

Reflections on Priesthood

2009 marks the 150th anniversary of the death of St John Vianney, the Curé of Ars, patron saint of parish priests. Pope Benedict has declared it a “Year of the Priesthood”.

Initial Thoughts

What can I say about priesthood? The image that most of us have comes from what we see of our priests (in itself a worrying thought!). Even our training in the seminary didn't really give much more of an idea as to what priesthood is, or would be, all about. Apart from Mass and the sacraments, much of what you end up doing as a priest you were never really told about or prepared for. Much will depend on where you are, what is waiting to be done there, what comes along from day to day and who, if anyone, is there to help you do it.

When kids in school ask: “What do you like most about being a priest?” what can you say that does justice to such a question? It ranks alongside questions such as: “What do you like most about breathing?” Any possible answer to their question would probably and primarily have to do with the Eucharist, but possibly also to do with people. Priesthood will be very difficult if you're not a people person and it would be totally impossible, and purposeless, if it wasn't for the Eucharist.

It is recorded of some of the priest-saints that in their celebration of Mass they would become transfixed, as it were, at the Consecration, held by the wonder of what was taking place. It is indeed an awe-inspiring moment and one that most priests perhaps hardly dare reflect on as fully as those saints did because I don't know that the Mass would ever move beyond that point if we did. It's the reality that, at the words of consecration, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through you, the bread and “cup” become, while you are holding them, the Body and Blood of Christ. It's a reality almost too much to comprehend; the best we can do is to say our “Amen” to that central mystery of our faith. But because of God's invitation to us priests to stand at his altar *in persona Christi*, the celebration and reception of the Eucharist then become possible for everyone else. Surely nothing better, nothing more profound, than that can be said in trying to explain what priesthood is all about. And, of course, as the catechism reminds us, it is from the Eucharist that all the other sacramental celebrations and devotions flow.

The priesthood is also, as I said, very much about people – it's to a ministry of service that we are ordained. Sadly, human nature being what it is, it is also people who can sometimes make life most difficult for a priest. A retired colleague once famously said: “I always hoped for a perfect parish, but there were always people in it!” It was said tongue-in-cheek of course because people are the very object of our ministry and it is in trying to be present and available

to them in their needs – whether spiritual or pastoral – that the purpose of our ministry becomes most apparent. We also depend on the support – both practical and spiritual – that people offer us.

The sacrament of confession also comes to mind – that great sacrament of healing and reconciliation which is also central to priesthood. The prayer before communion begins: “Lord, I am not worthy...”, a thought surely in every priest’s mind in confession too: Lord, I am not worthy...to hear this person’s sins, but God asks me to (again *in persona Christi* – in the place of his loving and compassionate Son) for the sake of that other person, so they can unburden themselves within the absolute confidentiality of the sacrament and know, through the words of absolution spoken by the priest, that they are forgiven. And from time to time, amidst the more usual - but no less important - Saturday morning confessions, will come a particularly profound occasion of deep spiritual healing that reinforces all the more the fact that I am not worthy, but also the privilege that it is to be, at his invitation, God’s instrument of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Clericalism

The word *clericalism* refers to the deference shown to a priest simply because he *is* a priest. Rightly or wrongly, people tend to have high expectations of their priests and, whether we like it or not, we are often placed on pedestals as a result - and are not expected to fall off them! Yes, we are in a privileged position of leadership and with privilege come responsibilities and expectations, but at the same time we are only human and allowances may sometimes need to be made for our limitations, our frailties, and even our inabilities.

The word can also be applied to privilege being assumed *by* a priest as if the words *ordination* and *elevation* were somehow the same process. A priest who effectively insulates himself in his “clerical tower” can become a law unto himself, feeling he is accountable to, and responsible only for, himself. Any authority that a priest legitimately has isn’t meant to be wielded autocratically. It should be accorded to him by the people to whom he ministers on the basis that his ministry reflects his knowledge, experience and conviction – not to mention spirituality. Vocation to priesthood comes from God and ministry is founded on that call. When Pilate said to Jesus, ‘Surely you know I have the power to release you and I have the power to crucify you?’ his reply was, ‘You would have no power over me if it had not been given you from above.’ Food for priestly thought.

Leadership and Accountability

One particularly important aspect of priesthood is that of leadership, which must also include accountability.

At his priestly ordination, the candidate is asked by his bishop:

Are you resolved, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to discharge without fail the office of priesthood in the presbyteral order as a conscientious fellow worker with your bishop in caring for the Lord's flock?

Are you resolved to celebrate the mysteries of Christ faithfully and religiously as the Church has handed them down to us, for the glory of God and the sanctification of Christ's people?

Are you resolved to exercise the ministry of the word worthily and wisely, preaching the Gospel and explaining the Catholic faith?

Are you resolved to consecrate your life to God for the salvation of his people, and to unite yourself more closely every day to Christ the High Priest, who offered himself for us to the Father as a perfect sacrifice?

A priest is accountable first and foremost to God but he puts that into practice principally through accountability to his bishop. That is the commitment contained in the first of those questions, a commitment renewed annually at the Chrism Mass. But he is also accountable to the people to whom he ministers, as those other questions make clear, a commitment also renewed annually. How someone exercises his priesthood is perhaps a measure of how seriously he takes his responsibilities and accepts accountability.

St Paul, in chapter ten of his letter to the Christians of Rome says: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But they will not ask his help unless they believe in him, and they will not believe in him unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher, and they will never have a preacher unless one is sent." To which we might add: but what is the point of one being sent if he is not prepared to preach (and teach), or, for that matter, if the people are not prepared to listen and be led?

I don't know if seaside amusement arcades still have the "Aladdin's Cave" machines they used to have when I was a youngster. The glass-sided machine was full of "trinkets and treasures" and when you put your sixpence in, an elephant moved round a track into a cave and emerged with a box on its back which then tipped into a chute and inside was your sixpenny prize. There are parishioners who expect their priests to be like that. They put their money in the collection and all they want is for the priest to come out, "say" Mass, and then disappear again leaving them in peace. Though it would make for a quiet life, we are not meant to be "sixpence in the slot" priests.

I often return to one of the readings in our Office (for Sunday of Week 27), taken from *The Pastoral Rule* of St Gregory the Great. He writes: "A religious leader should be careful in deciding when to remain silent and be sure to say something useful when deciding to speak. For, just as thoughtless remarks can

lead people into error, so also ill-advised silence can leave people in their error. Negligent religious leaders are often afraid to speak freely and say what needs to be said – for fear of losing favour with people. As Truth himself says, they are certainly not guarding their flock with the care expected of a shepherd but are acting like hirelings, because hiding behind a wall of silence is like taking flight at the approach of the wolf.”

The alternative is to opt out, to settle for a quiet life, keeping your head down, willing to accept the “lowest common denominator” as good enough in one’s ministry – but it *isn’t* good enough. A priest must lead, must do what he feels to be right and good for the majority, and must do and teach what the Church says should be done and taught, otherwise he is useless to the people. It is his responsibility to challenge them spiritually and to invite them forward in their pilgrimage of faith. That’s what the bishop sent him to do, it’s what God calls him to do, and so that’s what he should be doing. But it’s not about power, it’s about invitation; and it’s not about autocracy, it’s about co-operation, and in that sense there should be accountability in the other direction too: that the people of a parish should be accountable to their priest for the degree to which they trust and follow his pastoral and spiritual leadership, and their involvement in all aspects of their shared parish life.

God’s message through the prophet Ezekiel (3 v.18-21) was to the effect that as a priest I can’t be responsible for people’s choices - just so long as I have said what needs to be said. But if people make the wrong choices because I have failed in my spiritual or pastoral responsibilities to them, that is quite a different situation, one for which God will one day hold me to account.

Availability

I’m sure there are still some people who think a priest only works on Sundays and therefore at all other times he ought to be sitting there waiting for the doorbell to go or the phone to ring. You’d probably have to follow a priest around all day and all week for several weeks to get a more accurate picture of exactly what he does do. Perhaps it’s because we meet people in the particular circumstances of their personal needs that they understandably have certain (and often immediate) expectations of us. Despite what we have just been doing or what we will be doing next, we have to apply ourselves exclusively to the here-and-now of people’s situations. I’m reminded of a scene in the brilliant TV drama series *The West Wing*, in which the President (played by Martin Sheen) is meeting and chatting with a group of school children in the White House. Suddenly he is called to the next room to be informed of a crisis situation that he needs to be kept up to date on, but then returns to joking with the children as if nothing had happened. Such “gear changes” tend to keep priests on their pastoral toes and certainly add variety to the day!

These days, more than ever before, it could be all too easy to fail people – albeit unintentionally. Due to the shortage of priests we seem to be taking on more and more responsibilities and with that comes, inevitably these days, oceans of paperwork, administrative chores, and a thousand-and-one other things that were never a part of our rosy picture of priesthood, but are now in the foreground of that picture. The parish priest has become, to all intents and purposes, a parish manager and, as such, ends up being trapped at his desk, on his phone, at his computer, or waiting for tradesmen and contractors to arrive (often not very promptly - as seems to be the way of things these days).

When I found myself assuming responsibility for an amalgamated parish, one of the first things I did was to apologise to people for the fact that I knew there was going to be no way I could promise to make house visits. I felt it was best to admit that up-front and then, if I ever did manage to find time for it, it would be a bonus. In the “good old days” - and I often wonder if they were as good as our selective memories make them - parish visiting was the traditional occupation of curates (assistant priests) and once upon a time there were plenty of them to do it and all day to do it in. Parish visiting is, of course, a very valuable pastoral activity but I find that, with the best will in the world, time rarely makes it possible. And if you ever do find the time, typically no one will be home during the day because both husband and wife will be working (either by choice or to pay the mortgage) and, in the evening, visits will clash with favourite programmes on the television and there is often a reluctance to turn the television off.

It isn't the most ideal of situations, but necessity now dictates that the best that many of us can hope for is to make contact with the majority of our parishioners outside church on Sundays, though clearly that may not include the very people who, perhaps, most need to be contacted. Thankfully, while we priests may be in short supply, we can rightly rely on the spiritual and pastoral ministry of the lay people of our parishes. Indeed, we should never have *not* relied on them, and our current reliance shouldn't be a consequence of the shortage of priests but rather that the shortage has highlighted the problems of “clericalism” and the almost conditioned reliance on “Father” to do everything or of “Father” insisting that he does! Priests don't need to be doing the things that lay people could and should be doing, and in many cases there are plenty of people in our parishes far better qualified to be doing them than we are.

Depending, I suppose, on one's personal image of priesthood, we can lay a real guilt trip on ourselves if we are not keeping up with the example set for us by the likes of St John Vianney and other wonderfully pastoral priest-saints throughout history. Being that driven is OK for some, but it can drive others to an early grave just trying or trying too hard.

Today's world is very different, the demands on our priesthood can be very different, and I think that sometimes (and realistically) we have to settle for a ministry that is more about *being* than *doing*. At a time when manpower levels are falling but the number of parishes and churches that priests are expected to serve hasn't decreased to the same extent, it is perhaps far better to admit our limitations and the fact that if we burn ourselves out completely then we are no use to anyone. *Being* a priest in the sense of being available (when we can be), may be more realistic than the *doing* - doing everything priests traditionally did when there were twice (or more) as many of us as there are now. It doesn't always sit too well with priests, and it takes a lot more discipline in a sense, but it may address the situation of parishioners saying, "I didn't like to bother you, Father, because I know you're so busy." We should never be that busy.

A Passing Guest

In an ideal world the call to priesthood would come "from the people for the people" - from God, yes, but a person identified by the community and called into priestly service of that community. Sadly, however, things don't work that way and, perhaps heeding Our Lord's own caution that a prophet is never accepted in his own country, priests are usually appointed by their bishop anywhere other than to their home parishes.

If we did have "home-grown" priests in that sense, they would be much more aware of, and sensitive to, the history of the community and of its church. As things are, in many ways a priest is a "passing guest" and yet that can't become an excuse for not investing himself or his energies in a parish simply because he won't be there forever, anymore than it can be an excuse for people detaching themselves from his spiritual leadership. (When I was first appointed as parish priest, it was felt to be too soon after ordination to call me that and so I was officially "priest-in-charge". I overheard someone saying, one day, words to the effect that it meant I wouldn't be around for very long and therefore there was no real need to take much notice of anything I said!)

Certainly in the case of long-established parishes, many families will have lived there for years, perhaps their whole lives. In every sense of the word it is *their* parish – they have grown up in it, they have supported it, they have celebrated their sacraments in it and it's where they worship week in and week out. But when a priest arrives it becomes his parish also, and if he didn't feel at home or consider the parish to be his home, questions ought to be asked – of the people and of him.

Every once in a while a parish will lose its priest and a new one will arrive and before long (not straightaway would be the recommendation) he may start changing this, and moving that, and doing things differently – though hopefully

for sound liturgical reasons, not “change for change’s sake”, and not without due discussion and explanation. I can sympathise with people who might find this unsettling and perhaps resent what they see as interference by a newcomer. However, he arrives with a new set of eyes and, in addition to having his own particular way of doing things (hopefully for sound liturgical reasons), might well see that certain things should be done differently – but, again, first explaining why.

Being at Home

This, then, leads to the importance of priests making themselves at home where they are appointed. All too often priests seem simply to exist, rather than *live*, in their presbyteries which consequently tend to have a very institutional feel to them. They may even take great pride in the fact that they spend very little money, but the problem is that houses (and churches) need to be regularly maintained and if they are not, not only does the resulting state of disrepair eventually have to be dealt with by the next priest to arrive, but it has to be dealt with at current prices thus negating completely any previous misplaced efforts at being frugal.

Those of us who became priests later in life, were not only quite used to looking after ourselves (cooking, cleaning, laundering, etc), but were also used to living in a place that was our home. Surely no one would begrudge a priest living comfortably – not excessively, but comfortable - in a house that he has made his home and where family and friends can visit and feel comfortable? It is also a matter of good stewardship and helps ensure that he leaves the presbytery in good condition for whoever follows him.

One of the things priests may perhaps struggle with is the fact that we tend to get moved at fairly regular intervals and therefore have to be prepared to let go of what we have established, hand it on to the next incumbent, and start again. It would, of course, be nice if we didn’t have to start again and that, wherever we were moved, we would find a presbytery that had been similarly well looked after and enjoyed. More often than not it doesn’t happen – which is unfortunate on a number of levels.

Celibacy

I couldn’t leave these reflections on priesthood without a word or two about another and very obvious aspect of it – that of celibacy.

Celibacy and remaining single (and of course they are not necessarily the same thing!) is a current requirement of those who pursue a vocation to Catholic priesthood. However it cannot be something you put up with for the sake of becoming a priest, nor should the celibate life be used as an escape. It would be

most important to experience a vocation both to priesthood and to celibacy. And perhaps a test of that would be that if the Church changed its mind tomorrow, those who would “rush out” and get married may perhaps have never really embraced a vocation to celibacy as fully as to priesthood.

When we are asked why priests are not allowed to marry, the answer may not always make as much sense as it might once have done. In the first place, historically, priests haven’t always had to remain single and celibate, but also, in recent years, many married Anglican priests have been accepted not just into the Catholic Church, but also into the priesthood. It is difficult, therefore, to rationally explain why the Church doesn’t allow priests to marry when, in certain specific circumstances, it accepts priests who are married already. Clearly, therefore, the two states of life do go together and whether doors may yet open in that regard remains to be seen.

My own response to the question of why priests aren’t allowed to marry would have to do, by and large, with availability. This has become particularly evident with, for example, the permanent diaconate and the situation of ex-Anglican married priests when family commitments quite rightly mean that unlimited, or all hours, availability cannot be expected. The celibate priest, on the other hand, has no such commitments and can be as available as is necessary, and at whatever hour of the day or night is necessary, because he is only answerable to himself in that respect. At the same time it does suggest, however, the need for some personal discipline in terms of time for oneself.

Having said all of that, I would also say that a priest shouldn’t be without female friends or family friends (families he knows well and visits as friends). Celibacy should never produce crusty old bachelors residing in virtual isolation from the social milieu important to everyone else. I find that being single certainly contributes to my availability in all aspects of my priesthood, but at the same time I have always been richly blessed with all ages, and both genders, of friends and family friendships. Consequently I have never felt impoverished by the requirements of the celibate life, and I certainly hope I haven’t been, and won’t ever be, a “crusty bachelor” - old or otherwise!

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