

Collaboration of Priests and Bishops in the Presbyterium of the Early Church

Bodija Journal
Vol. 14 (2024): 97-115

Joseph Paul Iyamah
SS Peter & Paul Institute of Theology
Bodija, Ibadan
ekhaigbaijp@ssppibadan.edu.ng

Abstract

The theological reality of the *presbyterium* has profound significance when we examine its origin and use from the New Testament and its theological and juridical evolution in time leading to the Second Vatican Council. Since the theme of this work relates to collaboration between bishops and their priests, we will examine the topic from a collegial and ministerial perspective. Our consideration in this paper is greatly limited by the fact that it only attempts an overview of the situation, and secondly, it focuses only on some selected Fathers who were specifically cited in the conciliar documents. The question before us in this regard is the nature and understanding of the subject of cooperation between the bishop and the *presbyterium* before the Second Vatican Council, since the Council is credited with having rediscovered the institution of the *presbyterium* and strengthened the cooperation between bishops and their priests. For this we attempt to look at the scriptures and early Christian communities for collaboration in the ecclesiastical ministry of the Church. Though there is difficulty in making a definitive evolution that occurred within the sacred ministry, we hope we can obtain essential elements relating to the primitive organization of the Church from the Sacred Scriptures and the ancient patristic texts.

Keywords: Presbyterium, Bishops, Priests, Collaboration, Fathers, Church.

1. Introduction

The term *presbyterium* can be understood from two views. The first is the Judaic source where, as the senate, it is the highest authority in Jerusalem. The other is in the New Testament where the term takes on a Christian connotation as the council of elders, having a special responsibility – that of laying on of hands on new ministers to whom is also conferred a corresponding charism in relation to their roles (1 Tim 4:14).¹ The significance of the practice is that in the handing on of authority from teacher to pupil lies the preservation of an unbroken succession.²

In Greek, the term *presbyteroi* is generally related with *présbus*, an elder who is superior by reason of age; its usage in the LXX indicates *zqenîm* which signifies the elders who in various ways exercise authority over the people of Israel in the different moments of their history.³ In this regard, the original context of presbyters, whose role and understanding is linked to the community, presupposes an ecclesiology of communion. Later on *presbyteros* took on a technical meaning of all those who had the duty of governing the community. They formed a college, and as demonstrated in the New Testament, they played a very important role in the installation of Timothy, accomplished by the laying on

¹ Cf. Joseph Lécuyer, “Le presbyterium,” in Yves Congar and Jean Frisque, ed., *Vatican II Les Pretres: Formation Ministere et Vie* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1968), 276. See also Joseph Lécuyer, *Le Sacerdote dans le mystère du Christ*, (Paris: Le Cerf, 1957), 345-349; C. Drury, “The Pastoral Epistles,” in John Barton and John Muddiman, ed., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1226. This author underlines the importance of the laying on of hands as “a means of transferring the power of the Spirit from one person to another for teaching and healing. It was transference of authority, a commissioning or consecration to a particular office or task”.

² Cf. Hans-Hartmut Schroeder, “1 Timothy,” in William R. Farmer, ed., *The International Bible Commentary*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 1742.

³ Cf. Stefano Romanello, “La rilettura dei dati del Nuovo Testamento relativa a prebiteri ed episcopi,” in Marino Qualizza, ed., *Il Ministero ordinate: Nodi Teologici e Prassi ecclesiali* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2004), 113.

of hands.⁴

The Old Testament reference in Dan 13:50 of the term *presbyterion* signified an elderly dignity accorded young Daniel to stand and speak in the council of the *presbyteroi*, those who were superior by reason of age, elders who by implication were presumed to be wiser. The usage of the term as a college of elders is more obvious in the New Testament writings (Luke 22:66; Act 22:5; 1 Tim 4:14).⁵ Nonetheless, in the Israel of the Old Testament as in the Judaism of the New, the *presbyteros* (elders) played an important and basic role both in the local community and in the life of the people as a whole.⁶ Though duties of these presbyters were given as pastors, guides, announcers of the doctrine, those who pray for the sick, lay on hands, exhort and oversee the community; the structure of a hierarchical ministry is not apparent, save for the fact that in each local Church there existed a college of *presbyteroi* and *episcopoi* whose function was also difficult to determine.⁷

There is, however, uncertainty whether the term “presbyter” translates into our modern day “bishop” or “priest”. Since at Ephesus, for instance, when Paul sent for the presbyters of the community, they are seen as a body of presbyter-*episcopoi* appointed by the Holy Spirit to shepherd the Church of God (Acts 20:28), thus on their pastoral service for the Church.⁸ What this portrays is that there was probably interchangeability in the use of

⁴ Cf. Giovanni Frausini, *Il presbiterio: Non è bene che il vescovo sia solo*, (Assisi: Cittadella, 2007), 130-131.

⁵ The Lucan usage of the term *presbyterion* in Lk 22:66 signifies the council of elders in Jerusalem around the high priest. Its use in Acts 22:5 to whom Paul made his appeal, has the same significance as Luke. It is only in 1Tm 4:14 that the term *presbyterion* now assumes a Christian import for the first time as an organ of leadership in the Christian community already bestowed with the power of ordaining. Cf. Frausini, *Il presbiterio*, 124.

⁶ Cf. Karl Herman Schelkle, “Ministry and Minister in the New Testament Church,” *Concilium* 5 (1969): 8; Luigi Padovese, *I sacerdoti dei primi secoli: Testimonianze dei Padri sui Ministri ordinati* (Milano: Piemme, 1992), 20.

⁷ Cf. F. Oliva, *Il Presbyterium*, 12.

⁸ Cf. Jacques Schlosser, “The ministry of the Episkope”, 94.

these terms or that a strict bond existed between the two roles.⁹ What is, however, clear from this period is that the collegial direction of the community and the guidance of authentic teaching rested on the presbyters-bishops.¹⁰

2. Pastoral Ministry in the Apostolic Era

At this early stage of the New Testament, the exercise of responsibility in the local church was mostly through the presbyteral college to whom the direction of the faithful was entrusted.¹¹ In the New Testament Church, Timothy and Titus established colleges of presbyters to assist in the supervision of the Church. These presbyters, like Timothy and Titus appointed by the Apostles, shared in the responsibilities of the apostles. Thus the guidance of the local Christian community was done through shared responsibility. In the New Testament primitive Jerusalem community, church organization was around the apostles, but they also shared responsibility with other persons.¹² According to the tradition attested to in the Acts of the Apostles, a council of elders under the leadership of James emerged in what was beginning to be a more or less definite structure of ministry in Jerusalem. The *presbyteroi* had a unique role similar to the elders of Israel acting as trustees and administrators in every community. In the Christian community, the institution assumed a new meaning, particularly at the Council of Jerusalem, where the college of presbyters was composed of leaders who govern the new society now separated from the old. Thus the group of elders derived from the Jewish synagogue organization, and modelled after the Jewish Sanhedrin acted as the executive or administrative pivot of the local Church.¹³

⁹ Cf. Frausini, *Il presbiterio*, 131; Joseph Coppens, "La Chiesa e l'origine delle strutture ministeriali", 226.

¹⁰ Cf. Padovese, *I sacerdoti dei primi secoli*, 22.

¹¹ Cf. Jean Colson, *L'organisation ecclésiastique*, 61, 63-64, 68-69; Coppens, "La Chiesa", 226.

¹² In Acts 6, we have the account of the appointment of the seven for the service at table.

¹³ Cf. Kenneth E. Kirk, "The Apostolic Ministry", 7-14; Gregory Dix, "The Ministry in the Early Church", 228-230; Mauro Orsatti, "La figura emergente dell'*episcopo*", 365.

They acted as judges, and alongside the apostles resolved controversies about the obligation and observance of the Law, issues of circumcision, and even acted as conciliators and mediators in the community.¹⁴ They were involved in matters of doctrine and discipline (Acts 15:2-24; 16:4). The importance of the college is that it completed the leadership structure of the new community even outside Jerusalem (Acts 14:23; 20:17), but it was in an analogous imitation of the council of elders of the Israelites.¹⁵ The work they were doing was described as *diakonia*, which is service.

3. *Presbyterium* in the Thoughts of some Fathers of the Church

The etymology of the term “presbytery” is of Greek root meaning the council of elders; its Hebrew equivalent is *synedrion*.¹⁶ This was the understanding it assumed in the New Testament but with a new meaning in 1 Tm. 4:14, which is the laying on of hands. When Paul admonished Timothy about the laying on of hands by the presbytery, it underlined the basis for inferring that the presbytery carried out a role in the transmission of the apostolic mission.¹⁷ By this imposition of hands, it means that the *presbyterium* exercised sacred powers in the discharge of their ministry.¹⁸ The consequence of the laying on of hands is that it enables and obligates the recipient to leadership and teaching in the community, and the community in turn is required to listen to the officeholder, his preaching and obey his directions.¹⁹

The characteristics of the presbytery as a collective body is present both in the Judeo-Christian and Hellenistic covert communities, which explains the fact that the concept was not totally new since the presbytery as a group of elders of the people,

¹⁴ Cf. Giuseppe d’Ercole, “The Presbyteral Colleges”, 12; David Power, *Ministers of Christ and His Church*, 21.

¹⁵ Cf. d’Ercole, “The Presbyteral Colleges”, 17, note 7.

¹⁶ Cf. Frausini, *Il presbiterio*, 115.

¹⁷ Cf. Arturo Cattaneo, *Il presbiterio della Chiesa particolare*, 12.

¹⁸ Cf. d’Ercole, “The Presbyteral Colleges”, 13.

¹⁹ Cf. Schroeder, “1 Timothy”, 1742.

carrying out the task assigned it by the people, was already well known in the Egyptian tradition, in Asia Minor and in Old Testament.²⁰

Let us now look at *presbyterium* in the conception of some early Fathers as it relates to collaboration and co-responsibility in the local Church.

3.1 *Clement of Rome*

The First Letter of Clement of Rome (c. 96 A.D.) sent to the Church of Corinth exhorts the community to respect the presbyters: “let us respect those who rule over us, let us honour the aged.”²¹ In using the term “ruler” or “head” for the presbyters, Clement distinctly distinguishes these presbyters-elders as leaders to be honoured²² not only in life but also even after they have accomplished their leadership task.²³ This is so because Clement believes that the leadership and governing function of these presbyters in the community has apostolic origin, hence it is a divinely established ordinance.²⁴

In the bid to reassert the importance of the presbytery and prevent possible rebellion against the college, Clement reprimands the Christians of Corinth for unfairly ousting and revolting against its presbyters: “It is a shameful report, beloved, extremely shameful, [...] the steadfast and ancient church of the Corinthians is being disloyal to the presbyters.”²⁵ This was the central reason for this letter: the revolt against the presbytery of an ancient and solid Church. The admonition that follows was emphatic of the leadership of the presbyters, “let the flock of Christ have peace

²⁰ Cf. T. Pieronek, “Natura e funzioni del Consiglio Presbiterale”, 695, J. Colson, “Le presbyterium”, 544-545; G. D’Ercole, “The Presbyteral Colleges”, 16.

²¹ Clement of Rome I Cor. 21:6. Translations of Clement work are taken from, K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, I. I Clement; II Clement; Ignatius; Polycarp; Didache; Barnabas, London 1965.

²² Cf. E. Peretto, *Clemente Romano. Lettera ai Corinzi*, 164.

²³ Clement of Rome I Cor. 44, 5.

²⁴ Clement of Rome I Cor. 44, 2-3.

²⁵ Clement of Rome I Cor. 47, 6; See also R. Trevijano, *Patrología*, 21.

with the presbyters set over it;”²⁶ “You, therefore, who laid the foundation of the sedition, submit to the presbyters, and receive the correction of repentance, bending the knees of your heart.”²⁷ The demand of submission to the presbyters is because Clement believes they are ultimately appointed by Christ through apostolic succession. He thus insists on the presbyteral office, just as it was in Rome.²⁸

In his letters, however, the distinction between bishops and presbyters is not very clear, as leaders of the local communities were indiscriminately called bishops and presbyters.²⁹ For Clement, however, the task of these leaders is mostly liturgical, but it also involves the direction of the community. Clement clearly believes that the organization of the Church is a divine ordinance.

3.2 *Ignatius of Antioch*

A clearer distinction of the ministry enumerated in the form of three ministries and having the monarchical episcopate as the leader of the local Christian community began with Ignatius. In fact, in the writings of Ignatius the position of the bishop has become enhanced, with the deacons as his administrative assistants, while the council of presbyters remains prominent as his personal advisors.³⁰

The *presbyterium* consists of all the presbyters of a particular Church, who we may say are inferior ministers to the bishop, (superior to the deacons) that participate in the official teaching, public cult and in the governance of the local Christian community.³¹ It is, therefore, to Ignatius that we owe the idea of the *presbyterium* as a collegial entity.³² In Ignatius the *presbyterium*

²⁶ Clement of Rome I Cor. 54, 2.

²⁷ Clement of Rome I Cor. 57, 1.

²⁸ Cf. Clement of Rome I, Cor. 42-44.

²⁹ Cf. Power, *Ministers of Christ and his Church*, 42.

³⁰ According to Ignatius the bishops hold their position as rulers of local churches “by the will of God” (*Ad Eph.* 3), and those who are his associates are “in union with God, Christ and the ordinances of the apostles” (*Ad Trall.* 7).

³¹ Cf. J. Lécuyer, “Le presbyterium”, 276.

³² Cf. F. Haarsma, “The presbyterium”, 32.

has a defined function and precise characteristics within the local Church with a technical undertone; so also the role of the bishop who now assumes leadership over the presbyterate. This is why the writings of Ignatius are some of the principal sources for the understanding of the presbyteral college.³³ Notable in Ignatius, also, is the fact that he was the first to expound the ministerial structure of bishop, presbyters and deacons.³⁴

It is within the ecclesiological conception of Ignatius that the theological import of the *presbyterium* and co-responsibility is expressed, as Ignatius essentially linked the concept of the *presbyterium* with the idea of the Church. The necessity of collaborating in the ministry arises from the mystery of unity through which the Christian faithful are united with Christ and among themselves, in the way that Christ is united with the Father. The harmony of the presbytery with the bishop becomes the fundamental source of the unity of the whole Christian community.³⁵ This union is accomplished through the Eucharist, the visible sign of the one Church of Christ, thus becoming also a sacrament of unity.³⁶ Ignatius, therefore, taught that in the Eucharistic liturgy, the full union of Christians with Christ is achieved.³⁷

However, without this hierarchy of the bishop, the presbyters and the deacons, Ignatius firmly declares that there is no Church;³⁸ and within the hierarchy, Ignatius underlines the primacy of the bishop in the direction of the Church along with the important

³³ Cf. G. Frausini, *Il presbiterio*, 116; G. D'Ercole, "The Presbyteral Colleges", 14.

³⁴ Though Ignatius mostly talks about the *presbyterium* as consisting of the bishop and priests, sometimes he includes the deacons. Cf. J. Lécuyer, "Le presbyterium", 276-277.

³⁵ Cfr. Ignatius, *Rom.* 9, 1. On this theme see also R. Trevijano, *Patrología*, 35-38.

³⁶ Cf. Ignatius, *Ad Magn.* 7, 2; *Ad Philad.* 4, 1.

³⁷ Cf. G. Frausini, *Il presbiterio*, 137; D. Borobio, *Eucaristía*, 53-54.

³⁸ Cf. Ignatius, *Ad Trall.* 3, 1. The Ignatian expression, "without the bishop, the presbytery and the deacons there is no Church", demonstrate that the tripartite configuration of ecclesiastical ministry was seen as part of the essential structure of the Church. Cf. F. Oliva, *Il presbyterium*, 23.

ministry of the presbyters.³⁹

Outside the liturgy, he also conceives of unity in a hierarchical organisation in which the office of the bishop is the visible symbol of unity and orthodoxy of faith, and acknowledges the body of elders at the same time as a college together with whom the bishop governs and directs the Church. Ignatius nonetheless makes the bishop a distinct figure from the presbyters, which is quite a different shift from the New Testament understanding. The extent to which the two religious and cultural traditions (presbyteral and episcopal) influenced Ignatius in forming his new image of the *presbyterium* in his letters is not certain.⁴⁰

Ignatius clearly underlines in his letters the fact that the Christian community is organised through collaborative unity by its ministers that includes the bishop, presbyters and deacons. Believing that Christianity is a covenant of unity and love, Ignatius sees the principle of collaboration between bishops and priests through the exercise of a united authority, as a fundamental source of the unity for the Christian community in itself and with God.⁴¹ It is not only in the bishop that the community is present, but it is also present in the presbyters and deacons. Ignatius points to the unity between the bishop and presbyters as a beautifully woven spiritual wreath.⁴²

Regarding the relationship between the bishop and the presbyters, he states that the presbytery is a *collegium* fitted to the bishop as the strings to a harp (*chordae citharae*).⁴³ This descriptive musical imagery of Ignatius clearly testifies to the fact that the presbytery as the senate of the bishop shares with him the responsibility of the local Church.⁴⁴ They participate in the official teaching, the public worship and the administrative governance of the church.⁴⁵ Another significance of the imagery is that it relates

³⁹ Cf. Ignatius, *Ad Smyrn.* 8.

⁴⁰ Cf. G. Frausini, *Il presbiterio*, 137-138.

⁴¹ Ignatius, *Ad Philad.* 4.

⁴² Cf. Ignatius, *Ad Magn.* 13, 1.

⁴³ Ignatius, *Ad Eph.* 4, 1.

⁴⁴ Cf. Ignatius, *Ad Philad.* 8, 1. See also J. Pascher, "The Relation between Bishop and Priests", 15.

⁴⁵ Cf. Ignatius, *Ad Trall.* 7-11; *Ad Philad.* 4.

to the harmony of the presbyteral bond within the *presbyterium* on the basis of which no priest is isolated, each is united with the other priests, and this principle of unity of the body serves also as the common bond which each priest has with the bishop.⁴⁶ For this, Ignatius exhorts the Christian community: “therefore it is necessary that you should do nothing without the bishop, but be also in subjection to the presbytery, as to the Apostles of Jesus Christ...”⁴⁷ Such obligation of obedience evidently presupposes the fundamental collaborative unity in which the bishop and the *presbyterium* exercise authority, though the bishop constitutes the centre of pastoral action and responsibility to which the presbyter must be subject.

In Ignatius, the attribute of the *presbyterium* as the council of the bishop throws new light to our understanding of the meaning of the *presbyterium*, when he described the presbyters as the council (*synedrion*) of God and the college (*syndesmos*) of the apostles, obligating all to respect them.⁴⁸ From Ignatius, the *presbyterium* has its significance within the local Church with the bishop as its head. His thought about collaboration and co-responsibility between bishop and priests is found in the *presbyterium*, as a body of priests around the bishop. This demonstrates an evolution from what was the case during the apostolic era. It is clear that a strong and intimate bond with mystical overtones exists between the bishop and the *presbyterium*. Their relationship cannot strictly be defined as that of equality, as the body of the *presbyterium* is subject to the bishop just as the apostles were to the Lord; on the other hand they both share in the authority of overseeing the Christian community. Therefore, the relationship between the bishop and the *presbyterium* can be said to be “two-in-one, inseparable and indivisible.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Cf. J. Lécuyer, “Le presbyterium”, 278; F. Haarsma, “The presbyterium”, 32.

⁴⁷ Ignatius, *Ad Trall.* 2, 2. (English translations of Ignatius’ work are taken from, K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, I. *I Clement*; *II Clement*; *Ignatius*; *Polycarp*; *Didache*; *Barnabas*, London 1965).

⁴⁸ Cf. Ignatius, *Ad Trall.* 5, 1

⁴⁹ F. Haarsma, “The presbyterium”, 32.

3.3 Polycarp

Polycarp of Smyrna, to whom Ignatius addressed one of his letters, also wrote to the Philippians. In this letter is the indication, too, that the Church of Smyrna was being administered in a collegial way. The greeting in the letter begins thus: "Polycarp and the presbyters with him to the Church of God that sojourns at Philippi."⁵⁰ Here Polycarp associates the presbyters of the Church with himself in a way that signifies their participation in his episcopal action,⁵¹ and the fact that he includes the presbyters in his salutation corroborates the collegial element in the leadership of the local church. Interestingly he does not refer to himself as a bishop and according to Sullivan neither did Polycarp speak of the presbyters as "Polycarp and his fellow presbyters."⁵²

He admonishes the Christian community of Philippi to be "obedient to the presbyters and deacons as unto God and Christ,"⁵³ while at the same time encouraging the presbyters to be steadfast in their work. What is striking in the passage when compared with Ignatius is that, whereas Ignatius called on Christians to be subject to the bishop as to God and Christ and to the presbyters as to the apostles, Polycarp calls for obedience to the presbyters and the deacons as to God and Christ and was curiously silent on the figure of the bishop.⁵⁴ But like Ignatius, he also talks about the presbytery collectively as a group, and not individually.⁵⁵

Polycarp in his letter gave an indication of what the office of the presbyter entails. It is a pastoral ministry⁵⁶ whose responsibilities seem to be the same as those Ignatius had attributed to the bishop.⁵⁷ From Polycarp the evidence of a strict bond exist at this period between the presbytery and the bishop that constitute them in a unitary reality invested with the sacred ministry.

⁵⁰ Polycarp I.

⁵¹ Cf. F. Oliva, *Il presbyterium*, 33.

⁵² F.A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 127.

⁵³ Polycarp 1, 5, 3.

⁵⁴ Cf. F.A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 128.

⁵⁵ Cf. Polycarp 1, 1.

⁵⁶ Polycarp 1, 6, 1.

⁵⁷ Cf. F.A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 129.

3.4 Cyprian of Carthage

Cyprian of Carthage considered the doctor of the episcopate, who actually stressed the primacy and central importance of the bishop very forcibly,⁵⁸ also gave witness to a flourishing collaboration between priests and bishop in his time, based on the strong conviction that unity is *principium* to the Church.⁵⁹ He decided at the beginning of his episcopacy to do nothing of his own private opinion without informing, consulting, and having the advice and consent of his presbyters and deacons, whom he gladly addresses as his brothers.⁶⁰ Even though the bishop is the one who makes the final decision, he works closely with his priests, and would not make any major decision without first seeking their counsel. Cyprian often makes reference to “a common council”⁶¹ with his presbyters in which the weightier business of the community is transacted. This cooperation is clearly demonstrated in the handling of fundamental problems arising from schismatics wanting to be readmitted into the community;⁶² in deciding on some clergy who during persecution deserted the faith and now wanting to come back to the Church;⁶³ in the treatment of the lapsed; in resolving problems arising from baptism given by heretics and schismatics⁶⁴ as well as the promotion of candidates to the priesthood.

It is evident that the priests had a voice in the admission and promotion of the clergy as Cyprian himself indicated in his letter.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Cyprian *Epist.* 66, 8 (CSEL 3, 2:733); *Epist.* 33, 1 (CSEL 3, 2:566).

⁵⁹ His contribution on the ministerial priesthood is reflected in the fact that the conciliar document *LG* quoted Cyprian 12 times, superseded only by Augustine cited 18 times and Ignatius who was cited 13 times in the same document.

⁶⁰ Cyprian, *Epist.* 14, 4 (CSEL 3, 2:512).

⁶¹ Cyprian, *Epist.* 19, 2 (CSEL 3, 2:525-526).

⁶² Cf. Cyprian, *Epist.* 49, 1-2 (CSEL 3, 2:608-612).

⁶³ Cf. Cyprian, *Epist.* 34, 4 (CSEL 3, 2:570-571). See also M. Dujarier, “La tradizione sinodale africana”, *Concilium*, (1992) 1, 22-37.

⁶⁴ Cf. Cyprian, *Epist.* 71, 1 (CSEL 3, 2:771-772).

⁶⁵ “In the ordination of clerics, dearly beloved Brethren, we are accustomed to consult you in advance and in common council to weigh the characters and merits of each one”, Cyprian, *Epist.* 38, 1 (CSEL 3, 2:579-580).

Cyprian in this letter emphatically acknowledges the practice of prior consultation with his priests. Hence when he bypassed this consultative channel and ordained a sub-deacon and a reader, he had to offer an explanation to his priests and deacons.⁶⁶

The understanding of Cyprian's theology of ministry is firmly inserted in the ecclesiology that premised the origin of the Church in the Trinity, from which he sees the Church as a community of well-structured brothers (*fraternitas*).⁶⁷ It is here that the collegial status of the presbytery united with the bishop in the priestly honour and in the governance of the Church is evident as collaborators of the episcopal order (*sacerdotali honore coniuncti*).⁶⁸ The *presbyterium* for him designates a dignity with a determined *honorem*, which is a theme he also reflected in his letters as *honore consessus nostril*,⁶⁹ *collegii honor*.⁷⁰ In Cyprian we can say that the institution of *presbyterium* did find expression.⁷¹

That Cyprian gave practical recognition to the presbytery in the life of the Church within the near exclusive bishop church that he described is worthy of note. The presbyters for Cyprian are the bishop's *compresbyteri* – his fellow-presbyters – working as a group with equal dignity around the bishop, whom he consults in important matters.⁷² Cyprian teaching indicates this group meet collegially either occasionally or in a council working to resolve the issues facing the church, and having a strong attachment with the bishop which also underlines the universal character of the mission of priests.⁷³

Cyprian used certain words to express the nature of collaboration and communion between the bishop and the

⁶⁶ Cyprian, *Epist.* 29 (CSEL 3, 2: 548).

⁶⁷ Cf. C. Cerami, "Episcopato e presbiterato", 123.

⁶⁸ Cyprian, *Epist.* 61, 3 (CSEL 3, 2:696).

⁶⁹ Cyprian, *Epist.* 40 (CSEL 3, 2:586)

⁷⁰ Cyprian, *Epist.* 73, 26 (CSEL 3, 2:798)

⁷¹ Cf. Cyprian, *Epist.* 24, 1 (CSEL 3, 2:537); 45, 4 (CSEL 3, 2:603); 52, 3 (CSEL 3, 2:619); 39, 5 (CSEL 3, 2:584); 40 (CSEL 3, 2:585).

⁷² Cf. Cyprian, *Epist.*; Cfr. F. Oliva, *Il presbyterium*, 51.

⁷³ For a deeper analysis of Cyprian use of *compresbyteri* see A. Vilela, *La condition collégiale des prêtres*, 279-281.

presbyters. He uses the term *locus*⁷⁴ (rank) to mean a special office reserved only for the bishops and the presbyters and as such he never places the deacon in this position. By application this indicates that between the bishop and the presbyters there exists a different kind of relation in comparison with that of the deacons. The other term *consensus*⁷⁵ is an assembly which is exclusively made up of the bishop and the presbyters; in this assembly the bishop's seat is the cathedral.⁷⁶ The pastoral importance of this assembly, which Cyprian cites as the reason for the *consensus*, has to do with mutual respect (*honor mutuus*), and the interest of the Church which necessitates collective consultation, for the discernment of the will of God in order to arrive at a common resolution, respect for charism and the maintenance of apostolic tradition.⁷⁷ The importance of these underlines the *presbyterium* as a handy organ through which all presbyters, as collaborators and counsellors of the bishop constitute a unique group around the bishop responsible for the pastoral action of the Christian community.⁷⁸

3.4.1 *Profound Alteration of the presbyterium*

The extraordinary situation faced by the Church with the persecution of Decius not only affected and changed the collegial government of the local Church, but it also led to a new collaborative expression within the priestly rank. Thus, priests began to celebrate the Eucharist with a small number of participants.⁷⁹ The practice subsequently became permanent due to

⁷⁴ Cyprian, *Epist.* 12, 1 (CSEL 3, 2:502); 15, 1 (CSEL 3, 2:513); 55, 11 (CSEL 3, 2:632); 16, 1 (CSEL 3, 2:517); 3, 1 (CSEL 3, 2:469).

⁷⁵ Cyprian, *Epist.* 39, 5 (CSEL 3, 2:584-585); 38 (CSEL 3, 2:579); 40 (CSEL 3, 2:586).

⁷⁶ Cf. A. Vilela, *La condition collégiale des prêtres*, 273. See Cyprian, *Epist.* 55, 8 (CSEL 3, 2:630).

⁷⁷ Cf. Cyprian, *Epist.* 14, 1, 4 (CSEL 3, 2:510, 512); 18, 1 (CSEL 3, 2:523); 11, 3 (CSEL 3, 2:497-498); 71, 3 (CSEL 3, 2:773-774); 67, 5 (CSEL 3, 2:739) cited in A. Vilela, *La condition collégiale des prêtres*, 288-294.

⁷⁸ Cf. J. Lécuyer, "Le presbyterium", 278; A. VILELA, *La condition collégiale des prêtres*, 273-274.

⁷⁹ Cf. Cyprian, *Epist.* 5, 2 (CSEL 3, 2:479).

the spread of the Church to the hinterland and countryside, as priests were now being sent to these areas to minister and also began to celebrate the liturgy individually.⁸⁰ This was a profound change because, beginning from Ignatius of Antioch, only the bishop it seems was the ordinary celebrant of the Eucharist (*Smyrn.* 8, 2; *Phil.* 4, 1; *Trall.* 7, 2).⁸¹

This development led to the separation of the priests from the presbytery. This consequently led to the concentrating of administrative and disciplinary affairs in the hands of the bishop.⁸² By the third century, the function of the bishop as head of the presbyterate, endowed with personal prerogatives of government independent of the presbyters, along with an increase function as a successor of the apostles symbolized by the use of the *cathedra*, was clearly established.⁸³ The original sign of this *cathedra* (episcopal chair) was in connection with the authoritative teaching function of the bishop, and his episcopal headship of the community.⁸⁴

The importance of Cyprian in the bishop-priest collaboration is in the profound examples we get from his epistolary about two presbyteral colleges, both of which were operating under two distinct and exceptional circumstances yet exhibiting collaborative and collegial characteristics in tackling the affairs of the Church in governance, discipline, and normative legislation. The practice of cooperation in the affairs of the Church were evident in Rome, Spain and the provinces of North Africa⁸⁵ pointing to the fact that ministerial collaboration was part of Church's administration in this period.

⁸⁰ Cf. J.E. Lynch, "Co-responsibility", 30.

⁸¹ Cf. G. D'Ercole, "The Presbyteral Colleges", 16.

⁸² Cf. J.E. Lynch, "Co-responsibility", 30.

⁸³ Cf. Cyprian, *Epist.* 3, 1 (CSEL 3, 2:469); 17, 2 (CSEL 3, 2:522); 33, 1 (CSEL 3, 2:566-567); Id., *De Cath. Eccl. Unitate* 5. T.G. Barberena, "Collegiality at Diocesan Level", 12; F.A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 209; M. Maccarrone, "Lo sviluppo dell'idea dell'episcopato", 191-196.

⁸⁴ Cf. D. Power, *Ministers of Christ and His Church*, 56; M. Maccarrone, "Lo sviluppo dell'idea dell'episcopato", 133-191.

⁸⁵ Cf. Cyprian, *Epist.* 30, 5 (CSEL 3, 2:553-553, 627); 67, 1 (CSEL 3, 2:735).

3.5 Jerome

By the end of the fourth century, we see in Fathers like Jerome the effort to restore the dignity and status of the *presbyterium* in the Church, as it seems there were now struggles between the three grades of ministerial order. Jerome was particularly not happy with the assuming presumption of the deacons in relation to the priests.⁸⁶

Jerome sought to narrow the distance between presbyters and bishop by introducing a pivotal element to the bishop's and priest's relation in the ministry, when he claims that a bishop and his presbyters are like Aaron and his sons. Collaboration between them is therefore essential because, just "as there is but one Lord and one Temple, so also should there be but one ministry."⁸⁷ He then reiterated the theological function of the *presbyterium* (*coetus presbyterorum*) in the Church as the senate of the Church whose role is to counsel and governs with prudence; for this he considers the practice in some churches where presbyters have to be silent when the bishop is present as unacceptable.⁸⁸ Jerome certainly seems to direct his concern on the enormous power of the bishops, hence he remarks that bishops should know that they themselves are priests and not lords, as such they should "render to the clergy the honour which is their due."⁸⁹

His doctrinal view is that the presbyterate is of divine origin and that the source of all the power of sacrament and government is inherent in the priesthood. For Jerome, therefore, bishops and priests are equal because they are equal in sacramental power – they are equal on the level of that basic *sacerdotium* received directly from God in the ordination to the presbyterate.⁹⁰ Jerome then sees the superiority of the bishop as arising from a universal decree because of the troubling and divisive tendencies exhibited

⁸⁶ Cf. Jerome, *Epist.* 146, 1 (PL 22, 1192-1193).

⁸⁷ Jerome, *Epist.* 52, 7 (PL 22:534).

⁸⁸ Cf. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Isaiam Prophetam*, II, 3 (PL 24:61).

⁸⁹ Jerome, *Epist.* 52, 7 (PL 22:534).

⁹⁰ Presbyter et Episcopus, aliud aetatis, aliud dignitatis est nomen", Jerome, *Epist. Ad Evangelium* 146 (PL 22:1194-1195).

in certain churches in the apostolic time.⁹¹ But neither the issuing authority nor the text of the decree was given by Jerome. The development of the doctrine of the parity of ministers in Jerome was aimed at affirming that the orders of the bishop and the presbyters were originally the same, and as such they were equal as far as the priesthood is concerned. But he acknowledges a difference between them on the basis of the exercise of authority which he directly sees as arising from ecclesiastical law rather than a divine institution. So, if the bishops are in any way superior, it is not in *sacerdotium* but only in *regimen* – in authority over the Church, which is a disposition of the Church.⁹²

His contention was that the bishop did not enjoy a higher sacerdotal status in relation to the priests. But, if as Jerome claims there are no differences between the bishops and the priests, why then is the power of ordaining the bishop's preserve? The response seems to be in his *dialogus contra luciferianos*, where Jerome indicated the principle that priests too have the power of ordaining.⁹³ Up until the middle of the third century, St. Jerome reports the continued significance of the presbyterate. When the bishop of Alexandria died, "the priests always named as bishop one of their own number chosen by themselves and set him in a more exalted position, just as an army elects a general."⁹⁴ Then, the dead bishop's hands would be placed on the head of the newly chosen to indicate succession; but they will bring in other bishops for the consecration of the bishop elect in conformance with the tradition of the Church.⁹⁵

3.6 *Didascalia Apostolorum*

The Syrian *Didascalia Apostolorum* had similar notions already present in Ignatius and Hippolytus. This work, classified as

⁹¹ Cf. Jerome, *Comm. in Epist. Ad Tit.*, Cap. 1, 6-7 (PL 26: 563-567).

⁹² Cfr. S. Ryan, "Episcopal Consecration: The legacy of the schoolmen", 8.

⁹³ Cf. Jerome, *Dialogus contra Luciferianos*, 9 (PL 23:165).

⁹⁴ Jerome, *Epist.* 146, 1 (PL 22:1194); Epiphanius, *Adversus Haereses*, II, II, 69 (PG 42:202, 219).

⁹⁵ Cf. Jerome, *Epist.* 146, 1-2; (PL 22:1194-1195). J.E. Lynch, "Co-responsibility", 28.

belonging to the documents of Church Order, and third after the *Didache* and the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, is believed to have been written in the first half of the third century.⁹⁶ It presents the bishop as the heir of the Aaronic high-priesthood with supreme authority in the direction of the local community; as a consequence he presides at the celebrations of baptism and the Eucharist.⁹⁷

The place of the presbyters in the document is that they are appointed by the bishop with the characteristic function of being his counsellors or council of the Church.⁹⁸ It is a role they are honoured in the community.⁹⁹ In the Church they have their seats about the bishop's chair. This, according to Jalland, explains why the bishop at this time still retains the primary monopoly of the liturgical as well as the sacramental functions and the presbyterate as a corporate body continued its responsibility for discipline of the local community and overseeing its material needs.¹⁰⁰ The collaboration between the bishop and the priest in the judicial office was well in place here, as the *Didascalia* obligates the presbyters along with the deacons to assist the bishop in all cases of judgement brought before him.¹⁰¹

4. Conclusion

Collaboration between bishops and priests in the early Church has had an evolving understanding. The constitution of the presbytery in this time gave the local pastoral ministry a collegiate structure. This structure continued to exist up until the time of Clement who give us an insight into the organization of the Church's ministry, where the college of presbyters' functional responsibility includes pastoral supervision, direction, doctrinal teaching and the liturgical ministry of the local Church.¹⁰² The unity of mission and the

⁹⁶Cf. R.H. Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, xxvi - xxvii.

⁹⁷ Cf. R.H. Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 7, 80; 3-4, 86; 92-100; 146-147.

⁹⁸ R.H. Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 96.

⁹⁹ R.H. Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 90.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. T.G. Jalland, "The doctrine of the parity of ministers", 310.

¹⁰¹ R.H. Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 4 & 20, 111.

¹⁰² Cf. David Noel Power, *Ministers of Christ and his Church*, (G. Chapman, 1969), 41, 48.

plurality of ministries were the elements upon which the organization of the primitive Church developed.¹⁰³

However, the distinction between the bishop and the presbytery that was not made in the beginning was made by the Fathers of the first three centuries with the term *Presbyterium*, by which the bishop becomes the head of the local Church surrounded by priests in union with him, who assist him in governance and, under him exercise the power of teaching, of orders and of governance. The primacy of the bishop in this local community could not be said to be simply for the motive of efficiency and of human organisation as Jerome wants us to believe, rather the need for unity that has its foundation in the theological order which is ecclesial communion. This nature of the Church requires unity of the hierarchical ministry even though the bishop is in a pre-eminent position.¹⁰⁴

The significance of the collegial nature of the *presbyterium* is its expression of unity and collaboration of the ministerial order in the mission of the Church being the purpose of the ordained minister.¹⁰⁵ Clearly in this period the mission of the Church required unity and collaboration, despite the assumption of the individual presidency of the bishop. The practice of collaboration associated with the collegiate form was not lost, as the presbyteral college was retained. This is demonstrated in Ignatius and Cyprian who often assert the authority of the bishop, but also stress the existence, collaboration and need of the presbyters.

Nonetheless, the priest's moral union with the bishop, his subordination, dependence and collaboration were preserved, even with the development of Parishes that became the centres for direct pastoral care by priests. The fact that from the apostolic times, presbyters were always in the Church underscores the significance of the presbyters, despite the bishop's ever-increasing prominence, the presbyters continue to function.

¹⁰³ Cf. F. Oliva, *Il Presbyterium*, 9; G. Dix, "The ministry in the early Church", 189-191.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. F. Oliva, *Il presbyterium*, 18.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. E. Dal Covolo, "La formazione sacerdotale", 707.