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## What are Priests for?

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In recent decades the decline in vocations to the priesthood and the increasing age-profile of the clergy have become noted aspects of Church life in Ireland and in other western countries. There are many reasons for this clerical decline. The main reason is probably that it is part of a general decline in the life of faith. There is a shortage of clergy because there is a shortage of laity. However, one factor in this complex situation may be that for many people it is not very clear what the vocation to the priesthood is. In other words, what are priests for?

Historically and theologically, we can say that there are three aspects to the priestly ministry. These are the administration of the sacraments, the preaching of the word of God and the leadership of the community. All three are necessary. There must be an organic connection between the three aspects of priesthood. Otherwise, they could be separated and be done by different people. To some extent this is the case. There are teachers and preachers of the word who are not priests and there are community leaders who are not priests, but these roles are, nevertheless, still intrinsic to the priesthood.

At different periods in the Church's history the emphasis has been on one or other of the three roles of the priest and the other two have been seen as derived from it. This has had implications for how priests see themselves and for priestly spirituality. In this article I want to explore what is the most fruitful way of looking at this question today.

## THE CELEBRANT OF THE SACRAMENTS

In the centuries prior to Vatican II the emphasis was on the sacramental ministry of the priest and especially on his role in offering the sacrifice of the Mass. This was partly in reaction to Luther who had denied that the Mass was a sacrifice and that there was any special priesthood. The Council of Trent dealt with the priesthood as part of its teaching on the sacraments.

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Sacrifice and priesthood are by the ordinance of God so united that both have existed under every law. Since, therefore, in the New Testament the Catholic Church has received from the institution of Christ the holy, visible sacrifice of the Eucharist, it must also be acknowledged that there exists in the Church a new, visible and external priesthood into which the old one was changed. Moreover, the Sacred Scriptures make it clear and the Tradition of the Catholic Church has always taught that this priesthood was instituted by the same Lord our Saviour, and that the power of consecrating, offering and administering his body and blood, and likewise of remitting and retaining sins, was given to the apostles and to their successors in the priesthood.<sup>1</sup>

The Council of Trent defined the priesthood very clearly. It emphasised its sacred character which set the priest apart as a sacred person. The priest was someone who acted in the person of Christ. This gave the priest a strong sense of identity and motivated him to imitate Christ, to be a person of prayer and an icon of Christ in his dealing with others.

It is interesting that the Council of Trent itself made the connection with the Old Testament priesthood. Holiness in the Old Testament was associated with being separate from ordinary life. The spirituality of the priesthood was influenced by this concept. The difference between the priest and everyone else in the Christian community tended to be emphasised. He dressed differently, he was not married, he had a different lifestyle and he did not get involved in secular affairs.

In the pre-Vatican II Church there was in fact a very exalted view of the priesthood. The disadvantage of this was that it made the laity seem like second class members of the Church. If the “high theology” of priesthood was not balanced by an appreciation of the dignity of all the baptised, it could lead to a sense of superiority and the resulting evils of clericalism. If the sacramental ministry of the priest is taken as starting point it is hard to see where the other two roles fit in. One could be a priest without ever preaching or exercising a pastoral ministry. This in fact was the case with many priests who were monks.

### THE PREACHER OF THE WORD OF GOD

In the twentieth century there was a move away from the cultic interpretation of priesthood and a rediscovery of the importance of the word of God. We can see the influence of this trend in the

1 Council of Trent, Twenty-third Session, Doctrine on the Sacrament of Order, Chapter I (1563), Neuner and Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, (New York, 1996) p. 627.

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documents of Vatican II. The Council's Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, treats comprehensively the three aspects of the priestly ministry. It begins with the ministry of the word.

The People of God is formed into one in the first place by the Word of the living God. For since nobody can be saved who has not first believed, it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all.<sup>2</sup>

This emphasis on the word has been very fruitful for priestly spirituality. It has meant that priests have engaged with the word in their personal prayer and this has influenced their preaching. Since Vatican II the homily at Mass is based on the Scripture readings. Many priests begin their homily preparation by taking the readings of the coming Sunday for their personal prayer and reflection during the week. In this way their personal prayer and their preaching are enriching each other.

It is easy to see that there is an organic connection between the preaching of the word of God and the celebration of the sacraments. On the first Pentecost when Peter had proclaimed the message, explaining the meaning of Christ's life and death and the significance of his resurrection, the people asked: "What must we do?" and Peter replied: "You must repent and every one of you must be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2: 37-38). Preaching led to repentance, which in turn led to the celebration of the sacrament of baptism. Similarly, at Mass we hear the word of God proclaimed in the readings and in the homily. If this has been done effectively, we see our lives in a new light. We want to give thanks and so, we celebrate the Eucharist. Every sacrament is preceded by a proclamation of the word of God.

The sacrament is also the culmination of the proclamation of the word. Every sacrament consists of actions and words. It is the words that interpret the actions. It is the words that make the action a sacrament. For instance, the pouring of water over a baby's head is just that, but when done with the words "I baptise you" etc., the action becomes a sacrament. The Eucharist is the sacrament in which the power of the word is most dramatically demonstrated. At the word of Christ, spoken by the priest, the bread becomes the Body of Christ.

The connection between the preaching of the word of God and the pastoral ministry is, perhaps, not quite as clear as the connection

2 *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 4, Flannery, Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents (Dublin, 1975), p. 868.

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with the celebration of the sacraments, but it is there nonetheless. The preaching of the word of God brings about faith. This faith is a shared faith, the faith of the community. We are baptised into a community, the Church. The Eucharist makes us one body in Christ.

Taking the preaching of the word of God as the fundamental role of the priest has the advantage of integrating word and sacrament. From the point of view of the priest's relationship with the community, it applies more to missionaries and travelling preachers than to the resident priest in a parish. Where does the priest's role as pastor come in? A third approach to our question is to begin with the pastoral ministry and to see preaching and the celebration of the sacraments as essential components of that ministry.

### THE PASTOR OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

St John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), takes the figure of Christ the Good Shepherd as his main inspiration in putting forward a rich and integrated theology and spirituality of the priesthood. The love of Christ the Good Shepherd extends to all. This pastoral charity in which the priest shares is the underlying motivation for the ministry.

The internal principle, the force which animates and guides the spiritual life of the priest inasmuch as he is configured to Christ the head and shepherd, is pastoral charity, a gift freely bestowed by the Holy Spirit and likewise a task and a call which demand a free and committed response on the part of the priest.<sup>3</sup>

Pastoral charity denotes the idea of caring for the Lord's flock. This includes the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments. In fact, St John Paul sees it as the unifying principle in the priest's ministry.

This same pastoral charity is the dynamic inner principle capable of unifying the many different activities of the priest.<sup>4</sup>

The advantage of this approach is that it does not just begin with one of the functions of the priest, but with the underlying motivation for all he does. This means that a sense of vocation is essential. Being called by the Lord implies a relationship with the Lord. In the passages quoted above it is stated that pastoral charity

3 Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 23.

4 *Ibid.*

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is a gift of the Holy Spirit. This may be said to be the charism of the priesthood. It is a charism freely bestowed on all priests by the Holy Spirit. Priests who belong to religious orders or missionary societies also share in the charism of their particular institutes. The vocation of the diocesan priest is especially characterised by pastoral charity. Most diocesan priests are engaged in parish work where this charism is most obviously needed. However, all priesthood is pastoral. The priest who teaches Maths and French in a secondary school has a pastoral relationship with his students. The monk-priest, who may not have any pastoral charge as such, nevertheless exercises pastoral charity in his encounters with people through the sacrament of reconciliation, counselling or spiritual direction. What all pastoral activity involves is some personal contact or availability in order to help people in their relationship with God.

The word “pastor” comes from the Latin for shepherd. In Chapter 10 of John’s Gospel Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. The shepherd was a familiar figure in the countryside where Jesus lived and ministered. Minding the sheep was a full-time and hands-on job. There was a close bond between sheep and shepherd. Jesus uses the image of the shepherd to describe the relationship that his disciples have with him. “The sheep follow [the shepherd] because they know his voice. They never follow a stranger but run away from him: they do not recognise the voice of strangers” (John 10: 4-5). Jesus gives his life for his disciples: “The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.”

In Chapter 21 of the same Gospel Jesus shares his ministry of shepherd with Peter. “Feed my lambs ... Look after my sheep ... Feed my sheep” (John 21: 15-17). Before giving Peter his pastoral charge Jesus first asks Peter if he loves him. It is for love of the Lord that the priest takes on the office he is given. He then shares in Christ’s love for his flock. This is pastoral charity. Like Christ the Good Shepherd, the priest has a relationship with the flock and he is dedicated to their welfare. It is worth noting that the lambs and sheep in this passage remain the property of Jesus. They do not become Peter’s lambs and sheep. Peter is asked to care for them, not lord it over them. He must respect the fact that each of them has a direct relationship with the Lord himself.

### PASTORAL MINISTRY INCLUDES WORD AND SACRAMENT

Feeding the sheep involves giving them the word of God and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The preaching of the word of God and the celebration of the sacraments are intrinsic to the pastoral ministry. The ministry of the word of God includes the

proclamation of the word of God in the liturgy, but also teaching the faith, input into prayer groups and faith formation in less formal settings. The most effective sermon is one's own life. The liturgical homily has a central place in this ministry. Its purpose is to make the connection between the message of the Scripture readings and people's lives. The preacher can only do this if he knows the people he is addressing and has some understanding of their concerns, fears and hopes. There may be some effective televangelists, but the local pastor is more likely to have his finger on the pulse of the community and is more likely to strike a chord.

The celebration of the sacraments is also an essential aspect of the pastoral ministry. As mentioned already, the sacraments are the natural culmination of the preaching of the word of God. This is most clearly apparent in the Sunday Mass. The community hears the word of God together and then celebrates the Eucharist. The sacraments also mark important moments in people's lives. Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation mark key stages in the growth of the young Christian. They are also important family occasions. They are more meaningful if the priest is not a complete stranger. This is even more true when it comes to a wedding or a funeral. It also makes it more meaningful for the priest himself if he has some connection with the people with whom he is celebrating.

### THE PASTORAL DIMENSION AND VOCATIONS

Let us now return to the question of vocation with which I began this article. What motivates the would-be priest to respond to the Lord's call in the first place? I would say that usually there are two aspects to it. On the one hand there is the desire to follow the Lord and to dedicate one's life to God and on the other there is the desire to help people on their way to God. Both are essential to the priestly vocation. The priesthood is about bringing people to God. So pastoral charity is there from the start as part of the motivation to respond to a vocation. The pastoral dimension continues to be fundamental to the priest's motivation throughout his life. If, because of the shortage of priests, the priest is mainly seen as someone who administers the sacraments without any real pastoral involvement with the people, the priesthood becomes less attractive to potential candidates. The following anecdote helps to illustrate this point.

A few years ago, I met a young priest in France who had been ordained for the Paris Archdiocese even though he came from a different part of the country. I asked him why he did not go for his home diocese and he said it was because in his own diocese, which was largely rural, he would be going around six or seven parishes

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where he would have no real connection with the people, whereas in Paris he would be in one place and would have a chance to get to know the community.

The point I want to make is that if we want to encourage vocations, the priesthood needs to be presented as fundamentally pastoral. The best advertisement for the priesthood is the life of priests as seen on the ground. If priests are perceived as fulfilled in their ministry and making a valuable contribution to the life of the community, this will attract others. If they are seen as over-stretched and under stress, this will turn people off. Priests need to be relieved of much of the administrative work, such as looking after buildings and finance. These tasks are not pastoral and are often a source of worry and hassle. There are other people who can do these things more efficiently. The answer to the shortage of priests is not to place all the emphasis on the priest's sacramental ministry. The three aspects must be kept in balance.

In answer to the question which of the three roles of the priest can most fruitfully be taken as the starting point for the theology and spirituality of the priesthood today, it seems clear that it is best to see the pastoral role as the fundamental one. The ministry of proclaiming the word of God and the priestly role of offering the Mass and celebrating the sacraments are necessary components of that. The positive points in the other approaches can be incorporated into a theology which begins with the concept of sharing in the ministry of Christ the Good Shepherd.

## THE DEPLOYMENT OF CLERGY IN THE CURRENT SITUATION

How should we respond to the problem of the depletion of the clergy in Ireland at the present time? One of the results of this situation is the increasing involvement of the laity. This is to be welcomed. In the coming years there will be much greater involvement and, hopefully, new ministries will be developed which will engage the talents of both women and men. Lay ministry does not replace the ministry of the priest but complements it. A lay Church in which the priest would be an occasional visitor to provide some sacramental functions would be an aberration. It would also be very unsatisfactory for the priest himself. So, I think that stretching out the remaining priests over larger and larger groups of parishes is not the solution.

An alternative solution was actually proposed in *Presbyterorum ordinis* as far back as 1965. Having pointed out, that every priestly ministry shares in the universal mission that Christ gave to his Church, the document states as follows.



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Priests, therefore, should recall that the solicitude of all the churches should be their intimate concern. For this reason priests of those dioceses which are blessed with greater abundance of vocations should be prepared gladly to offer themselves, with the permission or encouragement of their own ordinary, for the exercise of their ministry in countries ...that are hampered by shortage of clergy.<sup>5</sup>

The Council document goes on to recommend that clergy coming from abroad “should be sent at least in groups of two or three so that they may be of mutual help to one another.”<sup>6</sup> In the globalised world in which we now live many young priests would welcome the opportunity to spend five years in another country. It would be quite a normal thing for people of their generation. The fact that Ireland is English speaking would be an advantage, as it is the language most often learned as a second language.

A good way to deploy these volunteers from abroad would be to place them in the more urban areas, most of which are becoming increasingly multi-national and multi-cultural. This would free up the native clergy for the more rural areas. Rural parishes may suit the older priests better. It is important that the Church does not abandon rural Ireland. The priest in the rural parish is a reminder of God and of the service that is due to God and his presence is greatly valued by the community. It may be said that what I am proposing is a short term solution. This is true. What is needed now is a short term solution. There is no point in trying to devise a solution for twenty years time, because the situation will be completely different then. We do not know what Ireland or the Church will be like in twenty years time.

## CONCLUSION

What are priests for? The service that priests give to the People of God is to humbly represent Christ the Head and Shepherd of the Church who cares for all and who feeds his flock with word and sacrament. This vocation will always be needed in the Christian community.

5 *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 10, Flannery, Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents (Dublin, 1975), p. 882.

6 *Ibid.* Flannery, p. 883.