

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

FURROW

The

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Patrick H. Daly

Ambassadors for
Christ: A Model
for the Priest in
the Contemporary
Church

November 2021

Ambassadors for Christ: A Model for the Priest in the Contemporary Church

Patrick H. Daly

The word of God, when proclaimed in the liturgical assembly, is addressed to all present. It is often the case, however, that individual members of the congregation feel that on a particular day or in a particular setting, God's word is specifically addressed to them: Paul's words on love strike a chord with a couple on their wedding day (1 Corinthians 13), the recently widowed mother with young children may recognise the apostle James speaking directly to her (James 1, 27), or those who despair of the effectiveness of their prayer for themselves, a sick relative, a wayward teenager, a husband who has just been made redundant, or who are wrestling with despond at the tsunami of scandals breaking over the Church they love may gain fresh courage from Jesus' insistence that prayers of petition will be answered (Mt. 7, 7-12). There are occasions too when the presiding priest recognises in the scriptural passage proclaimed that he is being explicitly addressed by God's word.

Two days in the liturgical calendar spring to mind. The *first* is 23 December, two days short of Christmas: the terrifying warnings of the OT prophet Malachi remind us priests that central to Messiah's mission, an essential dimension to the awesome day of his coming, is to purify the sons of Levi (Malachi 3, 3). It is as if the prophet's voice is cautioning us that before we celebrate the great liturgies of Christmas we need to be purged of our sins. The *second* is Ash Wednesday where the OT prophet Joel challenges the priests, the ministers of the Lord to weep themselves between vestibule and altar and thus lead the people's lament, to act as their advocates and to plead that they be spared God's wrath (Joel 2, 17). The NT reading on this first day of Lent opens with a voice also speaking directly to the priests: in our ministry as enablers of reconciliation we are to be *ambassadors for Christ and his fellow-workers* (2 Corinthians 5, 20). The scripture scholars commenting on the

Patrick H. Daly is parish priest of Our Lady & St. Anne, Caversham, Reading RG4 5AB

peroration to Paul's second letter to the Christians of Corinth emphasise that it is precisely as ambassadors/legates for Christ that the apostolic ministry of the priests of the New Covenant is best defined.

AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST

The designation given by Paul to the church leaders at Corinth is one which, in the on-going and somewhat restless search to re-define priestly identity sixty-five years down the road since *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (December 1965), is worth exploring as we construct the profile of the contemporary Catholic priest. From the outset of his pontificate, Pope Francis insisted that the Church is of its essence missionary. In August 2019 on the feast of the *curé* of Ars, patron saint of the parochial clergy, the Holy Father sent a letter to those priests in front-line ministry: they are men who are *sent*, their calling is to mission.¹

Ambassadors, whether in the service of the Holy See or of nation states, are sent, despatched consular posts and embassies are sometimes known as *missions* - and it follows that if pastoral priests, especially if they have been allotted *cura animarum*, the cure of souls, the missionary dimension of their identity confers on them the quality of ambassador. Ambassadors for Christ are the lynchpin of every community in the world where the Eucharist is celebrated, the Word is proclaimed and preached, and its members share that common faith they and their priest proclaim Sunday after Sunday in the Nicene Creed, understanding its contents in unison with the Bishop of Rome and those Catholic bishops in communion with him.

And *how* exactly do priests fulfil this calling, first articulated by Paul in AD 57, to be ambassadors for Christ? A brief summary of what ambassadors, including those who work in the diplomatic service of the Holy See and are all ordained priests or archbishops once they have attained the rank of Nuncio, do in relationships between states might help initially. Paul Widmer, in his definitive handbook on the evolution of classical diplomacy and the multiple tasks undertaken by diplomats in representing the interests of their countries in the contemporary world order, lists the qualities of the ambassador as follows: sincerity, precision, level-headedness, modesty and a healthy, balanced understanding of his fellow man². Any priest who possesses these qualities, and even the harshest

1 Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to Priests on the 160th Anniversary of the Death of the Holy Curé of Ars, Vatican City, August 4 2019

2 Paul Widmer, *Diplomatie: ein Handbuch*, Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Zurich 2014, pp. 221-36

THE FURROW

critic will identify most of them in the majority of clergy, can recognise in themselves fulfilment of the expectation Paul had of the church leaders in first-century Corinth and, within the limited surroundings of the parish community of which they have custody, capitalise on *the favourable time, the day of salvation* (2 Cor. 6, 2).

THE PARISH PRIEST: A MAN SENT

Right from the day of his ordination, the priest like an ambassador is a sent man and, again like diplomats, his tenure of his posting is never secure. The grieving experienced by a diplomat on leaving a country to which he has been accredited and that demand for total dedication which his next assignment makes of him and his family is a grieving similar to that of the priest for the parish he is leaving and the resolve to meet the expectations of his new parish which the secular priest faces on multiple occasions in his life. That command, consequent to a phone call from bishop or vicar general, to move parish and suddenly cease a loving relationship with one community and embrace another with heart and soul, is often cause of deep grief. The parallels with bereavement are often underestimated.

The priest is an ambassador for Christ. He represents Christ to his community in which that same Christ is already present in so many ways: in his word, in his sacramental outreach, in the very tissue of the parish community as a constituent cell of his mystical Body. The priest, as ambassador, makes his parish aware of that presence, makes the parishioners alert to Jesus speaking to them. The priest is cognisant of the fact that he represents Jesus Christ by conveying his message to his people. His ambassadorial credentials are his Christ-like deportment and the way he enables his flock to see in him, at the altar, at the ambo or at the presbytery door an icon of that same Christ. The *alter Christus* model so loved by Pope John Paul II casts the priest in an ambassadorial role.

The priest is an ambassador for Christ through making Christ's cause his own. In announcing the kingdom of God through his preaching and embracing kingdom values, through his stewardship of his parish, the priest is thus advancing Christ's cause. Advocacy of the poor, the outcast, the marginalised and seeing to it that the threshold of access to the church community is such that all feel they are welcome to enter make of today's priest an ambassador which the early communities of Corinth, Ephesus or of the mother church of Jerusalem would recognise.³

³ On the role of the presbyter and the practical application of apostolic authority in the early Church, see Rudolf SCHNACKENBURG, *The Church in the New Testament*, Burns & Oates, London 1965, pp. 30 - 35

Ambassadors do much of their most effective work off-stage, they operate on the side-lines of the political chess board, as indeed many priests exercise their most discreet pastoral ministry in the sacristy, the presbytery parlour (and/or the confessional). Discretion is the ambassador's most productive weapon, prudence his indispensable virtue. Through his pastoral ministry, imperceptible save to those who are its beneficiaries, the priest-ambassador brings Christ - his mercy, his tender solicitude and the hope his message engenders - to those in greatest need.

The interests of the country he represents are always to the forefront of the secular ambassador's mind. Sometimes his promotion of those interests or his defence of the brief he has been given is, to use a term one frequently hears about parliamentary rhetoric today, "robust." It is not uncommon for the priest too to find himself standing up for Christ, for kingdom values and, increasingly these days as the environmental crisis grows, for creation itself and our "shared home." Frequently the gospel incites in him a robust response to the challenges of the age: homelessness, workplace bullying or the exclusion of the spiritual/religious dimension from public discourse.

The priest will be increasingly aware that not only must he defend what Christ stands for, even to his own congregation, but he must strenuously refrain from doing anything which would bring Christ or his Church into discredit. The ambassador may often be pro-active in promoting the interests of his country, and yet he will be conscious that he has an equal duty to avoid any indiscretion which might tarnish its reputation. The obligations of the priest in this regard, even if his field of operations is on a smaller scale, are similar.

Ambassadors and legates frequently are the bearers of gifts to the country to which they have been accredited: the Christmas tree the Norwegians give the UK to be placed in Trafalgar Square each December since the war, the shamrock presented at the White House or the Court of St. James on St. Patrick's Day, are just familiar examples. The priest/ambassador brings gifts to his new flock when appointed to a parish, and they are gifts that will be a permanent feature of his ministry to them: his profound Christian convictions; his eloquence in the pulpit; his theological learning, his cultural interests, his musical skill; the human, pastoral and administrative experience he has gained in other parishes; and above all, the greatest gift, is his desire to serve and his unswerving commitment to the promises he made on the day of his ordination and which he reaffirms annually at the Chrism Mass. Just as a secular ambassador is conscious that he brings gifts to the country where he is posted on behalf of his native land, so the priest is

THE FURROW

acutely aware that the gifts he bestows day by day on his parish community he does on behalf of and in the name of Christ.

AMBASSADOR IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

The secular clergy who serve in parishes are acutely aware that the field of operations for the majority of them for the greater part of their life in ministry is their diocese of incardination. Vatican II and all subsequent papal documents on the priesthood, such as Pope John Paul II's magisterial apostolic allocution *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), remind them that they are co-workers of their diocesan bishop. In a secondary sense the parish priest is also thus an ambassador for the bishop. He facilitates episcopal visitation, welcomes the bishop when he comes to the parish and sees to it that Lenten or other pastoral letters from the bishop are read to or by his parishioners. As an ambassador for the local church, a parish priest may well see it as his duty to make his parishioners sensitive to the greater diocesan need, not least to encourage and promote vocations to the diocesan priesthood.

For many in our parishes the priest is the touchstone of reference on all things religious and Catholic. There are those in our parishes who persist in the belief that Father knows best or, if in doubt, *you had better ask Father*. These are touching signs of respect and affection, but they articulate a deeper truth. Not only are his parishioners moved by the clarity and conviction with which their priest pleads Christ's cause, he also finds himself in his small patch an ambassador on behalf of the universal Church. The teaching of the Church needs to be safeguarded by him, the shared beliefs which form the faith of all Christians who belong to the Catholic family and see in the Successor of Peter the ultimate point of authoritative reference are always at the core of his preaching and witness. It is the orthodox faith of which he, ambassador for Christ and by analogy for his Mystical Body, is the custodian, interpreter and envoy, translating the doctrine of the Church into a message tailored to meet the pastoral needs and the cultural heritage of his particular parish community.

THE ECUMENICAL DIMENSION

Bishop Brendan Leahy has reminded clergy in Ireland, and a fortiori those of us who exercise ministry as Catholic priests in much more pluralist societies, that there is an ecumenical dimension to all that we do.⁴ I have been involved in LEP's,

4 Brendan Leahy, 'Churches Walking Together: Giving, Receiving, Learning', *Doctrine & Life*, February 2020, 2-10.

ecumenical clergy fraternals, local clergy associations and, for a short period, worked on behalf of the EU Catholic bishops in a very fruitful and enriching collaboration with CEC (Council of European Churches). That ambassadorial dimension of the priestly calling has convinced me that the qualities highlighted by the Swiss diplomat Paul Widmer are not only essential to the priest and define the quality of his ministry, but are particularly significant in the area of ecumenical or ecumenically inspired co-operation. This is all the more important as the Catholic priest is often the only Catholic in ecumenical fora. He is frequently turned to for information about the Catholic teaching or position on a range of issues under discussion in an ecumenical setting. He carries a particular burden of responsibility in translating the social teaching and doctrinal tradition of the Catholic Church for colleagues from the churches of the Reformation family, whether it be in a majority Catholic setting or a more mixed ecclesial landscape.

Our parishes can be urban or rural, they can be at the heart of a town or in suburbia, they can be centrally located in a neighbourhood or, as is frequently the case in England, at a discreet distance from the town centre on a street that runs parallel to the High Street. Whatever the location, they all have a relationship with civic society, they are stakeholders in the welfare of the community and generally also major contributors to the local community's well-being. The priest is often called upon to represent his parish, or indeed the Catholic Church, at civic functions, Remembrance Day ceremonies or at gatherings of Rotary, Lions Club, Knights of Columbus or Catenians. This role has an ambassadorial quality to it. More broadly, especially in neighbourhoods where clerical dress is still customary, the public presence or visibility of the priest is a reminder to the community at large that there are believers among them and that there is a legitimacy to the spiritual dimension of contemporary living. It is all too often the well-regarded priest or minister of religion who enables religion to claim its legitimate place in the public square.

CONCLUSION

One of the largest paintings in the National Gallery in London is a canvass painted in 1634 by Sir Anthony Van Dyck. It is a portrait of the *abbé Scaglia*, wearing rabat and soutane with the elegant style and air of self-confidence which befitted one of the most celebrated ambassadors of the age⁵. Few priests can match his posture, few have merited having their portrait commissioned

5 Christopher BROWN & Hans VLIEGHE [ed], *Van Dyck: 1599-1641*, Royal Academy Publications, London 1999, pp. 272 - 74

THE FURROW

from Van Dyck, but many priests down the ages have distinguished themselves, have served the Church, have brought credit to the Catholic cause and, through conveying with skill, dedication and pastoral sensitivity the message of the Gospel, have been true ambassadors for Christ⁶.

An understanding of representative, ambassadorial dimension to the ministerial priesthood, that insight into the apostolic mission which Paul endeavoured to impress on the early Christian community of Corinth, has remained an integral feature of the priestly profile throughout the Church's history. As this brief review of a key piece in the jigsaw of priestly identity has aimed to show, the priest who understands himself as an ambassador for Christ is well placed to further the Church's mission to the contemporary world.

- 6 The Catholic Church in Ireland will have particular reason to remember with pride and gratitude the life as a papal diplomat of Archbishop Michael Courtney, priest of the Diocese of Clonfert. He died in December 2003 in the exercise of his duties in an attempt to reconcile warring factions in war-torn Burundi where he was Nuncio. He was the first papal diplomat to be assassinated in over four hundred years.

A Colourful History. The couple-beggar (or 'buckle-beggar') was a marriage celebrant who worked outside the boundaries of the established church and sometimes the law, providing marriage services – and occasionally divorce – for a fee. They can be found across Europe but were common in areas, like Ireland, where different religious groups lived alongside each other and where the established church had a legal monopoly. They were present in many Irish towns in the early nineteenth century, and were particularly notable in Dublin and in areas with a large Presbyterian presence.

- Katie Barclay in *Marriage and the Irish: a miscellany*, ed. Salvador Ryan (Dublin: Wordwell Ltd.) p. 137.