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(Fr. Eugene Duffy)

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Towards What Kind of Priest?

Eugene Duffy

THE CULTIC MINISTER

When the Jesuit director in Belvedere College called Stephen Dedalus into the parlour the young man had a strong suspicion of the agenda. The priest got to the point quickly: Have you ever felt that you had a vocation? There followed a proud address by the Jesuit on the awesomeness of the calling which sent a flutter through Stephen's soul.

To receive that call, Stephen, said the priest, is the greatest honour that the Almighty God can bestow upon any man. No king or emperor on this earth has the power of the priest of God. No angel or archangel in heaven, no saint, not even the Blessed Virgin herself, has the power of a priest of God: the power of the keys, the power to bind and loose from sin, the power of exorcism; ... the power, the authority, to make the great God of heaven come down upon the altar and take the form of bread and wine. What an awful power, Stephen!

In a few, short, eloquent sentences the Jesuit had encapsulated the popular understanding of the priesthood which was well enshrined in the Catholic mind at the beginning of the twentieth century, the residue of which is still more deeply rooted in many minds today than one might care to admit, despite the teaching of Vatican II. The real problem is that it is still conditioning the criteria by which students are recruited for the seminary and subsequently, when ordained, appointed to parishes.

The understanding of priesthood so well captured by Joyce emerged to meet the needs of the Church during the Counter-Reformation, even though we can now say, with the benefit of hindsight, that it carried with it an unnecessary oneness. Trent reacted to the objections on the Reformers by stressing

I. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1966), p. 158.

Eugene Duffy is a priest of the diocese of Achonry. He teaches Systematic Theology at All Hallows College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9, and is Head of Formation there.

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those very aspects of the priesthood which were being challenged. The Reformers stressed the priesthood of all the believers and dismissed the notion of sacramental character which distinguished the ordained priest. Trent reacted by restating the reality of the sacramental character, although it did not define what it was. It wished to reaffirm the fact that ordination effects a real change that bestows powers which guarantee the effectiveness of the priesthood in the Church. The stress was on the cultic aspects of the ministry to the detriment of the preached word² and the prophetic aspects of the ministry. To offer the Mass and to forgive sins were regarded as the important duties of the priest.

A SPIRITUALITY FOR THE CULTIC MINISTER

The theological outlook of Trent was added to by the emerging priestly spiritualities of the subsequent centuries. At first eucharistic devotion was cultivated and the daily celebration of Mass encouraged for priests. Personal sanctification was emphasized at the expense of communal liturgical celebration, resulting in a kind of spiritual individualism. The French School in particular compounded the narrowness of Trent by rooting the priesthood of Christ in his divinity thus downplaying his humanity. The ordained priest must then imitate Christ the Priest by emptying himself of his humanity and allow himself to be taken hold of by Christ.³ Through his priesthood the ordained shares in the mystical power of Christ, the mediator between God and the people. All of this contributed to a false exaltation of the ordained and a neglect of other important ecclesial aspects of their ministry, not to mention the separation of clergy and laity.

Other complications were to ensue with a growing emphasis on the hierarchical structuring of the Church. Authority was being centralized increasingly, thus undermining the role of leadership at a local level. The prophetic aspects of ministry were stifled by a growing negativity towards the world and the emerging ideas of the Enlightenment. A fortress mentality developed which helped to concentrate attention on the power and efficacy

2. Trent was concerned about the preaching of the Word and encouraged the giving of homilies on Sundays and major feasts, as well as encouraging pastors to prepare their flocks properly for the worthy celebration of the sacraments. However, the impact of its guidelines in these matters was overshadowed by the agenda created by the emerging priestly spirituality.

3. On the Sulpician contribution to this priestly spirituality see Kenan Osborne, *OFM, Priesthood: A History of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 283-8, where he shows that the intention of Olier was distorted by later redaction among his successors.

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of the sacraments. Even the wonderful works of charity which were performed by the various newly-founded congregations were brought within the control of the hierarchy so that we may now, from our post-Vatican II perspective, wonder if they were not robbed of much of their prophetic potential. The Church succeeded in making little impact on the world after the Industrial Revolution⁴ and this failure is hardly unrelated to its emphasis on structure, control and cult.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SELECTION

If one sees priesthood in the terms outlined above, the qualities which one might look for in a candidate are minimal. It does not require a very learned or dynamic person to administer the sacraments. What is most important is that they are present when their services are required, that they are dependable, prayerful and respectful of the authority which has given them a specific mission. Their own personal creative or dynamic gifts are very secondary. Thus, if we continue to recruit students for the priestly ministry from this pre-Vatican II theological framework our requirements will not draw the natural leaders among youth or the potential leaders of the future. We are more likely to attract passive, conservative and weak candidates. The more of these who come forward and are accepted the more likely it is that the real leaders who may be tempted to respond to a vocation to priestly ministry are likely to be put off by the prospect of joining such a lack-lustre group.

VATICAN II PRESBYTERS

Those responsible for the recruitment of candidates need to look again at the image of priesthood put forward by Vatican II, especially in its decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. First of all it speaks of presbyters rather than priests,⁵ suggesting a shift away from a cultic understanding of ministry. It speaks more of a service of leadership within the Christian community. The identity of the presbyter is as one who stands in a particular relationship to the community and whose very presence is determinative of it being Church. This is expressed most explicitly in his presidency of the eucharistic gathering wherein the Church as mystery is celebrated. Here the presbyter acts in the person of

4. Cf. Liam Ryan, "The Pastoral Challenge of Social Change", in *Good News in a Divided Society* (Papers of the 1991 Annual General Meeting of the National Conference of Priests of Ireland) (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1992), pp. 19-23.

5. The document rarely uses the word *sacerdos* or *sacerdotalis* but instead uses the term *presbyteratus*.

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Christ the Head, who calls and gathers the community to be the sacrament of his presence. The role of the presbyter is to ensure the right ordering of the community's life so that it is more effectively the Body of Christ in the world, the sacrament which finds its outward expression in being a genuine community of disciples of Jesus Christ. The presbyter is, of course, gifted by the Holy Spirit to accomplish this task of leadership in the community, not primarily for his own sanctification. The principal task of the presbyter is to preside over the community, itself a priestly people, to exercise a service of leadership in building up the unity of the Church so that it may, as one, offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Unlike Trent which tended to locate the moment of the establishment of the priesthood in the Last Supper, Vatican II indicated that those called to exercise this ministry were formed and prepared through the whole life and activity of Jesus.⁶ Thus it moved the emphasis away from the sacrificial activity alone. In fact the understanding of the Eucharist itself is also extended beyond the sacrificial only, to see it as the culmination of a life of agape which strengthens the community in its commitment to loving service in and to the world through Christ in the power of the Spirit. It is in such a context and never isolated from it that the presbyter presides at the Eucharist.

SOCIAL AND ECCLESIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since the role of the presbyter is one of ecclesial leadership the mission of the Church must itself be an important determinant of its exercise. Indeed the mission of the Church is itself conditioned, though not exclusively, by the context in which it has been called to live. Recently the Irish Bishops' pastoral, *Work is the Key*, outlined very graphically the social, economic, political and moral environment in which as members of the Church we are called to make a gospel response. There is a massive shadow of unemployment and emigration hanging over the country, affecting hundreds of thousands of families, bringing with it poverty, alienation and dehumanization. The loss of human dignity which ensues contributes to a decline in civic culture and public morality. These realities form the context in which the presbyter of the foreseeable future will exercise his ministry.

Within the Church itself there is the growing awareness among many parishioners of their adult responsibilities for the life and mission of the Church. There are many who are more theologically attuned and spiritually alive than many of their

6. Cf. Paul Bernier, *Ministry in the Church: A Historical and Pastoral Approach* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992), p. 231.

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parish clergy. There is a genuine desire for a greater participation in ministry, especially among women, which must colour the way in which the presbyterate is understood and exercised.

SELECTION FOR THE PRESBYTERATE

All of these considerations are important when it comes to choosing candidates who will have active roles of leadership in the Church well into the next millennium. It will require intelligent, enthusiastic, dynamic and enlightened men of faith to meet these challenges. Therefore, high standards will have to be set for entry into formation programmes. Indeed, if higher standards were in place, might better calibre candidates not apply more often than is the case at present?

In former times many of the most able students in a Leaving Certificate class would apply to join a diocese or religious community. Even though great resources were not available for the formation process, many excellent pastors emerged at the end of six or seven years. There was a sense in which the candidates themselves were very important formators of one another. Peer formation is still an important factor in any formation process but it cannot be effective if there is an imbalance of weak candidates in the group.

It is important therefore that vocation directors, bishops and others responsible for the selection and acceptance of candidates be attentive to certain basic criteria in their discernment process. It is not fair to the candidate or the formation community to put him forward on the understanding that the seminary will sort out his issues for him. To continue to send weak candidates, quickly turns the formation process into a therapeutic exercise. This can hardly be the function of a seminary or a house of formation. Against the background of these comments the following criteria may be worth keeping in mind when a candidate presents himself for selection for the presbyteral ministry.

CRITERIA FOR CONSIDERATION

1. The ideal candidate will be in good physical health. Unless a man is in good health it is not possible for him to meet the demands of the ministry. This raises questions about the acceptance of people with serious physical handicaps or who are of advanced age. If we want cultic ministers the problem is not too serious, if we want dynamic presbyters these are more problematic issues.

2. He must show evidence of having lived a life of faith. This is a significant consideration today given the fact that many young people today come from home or school backgrounds

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where the practice of the faith is weak. There must be evidence of a sense of commitment to the person of Christ and some reasonable appropriation of the ideals of the gospel. Such evidence would be provided by a pattern of prayer, perhaps involvement with some parish based groups, e.g. a folk group, the scouts, the Vincent de Paul Society or YCS. In this context, too, it may be worth noting that someone who has recently converted to Catholicism or has returned after long absence from practice should be encouraged to wait for the initial fervour to cool. Recent converts often come with a great sense of enthusiasm but in fact their appreciation for the role of service involved is usually very limited. Once they hit the harder realities of what is involved in the presbyteral ministry they become disillusioned or else they find it difficult to move on in their faith journey having already made one big step forward. A further growing concern among many seminary rectors at present is the increasing number of conservative people presenting themselves for admission. Their interest is usually in a cultic rather than a prophetic ministry.

3. A future presbyter must be self-motivated and energetic. It is possibly far more alarming that many who seek to enter seminary at present do not have these basic qualities than that the number actually coming forward is so low. Some seem to move towards the ordained ministry when all other avenues have proved too daunting. So one needs to look out for candidates who show the capacity for taking initiative, who are resourceful, who can exercise leadership with imagination and creativity and who can relate comfortably with their peers. Their involvement in sports clubs or other voluntary organizations may be helpful indicators here.

4. The prospective candidate should show an appropriate level of emotional self-awareness. This will obviously be determined by age and experience. One would expect to find a person who is interested in people and capable of relating sensitively to them. Therefore it may be important to know the family background of a candidate. If there has been a history of dysfunctional relationships these will affect the children often giving rise to emotional problems later in life and indeed often hindering any real growth in a process of formation. Sometimes even the desire for ministry may itself be the attempt to resolve the issues of childhood. In recent years the availability of professional psychological assessment has been useful in highlighting such issues and providing guidance on how a candidate if accepted may be helped to overcome difficulties inherited from the past.

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5. As a significant number of applicants today are older than those of yesteryear it is important that they be able to show evidence of all stages of life's journey to date. The hidden years may have important tales to tell. Over those years responsibilities may have been assumed or avoided which may impede any real formation taking place. There may be responsibilities to children, to business partners, even to a spouse. These are issues which need to be checked out carefully before admission.

6. Finally, but not insignificantly, a certain academic standard is necessary if good leaders are to be formed. If presbyters are to be people who are well informed leaders capable of deep discernment and sound judgement there seems to be no substitute for a reasonably high level of academic achievement. This is becoming a more urgent consideration that is currently being recognized and will continue to be so as long as more and more people in the community become theologically, spiritually and socially more aware.

CONCLUSION

Proper selection procedures need to be put in place at a national level to ensure the provision of good leaders for the Church of the future. The current selection conferences run by the CMAC for the recruitment of counsellors and the criteria they use in their selection may be a helpful model from which to start. The task of discerning candidates who present themselves for the presbyterate is an important and responsible one in the Church today. Every care needs to be taken to ensure that good candidates are helped to find their way towards ordained ministry and that those who are not suitable are also helped to find a worthwhile and fulfilling role in the mission of the Church.