

Response to dissertation of Jorge Himitian in Caserta, Italy on the subject:
THE NATURE OF APOSTOLIC MINISTRY

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I have been privileged to consider Jorge Himitian a close friend and admired colleague for over forty five years. We met when I was 35 and a father of four, while he was single, living with his paternal family in the city of Buenos Aires. I have seen all five of his kids come into the world and grow into adulthood. They are all wonderful kids and deeply committed to the Lord.

We have ministered together all these years in many cities and in a large variety of countries. I believe I can say that I know him quite well. We have been in the home of each other on numerous occasions, and we have shared together significant triumphs and difficult trials. We have not always been in total agreement, but our love and appreciation for each other have overcome all the differences and bound us together for time and eternity.

My deep appreciation for Jorge is because I know him to be a man of absolute integrity, a man who is fair and gracious with all, but especially a man of deep devotion to the Lord. I say this because I think these characteristics are among the most important aspects of a Christian minister, and especially of all those involved in apostolic ministry. Jorge has keen spiritual perception, excellent judgment and a passion for the things of God. He chose many years ago to bear the cross of Christ and I am a witness that he knows how to handle losses and pain, injustice and mistreatment while continuing to trust his fate in the hands of an all-wise and all-loving God. The more time that passes, the more I appreciate friends and colleagues like Jorge.

There seems to be little to add to Jorge's excellent presentation on the nature of apostolic ministry, and nothing that I would take away. But perhaps I can add a little background for the whole matter and contribute something of an anecdotal nature.

Our mutual concern for apostolic ministry goes back nearly four decades, when in Buenos Aires we began to think and to talk about it with some reservation and trepidation. It was in one of our annual pastors' conferences in Argentina in 1982 that it fell my lot to open the subject of apostolic ministry and to lay out some basic guidelines to promote dialog among the pastors. After a brief review of a number of topics that we had studied together over several years of close relationships, I posed some questions for consideration concerning the need for a larger scope of ministry beyond that which is strictly evangelistic or pastoral. In order to provide further historical background, perhaps I should mention that we had become comfortable with some significant adjustments in our thinking on the following subjects:

- The need for active Christian discipleship and the formation of those who choose to follow Christ.
- Strong relationships between believers that go beyond occasional or regular meetings.
- The essential unity of the church, as the Lord's purpose for his people, wherever they are.
- A plurality of pastors in each congregation.
- Home groups that function both for outreach and for deeper relationships among believers.

In addition, we found ourselves pretty much “on the same page” in our understanding of a number of theological issues, such as:

- The lordship of Jesus Christ
- The gospel of the kingdom of God
- The objective of evangelism and redemption: that we become like Christ
- The meaning and importance of repentance, confession, baptism
- The responsibility of all believers to evangelize and make Christian disciples
- The formation and restoration of Christian families

Yet we were aware of situations that required that we move further ahead, and that eventually led us to embrace a level of ministry and spiritual oversight that exceeded what we had known to date. Here are some of the considerations that we laid out on that occasion (I remind you that this was in 1982):

1. There are situations in ministry that go beyond the normal or traditional bonds of pastoral relationships. How should we face a situation today similar to that which emerged in Antioch with the conversion of a large number of Gentiles? Should Jerusalem simply name a pastor for Antioch?
2. There are congregations that develop well with a good pastoral ministry. But to develop an integral and broad vision, to encourage sustained growth and coherence, they need a ministry that would open the congregation to a larger vision and realization that is beyond the scope of a local congregation or simple pastoral ministry.
3. A classical evangelistic approach often lacks effective coordination with an integral vision of the church. Since evangelistic ministry leads to an extension of the kingdom of God, there is a need for a larger focus to provide orientation beyond simple congregational growth.
4. When ministries emerge with gifts and graces, together with experience and maturity, for the formation of new leaders, the establishing of new points of outreach, and the orientation of communities facing difficulties, can we continue to limit our approach simply to pastoral ministry? Would it not be better to recognize those gifts and abilities and encourage those persons to dedicate themselves to tasks that contribute more significantly to extension?
5. Several questions arise concerning problems in the congregations:
 - When a difficulty arises in a congregation that exceeds the capacity or the authority of the local leaders, to whom should the brothers appeal for help?
 - What can be done to save a congregation from disgrace or division when the local leadership abandons their responsibility, or incurs in behavior that discredits them?
 - When several pastors in a city or a community are unable to reach agreement and there is threat of division, would it not help to involve a ministry beyond merely pastoral oversight to resolve the situation? Isn't it better to recognize those ministries before a crisis occurs?
 - There are situations bogged down in confusion, indisposition, traditionalism and stubbornness that grow and afflict an entire Christian community and that can hardly be resolved apart from wise oversight and a larger mandate with clarity concerning goals and methods of implementation. Clearly, a ministry of broader scope is needed.

6. As the testimony of spiritual renewal and refreshing extends to different parts of the country, sometimes we have seen that several pastors in a given area desire to experience spiritual renewal in their congregations. Would it not be well to promote greater companionship among them if a ministry of translocal characteristics could give them orientation conjointly?
7. In practice, many Christian groups have seen the need for a ministry that exceeds a strictly pastoral function, but then proceed to give that function a different name: bishop, superintendent, district missionary, etc. One of the problems of such a practice is that, because these titles often lack biblical authority, or because they combine responsibilities that are not biblically related, we lack Scriptural precedence to define functions and correct abuses. In addition, this practice allows for the creation of titles that perpetuate themselves and are sometimes occupied by persons who do not have the grace necessary or a vital relationship with the churches and the pastors, and they wind up with an institutional function (product of an organization rather than organism).
8. When the need arises to recognize new pastors that have emerged in a congregation, what are the proper ministries that are authorized to grant them public recognition?

CURRENT NEED OF THE CHURCH

One of the difficulties we face when we consider the biblical framework of apostolic ministry in relation to the social context is the great difference that exists between our context and that of the first Christian century. Western society in general is characterized by a pseudo-Christian posture, not completely pagan as in those times.

In the midst of this social framework, there are Christian churches and congregations—both evangelical and Catholic—that, broadly speaking, represent a type of social island, where the language and the ideology are in marked contrast with the surrounding society, and upon which they make little impact. Many of these people consider themselves traditional Christians, either because they were baptized as babies or because they attend mass or worship service from time to time.

In that sense, our societies are not like the general picture faced by the early Christians. For example, consider some of the characteristics that were common:

- Slavery was the style of life of a very large percentage of human beings.
- Pagan temples with degrading and immoral practices were attended by large numbers of people.
- Entire nations lived under the yoke of other empires, to which they paid tribute.
- The only religion based on a divine revelation—that of the Hebrews—was largely neutralized and limited to persons of that race.
- Few people could read or write.
- There were few grand and noble ideas or philosophies to inspire the masses.
- The social classes were relatively fixed with very little mobility between the classes.

Obviously, apostolic ministry in a context with those characteristics operated in a different way than the style that would characterize it in our social context. If the principal purpose of apostolic ministry is to establish the church in the social context, penetrate the society with the message of Christ, present to men a viable alternative through a community that practices the teachings of Christ, then it is vital to interpret the focus of such ministry in practical and

understandable terms for those who live in the social context. The apostolic task cannot be isolated from the worldly context.

I think that part of the problem with unfruitful evangelistic methods that fail to adapt to our context is the lack of an integral apostolic vision. The evangelistic task must be incorporated and integrated with the apostolic vision. Biblically, the first function—both in priority and in chronology—is the apostolic function. Christ, as apostle, evangelized, healed, taught and made disciples. Of these he chose some to groom as his apostles. Then they, as apostles, introduced the word of Christ and the kingdom of God into their context—first among the Jews and later among the Gentiles—and then taught the disciples and formed Christian communities.

The work was done with grace and anointing. With liberty and authority they laid the foundation of the church, determined the general guidelines for the communities and faced the varying situations that were presented. It was an enormous task. Without this action, the disciples could hardly have confronted their society with boldness and maintained coherence in their ranks.

But without an apostolic ministry that translates the project into action, correcting errors, laying foundations and forming communities, we can hardly accomplish a significant penetration of the social context. And all this must be done with a singular purpose, clarity and with an effective methodology.

Another element of great importance is the unity and universality of the apostolic vision. This vision unifies his work and unites the Christian communities. Without an apostolic vision, the churches tend to distance themselves from each other and dedicate their energies according to the particular grace and concern of their leaders. The broad and singular vision of the apostle assures that the different congregations are maintained in close relationship and helps them to consider their particular work as complementary to each other rather than give way to a competitive attitude.

OUR EXPERIENCE IN ARGENTINA

How did we make the necessary adjustments? We encouraged conversation and provided basic orientation, especially among the pastors more closely associated with us. In time, the concepts began to mature and we began to discern more clearly which of the ministers were having positive results in their outreach to others, and especially to other communities. Certain leaders among us have been largely recognized by most from the early days of our relationships, and over the years that recognition has become almost universal.

From the first we avoided the use of the title apostle with reference to individuals, realizing that time was needed to overcome long-standing traditions. We preferred to use the more general term apostolic ministry in a generic sense and usually with reference to more than one individual. Today I think it is proper to say that there is little reticence in regard to the use of the term apostle, but we avoid the excessive use of it in any case. Sometimes we simply use a term like “the leading brothers”, or something similar.