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Gerard Condon

Facing the Reality of Fewer Priests

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The priests of Cloyne Diocese recently completed an exercise on facing up to the reality of our declining presence in the parishes of north and east County Cork. That reality is plain to all, part of the national trend, but one we had not previously addressed as a group. Like most men, priests have quite the capacity for assuming that life will continue as it always has, until suddenly it doesn't.

The exercise began with the diocesan office compiling a facts sheet, setting out the evolving demographics of our diocese. The statistics were discussed at *deanery* meetings in Kanturk, Mallow, Midleton, Fermoy and Macroom; the first time in some years that this forum was convened. The deanery reports were then reviewed at the annual assembly of priests in Killarney, last November, at a session led by Martin Kennedy. Finally, the Council of Priests distilled the discussion into a series of responses, which are summarised here.

STATISTICS

The Diocese of Cloyne has a Catholic population of about 150,000 in 46 parishes and currently has 75 priests in ministry within the diocese. That ratio of one priest for every 2,000 people happens to be the current international standard. It compares well with other Catholic countries such as France (1:2,800), Brazil (1:8,500) and the Philippines (1:10,000). One to 2,000 is also the traditional ratio for Ireland, once the surge in vocations of the mid-Twentieth Century is excluded. However, we stand at the edge of a precipice, the dimensions of which are revealed on examination of our age profile and reliance on priests already in their retirement. No ordinations for Cloyne are expected for another six years. We anticipate that, by 2028, one-third of our priests will have reached the age of retirement (at 75). By 2038, without a renewal in vocations, there may be just 34 priests in active ministry in Cloyne, almost all of them over the age of 65.

Gerard Condon is a priest of the Diocese of Cloyne. He is Diocesan Adviser for RE (Second Level). Address: Teach Paróiste, Ballygriffin, Killavullen, Co. Cork. P51 NX22.

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CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

The most obvious challenge presented by the current situation is that more is being asked of fewer priests. The parishes of Cloyne Diocese traditionally had one or more curates. Single priest parishes are fast becoming the norm. Being the only priest “on call” creates the impression that the parish cannot manage without you, even for a weekly day-off. The fear of becoming ill, without any backup, itself creates a sense of anxiety. The advent of Pastoral Councils, Safeguarding Children Committees, Finance and Liturgy Councils, do help to share the burden of responsibility, but also add to the monthly round of meetings.

Most of the Catholics, who present for marriage papers, baptisms, confirmations, etc., are not familiar to us from Sunday Mass. This has a demoralising effect on the priest. Even if the grace of the sacraments works in ways we can only imagine (*ex opere operato*), liturgical celebrations lack the ring of authenticity (*ex opere operantis*) without an ongoing participation in the life of the Church. Priests would prefer to be known as familiar faith friends rather than occasional service providers.

Parish boundaries have become less relevant. The larger towns and cities are popular Mass venues for rural parishioners who combine Sunday shopping with Sunday Mass. As is typical for an institution in decline, the Catholic Church in Ireland is less homogenous nowadays, with liberal and conservative groups attracting committed adherents, who are not necessarily linked to their local parish.

As our numbers decline, the priest’s feelings of isolation can increase. Loneliness stems not so much from living alone (many priests relish their retreat from the whirlwind of each day), but from the perception that our way of life does not matter much to society anymore. Given that the cultural milieu can be so critical of the Church, we may be tempted to retreat to our clerical bunkers, emerging each Sunday to fire off a salvo of counter-criticism. Our congregations have come to hear the Good News, not a harangue! Too much of our time is spent maintaining existing structures and ministering to those already proficient in faith. We can feel under-resourced and helpless in finding ways of making Christ relevant to young adults, the disaffected and those who have drifted away from their Church.

With all these challenges comes the danger of losing confidence and becoming cynical. The generosity of spirit with which we offered our lives to God and the Church might be replaced by a “creeping selfishness”, as one priest called it. We might prefer to think just of our own patch of the Lord’s vineyard, forgetting our responsibilities to the wider Church and her future.

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ADVANTAGES

In other ways, there has never been a better time to be a diocesan priest in Ireland. While it is regrettable that Irish society is turning away from Gospel teachings, a clearer distinction from the State will make for a humbler, nimbler Church. We can again take a stand with those on the margins, the latter day *anawim Yahweh*. Some priests report that the atmosphere at Sunday Masses has become more vibrant in recent years, thanks to the greater proportion of *intentional* as distinct from *cultural* Catholics in the assembly. The years of opprobrium by the commentariat has, on the ground, only created a climate of sympathy and goodwill.

There was a time when Irish dioceses had too many priests for their own needs. Now that we are more scattered and busier, there is less time for petty, personal rivalries. No longer does the local priest have to cope with the pressure of being on the community pedestal, *mar fear i lár an aonar*. Information technology has made administering parishes more efficient and effective.

Most crucially, our reduced presence is creating the climate for a more inclusive Church. Many of the roles previously played by the priest are not essential to the priesthood and can be better carried out by suitably prepared lay and religious women and men. That, I think, is the reason why, in our discussions, there was no motion for changing the Church's teaching on an all-male and celibate-only priesthood. No radical or "curve ball" suggestions emerged from our discussions. Our responses to the emerging reality are based on current Church teaching and practice.

Promote vocations to the diocesan priesthood: Among the commonly stated causes of the crisis in vocations, is the requirement of celibacy, smaller family sizes in the Western world and the sexual abuse scandals. To this list we added our failure to promote and lead public prayers for vocations. Where this has happened, in parts of the United States, an increase in vocations has followed. The personal example of priests is also inspirational. If we present as selfish, tired or over-busy, we are hardly making the priesthood an attractive option for young men. Conversely, the witness of a prayerful, wholesome and compassionate life itself invites vocations.

Invite priests from abroad:

There were views for and against this response. The principal argument for inviting clergy from other countries is that, without priests, the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Church's life, cannot be celebrated. Priests from other cultures and nations would be a reminder of the "catholicity" of the Church, and parallel the

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welcome Ireland is extending to migrants from around the world. *Against* the suggestion is the argument that it is the responsibility of the local Church to nurture its own vocations. Non-Irish priests might fail to connect with the peculiar expression of Catholicism in Ireland. The presence of many priests from abroad might stymie the emergence of a new Church, one that is less clergy-centred.

Promote priests' wellbeing: Our discussions noted that fraternity among priests is not as strong as it was in the past and that our houses are often untidy! We can be so busy that, all too easily, our accommodation can become badly kept and forbidding.

In the days of yore, it was the housekeeper who kept the priest in good stead. She was not just a cook and a gatekeeper, but also a companion. Cardinal Basil Hume once observed the most biting sacrifice of being celibate to be, at the end of each day, having no one to share his problems before being told to, "Come off it, Basil!" So, who can replace "Mrs. Doyle"? Or would we really want her to be replaced? Her role in the priest's life is now taken by multiple others: such as a visiting housekeeper, the parish secretary, as well as lay and clerical friends. Several priests referred to the role of their own family as a cornerstone in their lives.

The role of the bishop as shepherd to priests was also aired. Priests would welcome a personal visit from their bishop, or his vicar for clergy, at times other than parish events. The vow of obedience (from "ab audire", meaning "to hearken"), properly involves mutual listening to the concerns of both the priest and of the diocese, as expressed by the bishop. The ongoing back-up of the diocesan office in matters of everyday pastoral practice is much appreciated. We called for the greater provision of recommended pastoral supervisors, therapists and spiritual directors, as a way of encouraging priests to seek help, when needed, and as an ongoing support. We suggested that, even in times of fewer priests, opportunities for sabbaticals and for postgraduate qualification should continue to be encouraged. Without continuing formation, we risk becoming time-locked and anachronistic. Diocese-wide and regional meetings are other opportunities for learning, as well as building consensus and fraternity.

We noted that fraternity among priests cannot be legislated. Being sensitive to the personal space and idiosyncrasies of fellow priests is a form of Christian respect! On the other hand, we have a duty to the common good and should avoid becoming lone rangers. That balance between being true to oneself (the *intrapersonal*, to use Howard Gardner's term) and being true to others (the *interpersonal*), is not just good for the Church, but also for personal wellbeing.

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Create Pastoral Areas: Our discussions took a view against the practice of amalgamating or “clustering” parishes. It was felt that, where possible, each priest should have a “home” parish and each parish have a priest or priests it can call its own. However, a looser cooperation between parishes, based on shared responsibilities, would help. These might include sick call and holiday cover and coordinated Sunday Mass times. Regular meetings between the priests of each area would plan for inter-parish events such as adult faith development courses, liturgical ministry training, and shared Advent or Lenten reconciliation services.

In Cloyne Diocese, as in most of rural Ireland, medium sized towns are flanked by rural parishes in their hinterland. The ‘hubs’ might provide secretarial services to the outlying parishes. The priests in outlying parishes could assist with chaplaincy in the second-level schools and nursing homes, which are generally located in the larger towns. One suggestion was that priests regularly “rotate pulpits” at weekends. The late editor of *The Furrow* liked to point out that each priest, no matter what the Sunday, drew on a repertoire of just five sermons, variations on his favourite themes. Making available an alternative celebrant for Sunday Mass would bring a welcome variety for parishioners.

Review Sunday Mass times: The news of the cancellation of a Sunday Mass is received in much the same way as the closure of a village shop or post office: even if it is poorly supported, the announcement is seen as a diminishment of community life. In an effort to explain our changing situation, we recommended a diocese-wide statement on *Sunday Mass in a Time of Fewer Priests*. This would point out that the frequency of Sunday Masses, depends on the number of available priests. Each priest should normally celebrate two Sunday Masses, and no more than three, including the Vigil Mass.¹ The statement would note that there is seldom need to replicate the number of Sunday Masses on a holyday of obligation, and that our policy is not to schedule separate funeral or wedding Masses on Sunday. It might be suggested that some weekday Masses would be cancelled in order to give greater attention to Sunday Eucharist. In this event, the appropriate moment from the Liturgy of the Hours would be celebrated.

The statement would appeal for parish unity. Having fewer, but better prepared Masses could be seen as a good move in itself, but only if parishioners continue to worship in their local church. A half-empty church is not the optimal setting for Sunday Eucharist, which is meant to gather together, not fragment, the local community of faith. A fuller Church itself creates a joyful

1 Cf., *The Code of Canon Law*, Can. 905.

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mood and atmosphere of encounter, with one's neighbours as well as the Lord.

Active participation of all the baptised: The participation of the laity in liturgical ministries and parish stewardship is one of the most visible outcomes of Vatican II. Priests have learnt that it is neither effective nor justifiable to "run" the parish on their own. Within the past decade, many parishes have appointed part or whole-time secretaries, building caretakers and finance officers. A lay pastoral worker can add much to the parish's faith formation activities, among adults as well as children. However the limited financial resources available to parishes restrict the development of these posts. We suggested that the diocesan office draw up model job descriptions for the emerging roles. We also called for duly accredited courses in Pastoral Theology for lay-people preparing to take up the positions.

Confining the participation of parishioners to liturgical ministries and the administration of the parish runs the risk of clericalizing the laity. The priest's roles could be replaced, but parish life might not be reformed and continue to be administered along "clerical" lines. The Church could well show greater imagination in acknowledging what being a Catholic means to the average worker or student or homemaker, and integrate that experience into parish life.

Assistance to Education: Jesus blessed the children and taught adults. We have tended to do the opposite. In the early Church, evangelisation generally preceded catechesis, but our custom is to teach the faith (in schools), even before it has been received. The priest's primary function, we proposed, is as chaplain, both to the school's staff and students. His traditional responsibility, as chair of the parish's Board of Management can easily be taken up by suitably qualified lay people. (On the other hand, the view was expressed that our role in school management is a service to society. Teachers, in particular, appreciate the impartiality of the priest.) We also welcomed the growing focus on the parish (rather than the school) as the animator for Communion for the First Time and Confirmations.

The local priest's relationship with secondary schools is less well defined, and varies greatly. We regret that so few young people, even those who enjoy Religious Education, are involved with their local parishes. The *John Paul II Award* is an example of ways that parish-school links can be created.

Wider Conversation: The declining numbers of priests has created a new context for the Catholic Church in Ireland. We recommended

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that our conversation be extended to involve a wider cross-section of the *pobal Dé* in Cloyne. This would take up the call of Pope Francis for “an entirely synodal Church”.² While the Holy Father commends the traditional “organs of communion” within dioceses, such as the council of priests and the chapter of canons, he believes that it is “only to the extent that these organizations keep connected to the ‘base’ and start from people and their daily problems, (that) a synodal Church can begin to take shape.” The conversation could take the form of a regional pastoral council, or convention or the more formal diocesan synod envisaged by Canon Law. The process itself would be an opportunity for renewal: all that is admirable in Catholicism would be more widely known; the local Church would better appreciate what is positive in society.

In *The Second Curve*, Charles Handy uses the mathematical concept of the sigmoid curve (a horizontal “S”) as a metaphor for the cycle of growth, decay and reinvention in “all things human”, be it the Roman Empire, the career of Alex Ferguson, or the Apple Corporation. Before the pattern of decline becomes irreversible, the individual or the organisation has an opportunity to restore itself by sending out a second upward curve.

“The real problem,” Handy writes, “is that the change has to be initiated while the first curve is still going. ... Those who have been in charge ... have to begin to think very differently about the future or let others lead the way up the new curve. That is something that does not come easily. ... Change is easier to deliver when crisis looms, but harder to implement with resources and time running out.”³

While Handy does not cite the Catholic Church as an example, his insight clearly applies to our situation. The traditional Church, that assigned a central role to priests and religious, is in obvious decline. It is up to our generation, who have inherited the strengths of the previous upward curve, to play a constructive, but not exclusive, part in the next.

2 Pope Francis, “Address to Commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops” (Vatican City: October 15, 2015).

3 Charles Handy, *The Second Curve. Thoughts on Reinventing Society* (London: Random House, 2015), 7-8.