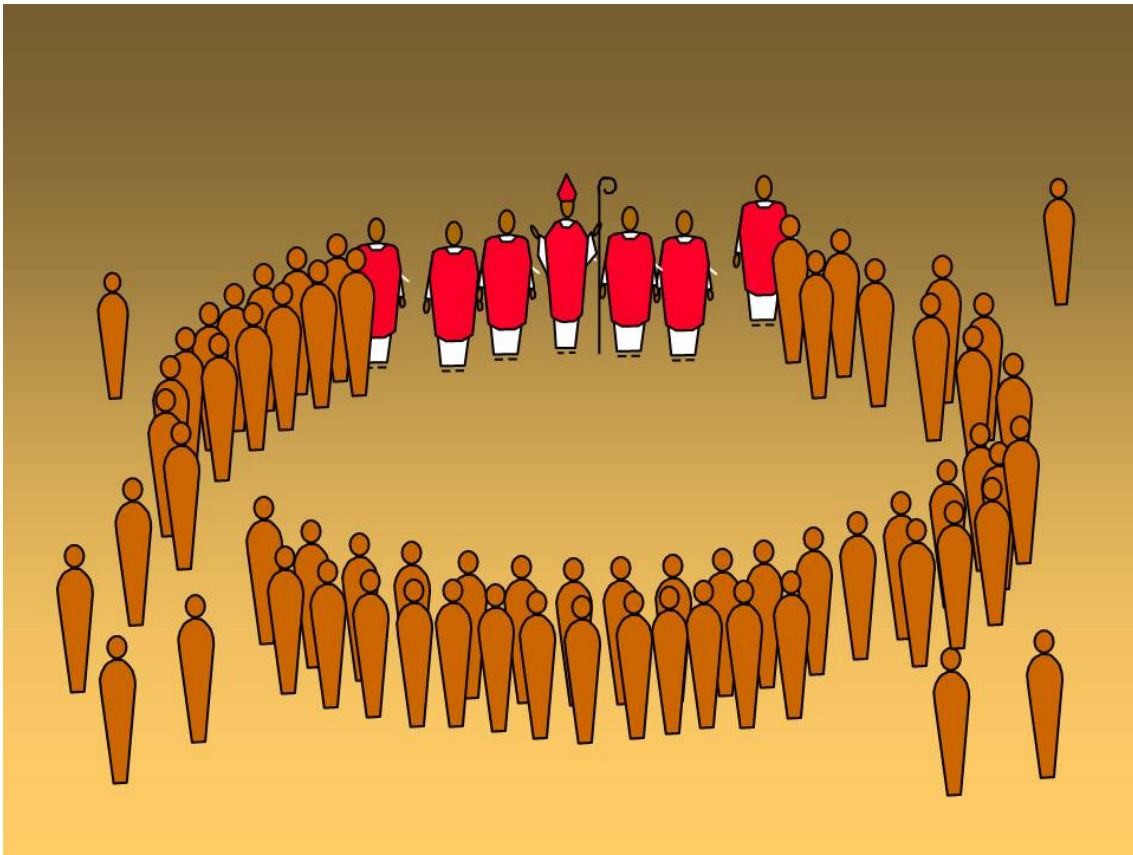


If the situation depicted above were quite common in a diocese, the Pope could not give it permission to ordain Elders. If a majority of the priests of the diocese would be unconcerned about the formation of local leaders, then the bishop would not even ask the Pope for the permission to ordain Elders, even if there is a severe shortage of priests. The reason is that the ordination of Elders would overcome the rarity of the sacraments, but it would make the priests insecure. The solution of one big problem would create another big one.

For this reason many dioceses have helped the priests to take on this new task of training and animating the leaders and the communities. Courses and meetings have been held for the priests, and suitable publications have been provided for this purpose.

Fortunately at least half of all dioceses do not experience this problem because the majority of their priests have been formator-priests for many years.

The bishop will try to build consensus



The diocese that is symbolically depicted above suffers from a severe shortage of priests. The bishop, many of his priests, and many of the laity have made up their mind that this problem can only be solved through the ordination of Elders.

The bishop and his co-workers are aware that this demanding project can only be undertaken if there is a broad consensus for it in the diocese. It will not be possible to achieve a complete consensus, but those who do not like the idea of ordaining Elders should at least tolerate it and should not oppose it in a polemic way.

Before Rome is asked for its consent the diocese must arrive at a general agreement in favour of such a move forward.

It has often been said that the Roman authorities are the only obstacle against the ordination of local leaders, but should we not first remove the obstacles in our own ranks?

How do you yourself see the situation?

- before approaching Rome for permission



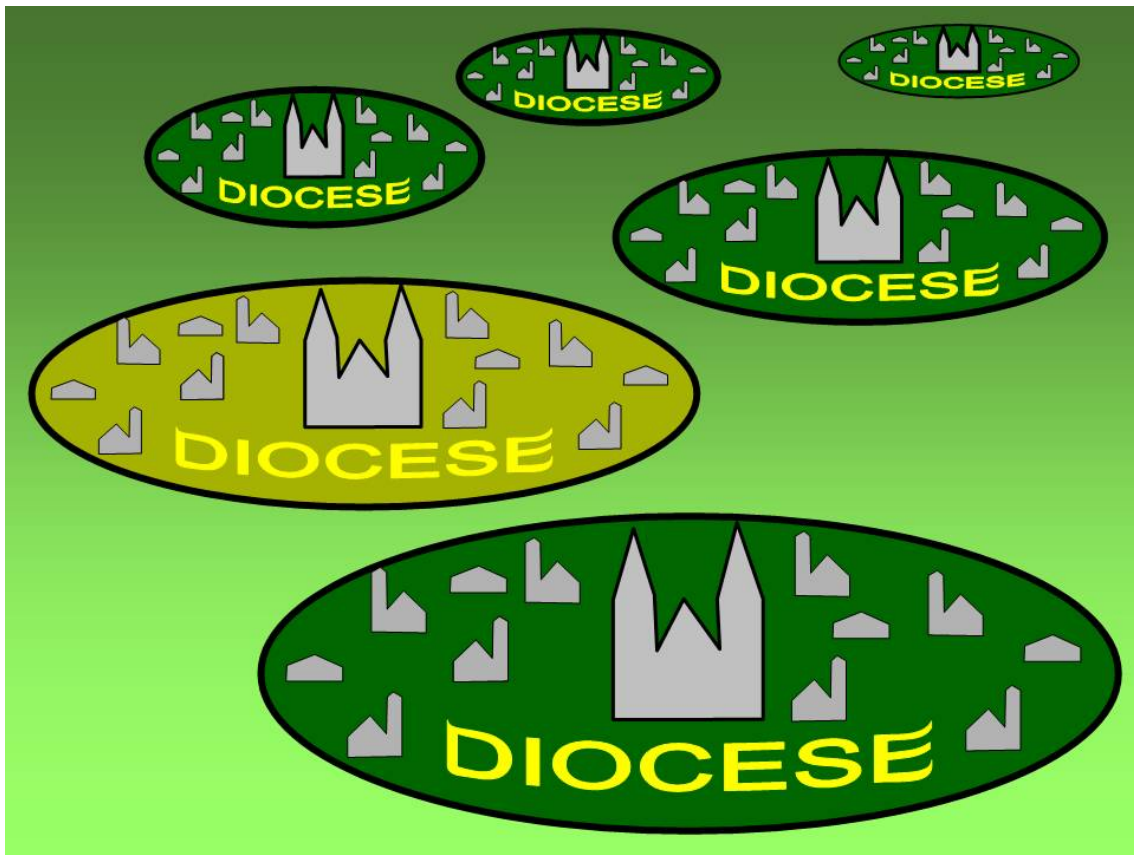
We cannot achieve complete unanimity in a diocese about this challenging project of ordaining teams of Elders. There will always remain a certain number of those who disagree.

What we can achieve is a readiness to work together. We can achieve some degree of uniformity in our pastoral methods, so that when one priest becomes ill, there are several others whom the bishop can ask to replace him.

We must expect that some unforeseen difficulties will arise. We must therefore prove beforehand that we have sufficient will to face such problems together. We must prove a readiness to come together when problems arise in order to find solutions.

What else must be achieved in a diocese before it can ask for permission to ordain teams of Elders?

It is a diocesan project -



Several times an unsuccessful request has been made to the Pope to permit the ordination of proven local leaders. The requests were refused because such ordinations would not only bring about a change for one diocese but would cause insurmountable problems for the whole Church. A proposal that is meant for the whole Church does not seem feasible at this stage.

The above pages present a proposal which avoids this obstacle. The proposed ordination of Teams of Elders is feasible because it is a diocesan project, not a universal one.

The establishment of Teams of Elders can remain confined to one diocese. It will not affect neighbouring dioceses that do not intend to take that step. It is therefore possible for a small number of dioceses to present to the Holy See an application⁴ for ordaining Teams of Elders, although the Universal Church has not yet made an overall decision on this matter.

In this way the most serious obstacle against ordaining Elders is removed, which is the fear that such a step would endanger the status of the present priests in the whole world. On the contrary: their role will be enhanced.⁵

⁴ The author has published a possible model of such an application in "Teams of Elders", Manila 2007.

⁵ More detailed explanations of why this danger can be avoided can be found in "Teams of Elders".

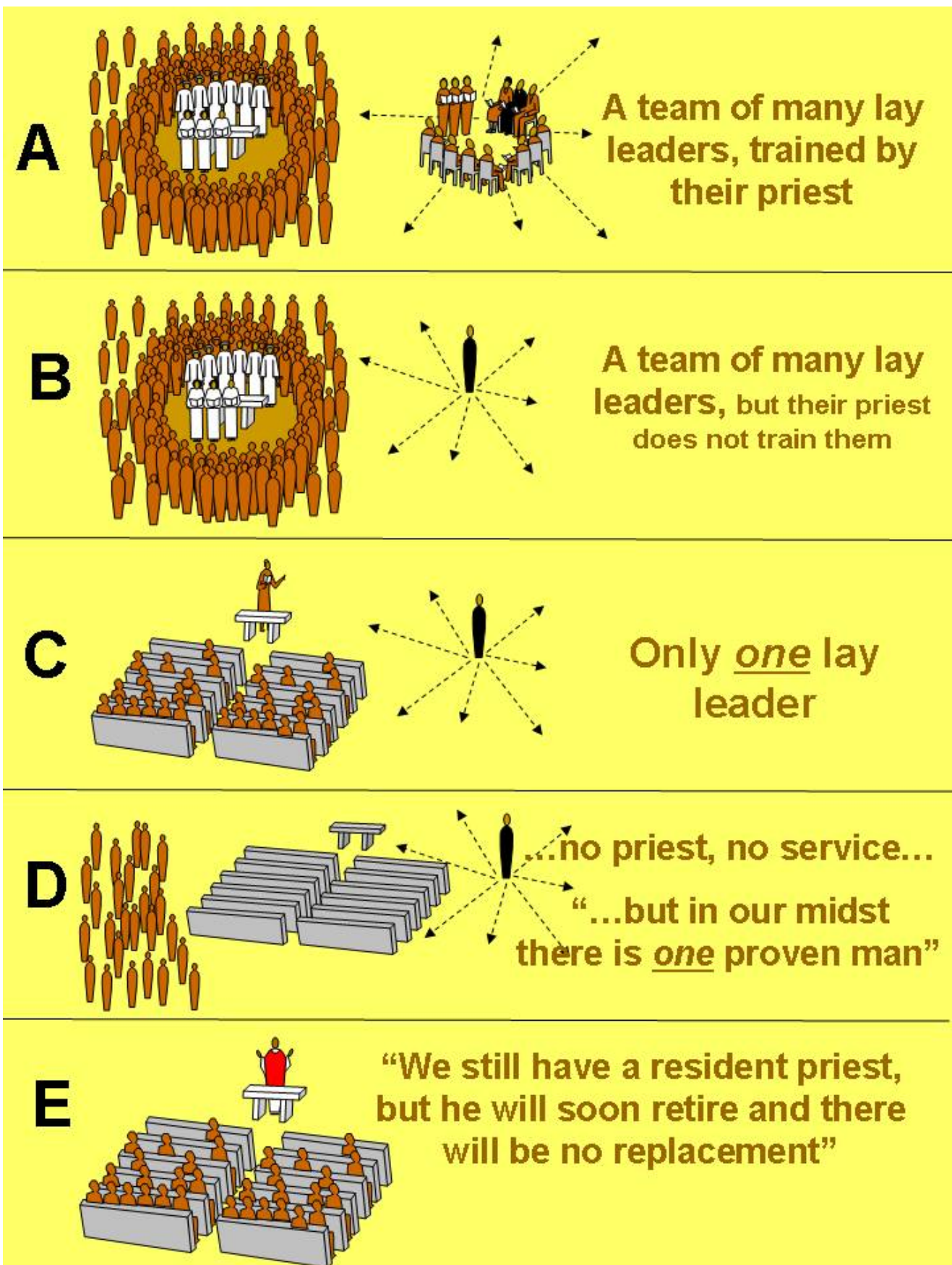
- not immediately a worldwide one



The situation of the Church differs greatly from country to country. While many countries suffer from a serious shortage of priests, a few others are happy to continue with the present form of priesthood and therefore are opposing any suggestion of a change. For this reason, it has proved impossible during the past decades to come to a world-wide agreement on the ordination of “Viri probati” (proven men). The bishops felt that a change in any part of the world would affect all the other parts.

The proposal to ordain Teams of Elders is different. It is not a world-wide change. If it is introduced in a few dioceses, the other dioceses are not affected. They can study the project and can make up their mind more easily as to whether this step could be taken in their areas as well.

To ordain Teams of Elders in a limited way will be a sign of hope. It will encourage the various other parts of the Church to search for the most suitable form of the ministerial priesthood for our times.



Think of your own diocese: Roughly what percentage of the parishes of your diocese are similar to any of the above diagrams A, B, C, D, or E?

What should be the next step to be taken in your diocese, in view of this situation?

Where does our Diocese stand?

In Congregation A there is good community spirit. The people have elected many of their members as leaders, men and women, (in this case nine leaders, all shown in liturgical garb). They conduct a Service of the Word when the priest cannot come. (Three leaders stand before the empty altar, leading the Service of the Word.)

When the priest visits the community, he not only leads the Eucharist but also conducts training sessions for all the leaders. In the picture he is shown sitting among the leaders for a training session. - If a team of leaders were ordained in this situation A, what would be the effect on the community, on the leaders, and on the priest?

Congregation B is equally active, with the same number of lay leaders, but the priest is not involved with the training of leaders. The leaders receive their training and formation in other ways, e.g., by attending courses in the city, or by learning from other leaders, completely independently from the priest. (One actually comes across very few congregations like B.)

How would the priest feel if the team of leaders in B were ordained?

In picture C there is not much community spirit, and therefore the people leave it to one good person to conduct a Sunday service when there is no priest. People hope that one day the Church would allow that proven leader to be ordained priest so that they could have the Eucharist every Sunday. In this situation C, what would be the effects on the people, on the ordained person, on the priest?

Congregation D does not come together on those Sundays when the priest cannot come to them. They stay at home and pray at home or travel to Mass in another parish. Among them there is at least one good, proven member who would be able to lead the community. People hope that one day the Church would allow one of their proven members to be ordained priest so that they could have the Eucharist every Sunday. In this situation D what would be the effects on the people, on the ordained person, on the priest?

Congregation E still has its own resident priest, but has been told that the priest will soon retire and cannot be replaced. What should the priest do before he leaves? What should the bishop do? What could the congregation be doing at this moment?

How communities and priests can welcome the ordination of Elders

After reading the above pages many will wonder: “Will the pope ever agree to this proposal to ordain teams of local leaders?”

The pope certainly has the last word in this question. We must remember that he will always do what is best for the Church. If he, one day, will realize that this proposal is the best one, he will give his consent.

We should, however, not concentrate so much on the question whether the pope will eventually agree to this proposal. We should rather ask ourselves whether the local communities will welcome this idea of ordaining teams of local leaders, and whether the priests of today will welcome it.

Will communities welcome the ordination of elders?

There are parishes where the laity already is taking an active part in living as a “self-ministering community” while other parishes are still passively provided by a resident priest.

Self-ministering communities

We can foresee that self-ministering communities⁶ will find it much easier to accept the ordination of elders. Why? Because for years already men and women of these parishes or sub-parishes have actively been involved in the task of the local Christian community. They have accepted their common responsibility of continuing Christ’s mission in their particular locality.

“Self-ministering” communities are the majority in many dioceses because of the shortage of priests. It will become for them a pastoral necessity to request the ordination of teams of elders.

Parishes which are still well provided with a priest

In major towns of a diocese there may be parishes which are still well provided with a priest and the sense of co-responsibility among the laity may not be well developed. It is natural that these parishes will find it difficult to agree having a team of ordained elders instead of their own priest. They may even oppose this idea. They may raise their hesitations more powerfully than the smaller communities that have no priest.

It will be important, however, to discuss the issue of ordained elders with such dissenting parishes as well. Firstly, it should be avoided that they oppose the bishop when he wants to introduce teams of ordained elders in certain parishes. Secondly they should discuss and discover the value of ordained elders, irrespective whether there is a shortage of priests or not.

⁶ See above, p.22-23

Will priests welcome the ordination of elders?

Priests know that there can be no Church without the Eucharist. The Church lives from the Eucharist says Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. However, the fact is that half of all Catholics of the world, on any given Sunday, are unable to take part in the Eucharist and can only have a Service of the Word instead. This situation is alarming as, without the Eucharist, a crippled and mutilated Church is developing. We are confident, therefore, that priests, in principle, will welcome the ordination of elders.

At the same time we also realize that there may be some reasons why priests will not like this idea of ordained elders. They may ask themselves:

“What will I myself be if thousands of local leaders are ordained?”

“Will I still be somebody special through my ordination when elders are ordained?”

“Are my long studies in the seminary not wasted if elders can be ordained after short weekend courses?”

“Will my celibacy not appear outdated when married men can be ordained?”

In spite of such opposing feelings and arguments, the pastoral anxiety will remain in the hearts of the priests:

“What about the many Catholic Christians who seldom can take part in the Eucharist? Something must happen! “

“I cannot invite people to the sacraments on one hand and on the other hand I block the development of a new possibility for priesthood. Something must happen. The ordination of elders might be a way which God shows us. We should give it a serious thought and even try to implement it.”

What will make it easier for priests to accept the ordination of elders?

There are a number of considerations that can help priests and communities to overcome their hesitation against the introduction of ordained elders.

1) The ordination of teams of elders will initially not affect ALL parishes but only a MINORITY of communities.

For example, a diocese consisting of one hundred parishes may start introducing the ordination of teams of elders in three or five parishes only⁷. These will be pilot parishes where people are best prepared for this step.

This means in practical terms that in the first ten or twenty years the great majority of the priests will not yet be directly affected. Therefore, they do not need to be afraid of “losing their identity as priest” as they have been accustomed to. Of course, they should nevertheless be involved in serious discussions about the ordination of elders in the diocese.

2) The priests of pioneer parishes will only change their role partly, not completely.⁸

Sudden change would make the priests and the communities uncomfortable, but there will be no complete, sudden change. The reason is that in a parish consisting

⁷ See the detailed example in F.Lobinger, Teams of Elders, 39-40

⁸ See above, p.57

of twenty communities in the first years only about ten may get a team of ordained leaders. Only in these will the priest work as formator-priest while in the other ten the priest will continue to celebrate the sacraments as before. His overall role will therefore not change completely.

Many communities will simply be too small for finding candidates for a team of elders and in these communities the full-time priest will have to continue working as before, for very many years to come. His accustomed work will therefore not end completely.

3) *The formation work expected of the priests is something rather easy and natural. Most priests are able to do it.*

The formator priest does not need to be a theological “specialist” . His seminary studies will be sufficient for him to use simple training programs on leaflets, not big volumes. He will not give complicated lectures but will assist the elders to go through simple formation programs together with him.

Experience has shown that most priests are able to do that. No special degree is needed for this type of formation. The more complicated training for elders will be done occasionally over weekends in a diocesan centre.

4) *Change will be slow. Priests and their communities will decide for themselves when to introduce ordained elders at each place.*

No priest will be forced to adopt the role of a “formator priest” as many parishes will remain without ordained elders for decades to come. It will also take a long period of time until all priests will gradually get used to the role of formator priests. Therefore priests who may at the moment hesitate to become formators for ordained elders do need to be worried. They can for their whole life continue in their present role if they so wish. “Slow change” is the principle.

5) *The decision to introduce ordained elders must be made after widest possible consultation in the diocese.*

The key role in the consultation process will be with the bishop and all his priests, but all communities and their leaders will also be involved. All must be well informed and must have the opportunity for free discussion.

6) *The role of the priest will become still more important.*⁹

Some may feel that a future “formator priest” will lose his central and unique position he today holds in every community. He may be afraid he will become a marginal figure and his own priesthood will be downgraded. In fact, the opposite is true. He will become responsible for several teams of ordained elders in different parishes. The bishop may even raise him to an “Episcopal Vicar” which means he will represent the bishop in this particular task of accompanying and overseeing the ordained elders in a cluster of neighbouring parishes.

The “formator priest” will assume a high spiritual image as his task as spiritual guide of ordained elders will require a very deep spirituality on his side.

Some communities may object to having ordained elders because they are afraid that the present high image of the priest is lowered when he becomes a formator priest. They should realize, however, that this new role of the formator priest is not lowering the role of the priest but will enhance it and make it still more important.

⁹ See above, p.43

7) *The essentials of our present priesthood will remain and we merely place a second form of priesthood next to the existing one.*¹⁰

By introducing formator priests, we are retaining our high ideal of priesthood at the same time. Why? Because formator priests will also in future receive a high level of training in seminaries, will live a celibate life for the sake of the gospel and will remain responsible for the life of the parishes, although in a different way as in the past.

Ordained elders are not a lower form of priests and we should not refer to them as “married priests”. They are priests who have accepted a different form of priesthood and are therefore called “elders”. They receive their vocation through their home community and remain within that community. They cannot be transferred.

In other words: Through the ordination of teams of elders we are putting a second, new form of presbyterate next to the existing form of priests. We need these two types of priesthood.

The full-time celibate priest upholds the high ideal of total availability for God. In our times we need the presence of such consecrated persons who give witness to the greatness of God through their life of total dedication.

At the same time we need a high number of ordained elders so that the Catholic Church will remain a “Church which lives from the Eucharist”.

The Second Vatican Council has stated that the first task of the priest is to proclaim the gospel. This remains so when priests assume the role of formators and animators of the ordained elders. Forming others in the faith and inspiring them with the message of God is an outstanding form of proclaiming the gospel.

Neighbouring dioceses that are not introducing the ordination of elders need not fear that they will be affected if the diocese next to them ordains elders. The reason is that the life commitment of the existing priests will continue, whether elders are ordained or not. The ordination of elders will always remain a diocesan undertaking, not a national or international project.

If the aspects presented above are observed, it can be foreseen that priests and communities, after some initial anxiety, will cooperate in introducing teams of ordained elders.

Conclusion

During the last fifty years we have entered a totally new phase of Church history. Until now the shortage of priests occurred only in some parts of the Church, especially in newly evangelized areas. In the past, it was correctly considered a transitory problem. Now we have reached a stage where that shortage is felt also in the old parts of the Church. Even in Europe and North America more and more parishes cannot have the Eucharist on Sunday.

Therefore it is more than urgent that new forms of the ordained ministry are found. Decades of hesitation have to end soon. The Church must go ahead in order to avoid further damage. Our Catholic Church is getting distorted at the moment because, as we have said already, half of all its communities are getting used to celebrate a Service of the Word instead of the Eucharist.

¹⁰ See above, p.42-45

We must follow the old-age principle of ORA ET LABORA, pray hard and work hard, in order to overcome the rarity of the sacraments. Part of the work which we have to do is to reflect together on new forms of priesthood and to invite priests and communities to cooperate wholeheartedly in this project.

We feel with St. Paul who told the Corinthians:

“God in his mercy has given us this work to do, and so we are not discouraged”
(2 Cor 4,1).

The parable of the visitor from Athens

The Christian community of Corinth once received a visitor who was a merchant from the nearby city of Athens. The visitor arrived on Saturday evening while the community was preparing for the Sunday Eucharist. He told them that he was one of the community leaders of the Christian community of Athens. He therefore took part in the preparations for the Sunday worship. The visitor gave his advice for making the service beautiful and his advice was so good that at the end the Christians asked him to lead the Eucharist the next morning. He did so, and he led the thanksgiving prayers so well that people were deeply moved. They asked him to come again and again to lead their Eucharist. He said that would easily be possible because his business activities would in any case in future bring him every week to Corinth which was not far from Athens.

When the visitor agreed to lead the Sunday Eucharist week by week from now on, the people hesitated for a moment and said to him they would have to meet on their own before they could give this task to him for all Sundays. They said they would give him their answer the following week.

When the visitor arrived the following Saturday, the Christians of Corinth asked him to sit down and listen to their reply to his offer to lead the Eucharist in Corinth week after week in future.

The Christians of Corinth said: “We have discussed your offer very carefully. We were at first inclined to accept your offer, because we realize how well you can lead our prayer of thanksgiving. You saw yourself how happy and how grateful we were when you led the prayers on that Sunday. Then we began to ask ourselves whether it would be good that you would lead the prayers week after week, every Sunday. We became afraid that our Sunday prayer of thanksgiving would no longer be our own if it would always be spoken by a visitor. Yes, the prayer would be said in a more beautiful way, in a more artistic way. But would the Lord not ask us: is this your own word of thanks? Is the prayer coming from Corinth or from Athens? Why are the leaders of Corinth not saying ‘thanks’ themselves? Is it really their own if it is not said by their own leaders?”

Some of us reminded us of the visit of the Apostle Paul. When he came to visit us and we asked him to baptize our catechumens, he refused. He said, “These are your catechumens, not mine. These catechumens join your community and therefore it is you who should baptize them. He said: “I did not come to baptize but to remind you of the Gospel. Let your own leaders baptize them.” And we did so.

We should therefore give the same answer to you today. It was wonderful that you led our Eucharist on that one Sunday, but on the other Sundays the Lord expects us ourselves, our own leaders, to lead the Eucharistic Prayers.”

