

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Neil H. Ritchie

Finding Meaning
in the
Priestly Life

October 2021

Finding Meaning in the Priestly Life

Neil H. Ritchie

What keeps me going as a priest? Why do I do this? To be sure, there are joys, as well as sorrows; benefits as well as losses, but what has kept me going despite the challenges? Why have many of my brothers in priesthood stayed, but other have left? Why do some come to the end of their days with a sense of gratitude and fulfilment (despite an awareness of mistakes, or wounds inflicted by the challenges of life) yet others – fortunately few in my experience – face death with a sense of waste and futility? *Meaning*, it seemed to me, might be a useful ‘lens’ to adopt to explore this subject.

MEANING

Meaning, of course, is a subject that has attracted the attention of many people in the world of philosophy (such as Nietzsche) and psychology (think of Viktor Frankl’s ‘logotherapy’). Of the various studies and research projects that have been completed into Catholic priests over the years, I found none directly explore the question of how priests make meaning, but a good number touch on the question tangentially, or shed some light on the subject.

What does meaning mean? It is perhaps best understood as a multi-faceted reality, embracing various themes. Psychologists Ray Baumeister and Mark Landau propose the following list of themes as prominent concepts in meaning:

- purpose – connecting our lives to higher or future goals;
- value – ideas or themes which people consider to be of particular importance and which are worth promoting, protecting or striving towards;
- a sense of one’s life “mattering;”
- continuity, coherence and comprehension: a sense that life unfolds reliably over time, and that different aspects of one’s life fit together.

Neil H. Ritchie, Philip Neri House, 30 Catherine Street, Liverpool, L8 7NL

“People,” Baumeister and Landau suggest “derive meaning in life partly by crafting a story in which the present is explained both as a product of past events and as a springboard towards future states, toward which they are striving.”¹

Austrian psychiatrist and author Viktor Frankl saw the pursuit of meaning as the fundamental drive which motivates us. When that drive is frustrated, we experience what he called an “existential vacuum”: a loss of sense or purpose. A survivor of Auschwitz, he found that those of his fellow prisoners who had something to live for beyond the awfulness of the camp – the chance that their children may have survived and needed them, or a life work that was still to be completed – were more apt to survive than others, who more readily succumbed to illness. Some people may make pleasure-seeking the centre of their lives, but not many, I think. Mostly we seek something deeper, and we may even be prepared to sacrifice personal comfort or pleasure to obtain it. Think of the sacrifices a married couple may make to raise their children, and give them the best start in life they can manage.

Meaning is attractive, as a concept, because we are “meaning-making creatures.” But not all meaning leads to the good. Think of the suicide bomber, or neo-Nazi. They may have a perfectly strong set of values, giving coherence and direction to their lives. Indeed, the strong sense of meaning may be the very thing that has drawn them to that ideology. But this is the potential down-side of meaning. Having a clear set of values and goals is no guarantee that they are good.

In former generations, people generally found meaning “ready-made” in social, cultural and religious traditions, but this is less so today in Western society. Religious affiliation may provide a source of meaning, but fewer people than before are able to accept such codes without question. We may find a religious code attractive, but for that code to become personally meaningful, we have to adopt it for ourselves.

Similarly with *vocation*: we may begin with a clear sense of value and purpose, drawn and inspired by a certain vision. But confrontation with the realities of life and our human limitations can cause that initial vision to crumble. It may be that we never recover a sense of purpose in that original vocational direction, but such a crisis can provide the opportunity to re-establish and “re-focus” our vocational vision, grounded perhaps on deeper goals and perhaps on a more humble acknowledgement of our dependence on God.

1 Baumeister, R. and Landau, M., “Finding the Meaning of Meaning: Emerging Insights on Four Grand Questions”, *Review of General Psychology*, 22(1), p. 3.

THE FURROW

Years ago, I remember a seminary rector asking me why I thought it was that a number of students had left ministry within months of ordination. I can't recall what I said at the time, but over the years what I have seen is that the cocoon of seminary life can provide an agreeable environment, sufficiently insulated from the rest of the world, which does not always confront students with questions of purpose emerging from the realities of life outside the seminary doors. The meaning-systems we adopt have to be tested against the range of life situations and possibilities we will encounter, and will not be able to easily avoid (though it is possible to sustain a meaning-system by being in denial about realities we don't want to accept).

CRISIS MOMENTS

Meaning systems can be said to be the way we organise our lives. But these may change over time, sometimes gradually, as we revise our values and "life-maps", but sometimes radically. A crisis moment may plunge us into chaos. Bereavement, failure, or even falling in love, can shatter the meaning structures of our lives, leaving us feeling adrift and rootless, unsure of who we really are or where we are going. Spiritually, we might call this a "dark night of the soul", or in philosophical terms, an "existential crisis." Richard Sipe describes how Henri Nouwen underwent such a crisis at one stage in his life, precipitated by the disappointment of an academic appointment which did not turn out well. In the ensuing period he opened himself to a friendship, the intensity of which tested his integrity as a celibate priest to the limit. Sipe describes how Nouwen entered a period of "disintegration" but one which, when worked through, brought him to a new plane of personal integration. He terms this "Positive Disintegration":

... the idea that in order to move from one level of personal or spiritual integration to another, a person has to relinquish the security of a stable state and go through a period that is experienced as disintegration, to achieve a higher level of integration ... [Nouwen] described the pain of the experience as a gift of immense joy and peace that revealed a new part of himself, "as if a door of my interior life had been opened ..."²

One former priest described how, as a seminarian, he had a strong sense of purpose and value about his future life as a priest. He identified with and was inspired by the martyrs of post-Reformation England. His Catholic faith gave him a strong sense of continuity

2 Sipe, A., *Living the Celibate Life: a search for Models and Meaning*. (Chawton, Hamps.: Redemptorist Publications, 2004) p. 116.

FINDING MEANING IN THE PRIESTLY LIFE

and coherence. Once ordained, he passed on to his people the teaching of the Church, somewhat rigidly and dogmatically, as he later reflected. Yet something was missing, and it was only when he met a young woman who did not defer to his clerical status, but related to him as a man, that he was able to recognise and address the unexplored territory in his life: intimacy. His discovery was that he could not make his best contribution to the world as a man without the love and support of a wife. It's not always this way: many priests come to discover the profound need for intimacy after ordination, and perhaps confront the prospect of leaving for marriage, yet have concluded that their deepest "truth" is to remain as a priest. In the best cases, they have found ways of being able to live this choice fruitfully and in a more settled way, even if there is still a loss in not being able to realise the desire for a "coupled" relationship and the joy of parenthood. In other words, they have been able to make the celibate choice meaningful *for themselves*.

It is not a foregone conclusion that such a crisis will lead to a positive and creative outcome; for some, the crisis may never be resolved; some may slide into despair, addiction, or other sates of entrapment. Whether it is resolved, and how quickly, probably depends on the resources we have around us: supportive relationships, access to professional help, and perhaps a faith system that is flexible enough to allow a new integration of self and identity, and inner resources of hope and perseverance that enable us to keep going in the midst of darkness. And no doubt in this there is an element of choice: we must strive to come through the hour of trial.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

It is not only the confrontation with the realities of life that may challenge one's meaning system: the world itself changes, making our vision of priesthood – or at least what it needs to address in the world – less meaningful than before. As a young priest, I was able to witness the effect that changing circumstances in the Church, and in society more broadly, had on older priests. Many of these had come from Ireland to Britain in the post-war years, and had laboured hard for the Church, building up local communities. In fact, the "mark" of a good priest in many peoples' eyes in those days was his success at *building* things: schools, churches, social centres. This was where they found meaning. It's hardly so today, especially in the Western world. We have too many buildings, and so many priests find that their working lives centre around shrinkage, amalgamations and closure – with all the associated complex emotions this can arouse. Its perhaps a little more challenging to

THE FURROW

find meaning in such circumstances. But not impossible: perhaps we can take a little consolation from the idea that pruning the vine (cf. John 15:2) is part of the process of allowing for future growth, however painful it is at the time. Possibly more recently ordained clergy are more equipped to cope with these challenges, because they have known nothing else. But they too will know the challenge of a changing world, and will have to look deeply for the sources of meaning that will sustain them.

It's not surprising that the clerical child-abuse scandal has, for many people, including priests, severely challenged their sense of trust and security. Fr Barry O'Sullivan researched the impact of the crisis on non-offending priests.³ They may feel angry and have a sense of shame, as members of a presbyterate which has included perpetrators, and of a church whose institutional failings have been exposed. Many report feeling anxious about being the subject themselves of an untrue allegation, and wonder whether they would be supported by the Church in such a situation. They may at the same time grieve the loss of a more innocent age, yet wonder how they, and others, could have been blind to the terrible crimes committed. Every aspect of meaning – their values, self-worth, and sense of coherence and continuity – has been challenged. What is remarkable, as O'Sullivan's research finds, is that in many cases, priests have found ways of coming to terms with the crisis, overcoming adversity, and making renewed sense of themselves and the priesthood. The emerging recognition that many parishioners support them and empathise with their plight is often a help, as is the recognition that bishops, despite their limitations, are usually also striving to do the best for everyone.

Our meaning systems, then, both enable us to meet the challenges of life, but will inevitably be challenged themselves. Yet the drive toward meaning enables us to refine our meaning system, shedding more superficial goals and seeking the deepest sources of value within us.

ENCOUNTERING CHALLENGES

What factors might help priests meet those challenges more effectively?

Fr Stephen Rosetti comments: “priesthood is a spiritual life. To be a happy priest necessarily includes having a strong relationship with God...”,⁴ and indeed his research finds that priestly happiness correlates directly with a strong spiritual life, lived out in regular

3 O'Sullivan, B., *The Burden of Betrayal. Non-offending Priests and the Clergy Child Sexual Abuse Scandals*. (Leominster: Gracewing, 2018).

4 Rossetti, S., *Why Priests are Happy: A Study of the Psychological and Spiritual Health of Priests* (Notre Dame, IN.: Ave Maria Press, 2011) p. 11.

FINDING MEANING IN THE PRIESTLY LIFE

daily prayer and other spiritual practices. A strong spiritual life expresses the values, commitment and purpose expressed in ordination. But this must be nuanced. It is too easy to dismiss the struggles of priests who leave ministry as the consequence of “not saying their prayers.” Sometimes a deep conflict within us can make prayer all but impossible. And faith must be sufficiently flexible to allow new integrations of meaning as we go through life.

All of the studies I reviewed found that satisfaction and joy was very prevalent among priests. Rosetti comments in his book *The Joy of Priesthood* that this may be for many people an unexpected finding: given all the bad news about the Church in the media, one might expect priests to be a rather sad and melancholic group of people – yet the truth seems to be that a significant majority of priests report that they still find great joy and satisfaction in ministry.⁵ Meaning and happiness are not the same thing, but this finding would suggest that most priests do manage to find meaning in their priestly lives, despite its challenges. *Why* might this be?

The priest represents God in a society in which God has been, if not eradicated entirely, relegated to the margins – in the Western world at least. This is a lonely place to be, much of the time. Yet, still people seem to need the priest to be there, to give them hope in times of suffering, and to add a spiritual dimension to the joyful moments of life. Priests are in the business of helping people to find meaning. This is what we do, Sunday after Sunday, as we proclaim the Word of God and help people to relate it to their lives. In the liturgy we gather and guide a community to celebrate our belief in a God who comes among us to bring wholeness and healing. I believe that helping other people to find meaning depends on our own sense of having found meaning, and also enhances it.

CONCLUSION

Meaning is something we find by committing ourselves to a project – something beyond ourselves. Happiness will elude us if we seek it directly; it comes as a by-product of commitment to a cause beyond ourselves:

For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it.⁶

5 Rosetti, S., *The Joy of Priesthood* (Notre Dame, IN.: Ave Maria Press, 2005).

6 Frankl, V., *Man's Search for Meaning* (London: Rider, 1959, 2004) p.12.

THE FURROW

Sooner or later, whether you are a priest or not, you have to wrestle with the questions: what are my ultimate sources of value? What am I prepared to live my life for? Will I do this? One can avoid these questions, but in doing so one can end up living in the uneasy half-light of the unchosen life, risking a future of cynicism and bitterness. Those courageous enough to face the questions may find that crises, challenges, and even personal failures not only do not destroy them, but paradoxically can become the foundations of our rediscovered selves.

Fr Timothy Radcliffe's recent article "What are you here for?" made the observation that mid-life changes of direction can represent a liberation, in finding out, like Elijah at Horeb, that the real narrative is not "about me," but is something that transcends me: something of God's making.⁷ Perhaps this is part of the meaning-making – or meaning-finding dynamic of the priest: we discover that the narrative that will truly fulfil us is not one of our own making, but one of God's creating, in which we have – eventually – managed to find ourselves.

7 Radcliffe, T., "What are you here for?", *The Tablet* (15/22 August 2020) p. 7.

The Life-giving Power of No. A beginning is for Catholics to recognize how much the vitality of the Church is owed to the holy people who have said No within the Church, and whose protests have ultimately nurtured the unity for which Christ prayed. Karl Barth, the greatest Protestant theologian of the last hundred years, said that Mozart's music was so profound because its massive Yes contained and embraced a resounding No! Disharmonies are embraced within an ultimate harmony. Without them, the harmony would be lifeless. Can we imagine a way of being one that is strong enough to embrace invigorating protest? Can we imagine ways of protesting that ultimately nurture our unity in God?

– TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE, *Alive in God*, (London: Bloomsbury Continuum) p. 231.