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*The* FURROW

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*Paddy Sweeney*

Supporting  
Priests

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# Supporting Priests

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Paddy Sweeney

Over the past twenty five years, there has been a growing interest in the issue of the support of priests. Year by year the interest fluctuates. It intensifies when tragedy strikes in the life of a priest, when a priest surprises colleagues or parishioners by leaving ministry, when a priest unexpectedly becomes ill, or the dearth of vocations to priesthood makes itself felt.

For the past fifteen years it has been my privilege to be involved in the pastoral care of priests. The editor of *The Furrow* has invited me to share thoughts and ideas about supporting priests which are based on that experience. I will begin by introducing myself, then set out how I attempt to serve and support priests and finally share thoughts as to how support for priests can be developed.

A word of caution. This is a very broad topic which can only be touched upon here, given the constraints of space, yet hopefully this reflection might contribute to some thinking, discussion, and action. I must also caution that what I offer is a particular 'take' on the topic, others will approach it in quite different ways. My approach is shaped by my personal journey in priesthood, my training, professional experiences, and the contexts within which I work.

## INTRODUCING MYSELF

I am a diocesan priest, ordained in 1969, forty-seven years ago. Since ordination I have been teacher/chaplain in a Vocational School, director of a residential centre for troubled and troublesome adolescents, worked in a number of parishes and then fifteen years ago received my current appointment, which has never had a title, but the letter of appointment said that I was to engage 'in the pastoral care of priests'. Like all diocesan priests I had training in philosophy, theology, spirituality and pastoral practice. In addition, during my time as director of a residential centre, in order to upskill myself for my task I had taken a training in what is known

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as systemic psychotherapy, also known as family therapy, at the Mater Hospital in Dublin, and later had the opportunity to take advanced training as a psychotherapist at the Tavistock Clinic in London, one of Britain's main psychotherapy training centres.

### DEFINING THE TASK

When first appointed I had to decide how to engage with my task and in that regard certain considerations weighed heavily upon me.

I was anxious that 'pastoral care' would reach out to priests generally, to the many not just the few who were severely distressed, the many whose burdens were borne very privately and had not attracted the attention of parishioners, colleagues or leaders.

I was keen to see that priests were not labelled, not pathologised, that their struggles were normalised, seen as the norm not the exception.

I was also very aware of the fact that the struggles of an individual had a context and this must also be taken into account and I was particularly keen to see that what I was offering was, and was seen to be supportive and not a tool of control.

### FIRST STEPS

I embarked on my venture by writing to all the priests working in the Dublin Archdiocese introducing myself, saying a little about my new role, my training and qualifications and then defining my function. I said that I could provide counselling, psychotherapy and referral, but that above all I could provide something I called 'Supportive Conversation'. I pointed out that priests wanting to avail themselves of this service should contact me directly, that the conversations would be confidential, but not absolutely confidential, because the norms of good practice relating to the disclosure of a crime or serious risk to the individual or another would be adhered to. I pointed out that the authorities might suggest to men to come and talk to me, but that no one could be compelled to come. I also made clear that no information would transfer from me to the authorities, unless the individual wished it and explicitly mandated me to share information. This again was not an absolute commitment, but a relative one bearing in mind norms of good practice as set out by the authorities in state and church.

'Supportive Conversation' I explained was a term I use, because of a strongly held belief that everybody's journey through life requires them to negotiate many challenges, challenges arising from a loss experienced, a significant and difficult change of appointment, a trying relationship encountered, ill health, hurts endured, faith and commitments shaken, or just wear and tear. At

such times heads can drop; energy deplete, self confidence gets shaken. Repeatedly in life such challenges must be faced, and usually with some effort and help from friends are successfully dealt with. Sometimes however it is harder, challenges continue and do not seem amenable to solution, and often there is the temptation to embrace solutions that only amplify the difficulties and more serious problems are spawned. In such situations we all can do with conversation that enables us to break free from what entraps us and enables us to move forward. Often it is easier to have those conversations with people who are at an emotional distance from us.

To experience challenges and to need to talk about them is normal and part and parcel of the human condition, indeed a gateway to growth and development. I was very keen to normalise the difficult experiences of priests and to place such difficulties in a non pathological context.

#### THE RESPONSE

In the first week, after circulating the letter there were several enquiries. Over the first year many came to talk, usually beginning by saying they were drawn by the concept of 'supportive conversation'

After a first introductory conversation the priest was given options. He could continue to talk with me or we could make a referral. The great majority opted to continue talking with me, though in a few cases it was necessary to advise men to involve other professionals, and to assist them in taking that step.

Fifteen years later this work of 'supportive conversation' continues and seems to make a contribution to the wellbeing of our priests.

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#### WHAT IS TALKED ABOUT?

So what are the distresses that trigger priests to make contact and seek conversation. The range is very varied, and there are no issues that stand out above all others, and certainly very little that would make sensational media headlines.

Some priests seek conversation who are experiencing anxiety and other difficult emotions because they are about to receive or have received a change of appointment.

Research shows that major changes in life can set off a great deal of stress, e.g. change of job, change of house, change of work colleagues and of those one serves. A change of appointment for a priest involves not one, but all these elements.

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For others distress is generated by work overload. It becomes more acute if a priest perceives that he is overloaded while colleagues appear to him to be far less burdened, and also when a priest must shoulder the work of a colleague absent through serious illness and this extra burden seems unacknowledged by those in leadership. In such situations resentment, hurt and feelings of abandonment can seep in and overlay the pressure of extra work.

Everyone needs to feel that they matter, that they make a contribution, that their work makes a difference. Many priests today are wondering if their work makes a difference. They expend a huge amount of energy, on sacramental preparation, on weddings, and funerals. People do acknowledge that the priest's efforts make a difference but very often not the difference the priest wishes to make. Priests' efforts are best rewarded when parishioners are growing in discipleship of the Lord, but sadly this is often not apparent, the sacramental event is instead a social and personal celebration, not a spiritual moment.

Very many conversations have been with those distressed because they are embroiled in conflicts – conflicts with other priests with whom they must collaborate; conflicts with or within parish councils and with boards of management of schools; conflicts with church workers, conflicts with authority, and of course inner conflicts – conflicts between who a priest is and who he wants to be or should be.

There have been conversations with men suffering from serious illnesses; some of these conversations are about helping the men to come to terms with the illness. With others the conversations are about helping them to discern and negotiate with the authorities and others regarding what can be their contribution to church life in the future – a contribution that is meaningful and satisfying, a contribution that is manageable for someone chronically ill and yet a contribution that does not put others under too many burdens.

Conversations have been about bereavement and losses of various kinds. Often the loss is the death of parents and siblings. As Catholic priests do not marry, the death of parents, especially the death of the second parent and the dissolution of the family home, can be very upsetting, as can the death of a brother or sister with whom the priest has had extensive contact, at Christmas, holiday time, and times of crisis when a confidant is needed.

But there have been lots of conversations about other losses: loss of reputation through diocesan gossip, loss of reputation through false allegations, loss of goodwill in parishes due to decisions that had to be made.

Priests at times feel compelled to review their decision to become priests. These men seek help in discerning how to go forward,

whether to opt to leave the ministry or to stay; if they opt to stay how to deal with the situations that triggered the whole review, and if they go, they need to talk through the transition involved as they journey into a new life.

Distress enters the lives of priests because of the environment within which we live. Our environment until recently allowed us to be people of influence not just in ecclesial matters, but in the public square, in social and cultural arenas. People admired our choice of life, our sacrifices, our commitment, our contribution. This has changed, priests have less and less influence, are listened to less and less, priests' life choices and life style are seen increasingly as anachronistic, and what priests most want to offer, the Word of God, seems less and less heard. Worse still some priest feel shame, shame because of the child sexual abuse scandals and other Church scandals, and feel victimised by the attitude of many to these scandals. This sea change in the environment leaves some priests quite stressed and distressed, and needing support.

Priests seek conversation to discuss the challenges that are thrown up by their effort to live out faithfully their commitment to the celibate life, especially in a world that less and less values such a life style. For some the challenge is achieving a balance between healthy friendships and celibate living, for some it is about preservation or repair of boundaries, for some it is about integrating sexuality healthily, for some it is about dealing with the new challenges presented by the internet.

All the reasons for distress described here and many others like loneliness, hurts endured, compassion fatigue, loss of vitality, poor quality accommodation, financial worries, family worries generate pain and negative emotions and have led to a request for supportive conversation.

And there is always the tendency to handle stresses badly, to use comfort eating, excessive drinking, gambling, excessive absenteeism from work, isolating of oneself and excessive use of internet as ways of soothing pain and obtaining relief. These responses of course in time spawn a new layer of problems and these too have at various times been the trigger for some of the conversations that I have had.

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#### FINDING SUPPORT

We can now turn to some consideration of what supports priests and assists them to go on in an effective way, and in a way that is satisfying for themselves. Support for priests can take very many forms and it is not within the scope of this article to consider them

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all. I will touch on a few areas, which, given my ministry to priests seem to me very important and worth considering.

### THE FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORT

When considering the issue of support of priests, especially support at the times of trouble, I am attracted by the 21st chapter of St John's Gospel.

In this narrative the final events of the earthly life of Jesus have taken place. The disciples had found the cost of discipleship far too great; they had abandoned and betrayed Jesus. They were floundering, confused, likely traumatised. They leave Jerusalem and head back to Galilee. Their ministry seems to them to be over, and a group of them are trying to pick up the pieces of their lives by returning to their trade – fishing. It is night time, the optimal time for fishing, but in John's gospel night is the time when dark and chaotic forces hold sway, which probably resonates with their states of mind. Interestingly they go to the work they were good at, but don't seem to make any headway. Is it that there are no fish or is a metaphor for the loss of competence and confidence they have suffered?

After a frustrating and fruitless night, they head to shore. Near land they see a stranger, who calls to them to throw the net once more. They do, and with a wonderful result.

It triggers John's memory. He recalls that when there was scarcity and Jesus was at hand, there was abundance. He remembers times when things looked impossible, but Jesus was present and the impossible became possible. He thought of times when all was dark and dangerous, and Jesus was there, and light overcame the darkness. Suddenly it clicks for John, the dark is lightening, the impossible is becoming possible, the scarcity is replaced by abundance here in the nets. It is because the Lord is with them. He is the stranger, his support is with them.

When I reflect on this passage the basic truth comes home again to me, the truth I was told again and again from the moment I entered the seminary, the basic truth that is so hard to get into my head. Our biggest support in ministry is the presence of the Lord, engagement with the Lord, daily interaction with him. In a word we must be people who pray constantly.

The American priest psychologist, Stephen Rossetti published a book in 2011 titled *Why Priests Are Happy*. The book is an account of a survey that he and his team at Catholic University in Washington undertook. In the wake of the scandals there had been a lot of speculation inside and outside the Church about the morale and state of mind of priests. The survey set out to find answers and 3,500 priests were questioned.

Put briefly it emerged that priests were indeed happy, that they were emotionally in a better place than other caring professionals, that they were experiencing better mental health and tested better when tested for burnout, although a worrying feature of the survey was the finding that a higher than average number of priests in the first decade after ordination were struggling.

The survey sought to identify factors that correlated with wellness in priests and a very significant finding was that ‘priests who pray more, were less emotionally exhausted, less depressed, less lonely, better able to deal with stress, less obese, had better mental health scores and lower burn out scores’ (Rosetti, 2011).

The survey reported that 20% of the priests surveyed spent on average an hour per day in prayer, 20% prayed very little and 60% were somewhere in between. Best were the elderly and least good the middle aged.

The results of the survey would indicate that we priests must try to pray for one hour per day. Not only the celebration of Mass, but meditative praying and a slow reflective reading of the Divine Office might be included.

In addition to cultivating and maintaining this practice I believe that we also should cultivate the practice of constantly deepening our knowledge and love of Scripture, through private reading, attendance at short courses and using the scripture readings of the Sunday and weekday Liturgy consistently in our prayer.

A cursory reading of St Luke’s Gospel shows us that the great support that Jesus drew on in his life and ministry, was that of engagement with his Father, all those times, at high and low moments when he was found alone in prayer

We ignore this support at our peril and it would be foolish to become involved in prescribing all sorts of other forms of support, however valuable, while ignoring what ought to be our foundational support.

#### SOMEONE TO TALK TO

From time to time an advertisement appears on television, which shows a mother trying to feed her toddler who is being rather uncooperative. She becomes tense and uneasy. Suddenly the child takes a spoonful of his cereal and lands it on to the face of his mother. For a second the camera lingers on her face. It registers pain, shock, annoyance, hurt, a whole kaleidoscope of emotions in a couple of seconds. This advertisement always reminds me of the work of Donald Winnicott a major figure in the world of psychoanalysis and psychiatry for much of the twentieth century, someone whose work is still influential. Winnicott devoted much of his life to studying the bonding between parents and children,



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exploring how good attachments are formed and what damaged the attaching process.

He became very aware that in the course of relating with even a very small baby, mothers experience moments of pain, upset, shock and hurt like the mother in the advertisement. There are times when even the most loving mother might hate her child, feel like abandoning her little one, feel intensely angry at baby. Winnicot became fascinated by this and by what mothers did with these strong, negative feelings. He claimed that in her distress it was crucial that the mother had someone to turn to, someone who would listen to her, help her process the experience and regain her equilibrium. Typically such a support role is played by the father of the child. To use Winnicot's phrase he 'holds' the mother when she is vulnerable. If such holding is not available to a mother, if she just has to 'suck up' these difficult moments, it does not augur well for her emotional well being, the mother-baby relationship, and eventually for the well-being of baby. Winnicot noted that while usually the main 'holder' of a mother will be the father, others can play this role e.g. the mother's own mother or mother-in-law, her sister, or close friends. The crucial thing is that there is someone there for the mother.

As time passed, Winnicot became more and more convinced of all of this. Later in his career he came forward with the idea that there is a profound parallel between the mother/baby experience and the psychotherapist/client experience and indeed carers and those cared for.

Like mothers, carers – and priests are carers – are committed to those they care for, they love those they care for and want what is best for them, but those cared for can make a priest very angry, can hurt him, can exasperate him, can demean him and over time a priest can become fatigued, drained and end up 'going through the motions', rather than being emotionally engaged.

Carers like mothers – Winnicot claimed – need to be held. They must not just 'suck it up', they need opportunities to 'process these experiences' and so maintain equilibrium and maintain an emotional presence to those for whom they care.

It is as a result of contributions like Winnicot's that the practices known as supervision, mentoring and coaching, have entered the helping professions and have made such a difference.

All my experience, personal and professional, and everything I have seen over fifteen years in conversation with priests convinces me of the value of processes such as supervision, mentoring, coaching or my version – supportive conversation.

Priests can access this form of 'holding' support in three ways.

Most priests probably have access to it through having one, two

or more intimate friends, people they can say anything to, at any time and any place. Such intimates are vital.

Ideally that circle of intimates should include a fellow priest or two, and one or two lay-people, both male and female. Not all are lucky to have such a full range of intimate friends but it is vital to have at least one. The valuable friend is one with whom one can talk very regularly, even several times a week by phone or face to face, one to whom one can call unexpectedly and be received, one to whom one can say anything in confidence, one who can 'stand in your shoes', understand the situation, is sympathetic to one's life, one's values and commitments and yet does not 'buy into' all one's assumptions and prejudices but through gentle questioning and comments can help one see a wider and more complex picture, and other sides of stories.

Such friendships are like gold, not just for priests but for every man and woman, and must be cherished, and not misused.

But there will be times when such friends are not able to help, or a priest is slow to confide because of embarrassment or conflicts of interest, or because the friend does not seem to be able to respond in ways that are helpful. Friends can lose their capacity to help when their thinking is too similar to that of the one who is troubled, or feel unable to challenge because left upset by what he or she has heard.

This is the time that it is necessary to have the kind of service that it has been my privilege to offer in Dublin. I believe that it should be the aim of our dioceses to develop such a service across the country. It should be the aim to have a panel of persons to whom priests could turn for confidential supportive conversation. Such a panel should be made up of people with recognised qualifications in one or other branch of psychotherapy, be appreciative of the priestly calling, have a depth of understanding of priestly ministry and not be prisoners of a lot of the conventional thinking about priests and priesthood that is common in our society today.

Such a panel should include priest-therapists if possible, as many priests do want to talk to an appropriately qualified fellow priest. But some prefer to talk to a lay person male or female. Some priests like to deal with someone near at hand, other are more interested in persons that are at a distance and will not be seeing them at the next diocesan event.

The difficulty of putting together such a panel should not be underestimated, but the creation and maintenance of such a panel would be a very valuable contribution.

It might also be worth noting that over the fifteen years that I have been offering supportive conversation there has been a gradual shift in emphasis. Initially all those who came to talk came

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because they were struggling with a specific ‘problem’. Now at least half of those I meet, come for what might be called supervision or mentoring, and men who initially made contact because of a problem, often returned seeking ongoing supervision.

Recently I asked one such person what he got from coming. He commented,

I always go away with insights. I get feedback on how I am handling things. I feel affirmed and yet gently challenged. It is an opportunity to step back from the fray, step back from the busyness of my life. You could call it a good learning experience. It is very useful given the climate within which I minister today.

Another version of supportive conversation that I have offered is done in groups known as ‘Reflective Ministry Groups’. Over the past six years I have facilitated such a group and more recently two more groups were formed. These groups meet eight times a year, are facilitated by two facilitators, both of whom have similar training, a Marist priest Fr Martin Daly and myself. Usually at a meeting a topic is discussed or an issue that is bothering a member of the group is raised. The facilitators try to help the group to think about the topic in deeper and different ways and think about how the way they think is affecting the situation. Recently commenting on the experience of the group meeting, one group wrote,

Recently we discussed why we have been so loyal to the group and our meetings. It is hard to put into words. Put simply it is because we feel significantly better spirited as a result of attending. The meetings are very different from other meetings of priests. We are of all ages and generations yet the meetings are extremely safe, non-threatening, yet very deep. One goes home enlightened, seeing things in a new way and from new perspectives. One goes home restored, ‘rebooted’ and refreshed.

Such groups offer an important form of support to priests and in this context mention must be made of other types of support groups and fraternities for priests that operate throughout the country and have various emphases.

I have dwelt for a considerable length of time on the importance of having someone to talk to, be it informally or formally, one to one or in groups.

We must always be aware as priests that we might well be the ‘someone’ that another relies upon for support. This prompts the

question as to what kind of an influence I am. Does my presence make a difference for the better even in small ways, am I loyal, accessible, discreet, trustworthy and able to challenge without giving offence?

#### QUANTITY OF WORK

A crucial factor in the well-being of all workers is how they experience their work, in terms of how much work they must undertake, how satisfying or unsatisfying that work is, and how good a fit there is between the work and worker. Priests are no exception.

In the Irish Church of today the amount of work a priest is expected to do is a growing issue. Parishes that once had a parish priest and one or more curates, now are generally one man parishes, and in places three priests are caring for four separate parishes, now joined in a pastoral area. The number of Masses celebrated in parishes has often been cut back, but there is no decline in the number of funerals, work with schools, or parish administration. Some decrease has taken place in the number of weddings, but little in terms of baptisms and confirmations. The population of a parish has often increased, the expectations of the parishioners, and often of the priest himself have expanded. In some places pastors are becoming multi-parish pastors catering for two or more distinct parishes.

All of this builds up stress for individuals. But morale takes a particular dip when a priest finds himself, over a significant period of time, shouldering his own work and the work of a sick colleague; when a priest heavily burdened believes that others in his diocese have significantly lighter loads and nothing is done to support him with some assistance; or when a man finds he cannot have predictable time off, or his holidays are curtailed. Another setback to morale occurs when a priest finds himself becoming itinerant rather than resident, finds himself constantly moving from church to church on a Sunday with no time to linger, no time to talk, no time to build relationships, no time to be really present to parishioners.

Workload is a growing question and it triggers several major debates as to where solutions might lie. The resolution of these major debates are unlikely to occur in the immediate future, yet in the here and now efforts must be made to reduce stress and prevent new stresses. Each diocese will have to make its own plans, but for a beginning it would be valuable to attempt to see that there is reasonable equality in work load, that men are guaranteed a day off and holidays, and that clustering does not negatively affect the priest-people bond. This minimum requirement, calls for readiness

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by people, priests and bishops to co operate, to talk together, to make sacrifices especially sacrifices of familiar routines, and to become creative in thinking and action.

### QUALITY OF WORK

A separate but connected aspect of the work issue is the question of how satisfying and rewarding priests find their work.

All research into the workplace indicates that how the worker experiences his or her work is crucial for wellbeing. If their work is meaningful for them, if they feel that their work is significant and makes a real difference, the 'shelf life' of the worker is much longer.

When the worker experiences the opposite, he or she becomes dispirited, energy drops, standards fall, sick days multiply and the level of departures from that work force increases. But even in situations where workers are committed to their work and find it rewarding, over time vitality can drain away. This is often due to a growing sense that work done really doesn't make much of a difference when those served do not share the same goals as the worker e.g. a diabetes nurse who constantly sees a client who makes no effort to implement healthy patterns of living. Vitality can be sapped, when workers feel they do not have the necessary resources, and when the public at large do not seem to value the work done. Compassion fatigue is another dimension encountered at times by the once very committed worker. The worker has seen so much pain and suffering that she or he emotionally closes down.

Priests like all helping professionals need to have good work experiences to keep going in a vital and lively way.

But at the moment in Ireland there are factors in play which can be very dispiriting. Priests' work is generally very meaningful to them, but do priests really feel that they make a difference or that they make the kind of difference they want to make? Priests put huge effort into many things especially sacramental preparation, but what they are trying to bring about and what the participants are trying to bring about often do not concur. What priests value, what they have given their lives to promote, is less and less valued in society. Scandals and other upheavals in Church life do not help. When a priest encounters work overload, a sense of inequality in burden bearing, and a sense that what one is doing is perceived by the many as nice, fluffy, sentimental, but essentially meaningless and little to do with real life, he is very vulnerable.

But are there responses to such situations? It is my firm belief that there are. In this regard I draw upon my experiences in working with troubled and troublesome adolescents in a residential

care setting. That was a work for which there were not enough resources, not enough resources of money, staff, facilities, a work for which there was not great sympathy from the world outside, in fact at times hostility from neighbours. It was work that demanded lots of sacrifices from my colleagues and myself, a work in which one received many emotional knocks and bruises, and most of all a work in which one saw meagre progress and lots of relapsing, yet we were happy, contented and lively workers, where we could so easily have been discontented, exhausted and depleted.

What made the difference? Several factors. Firstly we believed that the more sapping and demanding the work with clients, the more we as a staff group had to enhance and enrich our teamwork, and our togetherness as a team. Great effort was put into building an effective team, who enjoyed each other and who worked to make one another shine. So even if the work was at times very unrewarding the company of the colleagues was always most rewarding.

Secondly we involved all in the organisation, in every decision of consequence e.g. what adolescent was admitted and discharged, who was employed, how money was spent and how the organisation was managed. There was a very high sense of involvement, of worker democracy and yet there were careful structures so that decisions could be made well, individual responsibilities respected, and elements balanced in a manner that ensured that the young people were always the priority. This work climate of course did not emerge overnight and had to be built patiently.

Thirdly it was believed that the way we thought determined what we could and could not do, so when there were difficulties there was always the effort to think differently about issues. This was not easily done and was achieved first by reading and discussion, then by inviting 'mentors' to come and observe the work, talk with the young people, staff and management, give feedback and help with dilemmas. Eventually we embraced training programmes outside the organisation which is how I came to study family therapy. These efforts to think differently and so act differently proved very effective in maintaining interest and vitality, and kept us in tune with the fundamental values that drew us into the work in the first place.

Fourthly we interpreted the behaviour that we encountered in the course of our work, especially behaviour that was unacceptable to us. We tried never to take such behaviour personally. We did not see it as a comment on us, but as most interesting, meaningful, and useful information about the young person or his family member. We were far more interested in the meaning of the behaviour than the fact of the behaviour. To interpret the behaviour required that

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the behaviour had to be filtered through a lens, usually a lens different from the lens conventional wisdom might supply. We were constantly constructing and adjusting these lenses through study, training events, reading, and in-house discussion. This was not easy at first, but over time proved massively useful in developing effective work and maintaining staff vitality.

I believe that in our dioceses there is work to be done about how we manage our work, manage the way we respond to the climate within which we work, and the gap that secularisation is bringing about. I now wish to turn to one final area of vital support.

### BUILDING AND MAINTAINING CREATIVITY

As was seen earlier when reflecting on the issue of supporting priests, I take inspiration from the 21st chapter of St John's gospel. There is a second element in that narrative that I find striking. The disciples were in a bad place, their discipleship seemed to have reached an impasse and now their old trade skills seemed to have left them too. Then a new idea was given them; it came from what they thought to be a stranger, and the stranger standing on the shore had a different perspective on the lake. It probably was not easy, especially for seasoned fishermen to follow the prompts coming from a stranger, but they did and everything changed.

When times are difficult, when our efforts seem to yield nothing, especially when we are hurting and dispirited, one of the first casualties is our creativity. To move on we need our creativity rekindled. This can happen only by encountering difference, by coming in touch with different ideas, new ideas. If we make the effort to encounter the new and the strange, to engage with the new and strange and accept inspiration from the new and the strange we will find ourselves nourished.

I would like to see creativity-sustaining programmes available for priests and for Permanent Deacons, Lay Pastoral Workers, Parish Sisters and other Church personnel.

Given my experiences talking with scores of priests, I would wish such programmes to offer a setting within which a number of themes might be explored. It would be my hope that these explorations would make available new thinking for priests, would be very enriching, boost vitality and trigger new actions. Themes that might fruitfully be explored might include: hope, what it means and how it is generated and enacted; ministry in an inhospitable climate; teamwork – building resilient teams; coping with hurts and disappointments; partnering with parishioners; mentoring colleagues, skills needed; using mentoring; communicating; change and its management; living the celibate life; offering and receiving spiritual direction; dealing with difference; managing

conflict; coping with difficult personalities; living with risk; stress management.

In recommending creativity supporting processes I am not thinking of a traditional style course or workshop, but a carefully constructed process with participants engaged in every aspect from beginning to end, a process that would look at how we priests deal with all that has been itemised above, eliciting stories of success in those areas, and exploring how we might enrich what we do through drawing on the insights of participants and wisdoms available from the human and sacred sciences.

In such a process hopefully priests will encounter newness and strangeness, be encouraged to act on the new and the strange, and experience a new abundance of energy and creativity,

I have looked at four areas that can offer significant support to priests, Prayer, Supportive Conversation, Balanced and Meaningful Working Conditions, and Building Creativity. But there are many others which space does not allow for consideration here e.g. the priest's relationship with his own family; the housing situation within which priests dwell, the arrangement for elder and retired priests, support arrangements for newly ordained priests. All and still more are worthy of examination, I have chosen these four because I think they are particularly important at this time.

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#### FINAL COMMENT

As I said at the beginning, interest in the issue of support of priests fluctuates. In conclusion I would wish to make a few general observations on the issue of support

Support of priests is best understood, I believe, as a set of processes that enable a priest to be the best priest that he can be in his particular context. It involves as far as possible providing a context within which he can best do what he was ordained to do. For me this is an important starting point, because in everyday discourse 'support' is often taken to mean 'firefighting' negative situations, and so is connected in our minds with problems. It is at other times taken to mean words or gestures that affirm another, recognise another's contribution, excuse the activity of another, or back the other up. Undoubtedly affirmation, recognition, and back-up are important and constitute a contribution to support, but they are elements within a wider and deeper set of processes. They are parts of the story, not the full story.

Support is best considered a co-creation, a joint project involving the one being supported and others. The responsibility then for enabling a priest to be the best he can be rests on multiple parties,



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the priest himself, his colleagues, his parishioners, his bishop, and the parish or diocese within which he works.

It is also important to realise that offering and accepting support is complex. On the surface, offering support might seem a delightful task. But it often is quite complicated. Support, though needed can often be interpreted by those to whom it is directed, as a 'put down', as invasion of privacy, an effort to control, or as an assault on independence. Equally, seeking support and/or accepting needed support is for some a challenge, which triggers resistance and vigorous opposition. Paradoxically persons very vocal in demanding support can sometimes be quite resistant to accepting it. And some needing support can be open to support, but solely on their terms, terms which those offering support realise are unrealistic or set to fail. All of this means that the business of offering support requires considerable skill and the task of seeking and accepting support is often not easy, and requires skills, skills of openness, flexibility, courage and trust.

There can also today be a tendency to medicalize and psychologize the issues of priests and those in the caring callings. Of course there are times when the support needed is psychiatric or psychological, but there are many situations where the support needed is of a different type, and medicalizing and psychologizing are best avoided

When considering support initiatives for priests, the 'system' within which an individual works, as well as the individual must be focused upon. The parish or the diocese as well as the priests must be considered.

Furthermore it must be realised that not all problems can be solved or dissolved. In these situations, support can mean burden sharing and enabling people to live with the lack of desired solutions.

Finally attempting to be the best priest I can be, does not mean being a perfect priest, or a flawless priest. It might be best described as being a good-enough priest.

As was remarked at the outset this reflection on the issue of supporting priests, is but one perspective, one shaped by my personal and professional experiences. I offer it in the hope that it might generate discussion and action, maybe very different actions from what I would initiate. I welcome responses to this article, comments and ideas. *psuibhne@hotmail.com*