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The Role of Moderator

WILLIAM J. DUHIGG, M.D.

As a layman and member of a Catholic Physicians' Guild, it is rather presumptive of me to pursue this subject. It is one, however, about which I have thought and to some extent researched since joining the group.

The concept of a moderator has undergone change in my mind during a period of twenty-five years. My first awareness of the role of a moderator was related to the Catholic high school Sodality, stamp club, band and other student organizations. These were varied in their needs but common to all, these directors did stifle initiative. There were exceptions but for the most part they were patronizing fathers who would appear to suffer great anguish if one of their sons should make a mistake or reveal imperfections. This resulted in the attitude that we were in effect to be led by the moderator. This role resulted in the development of a body of Catholic educated who long to lead but fail to do so for fear of misleading.

I had the good fortune of Catholic college education but nearly the same misfortune in activities of organization and leadership—the major concern being, "What does Father think?" I say *nearly* the same because there were unique exceptions wherein the moderator almost encouraged us to make our own mistakes.

In medical school, I had opportunity to observe another type of moderator who did not have the aura of religion and then realized that this was an important factor. Even among the Catholic educated, there was more tendency to challenge debate and develop ideas. It became apparent that much of my idea of the suppression of initiative was not related as much to the priest's attitude as it was to my inhibition. It had, of course, been generally taught at home and school that one did not challenge debate or develop ideas with priests. This is, of course, false. I am certain priests deplore this attitude and some sisters would point out the folly of such reasoning.

Some of the moderators along the way have, because of their patronizing attitude, taken nearly complete control of groups and then wondered why the organizations were failing. By the same token the fault was not all theirs, for the timidity of leading in the presence of a leader was compounded by the director being a spiritual father. I have seen intelligent thoughtful Catholic men retreat from discussion of subjects on which they were expert, in the presence of a priest. If the priest expresses a contrary opinion, the matter is dropped and later, in post-meeting discourse, when he is not present, Father is labeled a dog-

matic arch conservative or a wild-eyed liberal, as the case may be.

The priest-moderator, over the years, must of necessity grow weary of this lack of stimulus. It is even conceivable that he reinforces false conclusions with the rationalization that his premises have been accepted. This is true of all who are involved in teaching. Many a false premise has been, and is being, accepted because of the aura of expertness of the proposer. When these false premises are applied, error is compounded. A priest-moderator, in whose presence I could not lead because his great knowledge and virtue inspire me at a distance but blind me at close hand, solved this problem. I asked him about this confrontation of the knowledgeable layman and the seemingly dogmatic priest. He said, "If you have truth, you are Christ and are obliged to speak it." This must be the attitude of the Catholic layman in the new spirit of the Church. The real challenge is in the phrase, "If you have the truth," for to speak without it is to be a fool. If well informed, you should speak humbly but firmly.

But what of the role of the moderator? How does a priest develop this role, especially with the handicap of working with the Catholic educated layman? There are books and pamphlets written on the role of the moderator. Many have valuable suggestions and, though not specifically designed for priest-moderators, would make excellent primers. These would be of value chiefly for the methods of

"inspiring to leadership" and directing without dominating.

For the Catholic priest-moderator, this is ably expanded to include his supernatural aims by the recommendations of the Council and the Pope. From the August 3, 1965 Documentary Service, National Catholic Welfare Council News Service Bulletin, is taken the Papal discussion of this very problem. The remarks of Pope Paul VI are directed to the priest-moderators of Italian Catholic Action groups. "Well: You are not pastors, you are not teachers, you are not chaplains, nor canons, nor curials; you are assistants, not only as bishops' delegates for the entire diocese and for the entire chain of Catholic Action organization, and works, but also in charge of a special ministry within the different diocesan branches of Catholic Action itself." The paper then quotes from the Council text *Lumen Gentium*, "Let sacred pastors recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the layman in the Church. Let them willingly make use of his prudent advice. Let them confidently assign duties to him in the service of the Church, allowing him freedom and room for action. Further, let them encourage the layman so that he may undertake tasks on his own initiative. Attentively in Christ, let them consider with fatherly love, the projects, suggestions, and desires proposed by the laity. Furthermore, let pastors respectfully acknowledge that just freedom which belongs to everyone in this earthly city."

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The Holy Father then asks "What is there left to do for the priest who occupies himself with Catholic Action, now that the laity is declared adult and is authorized to act on its own initiative. At one time, and perhaps even today, the assistant was everything in an organization; he presided, he offered suggestions, he was in command, he carried things out, he made payments. Now what is there left for him to do?" Pope Paul enumerates the things he thinks the moderator should do:

1. Form the laity—"Particularly for what refers to the Catechesis" that is, knowledge of the doctrine of the Church. For what refers to prayer, worship, sacramental life, spiritual direction, supernatural life and to a perception of the Church.
2. Vigilance over the rectitude of the policies in ideas as well as activities.
3. Maintaining the relationship between organized Catholic laymen and the Ecclesiastical authority.

Concerning this last duty, he states — "On the one hand, our laymen place themselves at the service of the Ecclesiastical authority; on the other hand, we must not let this filial relationship weigh as a vexatious game."

Pope Paul then goes on to describe the form of the authority of the Church as a synthesis of command and service. Throughout the discussion, the Pope stresses the word "filial" to describe the pre-

scribed attitude of the layman to the authority of the Church, but quotes from the Council Decree on the apostolate of the laity in which the prescribed attitude of the bishops, pastors, and priests toward the laity should be fraternal. . . . "They should work fraternally with the laity in and for the Church and take special care of the lay persons engaged in apostolic works. . . . By virtue of the mission they receive from the hierarchy, those who are engaged in this ministry represent the hierarchy by their pastoral activity.

Always adhering faithfully to the spirit and teaching of the Church, they should devote themselves to nourishing the spiritual life and an apostolic mentality in the Catholic societies entrusted to them; they should contribute their wise council to the apostolic activity of these associations and promote their undertakings. Through continuous dialogue with the laity, these priests should carefully search for the forms which make apostolic activity more fruitful. They should promote the spirit of the unity within the association as well as between it and others."

His Holiness concludes by referring to these moderators as "beloved brothers and sons." *Filial* pertains to the relationship of parent to son or daughter, and *fraternal* as the relationship between brethren. The Pope describes himself as brother and father and from his description of the attitude he prescribes for the moderator-priest, they too must fulfill this dual role.

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This is indeed a difficult role and it is necessary for the layman to comprehend the full meaning of this duality in order to fully develop, with the priest-moderator, the potential of the organization. With a brother we can challenge debate and develop ideas. When the matter comes to extend in influence, outside the family, or when the ideas are in error, then a father must step in to moderate, to correct, or to suppress with wisdom. There are times when a father should relate to son or daughter as a brother. This need is less in larger families where the relationship of brother is well established; but, still, with the older more responsible sons, some brotherly rapport with the father is advantageous to both. This fraternal attitude is recommended by the church for

bishops, pastors and priests in their relationship to the laity.

What then should be the attitude of the layman to the priest-moderator? We should, I think, see him as brother in all matters save authority, whence he becomes a father. We should be able to open our hearts to him as we would a brother without the anxiety that may accompany the presentation of an idea of challenge to a father. When he declares that our concepts are wrong or our energies misdirected, we should accept his will. If he is fulfilling his role, he will assert his authority only after a brotherly dialogue and fatherly definition.

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