

On A More Positive Note...

In 2005 the total number of Catholic priests throughout the world was just over 400,000. In 2009 there were almost 5000 priests in England & Wales (3,506 diocesan and 1312 religious). The proportion of those guilty of sexually abusing children is extremely small by comparison. That doesn't for a moment lessen the seriousness of what has happened, but it does offer a much more positive picture of priesthood than the one currently being painted by a media always hungry for scandal and any opportunity, it would seem, to criticise the Church.

As I have said before, from a personal point of view, it makes me very angry that a few bad apples have caused, and continue to cause, so many problems for the rest of us, the vast majority of priests, who are simply trying to get on with our ministry. We are all being tarred with the same brush and that is both unjust and unacceptable. No one seems to be speaking up in defence of priests; no one is countering the bad news with good; no one is offering a positive point of view so I'm going to because I think it's long overdue and much needed.

Firstly, therefore, what is involved in someone becoming a priest?

Initially a candidate for priesthood will have experienced, in a way that is unique to each individual, a calling to be a priest. However long it takes him to recognise and respond to that experience, he will eventually meet with the vocations director for his diocese (or a similar individual if he is considering a religious order) and will be guided through an initial process of discernment, psychological testing, and interviews with a vocations panel and others. If all indicators are positive, he will then meet with his bishop to discuss admission to a seminary to begin formal training which may also include studying for a degree (younger candidates may be required to spend a pre-seminary year of preparation and study first). Training for the priesthood usually takes six years, studying subjects such as theology, philosophy, Church history, moral theology, Canon Law and liturgy, and students will be given practical pastoral experience by working in parishes, hospitals, schools, prisons, and so on. They also receive regular spiritual direction as well as making an annual retreat. Introduction into increasing levels of ministry along the way will eventually lead to their vowed commitment to celibacy and to ordination as a deacon and then as a priest, by which time Church Law requires they be at least twenty-five years of age.

So often in parishes it is typically a bit of an uphill battle to get people to take part in preparation programmes prior to the celebration of the sacraments even though such programmes may be only a matter of weeks or perhaps even days, and yet people wouldn't object for a moment to candidates for the priesthood having to spend six years in the seminary prior to priestly ordination. But that's

what it involves – six years of fulltime study, training, preparation, and testing of their vocation – and, really, should it involve anything less given the importance of the ministry they will eventually be ordained to carry out?

Secondly, then, what is that ministry all about? What might a priest's typical day and week look like? (And I would like to dispel at this point the popular myth that a priest only works on Sundays!)

Much will depend on the parish a priest is in because every parish is different and the things he will be called upon to do will therefore also be different. There are the obvious things such as celebrating Mass each day, hearing confessions (usually once a week), and celebrating baptisms, the occasional wedding and (usually far from occasional) funerals. There may be a parish school to visit from time to time; a hospital of which he may be the chaplain; nursing homes to visit; and possibly a prison.

Parish visiting in the way it used to be done when there were often several priests in a parish is largely no longer possible simply because of the time constraints that most parish priests now experience as a result of being on their own in a parish and having to be a “parish manager” rather than simply a parish priest. Thankfully lay people have, in recent years, taken up once again ministries that complement that of the priest so that pastoral needs are served and the priest doesn't need to be running round like the proverbial headless chicken trying to do everything himself!

The following could be a typical day for a priest. He gets up, has some breakfast, says his Office, and then celebrates morning Mass. He deals with the day's post (if it comes that early!) and, after a quick trip to the supermarket, heads out to visit a bereaved family to discuss the funeral with them. On the way back he calls in to the parish school and manages to visit most of the classes to say hello and to see what they are doing. Back home he grabs a bite to eat before a 1pm appointment with a building contractor who is coming to look at a rising damp problem in the church hall. The contractor is half an hour late and so the priest only just makes it in time to the deanery meeting in the neighbouring parish. Late afternoon, back home, he has several phone calls to return and, with no secretary, bills to pay. He manages to put his feet up for twenty minutes while he watches the news headlines. He cooks and eats his dinner rather hurriedly because he has a couple coming to see him about a wedding. They too are late making him, in turn, late for the Parish Council meeting at seven which goes on much longer than expected and so he doesn't get to finally say his Office and put his feet up until after nine o'clock. Half way through a programme he has been waiting all week to watch the phone rings and he is off to the hospital to anoint someone who is dying and by the time he gets back home it has been a fifteen hour day.

Everyone assumes that the things a priest may be called on to do are easy for him and so his ministry in those areas is often be taken for granted. Priests are just like everyone else with their strengths and weaknesses, abilities and limitations. Ordination isn't a cure-all.

Not everyone enjoys going into hospitals to visit and may have a real problem with the hospital setting. Priests are no different and yet they have to go because it's part of what they do and it's what people expect of them. Or, for example, how comfortable would you be in the presence of, or having to touch, a dead body? Regardless of how he feels, a priest is expected to pray with families in the presence of someone who has died, signing the body with the Sign of the Cross. And one of the more difficult things that a priest has to do is to be with families who have been bereaved. It is extremely difficult to suddenly have to step into a family's grief and try to sensitively provide both ministry and support to them in their needs. (Ten minutes later he could be at a celebratory gathering in school for a teacher who is retiring and, within the hour, have to step back into a situation of grief with another bereaved family.) But it's what is expected of a priest, it's what he does – often several times a week but no less personally on each occasion. But there is never a front page headline: “Catholic priest comforts grieving families”.

It goes without saying that one of the most important things a priest does is to celebrate the eucharist. Without the priest there can be no eucharist. Consider, also, the healing that he helps people to experience by celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation with them. Only a priest can do that. And just think of all the baptisms he celebrates and the weddings he conducts and, for a bishop, all the confirmations and the ordinations of the next generation of priests. None of that makes the headlines either: “Priest celebrates Mass for 300”, “Catholic priest brings inner healing through Confession”, “Families line up for baptism by priest”!

Hopefully when someone has a problem they need to talk about, rather than spending a fortune on a counsellor they remember their priest. No priest is an expert on everything (if only!), nor will he necessarily have the greatest counselling skills, but as a priest he brings something to the situation that other professionals can't simply by virtue of his priesthood. How many marriages have priests helped to save? How many suicides have they helped prevent? How many alcoholics have they helped turn their lives around? That won't make the front pages either.

Throughout the world there are thousands of missionary priests helping to spread the gospel and bring people to faith and salvation through the sacraments of the Church, often in conditions that most people wouldn't tolerate for a week let alone a lifetime. Where are the headlines? And there are priests being held

in prisons throughout the world, simply for having borne witness on behalf of their people to situations of injustice and corruption. Why isn't the media telling their story?

Of course most of the things I have mentioned are simply part of a priest's ministry; it's what he does; there is no reason for headlines. But unfortunately when priests do make the news for the wrong reasons, that's all that people hear. There is no good news to help redress the balance, no "but on the other hand..." stories. The vast majority of priests are good men – not perfect, but generally good – who, day in day out, quietly get on with their ministry, serving their people and trying to live up to their expectations (never an easy task!). Not for a moment to deny the seriousness of what abusing priests have done, but why is it that this has become all that the priesthood is about at the moment? The media are making it possible for the actions of a sad and sick minority who have already caused enough damage to the lives of the victims of their abuse, to now cause even more damage - this time to the priesthood and the Church.

Never wanting to spoil a good story, the media also seems to conveniently forget to mention that the incidence of abuse by priests is no more than in the general population. There have always been "bogey men" and "dirty old men" in mackintoshes; children have always suffered abuse at the hands of fathers, uncles (and "uncles") and even mothers and others, but the witch hunt doesn't seem to turn its attention to those areas of our society. As trustworthy as priests should be, surely a child's own parents should be even more so. Why, then, is all the media focus only on priests?

As long as this continues, we find ourselves having to minister under a cloud of suspicion that we don't deserve. One way or another it puts that much more pressure on our ministry in an age when there is pressure enough already. And of course, in such a climate, sadly there is little wonder that young people, seeing what they see in the media about priesthood and not always hearing a voice in support of it, decide that it's no way of life for them. Ultimately the people of our parishes will suffer as the number of priests available to serve them declines. Prayer is our ultimate hope: prayer for a priesthood currently under siege¹ and prayer for vocations in spite of it.

* * *

Fr Neil McNicholas

¹ (and specifically for our bishops and our Holy Father)