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Joe McDonald

Your Son a Priest?

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There was a time in this country when the news that a member of the family was going of to become a priest was greeted with excitement, joy and pride. That day is gone. We live in a changed, and rapidly changing, world. Irish society moves further away from the Church, and this may well prove to be a good thing not only for society but for the Church as well. The Church will survive. This is not said in an arrogant or triumphalist way but from the perspective that the Church will endure because it is rooted in Christ. That said, it will emerge as a very different Church. It will be interesting to see what the role of the priest will be in that new reality. What is more pressing at the moment is a question in relation to the promotion of vocations today. Put bluntly is it right that we continue to invite young men to priesthood? If the answer to this question, no matter how tentative it is, is yes, then it raises another question, and that is, what precisely are we inviting these men into? I mean this both, in terms of formation, and in terms of ministry, or working life?

Even as recently as ten years ago the idea of a call to priesthood may still have passed the 'respect' test whatever about the 'relevance' one. In other words many young people would have said, whilst they may not consider the vocation, or be convinced of its relevance, they retained some residual respect for it. Passing the 'respect' test today may not prove so straightforward. It is true there remains much respect for individual priests on the ground. Many will acknowledge great work done in schools and hospitals. Most people see the extraordinary contribution made by the Church in the area of social justice and we remain justifiably proud of our missionary outreach.

However, to dispute that there is a crisis is surely to be in denial. There is in fact a serious crisis in the Church and most specifically in the Irish Church. This crisis manifests itself in rapidly dwindling Mass attendance, the widespread rejection of core Church teaching, and a complete dearth of vocations. Part of our trouble is a 'crisis within the crisis' in terms of leadership. This is not to deny that

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we have gifted, intelligent and perhaps even holy men within the episcopate. I have genuine respect, and even affection for a number of them. Sadly I find it hard to find a prophet among them, and consequently the seldom time we hear from them we do not hear a prophetic edge to their voice. I wonder about the criteria for the appointment of our bishops. Surely two core values are essential, that of having a deep personal relationship with Jesus, and to be able to speak in a dynamic and attractive way as inspired by God's Holy Spirit. However the leadership crisis is for another day, and our main focus here is the priesthood.

Whilst acknowledging much that is good within the serving priesthood this is not the full picture. The reality is we are failing to attract candidates for priesthood. We need to have the courage to ask why this is so. There are those who point out some 'signs of hope'. I think we need to be careful here. This may well be a dangerous illusion. There is the emergence of a 'restorationist' model of Church. It harks back, unhealthily, to the past, and is often over zealous in its use of the law and more often than not lacks compassion. The two million young people gathered in Kraków both inspire and give me hope. Is this about the love of Jesus? I have no doubt it is, and it also reflects a real spiritual hunger, but is it a vote of confidence in the institutional church? I am not so sure. It would be easy here to slip into the unhelpful quagmire of debate around conservatism and liberalism. This has the seeds of schism. It not only divides us, it rips us apart. Are the bigger collar and the cassock a reliable measure of the priest? People do not fall for the cool, hip Fr. Trendy, yet many of them are frightened and suspicious of 'Father' in full battle dress. Surely we are a magnanimous-enough Church comfortably to accommodate, nay embrace, the priest who values collar, cassock and incense and the priest who presents in open-neck shirt, sandals and wearing a Taizé Cross in his lapel. Surely the measure of the priest is deeper than this? What is at the heart of priesthood? I propose five core values of priesthood today. 1. A profound, unique personal relationship with the Jesus we meet in the Gospels. 2. A knowledge of and comfort with one's own identity, including, and specifically, one's sexuality. 3. An ability to relate. 4. A clear appreciation of ministry, the life of the priest, as service. 5. To be the prophetic voice, creative and courageous in passionately proclaiming the Kingdom of God and its values, in a way that does not compromise the Gospel truth but mirrors the compassion of Jesus.

- It is not possible to have a profound relationship with the Jesus of the Gospels unless we spend substantial periods in his presence every week. This is essentially silent, wordless.

THE FURROW

- This self-knowledge regarding one's identity requires hard work. I am shaped by parents and siblings, where and when I grew up, and key life experiences. As a priest I need to know my sexual identity. I need to know my orientation and my drive, and whatever about befriending all this, at the very least that I am not enslaved by it.
- Essential to priesthood is the ability to relate to all kinds of people. To do this healthily we need to be aware of our own fears and prejudices. Perhaps we need to identify our latent racism or homophobia and be resolved with the necessary help to ensure it does not damage our ministry.
- True ministry is service, and yet much of our behaviour betrays something quite different. The enemy here is clericalism, in its broadest sense. This includes behaving as if priesthood is an élite but is also very much about the scourge of ambition within clergy.
- This represents the great deficiency in priesthood today. It appears to me that this deficiency is directly related to clericalism and to a lesser degree to how we choose people for leadership.

Clearly if we accept the above then it has ramifications for those training for priesthood. Perhaps we should consider a freeze on inviting candidates for priesthood for two or three years? This would allow us time and space to address some of the above. Surely parents and families can be forgiven for having some unease if a loved one was to declare an interest in priestly life? If our faith communities are not producing priests then we must look again at our communities. Is it not time we questioned the integrity of promoting vocations? Do we deserve vocations at the moment? Are those who have the courage and generosity to try it as a possible way of life, the better for the experience? Are they more self-aware, freer and happier? Or are they left crushed, dealing with a legacy of rejection? Is there any after-care? Let us not scapegoat the seminary in this. This is about the faith community. Maybe if we listened to the whisper of the Spirit we might see the body of work we need to do. Perhaps a little repentance, and a little more reform might in fact see some renewal, particularly in the area of vocations to the priesthood.