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I Will Give You Shepherds

-The Formation of Priests

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent article in the pages of this journal Brendan Hoban, writing about the priesthood in Ireland today, commented: the clerical world that we inhabit is falling apart.¹ Few would disagree and one hopes that not a few might cheer. Clericalism obscures the reality of the ordained ministry in the Church. Clericalism is a kind of club mentality where the interests, privileges and status of the clergy are promoted and safeguarded. It exudes an hierarchical and authoritarian view of leadership and gives the impression that the clergy can monopolise and control the work of the Spirit. Clericalism tends to put grace in short supply.

The theology of priesthood which has been emerging since Vatican II puts forward a very different vision of what the ordained ministry is in the Church. This vision is embodied for the most part in the document *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the post-Synodal Exhortation of John Paul II On the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day, which was eventually published in March of this year. It is the fruit of the deliberations of the Synod of Bishops of 1990. The focus of this article is not specifically on its theology of priesthood but on the question of priestly formation. However, a few comments on its understanding of the priesthood will be necessary to contextualise its positions on formation.

A VISION OF PRIESTHOOD

The understanding of priesthood which this document sets out is an endorsement of the current understanding of ordained ministry to be found in mainstream Catholic theology. It does not isolate the priest from the call to ministry extended to all the

1. 'What Are We At?', *The Furrow*, September 1992, p. 495.

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faithful by virtue of their baptism. Neither does it confine the ministry of the priest to a cultic domain creating an aura of holy officialdom around him. It certainly encourages a collegial sense of responsibility not just among priests and bishop but among priests and others called to service in the Christian community. Priestly service is one which empowers all the baptized to discover Christ who is already at work in them and among them, to reflect that loving presence to others and to celebrate it with joy in their eucharistic gathering.

One will find here no justification for clericalism but the call to humble service following the example of Christ in the fullness of his humanity. Indeed, significantly, the vision of priesthood begins with a reminder of the humanity of God's minister: 'he comes from the human community and is at its service, imitating Jesus Christ who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin'.² This starting point sets the agenda for what is to follow, because the humanity of the priest is given priority at every stage in its discussion on formation. Human formation will have to be an important consideration if the one who is to preside over the community is to be a man of: 'faithfulness, integrity, consistency, wisdom, a welcoming spirit, friendliness, goodness of heart, decisive firmness in essentials, freedom from overly subjective viewpoints, personal disinterestedness, patience, an enthusiasm for daily tasks, confidence in the value of the hidden workings of grace as manifested in the simple and the poor'.³ It is against this background, then, that the task of formation is presented.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF PRIESTLY FORMATION

Although this letter is attempting to speak to the whole Church, the observations which it makes on the socio-cultural context in which formation is to take place are as true for the Irish situation as for any other part of the world. The positive and negative factors which it lists are important considerations for all formators. They are, indeed, considerations of which most are vaguely aware but rarely follow through in all their implications when designing formation programmes in seminaries. There is, on the positive side, a great thirst for justice and peace, a concern for creation and nature, a growing desire that human dignity be respected, that international solidarity be fostered and that the quest for genuine meaning and values in life be pursued. Within the Church, too, these same desires are manifest as well as a growing desire for a deeper appreciation of the Scriptures and a

2. *Pas/ores Dabo Votis*, no. 5.

3. No. 15.

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willingness to give witness to the faith amidst persecution and tribulation. On the negative side, the following phenomena are to be taken into account: a rationalism which renders human reason insensitive to the possibility of Revelation; a desperate defence of personal subjectivity, giving rise to an individualism which is closed to true human relationships; 'a sort of practical and existential atheism which coincides with a secularist outlook on life and human destiny'.⁴ In addition there is the break-up of the family and a distortion of the true meaning of human sexuality. There is also the poor formation in the faith of many presenting themselves for ministry and among others a subjectivism in matters of faith. All that is said here could be applied to the Irish context without much modification.

HUMAN FORMATION

Consistent with the starting point of the document, viz. the humanity of the priest, the first area of formation to be attended to is that of human formation. 'The whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation'.⁵ This starting point is justified by everyday experience where the priest is constantly dealing with individual human beings. It is also justified by a consideration of the Incarnation where God works through the human perfection of Jesus as a way of expressing the Divine compassion for people. The effectiveness of the ministry of the priest depends on his humanity and the extent to which that has been developed and refined: 'in order that his ministry may be humanely as credible and acceptable as possible, it is important that the priest should mould his human personality in such a way that it becomes a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ the Redeemer of man' [sic].⁶ Future priests are then called upon to cultivate the human qualities which are necessary for the ministry. They are to be educated in truth and love, in justice and compassion so that they be men of integrity, balanced in judgement and behaviour. Given the nature of life today for many living in loneliness and isolation in the growing urban settlements of the world one of the most necessary and effective ways of bringing the Good News to them is through personal contact and genuine human love. This requires that the future minister be adequately prepared to be a person of affective maturity. It means that he must have worked on all aspects of his person, the physical, the psychic and the spiritual. A further

4. No. 7.

5. No. 43.

6. Ibid.

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urgency is added to this if the priest is to live a life of celibacy. To live the celibate life he needs to be a man of deep inner freedom, convinced about the truth and meaning of his own existence, 'capable of esteem and respect in interpersonal relationships between men and women'. Integral to the formation in freedom must be formation of the moral conscience of the person.

Until relatively recently most seminaries have done well in providing for the spiritual and academic formation of their students. Their success in the areas of human development and pastoral formation has been less impressive and of these the human development is still the poor relation. This Synod Exhortation sends out a very strong message about where the priorities lie. Each time the letter mentions the components of a formation programme, whether for pre-seminary candidates, for the seminary or the ongoing formation of priests, the first topic to be mentioned is human development. This is significant when one compares it with the Decree on Priestly Formation (*Optatam Totius*) from Vatican II where there is only passing reference to the need for 'a due degree of human maturity' to be developed in seminarians.

Developments since the Council both in society and in the Church all point to the need for human development and integration. There is a growing awareness that if a person has not reached a certain level of personal maturity there can be no further spiritual growth. Thus one could feel a deep theological love for the community which one is serving but be unable to communicate it due to emotional immaturity. One could possibly identify with the role of the priest, even with the Roman collar, but be incapable of self-giving in any genuine sense. If affective maturity has not been fostered the minister may find himself in many relationships which are in reality superficial and in the long run generate loneliness, frustration and its attendant problems. Many of the difficulties with which priests struggle today have more to do with issues of personal development than with a lack of faith or theological expertise.

Seminaries will need to take up this issue as a matter of urgency if they are to provide the Church with competent ministers for the future. Personnel need to be trained and allocated in generous ratios if this important task is to be accomplished. Seminary structures need to be reviewed and the question asked if large numbers of males living in cosseted isolation is the ideal environment for cultivating personal and affective maturity. There are well qualified people already available for this work and they are not, nor do they have to be, ordained

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in order to be effective. Indeed the synodal document encourages the employment of lay people, men and women, in the seminary. As more and more seminaries open up to enrolling students for courses in theology and pastoral care a more healthy atmosphere is being created in which relational maturity is fostered and the practice of collaborative ministry is established as part of the formation programme .

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The opening statement on spirituality acknowledges that human formation finds its completion in spiritual formation . So, from the outset it is agreed that a priestly spirituality must be an incarnational one. Secondly, the document reaffirms the point that the priest shares with every baptized Christian the call to holiness and to a participation in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. What it has to say of spirituality can be applied to all the faithful : that they cultivate a deep friendship with Jesus; that they continue to search for him; that he is to be found primarily in reflection on the word of God, through participation in the liturgy of the Church and in the service of charity, especially to the poor.⁷ This friendship with Jesus evokes a response: prayer. From a genuine appreciation of prayer as conversation with Christ the priest is called 'to be a teacher of prayer.' Here again the document is raising an important expectation of future priests. No longer is it adequate that they have a good life of prayer for themselves; they are being asked to lead others in the way of prayer. Priests still tend to think, perhaps because of a seminary experience of spiritual directors as doctors of souls, that guiding people in prayer is the preserve of the specialist. This problem was further compounded by the fact that seminarians were neither encouraged nor helped to be prayer guides to their communities, except in leading public liturgical prayer. The thrust of this synodal exhortation is an invitation to review the issue. The future priest needs to be given confidence and help in leading others into the ways of prayer.

In this context, too, the document highlights the fact that spiritual formation 'involves seeking Christ in people'. This is an obvious but important point when taken in conjunction with another issue raised in the same section: 'Students must clearly understand that it is not their lot in life to lord it over others and enjoy honours, but to devote themselves completely to the service of God and the pastoral ministry'.⁸ In other words, it is important for priests and future priests to realise that God has

7. No. 46.

8. No. 49.

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already been working in the lives of those to whom they minister and that their task is very often to enable people to see the marvels being wrought in and through them. This requires patient and humble attentiveness on the part of the pastor, not the presumption that 'Father knows best'. This attitude can be fostered in an atmosphere where students are learning side by side with others who are deeply committed to living the Christian life not necessarily as ordained ministers.

INTELLECTUAL FORMATION

The third area of formation considered by *Pastores Dabo Vobis* is the intellectual. It justifies the need for a rigorous intellectual formation on personal and pastoral grounds. The priest must be able to give a credible and coherent account of the faith which is within him. He must also be capable of communicating that faith in the public forum, in the course of his pastoral ministry, in a way which is capable of taking into account the contemporary issues with which the wider culture confronts his flock. There is a demand for a contemporaneity in the presentation of the gospel. A preparation for this task is assisted by a good grounding in philosophy and the human sciences as well as in theology itself. The document addresses itself to another important question for those engaged in the formation of future pastors, namely, 'the relationship between high scientific standards in theology and its pastoral aim'. It indicates that these two concerns need not be in opposition. Rather they are but two characteristics of the theological enterprise. Its statement is worth quoting in full:

In fact the pastoral nature of theology does not mean that it should be less doctrinal or that it should be completely stripped of its scientific nature. It means, rather, that it enables future priests to proclaim the gospel message through the cultural modes of their age and to direct pastoral action according to an authentic theological vision.⁹

Under the heading of intellectual formation other issues of current concern are raised for consideration in the seminary programme: the relationship between the magisterium and the theologian, the problem of evangelization of cultures and the inculturation of the message of faith.

PASTORAL FORMATION

The whole formation programme in a seminary must have a 'fundamentally pastoral character'. It is geared to enabling the priest

9. No. 55.

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to be a genuine shepherd of the flock modelled on the life and ministry of Christ the good shepherd. 'Pastoral theology is not just an art. Nor is it a set of exhortations, experiences and methods. It is theological in its own right, because it receives from the faith the principles and criteria for the pastoral action of the Church in history'¹⁰ Again the document says:

Pastoral formation certainly cannot be reduced to a mere apprenticeship, aiming to make the candidate familiar with some pastoral techniques. The seminary which educates must seek really and truly to initiate the candidate into the sensitivity of being a shepherd, in the conscious and mature assumption of his responsibilities, in the interior habit of evaluating problems and establishing priorities and looking for solutions on the basis of honest motivations of faith and according to the theological demands inherent in pastoral work.¹¹

The document makes a practical suggestion about the pastoral placement of students in formation. It suggests the parish as the ideal setting in which to gain valuable experience of the kind of problems and issues which they will encounter in their future ministry. Important, too, in this context is the fact that in their pastoral formation students would learn to value the gifts of the lay faithful, to work in close cooperation with them and discover how to draw forth their charisms in the service of the entire community. This has very serious implications for any formation programme. It calls for close contact between those preparing for the ordained ministry and others who are active in the service of the Christian community and anxious to promote the reign of God in the world. It surely throws a question mark over the kind of closed seminary communities to which we have become accustomed. It is hard to see how students will be enabled to value the contribution of other members of the Church to its ministry unless they have learned it through guided reflection from an early stage in their formation side by side with other committed Christians.

THE SEMINARY ITSELF

The document reaffirms the value of the traditional major seminary and describes it as:

an educational community in progress, . . . a continuation in the Church of the apostolic community gathered about Jesus . . . an original experience of the Church life . . . a community built on deep friendship and charity, so that it

10. N

o. 57.

II. No. 58.

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can be considered a true family living in joy ... a community of disciples.....¹²

This certainly sets a very high ideal for each seminary community. The staff must set the standard by the life of communion which they have among themselves if they are to be in any sense genuine, credible examples and guides for those in whose formation they are partaking. The tone set there will be inevitably contagious. The concern expressed is that it be a community which accompanies specific individuals who are moving towards a choice and commitment to precise ideals of life. This in turn calls for sensitivity and flexibility. The seminary is no sausage factory turning out identical products. Rather, it is enabling unique individuals to discover the action of the Spirit in their lives and enabling them to have the courage to respond appropriately. In most seminaries the student's rate of progress is determined by his academic achievement. It does not necessarily follow that those who have a normal rate of development in academic matters will be making equal progress on the level of human development, affective maturity, or spiritual insight. This calls for a review of the criteria on which students are advanced towards major orders. More attention needs to be given to the areas of personal and spiritual development in the assessment of readiness to assume the responsibilities of ordained ministry.

A concern is expressed about the readiness of many students today to enter the major seminary given the changed cultural and faith background from which they come. Karl Rahner was raising this very issue in Germany almost thirty years ago.¹³ His concerns then have still a very contemporary ring for us in the Irish context today. Our seminary structures and programmes cannot go on as if nothing had changed in the type of candidate presenting himself for formation. In view of this *Pastores Dabo Vobis* suggests that students be given adequate preparation in the human, intellectual and spiritual areas of life before being admitted to a major seminary. Religious orders and congregations have already begun to move in this direction. Perhaps diocesan vocation commissions need to investigate this possibility more seriously.

In most seminaries today there is a growing number of 'people of adult age', people who have had some years of experience of lay life and professional involvement. Of these the document says: 'It is not always possible and often it is not even convenient to invite adults to follow the educative itinerary of the Major

12. No. 60.

13. Cf. 'Reflections on the Contemporary Intellectual Formation of Future Priests', *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI, pp. 113-138.

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Seminary'. This is an area in need of further reflection and the question needs to be asked, at what point does 'this adult age' begin. In this context the question also needs to be asked, at what point should candidates cease to be admitted. If the priest is to be a dynamic enabler and leader of the Christian community are not his physical condition and energies considerations to be taken into account?

The employment and cooperation of the lay faithful, and especially of women, is encouraged in the formation of future priests. This is an important consideration today, as there are many of those who are not ordained who have skills and competencies urgently required in the seminary which are not possessed by the ordained members of the staff. There are, for instance, few priests well qualified in the area of human development and counselling, but there are plenty of lay people well qualified to carry out this important work in the seminary. However, scarcity of ordained personnel should not be the motive. Where there are people with the skills required they should be engaged, thus setting a sound precedent of fruitful cooperation between the ordained and non-ordained in carrying forward the mission of the Church. If students learn to value the contribution the lay faithful make to their own formation they will be encouraged to draw out the gifts and charisms of the faithful with whom they work in their future ministry. The example and experience of their contribution will be more important than any study of the theory.

This section of the exhortation ends by noting the valuable contribution to the formation of priests being made by many apostolic associations and movements in the Church to which many candidates for the priesthood may have belonged. Young people who come from these should not see the seminary as uprooting them from the values and friendships which they have encountered in them. They should be helped to build on what they have already received from them by way of formation especially from their spirituality. This agrees well with the underlying assumption that the candidate himself is ultimately the main agent in his own formation. It is up to him to be open to the Spirit uniquely at work in his own life, to the guidance of the whole People of God and to the direction being offered by the formation community.

THE ONGOING FORMATION OF PRIESTS

The exhortation concludes with a section on the ongoing formation of priests. It alerts priests to the importance of this because of the constant need for personal growth, inner conversion,

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professional updating, and ultimately because their communities have a right to pastors who are up to meeting the demands of the moment, priests who are familiar with the signs of the times, who have studied them and who are capable of addressing the word of God in a credible and meaningful way. It is, therefore a matter of pastoral charity that priests engage in ongoing formation. As regards the approach to be followed, it outlines the same plan for this formation as it did for those in initial formation. The human aspect of development is again given priority, followed by spiritual, intellectual and pastoral aspects. There is no age group excepted from the need for renewal. Priests in the first years of their ministry need special care and the statement here is strong:

In order to accompany the young priests in this first delicate phase of their life and ministry, it is very opportune, and perhaps even absolutely necessary nowadays, to create a suitable support structure, with appropriate guides and teachers.¹⁴

Priests in their middle years need help too, as they cope with the constant demands of very active ministry, the burdens of routine activities and the possibility of a resignation to disillusionment. Ongoing formation needs to be provided also for the elderly, who are a growing number in many parts of the Church. Here it is not a matter of educational renewal, but a reassurance and confirmation of the great contribution which they have made to the Christian community over a lifetime of dedicated service.

CONCLUSION

This post-synodal exhortation provides an enlightened and helpful guideline for all concerned with the question of priestly formation. It gives scope for fresh and imaginative approaches to formation in terms of content, structure and approach to be followed. It is truly revolutionary in the emphasis and priority which it gives to the human and personal development dimensions of priestly formation. One can only hope that the recommendations set out by the Pope will be taken seriously by those who are in a position to implement them. If they are implemented they may go a long way towards helping to lift the cloud of 'resigned disillusionment' which has enveloped far too many priests already.

14. No .
76.