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David Harold-Barry

## The Priesthood of The Baptised

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It is Holy Saturday. The Church waits. The men locked themselves away in fear. The women were safe enough; what they had to say would be taken as “pure nonsense” even by the apostles (Luke 24:11). The men were another matter; they were identifiable collaborators. It was an uneasy Holy Saturday.

We are in an uneasy time of “waiting” today. The familiar landmarks in the Church have gone. The number of men offering themselves for ordination has fallen dramatically. Many parishes no longer have their own priest; they share him with other parishes. I have heard of “clusters” of three, five, seventeen and even, in Germany, twenty-five parishes. In this last example the clusters are themselves clustered: five groups of five parishes each! It is not difficult to imagine the workload and physical and psychological consequences for the priest.

We seem to have reached a *cul de sac*, a dead end. Where do we go now? What will the Church of the future look like? Is it enough to say ‘wait and see’?

Before this scenario reached its present alarming proportions the Second Vatican Council, reading the signs of the time, reminded us of the priesthood of all the baptised. Simply stated this means that every Christian participates in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ and that “priests”, as we know them today, are there to activate this common priesthood of the laity through their ministry of service. The Council spoke of these two ways of priesthood stating that they were interrelated but it did not go far in explaining what this meant.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the time had not yet come.

Fifty years later the time has come. Fr Dermot Lane told us recently how much he enjoyed his twenty five years as parish priest of Ballaly, Dublin. The great support he received from the people helped him ride out the crises of this time in the history of the Catholic Church in Ireland. He even approaches the clustering

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<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, # 10

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phenomenon with hope. Yet he ends on a sombre note: “Is it accurate to suggest that the future of a parish depends on the temporary availability and passing presence of a priest?”<sup>2</sup>

This question, and its implications, won’t go away. The same question is being asked by others. Professor Werner Jeanrond, Master of St Benet’s Hall, Oxford, asks: “Is it possible to be disciples of Christ without priests?”<sup>3</sup> In other words, is it possible to have a Christian community (a parish) without a priest? In passing, we can note that this question was raised by the reformers centuries ago and they eschewed the title “priest”, preferring to call their leaders “ministers”, “pastors”, “elders” and so forth. What this question is really asking is, “what is the priesthood of the baptised”?

Allow me to make a short diversion. At the time of Vatican II, fifty years ago, the shortage of priests was not as acute as it is now. The emphasis of the Council was more on the role of the laity taking their part in the secular sphere.

A secular quality is proper to the laity. ... They seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God ... as leaven.<sup>4</sup> ... The laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where *only through them* can she become the salt of the earth.<sup>5</sup>

I have always found this a striking assertion of the dignity and mission of all the baptised. Each one has the task of “making the Church present” wherever they find themselves. In fact, this phrase, “making the Church present”, can stand as an expression of the mission of all the baptised in every age. The Council made this beautiful assertion but the time was not then ripe to develop its implication for the very life of the Church herself.

How can people make the Church present in, for example, a place of work if they do not experience her presence in a community gathered at the Eucharist? We can point to many examples of people of all ages offering themselves generously to bring justice, compassion, harmony with the environment and many other crucial manifestations of the coming of the kingdom. But they are often not related to the “hearth” of the family of God, the Eucharist, which can sustain them and give power to their imagination. Many of these good people will simply say, “I don’t need the Eucharist. What does it have to do with my engagement?”

Well, we can and do respect their stance but from the point

2 Dermot Lane, *A Pastor looks Back and Forward*, *The Furrow* October 2017, p. 549.

3 A lecture in manuscript used with permission.

4 *Lumen Gentium*, # 31

5 *Ibid* #33 (my italics)

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of view of one who believes that Jesus' coming into the world made all the difference, it seems they are living on the momentum generated by the Christian centuries, a momentum that is gradually slowing down as fewer people share in the Eucharist. Without the Eucharist the faith diminishes and can even die and people turn to their own resources which may sustain them for a while but ultimately they lose direction.

It is time to return to the thrust of this article which is to explore the common calling of all the baptised but I hope it is evident why we went aside for a moment. Jeanrond makes a telling point. If (i) the clustering of parishes is not a solution to the shortage of priests neither is (ii) the ordination of married men and (iii) the opening of ordination to women. The first of these solutions is already being practiced. The second is being tried under closely defined conditions – the Anglican Ordinariate and other rare occasions – and the third is not even being considered at the moment. But even if all three of these were being pursued, Jeanrond says, they would simply be reinforcing the role of clerics. They would not herald a new departure in our thinking of what it is to make the Church “present”.

This is not to underestimate the enormous impact the extension of ordination would have in the Church. There are many cogent reasons for such an opening up to married men and to women but the energy and excitement their admission to the priesthood would generate might well distract us from answering the more fundamental question; what do we mean by the priesthood of all the baptised?

Both Fr Lane and Professor Jeanrond, the two writers I am relying on here to be my guides, emphasise the “equality of all the baptised”. And the Vatican Council says,

Since all ... have been redeemed by Christ, and enjoy the same divine calling and destiny, the basic equality of all must receive increasingly greater recognition.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps we get tired recognising how difficult it is for those of us who are ‘clerics’ to practice this equality. No stroke of a pen, not even a papal pen, will remove in a hurry the mind-set that believes responsibility for the Church should be in the hands of clerics. By and large the baptised acquiesce in this and so the pressure to explore more fully our co-responsibility for the Church dithers under the impetus of a tradition that goes back to the Middle Ages when Rome, for good reasons, gathered all authority into her own hands.

6 *Gaudium et Spes*, #29

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A recent story coming out of Rome illustrates this mind-set. Archbishop Durocher was leading a group from the Canadian Bishops' Conference to the Vatican. Their secretary, a priest, fell ill and the bishops wanted the assistant secretary, a layman, to take his place. Vatican officials barred him as he was not a cleric but the bishops protested. The matter was referred to the pope who simply asked, "Is he baptised?" On being told he was, he said "let him come!" When the assistant secretary arrived the pope said, "I am glad you are a layman", to which the other replied, "I am glad you are the pope!" Everyone laughed but the point was made.

We have to be patient, but that does not mean we have to "sit on our hands". The baptised are called, in today's Church, to claim their responsibility. They can no longer leave the call to be the "holy people of God" to others – to clerics or religious. Jeanrond speaks of the "concept of representation" by which we leave to "professional Christians" the task of bringing about the Kingdom of God. This would be like the way we put our lives in the hands of professional medical people when we undergo an operation. But, when we are talking of the baptised, this metaphor won't do any more.

Dermot Lane quotes Cardinal Reinhart Marx, Archbishop of Munich, as saying "the way forward is to empower lay people through training (them) to lead parishes." This is the direction pointed out, but not elaborated in detail, by Vatican II. Marx's starting point is the parish which is the visible local presence of the Christian community and therefore of Jesus in the world. Priests come and go but the parish remains. It is God's presence in the community.

But then the question has to be pursued: what is the relationship between the priesthood of the baptised faithful and the ministerial ordained priesthood? The Council "went out of its way to affirm the primacy of baptism", Fr Lane tells us, but then it simply states the two "are interrelated, each in its own way".<sup>7</sup> The ministerial priest "moulds and rules" while the baptised "exercise their priesthood by receiving the sacraments, by prayer and thanksgiving, by the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity".<sup>8</sup> This kind of language may have been acceptable at the time but it jars today. And it does not take us very far when we are running out of priests.

Werner Jeanrond acknowledges the contribution of Vatican II in studying, understanding and welcoming the progress our human society has made in affirming the equality and freedom of all people. But he says the Council was "not prepared to deal with the

<sup>7</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, #10

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

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tension (between Christian freedom and equality on the one hand and clerical absolutism on the other) with sufficient radicalism”.<sup>9</sup>

The definitions of medieval theology and the neo-Thomist attempts to overcome the challenges of modernity, of the enlightenment and of the increasing emancipation of Roman Catholic Christians in the industrial age no longer work or convince.<sup>10</sup>

Jeanrond goes on to summarise the “critical perspectives of sociologists, philosophers, theologians, economists and psychologists” in exposing how structures of power and control emerge and how they are defended by reference to sacred tradition so that they become immune to change. And he goes further to remind us the world is made up of many “new lonely urban individuals” constantly hammered by “ever-increasing globalisation, digitalisation and post-industrial technological advances including artificial intelligence with its promises and threats”.<sup>11</sup> This is the reality and he quotes Pope Francis’ adage, ‘realities are greater than ideas’.

So the question that emerges ever more sharply is; how is the Church going to be true to her mission in the midst of the realities touched on here? Jeanrond writes about a “remarkable consensus” where Christian and secular voices agree: “what is most urgently needed is a new culture of love”. And so we come to ask what exactly does this mean for the new vision of priesthood? We have to make some effort to describe what it will look like.

It does not mean that we will do away with the centuries-old role of the ordained priest but there will be a gradual change in his status in the parish. To put it succinctly; the baptised Christians will step forward and the priest will step back. The former will take up the tasks of prayer guides, spiritual directors, homilists, leaders of parish/diocesan discussion groups, musical animators, social workers, carers for the sick and disabled, youth leaders, IT facilitators, catechists, parish leaders, fund raisers and planners. The ordained priest will be there to celebrate the Eucharist, the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Of the Sick and accompany people in their life in the Spirit. He will be, to return to the medical metaphor, a specialist in the company of general practitioners, nurses and medical orderlies. He will be part of the team in the parish. He does not have to be the leader any more than a specialist surgeon in a hospital has to be the manager of the hospital. It will be

9 Jeanrond p 5

10 Ibid p 6

11 Ibid.

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a community held together by mutual love and co-ownership. The affirmation of the equality of baptism will quietly take precedence over the hierarchal model of Church so fondly anchored in minds and hearts up to today.

It is time for another small diversion; we had a wonderful celebration in Zimbabwe just after Easter this year for the consecration of a new bishop. 15 000 people sang and danced their way through a four and a half hour ceremony. But it was noticeable in the sermons and speeches how the two words “rule” and “serve” vied for emphasis. Is the bishop a ruler or a servant? The modern bishop would, I suppose, want to identify with the latter role. But history and tradition still loads him with the former. The servant model cancels out “clericalism” at a stroke; the ruler model reinforces the idea of a special caste or state. On my way to that ceremony I travelled with a relatively young priest. He told me he had given up wearing clerical dress as it only brought him honour and privilege.

The model of Church we are moving towards – if we can but welcome it – is, to quote the pope, “a field hospital” rather than a fortress. It is a precarious, dynamic ever searching community open to all, ready to listen to the sciences and ready to shed her light on modern problems with humility and in solidarity with others on the same quest. She will not have the answers but she will be a fountain of compassion, ready to reach out to the brokenness of people irrespective of their faith or absence of it.

This poses a huge responsibility on the baptised who have to assume real responsibility for others. Vatican II does not allow for passengers. All have to be drivers.

**Desire.** There are many levels of life-force in us and so the movement of desire throws up a disorganised array of needs which we pursue in hope of satisfaction. Our experience of dissatisfaction is not a reason for condemning desire but rather for pursuing it more seriously and deeply.

– VINCENT MACNAMARA, *New Life For Old*, (Dublin: Columba Press), p. 11.