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Bridie Stringer

The Undivided
Heart

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The Guardian's columnist on religious matters, Andrew Brown, recently highlighted the possibility that the discipline of compulsory celibacy for Roman Catholic priests might be relaxed in Brazil¹ and noted that support for this initiative was likely to come from the Brazilian bishops. He contrasted this affirmation with the resistance in the 1990s by some members of the English hierarchy to the admission into Roman Catholic sacred orders of former Anglican priests. He forecast that the reception of these former Anglican clerics would die out within a generation and confirmed that, currently, there were no new candidates for priesthood from the ordained Anglican tradition. Brown also pointed to the serious depletion of active Roman Catholic clergy in Europe, with the average age of priests in France at 60+ and that in Ireland, there had been only six new entrants to Maynooth seminary in 2017 despite its capacity for five hundred. He noted that the Brazil pastoral crisis is one of colossal proportions as its Catholic population of 140 million is served by only 18,000 priests (7,777 lay faithful per priest). It is also significant that Brazil's Catholic population numbers have fallen from 92% in 1970 to 65% by 2010. This is balanced by a corresponding growth in membership of the Pentecostal church communities. These issues, taken as whole, raise some fundamental theological questions around the role of ordained sacred ministry as service to the People of God and the alternatives which might be considered.

My title for this reflection, 'The Undivided Heart', sounds as if it belongs in the catalogue of Mills and Boon romantic fiction, but it actually comes from one of the ordination rites for Roman Catholic permanent deacons – those who are unmarried (single or widowed). During the ordination ceremony, having been assured by the candidate's parish priest that: 'after inquiry among the people of Christ and upon recommendation of those concerned with his

1 See <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/andrewbrown> accessed 14 November 2017

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training he has been judged worthy’, the bishop then proceeds with the conferral of sacred orders. He says to the candidate:

By your own free choice you seek to enter the order of deacons. You shall exercise this ministry in the celibate state, for celibacy is both a sign and a motive of pastoral charity, and a special source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world. By living in this state with total dedication, moved by a sincere love for Christ the Lord, you are consecrated to him in a new and special way. By this consecration, you will adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart; you will be more freely at the service of God and mankind, and you will be more untrammelled in the ministry of Christian conversion and rebirth.

This wording is derived from the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* (Can. 277§1) and is explicated further in Can. 1037:

An unmarried candidate for the permanent diaconate and a candidate for the presbyterate are not to be admitted to the order of diaconate unless they have assumed the obligation of celibacy in the prescribed rite publicly before God and the Church or have made perpetual vows in a religious institute.

In the ordination rite, the use of the word ‘more’ in the formal pronouncement naturally lends itself to the questions ‘more than what?’ or ‘more than whom?’

In a diaconal ordination ceremony which includes single, widower and married deacons, the commitment to perpetual celibacy applies only to the first two categories of candidate. While these candidates make their commitment to perpetual celibacy, the married deacons and their families wait for their turn. I have often wondered how the prospective deacons’ wives feel on hearing the formal pronouncement about ‘being consecrated to Christ in a new and special way’ and ‘*more freely* at the service of God and mankind and *more untrammelled* in the ministry of Christian conversion and rebirth’? Their husbands, by implication, will not be quite so able to serve Christ with an undivided heart and will be less free to serve God and humankind. In ordaining the married deacons, the bishop invites the wives to stand alongside their husbands and they respond ‘I am’ to two questions about their willingness for their spouses to undertake the ministry of deacon, and their commitment to support them. So what does that support look like in real life?

My doctoral research on the permanent diaconate indicated that the wives of deacons were as diaconal as their husbands, if *diakonia* is understood as service rather than being a member of a clerical

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caste. The wives were often first responders for their husbands and were truly selfless and kenotic in the increased responsibilities they undertook in order to free their husbands for ministry. The deacons readily recognised this, and, in some cases, thought their wives more diaconal and giving than they were themselves. In the main, shared prayer life and ministry had strengthened their marriages. Unlike the early 1970s, when diaconal formation was an *ad hoc* tutelage arrangement, diaconal formation programmes are now academically accredited, theologically robust and pastorally relevant. Prospective deacons' wives are also fully engaged in the formation process so that their understanding of the ministry of deacon is informed by contemporary pastoral theology. The modern permanent deacon is, generally, a married man, aged over 35, financially independent i.e. he has a 'day job', so to speak. With the permission of his bishop, he may also hold a civic role and is the only rank in Holy Orders permitted to do so. He is, in effect, an ecclesiastical amphibian. Deacons I have encountered over recent years have worked in IT, local government, public transport, agriculture, financial services, accountancy, education, medical and clinical consultancy and the legal profession. The diversity of the deacon's life and the challenges he faces are very much his greatest strength in being able to empathise with the difficulties faced by the people he serves and by society at large. He truly 'walks the walk' in a way which, in my view, many priests do not. Some might well suggest that the celibate presbyterate is somewhat insulated from the frameworks of accountability within which the rest of us reside.

From my own experience of working within parish, deanery and diocesan structures, I am conscious of the skepticism and sometimes even distain of members of the clergy to any notion that they can be appraised, or their ministry evaluated by lay faithful. Some diocesan priests feel that they are accountable only to the bishop and not their parishioners or the public and some bishops feel that they are accountable only to the Pope.² How otherwise was it possible to export dysfunctional and even abusing clerics from parish to parish, at home and abroad, without calling them to account for their conduct, to account for their criminality and seek to provide proper treatment for their illnesses?

Because of the governance structures which prevail in the secular workplace, permanent deacons recognise a social accountability in a way which many priests do not. The Baldwin case for example, tested in the Court of Appeal in 2012, was argued on the basis that the

2 Re Fr Brendan Smyth abuse case in 2012, Cardinal Sean Brady's assertion that he would resign only if requested to do by the Pope. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/8567144.stm accessed 17/11/2017.

Diocese of Portsmouth was not vicariously liable for the conduct of an abusing priest because priests were not employees as such.³ The court rejected this and found the diocese vicariously liable for the conduct of the priest on the grounds that the relationship between the priest and the diocese was indeed akin to that of employer and employee. From an ecclesiological perspective, the legitimacy of presbyteral priesthood is grounded in the relationship between the bishop and the priest, since the latter is incardinated within the diocese and granted faculties to carry out his ministry. He has also made a solemn promise of obedience to the bishop who ordained him, and to that bishop's successors. It is therefore a sad irony that this relationship would appear to render the local ordinary less accountable for the conduct of an abusing priest than, for example, a local authority whose social workers turned out to be child abusers. A further consideration is the role of the diocesan trustee whose purpose is to be accountable for the probity and governance of the diocese. As organisations which hold charitable status and are therefore subject to the rule of law, the inability of trustees to monitor the quality of pastoral provision might at some stage result in scrutiny by the Charities' Commissioners and, potentially, the loss of charitable status.

For permanent deacons, they too are accountable to the diocesan bishop but, in their secular roles and their personal relationships they build "the other" into their very existence. They are familiar with appraisal, supervision and reflective practice which some priests find unacceptable and which some bishops feel unable to enforce or are unwilling to address. For some celibate priests and bishops, the only "other" is the Trinitarian God and their accountability to him is the only one they recognise. The legacy of Pope Pius IX's assertion in 1874 that the Church is 'a perfect society' still prevails and, it could be argued, lends cohesion to a universal Church which prevails in many political contexts, some of which are totalitarian and repressive.

To return to my original question about the nature of pastoral leadership, I would like to explore the received wisdom that the role of priest can be undertaken most effectively by those who are 'set apart' through sacred orders and vows of celibacy. The ontological change attributed to those in Holy Orders, together with the social recognition of being a member of the clergy might place a barrier between those who serve and those who are served. Despite the fact that a lay extra-ordinary Minister of Holy Communion reads and explains the scriptures to those in residential care homes who are too frail to attend the Eucharistic Assembly,

3 See <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2012/07/12/court-rules-that-diocese-of-portsmouth-is-liable-for-clerical-abuse/> accessed 17/11/2017.

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the lay ministers are forbidden to ‘proclaim and explain’ the gospel reading at the community Mass. The lay catechist may read the scriptures and draw out their meaning with the children attending Children’s Liturgy of the Word in the parish room but, again, is not permitted to do so during Mass in the parish church. There is clearly a hierarchy of credibility and formal legitimacy operative in this liturgical body language. The priest as Eucharistic presider is holy and set apart, whilst, ‘at the lower level of hierarchy’, the deacon appears not quite so holy and the lay faithful definitely not. In his book *Catholicism at the Crossroads- How the Laity can save the Church*, Lakeland asserts that one of the great ironies of the Catholic Church is that while it is devoted to a Trinitarian God, it has adopted a hierarchical structure. He expresses it as follows:

One would think, on the face of it, that the ecclesial structure that God would want for the Church would be one that took the hint from God’s nature about the superiority of Trinitarianism over hierarchical stratification What would happen if we if we modelled the Church on the life of God rather than on the structures of the Roman Empire or the Ford Motor Company?⁴

Jesuit theologian George Wilson, is equally critical of the unreflected assumptions which are endemic in a clericalist mindset, a mindset which Pope Francis has described as ‘spiritual worldliness’. One of the unexamined attitudes of such clergy is expressed by Wilson as follows: ‘By ordination I enjoy all the gifts the faithful need; I don’t have to be dependent on the gifts of others’⁵ or ‘I have the title. Therefore I can expect them to follow me.’⁶ Wilson also alludes to the complicity of the lay faithful in affirming the clericalist mindset i.e. ‘They’re the pros in the things of God: we are just amateurs.’ Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (Par 94) challenges a clericalist attitude of superiority to others which he says ‘leads to a narcissistic and authoritative elitism.

The reality in many parishes is that priests readily recognise that they do not have all the gifts required to support the People of God as a community of missionary disciples. In the main, they encourage their parishioners to embrace the ‘universal call to holiness’, a fundamental teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Equally well, I think it is fair to assert that most lay faithful do not believe that, in being called to be ‘priest, prophet and king’, they can automatically preside at Eucharist and minister the sacraments.

4 Paul Lakeland. *Catholicism at the Crossroads – How the Laity can save the Church*. New York: Continuum, 2007. p.51

5 George Wilson, *Clericalism – The Death of Priesthood*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008. p. 122.

6 Ibid. p. 130.

They do, however, acknowledge that they share in these roles in ways which are appropriate to them. Sacramental theology is not set in stone and mandated ministries now include lay people presiding at Liturgies of Word and Communion, and as authorised officiants⁷ at marriage ceremonies⁸ and presiders at funerals.⁹ These roles would have been unimaginable in a Church with an abundance of ordained priests. So in suggesting a metaphor for future developments in ministry to the People of God, I would choose the option offered by the mobile communications industry – ‘Restore Factory Settings’. In this case, the settings reflect the dual drivers of Vatican II – *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*. Rather like the varied gifts listed in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians 12:28 (apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, helpers administrators and speakers in tongues) and those listed in his letter to the Ephesians 4:11 (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers), there is an opportunity for contemporary laity and clergy alike to model their ministry, values and conduct on these earlier ambassadors for the Kingdom. As an official affirmation of their work of communion and mission, the institutional Church might envisage the opening out of ministry to include a variety of ordained and formally commissioned roles, including priests and deacons who can be married or celibate, female ordained deacons, instituted ministries of reader and acolyte for both males and females (currently these roles exclude women) and mandated ministries for presiding at marriages and funeral rites. The concept of the undivided heart as defined in the diaconal ordination rite is not one which rests easily with the notion that all are called to holiness and that the world is loved by God.

In bringing this reflection to a close and returning to the ordination rite for permanent deacons, perhaps a revised wording of the rite would honour the noble choice which the celibate deacon has made without seeming to make a qualitative judgment about his choice over and against the choices made by his married brothers in ministry. Removing the word ‘more’ and simplifying the sentences removes any implied calibration of holiness predicated on sexual activity or its lack. I would offer the following:

By your own free choice you seek to enter the order of deacons.

7 Can. 1112 §1. permits delegated lay persons to assist at marriages when agreement has been obtained from the conference of bishops and the Holy See. Such lay people are to be capable of giving instruction to those preparing for marriage and able to perform the matrimonial liturgy properly. (Can 1112 §2.)

8 See: <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2017/08/02/vatican-grants-permission-for-nun-to-officiate-at-wedding/> accessed 19/11/2017

9 See: <http://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2012/09/14/lay-people-to-preside-at-funerals-in-liverpool/> accessed 19/11/2017

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You have chosen to exercise this ministry in the celibate state, in order to be consecrated to Christ in a new and special way. By living in this state you will seek to serve Christ in the service of others in the mission of Christian conversion and rebirth.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the married deacon is vowed to a life of chastity in marriage. His exclusive self-giving to his wife in marriage is also a sacred commitment which should not be overlooked as he stands at the altar and makes his promise to be a sign of kenotic outpouring in his workplace and in his family life. He too stands as one with an undivided heart. As for the rest of us, not in sacred orders, we are all faced with moral choices each day on doing the right thing and it is these choices which can divide our hearts rather than our status as clergy and lay, celibate or married. At the end of the Eucharistic celebration, we are urged by the deacon to: 'Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.' That sounds like a very holy order to me.

Musings at Eventide.

I saw the bright evening sky
Shaking off the prison of winter,
And the ring of the horizon
Holding on to the day's vesper.

Memories raced along the road
And wistfully called my heart to hold
The story, and give them room within;
I sorrowed for many things unrolled.

Then, as more images trooped forward
From the opened doors of memory
I also felt a fountain of thanks
Issue from the repertory.

People too came in to greet me;
I had a tone of gratitude.
As I sang pardon for wrongs done,
I begged mercy as I humbly stood.

– Eamon Flanagan, *Church at the Heart of the World*, Maynooth, St. Paul's, 2017, p.42.