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The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Brendan Hoban

A Lost Tribe

February 2017

A Lost Tribe

– *priests at risk*

Brendan Hoban

First, I want to make it clear that what I have to say has to do with the world of diocesan priests. Whether it applies to others – non-diocesan priests, if you’ll pardon that expression – that’s for them to judge.

I speak out of my own experience.

In recent decades the Care of Priests has become a regular item on the agendas of Priests Councils and in the conversations priests have about our future lives.

Paddy Sweeney has an excellent article in a recent edition of *The Furrow* and I’ve written about it myself. Séamus Ahearne alluded to it in a recent contribution to the website *associationofcatholicpriests.ie*.

Fifty years ago no one talked about the care of priests or priests at risk.

What’s different now from fifty years ago? Well, everything or almost everything.

I was ordained forty three years ago, and I was appointed a curate in Crossmolina parish. My parish priest was Ben McLoughlin, a lovely man, who was around my age now. (I’m 68, he was 70 then).

Every time I visited him, his house-keeper of over 40 years, Mary Forde, carried out a long practised liturgy with its rubrics hallowed from time immemorial: she took out the china cups, cut the crusts off the sandwiches, handed me a cloth napkin, she left the room and returned discreetly every five minutes to ‘heat up the tea’.

I was 25 at the time and I imagined that when I was Ben’s age, my circumstances would be like his.

But my life now as parish priest in Moygownagh couldn’t be

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more different. And it isn't just that there's no live-in housekeeper, no china cups or neatly presented sandwiches but that the safe, secure, confident clerical world that Ben inhabited has imploded completely.

Then PPs could expect to have curates who did most of the work – if they couldn't or didn't want to do it themselves. Now curates are an endangered species.

Then PPs could expect comfort and companionship in their declining years. Now, in Killala diocese, not one priest in the diocese has a live-in housekeeper. And the statistics indicate that most of us may well die on our own.

Then PPs took for granted that they were admired, respected and supported by their parishioners. Their words were infallible; their decisions confident and unquestioned. In the society and culture of the day they had the wind on their backs and could dictate the play with embarrassing ease. They were like Real Madrid, both respected and feared.

Now, we're often pitied, patronised, reviled, insulted, disrespected, ignored and resented. To continue the sporting metaphor, a gale-force wind is now in our faces, it's the middle of the second half and we're 6 – Nil down. Now we're the equivalent of Plymouth Argyle, struggling to stay in the third division.

Fifty years ago there were plenty of vocations, almost everyone went to Mass (and those who didn't were rounded up by the Redemptorists at the Parish Mission), almost everyone paid the collection and if they didn't, as we used to say, they were read off the altar.

Now times are different: no vocations, congregations melting away before our eyes, collections declining by the year, morale at an all-time low.

Was it any wonder that, in Ben McLoughlin's time, PPs only retired if it suited them to retire, because to quote Harold Macmillan in another context, they never had it so good.

Now PPs often long for retirement, because they can't wait to get off the stage, despite the fact that their guilt in retiring in such difficult circumstances can be manipulated to get them to continue past their 75th year and their sell-by date.

Do I exaggerate? Yes, a bit for emphasis. But only a bit. The tide has gone out and only those out of sync with the times can imagine that it's ever going to come in again.

I may be accused of presenting a bleak picture, but it is bleak and we do no one any favours by pretending that everything is fine and that we're about to turn some mythical corner when everything will be sunshine and roses.

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We need to stop playing that game.

The average age of priests in Ireland now is climbing towards 70 years of age. So we're mainly in the senior bracket of the population. Donald Cozzens has written about 'The Last Priests in Ireland' and he's exaggerating, but only slightly.

But the problem is not that the Church in Ireland won't survive or adapt to changed and changing circumstances – I have no doubt it will – the question is even more urgent for us here today. It's this: how can the last priests in Ireland survive the final years of their lives with comfort, esteem and affection?

Because it isn't just the depressing scenario that I've outlined. There are a number of other factors exacerbating our growing sense of unease.

WORK

We're expected to work longer and harder. Clustering parishes is offered as if it's some kind of solution to the crisis in vocations when the dogs in the street know that (at its best) clustering is merely a short-term managerial strategy and at its worst a form of denial camouflaging the reality.

Of two men in a field, Matthew 24 tells us, one will be taken and one left.

Where there were two priests in the past one has already been taken away by the bishop and one is left. Where there are five priests in a cluster, one will be taken and then another one and then another until only one will be left.

In Ben McLoughlin's time work declined as age increased. Now work increases the older we get. And moving the deck chairs is no solution.

The effect of our increased and ever-increasing workload is that as we morph into sacrament-dispensing machines, we find pastoral work less and less satisfying with progressively little or no engagement with our parishioners.

There are two very prestigious dioceses in Ireland: Dublin and Killala. Both have to my mind only one thing in common. Both have just one diocesan priest under 40 years of age. In twenty years time both dioceses will have one or maybe a few priests under 60. That'll be a real problem for Fr Tommy Doherty in Killala trying to cover 22 parishes, from Ballisodare to Newport. I dread to think what it will mean for his equivalent in Dublin dealing with 199 parishes.

COMPLEXITY

More work is one thing. Complexity is another. We're struggling

at a pastoral level with issues beyond our training and probably our competence. The older we get, the more complicated life is and parish is. Take, one example, how to minister to parents of same-sex couples who may be upset or worried or confused? How to respond to an invitation to a same-sex marriage of parishioners? What does pastoral care mean in this situation?

We were never there before and we never expected to be here now.

BISHOPS

Irish priests traditionally liked to stay a healthy distance from their bishops. A certain reserve in regard to someone who exercised so much control over our lives seems entirely appropriate. But that distance or reserve allowed for a fundamental respect for the office bishops hold and the function they represent.

Now, the level of distrust between priests and bishops is such that a build-up of resentment and anger is increasingly obvious in *some* dioceses. Situations vary, as we know. But some bishops, not many I have to say, some bishops are using their positions to force their personal authority on priests who haven't the confidence to face them down because of the level of control bishops exercise over their priests' lives.

I hesitate to use the word *abuse* because it has unhappy associations but I think sometimes the word *bullying* is not inappropriate.

Recently in one diocese a priest retiring was asked to vacate his house with no prospect of alternative accommodation being provided. It is, at any level, an appalling attitude. It's scandalous and should be named and shamed as scandalous if a bishop, taking advantage of a vulnerable priest, can dictate terms and conditions that infringe the individual rights of priests to equity and justice. It is unacceptable that some priests because of their perceived loyalty to a bishop are treated differently from others who are perceived as *disloyal*.

This distrust in the leadership of our Church is exacerbated by the policies being pursued by the present nuncio in ignoring the traditions of dioceses, the preferences of priests and the rights of people to genuine as distinct from the present *mock* consultation. Frustration at the unhappy and sometimes bizarre choice of bishops is adding unnecessarily to the burden of priests as is the unjust manipulation by some bishops and dioceses of the commitment to priesthood of elderly priests in an effort to persuade them to postpone their retirement beyond 75.

The same is true of the policy, now apparently official, of bishops

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automatically reporting to the Garda authorities anonymous accusations of child abuse against priests, a practice that would be unconscionable and much resisted if applied to teachers, lawyers, Gardaí or any other professional group. The reputation and peace of mind of priests, it now seems, can be damaged forever by someone with a grievance, a sheet of paper and a 72 cent stamp.

ISOLATION

We elderly priests live increasingly isolated lives, a condition exacerbated by age. We live alone. We often have few enough close friends, diminishing as we grow older.

Local resentments, envy and gossip often dissuade us, especially in rural parishes, from making firm friends. Eccentricity is an ongoing and perhaps inevitable condition. A growing fearfulness and anxiety, born out of isolation, can mark our later years and create a vulnerability and a nervousness we hadn't experienced heretofore.

Compounding this problem is a growing disillusionment among priests in their fifties and sixties and a consequent drift out of priesthood, not because of celibacy but in search of companionship and what might be more generally called 'normality'. It's the isolation, I think, that gets to us in the end.

Compounding this drift is the often ritual acceptance in clerical company that many others would opt for the equivalent of early retirement if such were offered to them. More and more, still clinging to the wreckage, seem to be hanging on to a life that's no longer experienced as satisfying because they haven't the energy or the courage or the money to opt for a different, more amenable existence.

As priests age and become more aware that life is closing in around us and as the experience of isolation is exacerbated, the culture of distraction that helped us cope in our earlier years no longer delivers.

Golf days, poker schools, pilgrimages to Medjugorje, breeding pedigree cattle, travelling the world, writing books, attending Charles de Foucauld prayer groups and similar obsessions that helped distract us in the past no longer deliver. As life closes in, interests diminish and eventually melt away. Priests who attended the Wexford Opera Festival for decades wouldn't cross the road if Pavarotti rose from the dead and was singing *Nessun Dorma* in the local hall. Or whatever.

In the last century in the parish of Kilcommon Erris in Mayo, Fr John Lavelle – poet, teacher, intellectual, antiquarian, member of the Royal Irish Academy and a noted member of the literati

– was once described by a parishioner as ‘above there in the house, looking out the window, mad at everything’.

LONELINESS

Loneliness is a by-product of isolation. A celibate lifestyle presumes a certain isolation and loneliness is part of it. This factor is particularly difficult for priests with highly developed social skills, priests who are ‘good mixers’ as we say. Loneliness is for them a particular burden. More so, I think, than for the rest of us, eccentrics, bachelors and curmudgeons, among whom I’m happy to place myself.

Loneliness in priesthood depends on a number of factors: personality, life skills, hobbies, self-esteem, mobility, identity and, of course, health and even from that cursory list it’s clear that loneliness increases steadily as each of the above comes under greater stress.

Another factor is that when we are living on our own, unnoticed by ourselves our standards drop. There’s often no trusted companion to tell us to throw out that *gansie* (sweater) we’ve been wearing for years or to buy a new suit for God’s sake or to take a bath.

Loneliness it can be said, is just part of old age but my contention is that for those of us who live into old age without the supports of a ‘normal’ life, loneliness brings an added difficulty. I suspect that there are many of us in our seventies and eighties who, no longer able to distract ourselves, and in the silence and isolation of large presbyteries, mull over what seem the progressively limited satisfactions of a priest’s life.

The issue of loneliness in priesthood is rarely mentioned in dispatches and is sometimes regarded as an effete and self-indulgent consideration for us brave warriors. Some years ago, a retired priest in England confided in his bishop that he was lonely. The bishop replied, ‘Get a budgie’.

HEALTH

The American novelist, Richard Ford, has his famous chronicler, Frank Bascombe, muse, ‘When you grow old not that much is happening, except on the medical front’. Old age brings ill-health in some shape or form. And we sometimes lack the support of trusted companions to accompany us through the bewilderment and helplessness of a chronic condition and the regression almost to a state of childhood dependency that can ensue. How to cope then when we find ourselves sitting in a hospital waiting room, being told what needed to happen ‘surgery-wise’, and what the

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percentages might offer in terms of a future life, and then going home on our own to mull over life's probabilities.

Whatever about our physical well-being and its manifestations, our mental health is of a different order entirely, its absence sometimes unnoticed and often denied.

With the implosion of our Church, the unease and inconvenience and isolation of our lives, with the regrets and ambivalences that disturb our waking hours and with our singular lifestyle, we're prone to depression in one or other of its malevolent manifestations.

Often masked by crankiness and oddity, we can build a moat around our parishes, where our disorientations are regarded by our people as mere eccentricities resulting from what is perceived as an abnormal life. The indicators of a line being crossed may only become apparent in retrospect.

It's instructive and worrying that suicide among priests in Ireland has increased in recent years. There's significant anecdotal evidence that this figure masks a wider and deeper reality of depression and despair that we ignore at our peril.

As we age, and decrepitude in some form becomes a crucial factor and the normal disabilities of ageing – ill-health, immobility, isolation and so on are experienced – all of that becomes hugely problematic and burdensome, when we're on our own.

The support systems in normal family living are not present to sustain us in our homes and we find ourselves joining the queue for the nursing home before our time. I'm not knocking nursing homes because it will be good to have them, when we need them, that's if the diocese can afford them – another terror added to old age.

FAILURE AND RESPONSIBILITY

When I was ordained there were full churches, plenty of priests, supportive parishioners, the church was a confident, respected and influential presence in Irish society. Now we're not, as I said earlier, Real Madrid anymore, we're a tired version of Plymouth Argyle. And it has all happened on our watch, on my watch. And even though some of us know that priests are not saviours or messiahs, that we're not responsible for other people's salvation or indeed or the future of the Church, the truth is that some, possibly many, priests feel responsible, feel that they've failed and will go to their graves with that belief.

This is the generation, we need to remind ourselves, who often wrote on their ordination cards, Lacordaire's famous statement about priesthood:

To live in the midst of the world without wishing its pleasures;

to be a member of each family, yet belonging to none; to share all sufferings; to penetrate all secrets; to heal all wounds; to go from men to God and offer him their prayers; to return from God to men to bring pardon and hope; to have a heart of fire for charity and a heart of bronze for chastity; to teach and to pardon, console and bless always. My God, what a life!

And it is yours, O priest of Jesus Christ.

Forty or fifty years ago, mesmerized by that intoxicating power, we had all the answers to every last one of life's problems but with power came responsibility and many priests of that generation are left with a deep-seated conviction that somehow it's all our fault.

(And week after week we're reminded that we no longer really matter, that at best we're now little more than a ceremonial presence on the sidelines of life. We're a bit like Henri Nouwen who was on the deck of a huge liner that in dense fog was edging its way into a busy harbour. The captain, who was under extreme pressure, tripped over Nouwen in the fog and told him to get lost. Then he paused for a moment and said to him, 'No. Father, don't get lost, this just might be the one time we actually need you'.)

A retreat master recently told a group of diocesan priests that priests tend to be 'dangerously other-centred'. We believed not wisely but too well in intimations of our own infallibility and now it's coming back to haunt us. We were too good for our own good.

We continue to carry burdens of unrealistic expectations of ourselves.

ESTEEM

As old age beckons with its myriad inconveniences and disabilities and as we begin to contemplate, calmly and coldly, what's left of our lives, a number of truths begin to dawn.

One is that, as we age, there's a growing sense almost of desperation when we realise how little care, esteem or affection may be in our lives.

Another is that some of the anchors on which we had depended – friends, family members, parishioners – are no longer there.

Another is that we're continually reminded through an avalanche of criticism in the media that even though we feel we've done our best to carry the Good News we're now ritually presented as Bad News people, controlling, oppressing, limiting, obsessing . . .

Another is the sense that, even though for years we didn't want to admit it to ourselves, we come to realize that we truly are, in Donald Cozzens's memorable words 'the last priests in Ireland'.

We're a lost tribe, we've come at the end of a long line. But

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for all that we need to find a voice and a courage to name our truth. As the last priests in Ireland we have a right to consideration, acknowledgement, support, encouragement and, above all, respect.

Priests who have served the Church for so long deserve no less and it's time to start a reasonable conversation about this.

I paint a bleak picture. And no doubt I will be accused of being negative by the usual suspects.

(Accusing one of being negative, of course, is always a useful response because it excuses those who say it from responding to what has been said.)

But I think the question that needs to be asked is not whether my presentation of the landscape of our lost tribe is bleak or negative but is it true?

Prayer for the Rigid. 'Let's pray for our brothers and sisters who think that by becoming rigid they are following the path of the Lord,' Francis preached. 'May the Lord make them feel that he is our Father and that he loves mercy, tenderness, goodness, meekness, humility. And may he teach us all to walk in the path of the Lord with these attitudes'.

– POPE FRANCIS, Homily, Rome, 2016.