

PEREGRINATOR

Priesthood in the 21st century

In response to the proposed closure of churches in St Andrews and Edinburgh and elsewhere, a lifelong Catholic, who has asked to remain anonymous, proposes a new way of managing priesthood.

One of the distinguishing features of the Catholic Church is the place it affords to Tradition as a joint source of Revelation along with Scripture. The church has always held that the mind of God for the church, and the world, is revealed through prayerful and divinely inspired reflection on Scripture in the light of historical circumstances and actuality. This discernment of what the Spirit is saying to the church has led over the course of history to the development of the corpus of knowledge and belief expressed most essentially in the formulation of the creeds and, flowing from that, in the whole body of theology, liturgy and church practice. It has also led to the church in every age formulating policies and practices and adopting programmes, sometimes radical, to deal with the challenges that each age has presented. This is an essential implication of the incarnation and of the church's self-understanding.

A good example is the action taken by the Council of Trent, as part of its radical reforming programme, to establish the system for the formation of priests. This was hugely successful in raising the spiritual and intellectual standards of the priesthood and in creating a corpus of clergy of professional standing and authoritative status which has served the church well. But in the unique living organism which the church is, no policy or practice can be immutable or the last word; the Holy Spirit has more to say and always will, until the fulfilment of the last days.

Thus it was that, in spite of what Trent had achieved, in the aftermath of

World War II Pius XII recognised the need to revisit the question of priesthood and ministry to address the growing alienation of the masses from religious practice. His bold experiment, conducted in France, was to have priests immerse themselves as workers in the daily existence of those they sought to evangelise – the Worker Priest Movement. The history of the experiment has been well documented: the point is that it stands as an example of the church responding to the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through the realities of the time.

Being an orthodox Catholic, I believe that the Holy Spirit is speaking to the church still. In relation to priesthood, especially in Western societies, I think that the Holy Spirit is speaking loudly. We have seen an inexorable decline in vocations to the traditional Tridentine model of priesthood and the remorseless demographic is leading to the closure of churches, the combining of parishes and the relentless increase in demand falling on willing shoulders whose ability to carry the burden is being steadily eroded by the passage of years. What is to be done?

Perhaps we should look to Pius XII for a clue. The Priest Worker Movement was part of the church's response to the post-war crisis of faith in the industrial working classes. It sought to address the challenges by taking priests and making them workers. I believe the Holy Spirit is telling the Church in our time is to take workers and make them priests. Every parish community contains individuals ranging across the whole spectrum of work and social function who are

dedicated members of the faith community. They have gifts and skills which they would be willing to put at the service of the church in their parish community. They could be given a process of training and formation to serve in a role appropriate to their ability and individual charisma. St Paul envisaged that this is exactly how parishes should work: 'There is a variety of Gifts but always the same Spirit...' (1 Cor 12: 4-30).

What might be new is how to apply Paul's analysis in our circumstances. We need to look again at the priesthood bequeathed by Trent as it is exercised today. It would appear that our management of the role of the priest differs from Paul's analysis. The priest is a one-man-band. Until relatively recently he did everything. He managed the parish finances and buildings, organised anything that was to be organised, youth work, school work, care of the elderly and the ill and, especially, the celebration and provision of the sacraments. In more recent times, especially since the Second Vatican Council, there has been a move to decentralise the more obviously secular of these functions – finances, maintenance etc – and even some of the more 'priestly' ones – liturgy committees and the like. But even this degree of devolution never let authority or responsibility move very far from the shoulders of the priest. In the present crisis of vocations, it really does seem like rearranging the deckchairs on the bridge of the Titanic. We need to act on an altogether different level in a way that is based on a clear sighted and honest recognition of the needs of the

local church, the parish and diocesan community, the People of God. This will call for courage, as it may require us to move beyond the comfort zone of the church organisation with which we are familiar.

The role of priest in the church as currently managed can only be performed by someone who has undergone a lengthy and rigorous training in a range of key disciplines. But what if we were to *manage it differently*? It is clear that a person could not be licensed to preach unless they had a thorough grounding in the necessary branches of theology or administer the sacrament of confession without a thorough grounding in the necessary disciplines. But what about conferring Baptism? The Church teaches us that anyone can baptise. And what about funerals and marriages? In the latter case, the sacrament is conferred by the marriage partners; the role of the priest is official witness. What about the Sacrament of the Sick and Confirmation? And, at the heart of all this, what about the celebration of the Eucharist; acting as president of the local eucharistic community? Does carrying out these roles on behalf of the faith community require in every case six years training in philosophy and theology and a full time commitment, including celibacy? I think the answer is no, and I believe that the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us that.

If we were to reconfigure our thinking, *not about the nature of priesthood but about how we manage it*, we could envision a structure with a smaller cadre of full-time priests who concentrate on preaching and the sacrament of confession. They would perform those functions within a defined area such as a deanery, and would also carry out other pedagogic functions - in schools, with adult education groups - where a high level of technical knowledge and communication/counselling skills is called for. They would have undergone the necessary length, depth and rigour of training commensurate with their role. The other functions in the local parish community, including sacramental functions, would be delivered by members of that

community who had been identified as suitable in terms of their ability and quality of life and who would be given formation and training appropriate to their role. Those performing sacramental functions would be ordained for that role and would carry out that service for the local faith community as and when required, blending it in with their other duties in life.

What is proposed here is firmly located within the church's understanding of itself and its mission. It is, in short, entirely traditional. The foundation has long existed in church practice, with the distinction between the power conferred at ordination and the right to exercise that power, which is controlled by the church through the local bishop issuing a faculty sheet, 'licensing' the ordained person to carry out the functions of priesthood in the local church. Historically, this control has tended to be exercised in the negative and disciplinary context of a priest being restricted in the performance of the role, for whatever reason. It could as readily be exercised in a positive fashion. This could be tried and reviewed on a pilot project basis.

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The elephant in the room is the issue of celibacy. With the possible exception of the full-time cadre, celibacy would obviously have to be an optional feature of the other ministries. This would enable the flowering of priesthood and parish life envisioned above and would liberate the church from holding a position which seems to me to be essentially indefensible. On

the one hand, we have the clearly enunciated teaching that the church is most fully present, the community of faith most fully realised, when gathered together in the celebration of the Eucharist. And yet, the church opts to deprive faith communities of the Eucharist, rather than allow the Mass to be celebrated by a non-celibate priest. This elevation of celibacy above the Eucharist, making celibacy more important than priesthood, seems to me to be an essentially pagan position. It fits uneasily with a church which contains in its canon of Scripture the Book of Genesis with its proclamation of the inherent goodness of the material world, and which has belief in the incarnation at the heart of its dogma. Celibacy would of course continue to be an option for those called to ministry and would continue to be the source of inspiration and richness in the life of the church which, at best, it always has been.

The question of gender exclusion is another difficult and unavoidable issue, though its resolution is not a *sine qua non* for the changes envisioned above. It may well be that the differentiation of ministerial functions as suggested provide creative possibilities.

The reconfiguring of priesthood along these lines has other practical implications. New formats of training and formation will be required, just as they were after Trent. It will be necessary to identify, draw in and nurture persons with particular aptitudes and skills. Funding should not be such a problem as a number of valuable properties which would now be surplus to requirements can be released to the market (only the full-time cadre will need to be housed and supported financially).

I believe that the energy which such a programme of reform would unleash throughout the local church would be tremendous, a new Pentecost. People know the realities, they know the issues, they are ready for this; what they need is inspired and inspiring courageous leadership. The Holy Spirit is speaking to the Church loud and clear, as the Spirit always has. Those that have ears to hear, let them hear.