

# **INTRODUCTION**

## Introduction

I will raise up for myself a faithful priest  
who shall act according to what is in my heart.

– 1Samuel 2:35

Let us begin our reflections at the Last Supper watching Jesus and the Beloved Disciple ‘reclining next to him’(John 13:23). It is my hope and prayer that we will be graced to stay there as we explore priestly spirituality.

Thirty-five years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, the opening words of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World still ring true:

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men and women who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all people.

– GS, n.1

The circumstances of people’s lives are constantly changing. Different questions are being asked and, as Pope John XXIII said in his opening address to the Council: ‘The substance of the ancient teaching of the deposit of faith is one thing; the way in which it is presented is another.’ The Church as a living organism relating to a changing world is also undergoing constant change, and since the priesthood is defined in relation to the Church, we must expect changes in the way priesthood is exercised. David Walker names some of the changes:

We are experiencing a new understanding of the church and the role of ministry within it, as well as a re-evaluation of the role of the laity within the church, which is causing us to reflect further on their relationship to the ordained minister. Today, holiness is not seen as demanding separation from the world, but as able to be lived to the full in any Christian way of life; it is identified much more with the baptismal life of the believer than with any post-baptismal vocation. Part of this new approach to holiness is a new understanding of the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the temporal. All of these movements are motivating us to re-evaluate the meaning of ordained ministry, its role in the community, and the spirituality that is to be associated with it.

– ‘Models of Spirituality for Ordained Ministers’, in *Priesthood: the hard questions* (Ed. Gerald Gleeson, EJDwyer 1993) page 18

Part of the difficulty is that things are changing very rapidly. Furthermore, many of the changes as far as we priests are concerned do not feel good. In many ways John O’Donohue is right:

The landscape has shattered and the old maps no longer offer guidance or direction.

– *Minding the Threshold* (The Furrow, June 1998) page 326

He says elsewhere that there is no point in priests:

clinging desperately to their particular ledge of conviction as the ocean of different consciousness rises all about them.

– The priestliness of the human heart (The Way Supplement 83, 1995) page 44

At the same time, while it is essential that we alter our way of exercising the priesthood in a changing and more collaborative Church, it is important to reaffirm that the identity of the priest, as expressed in the writings of the early centuries down through the documents of the Vatican Council and since, has remained substantially the same. It is important to reassert this as we seek new ways of carrying out our ministry.

We have every reason to be confident in the spirit and the reforms of Vatican II. The Church needed reform and the Council steered us in a good direction. Let us not be too discouraged that we priests have not managed the change as well as we had hoped. After all, our generation of priests was given the enormous task of leading the community in implementing very significant changes. We had to do so in a world in which the very existence of God is by no means taken for granted and against the background of the pre-Vatican Church. In an article published in the ACR (January 1999), entitled ‘Understanding the Church’s present difficulties, and the reactions they are producing’, John Thornhill reminds us of some of the shortcomings of the Church which the Second Vatican Council set out to reform: it was strongly reactionary in character; it saw itself as apart from the world; it was excessively institutionalised; it was theologically and pastorally rigid; and it paid little attention to the sources of vitality found in the Scriptures, the Sacramental Mysteries and the wealth of experience found in Tradition.

The text already quoted from the beginning of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World shows the determination of the Church to engage with the world. To think of ourselves as standing apart from the world, to fail to believe in the world, is to fail to believe in people. This is to fail to believe in God who is present loving the world and drawing everyone to Himself in order that ‘all will be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Timothy 2:4). Every person is made from love and for love. Everyone is called to enjoy divine communion and everyone has a word to say and a spirit to share. Yes, there is darkness and sin and dysfunction and there is need for conversion, but Joseph Bernardin reminds us:

The Incarnation means that nothing of our humanity is alien to God or untouched by divine power ... All of our human experience becomes in principle a route of access to the divine.

– Priests: Religious Leaders, Doctors of the Soul (Origins)

Everyone recognises that there is a profound hunger and thirst for the spiritual in today’s world. Many of yesterday’s answers are, of course, still relevant, but they will need to be communicated in language that meets today’s questions and today’s quest. More to the point, people are looking for help from people whose lives they recognise as being real, and so relevant. What are people looking to a priest for?

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In the article just quoted, Bernardin speaks powerfully of the priest as a Bearer of the Mystery and a Doctor of the soul. He concludes:

We are not dispensable ‘functionaries’ in the church; we are bridges to the very mystery of God and healers of the soul. When we claim this identity unapologetically, we not only find ourselves; we also provide the church and our culture with the sustenance they require. This is the vocation, the reality, to which we are called. It is not dependent on numbers, or structures, or chancery offices, or any of the things we thought so essential, so important, but are now completely changed or are no more. Rather, it is dependent on the Lord Jesus, who never changes, and to whom we are irrevocably united through ordination – the Lord Jesus (who is the mystery of God and the healer of the soul) whom we make present in a tangible and inviting way each day to the countless people whom we serve. To him be honour and glory, now and always.

John Thornhill writes in a similar vein:

The church’s institutional structures exist to promote what is paramount in the church’s life: helping people find a life-giving relationship with God. Pastors who make this their overriding priority, consciously directing the pastoral guidance they exercise within their communities to this end, and sharing the truth of their own faith journey with their people, will find that their people respond positively. Pastors, on the other hand, whose vision is little more than administering a well-disciplined system, will find that their well-intentioned efforts often meet with dissatisfaction – as their people instinctively recognise that, before all else, membership of the church should develop their life-giving relationship with God.

He quotes Karl Rahner:

The priest can bring life to the preaching of the Gospel only if (as well as and as far as it is granted to him) he is a mystagogue of that ultimate, internal, religious experience of God and his grace, without which no one can in the long run resist the pressure of his secularised environment and remain a Christian. (Without this the pastor will be little more than) a cultic and ecclesiastical official celebrating no longer credible ceremonies. The ability to pray ought not to be seen as a sectoral occupation in his life but as a basic structure of his existence, since he is the very one who ought always to accept, as dependent on it, the presence of the absolute mystery facing everyone, and truly to live it in freedom. The priest today is primarily the servant of the faith of others.

Thornhill adds:

In taking up this challenge, we should weigh carefully Rahner’s parenthesis, ‘as well as and as far as it is granted to him’. Our ministry will be fruitful, if we sincerely offer the service of which we are capable. As we have already remarked, those pastors who effectively foster the faith, hope and love which constitutes the essential covenant-relationship between God and the church, and who help their people find God in the *reality* of their lives, are accepted by their people as effective spiritual leaders, whatever limitations they may have in their own talents.

We will be reflecting on some of these changes, but let us continue to focus on the central core of our calling which is to be Beloved Disciples, knowing Jesus’ love and listening as

he invites us to share his mission and to be instruments of his love in that part of the vineyard where providence has placed us. Paul spoke of us as ‘God’s work of art’ (Ephesians 2:10). Michelangelo had the gift of being able to see the finished product already in the crude marble. The grace given to us as priests is similar. From our communion with God, we are to see in others the work of art that God is gracing them to become.



For all the changes that we are experiencing, our key ministry as priests is the same as when we were ordained. Through us Jesus has chosen to teach, to sanctify and to govern the community placed in our care. In ‘I will give you shepherds (PDV)’, John-Paul II speaks of the ‘threefold ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral charity’ (PDV, n.26). He writes:

In the Church and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ the head and shepherd:

- authoritatively proclaiming his word,
- repeating his acts of forgiveness and offer of salvation, particularly in baptism, penance and the Eucharist
- showing his loving concern to the point of a total gift of self for the flock which they gather into unity and lead to the Father through Christ and in the Spirit.

– PDV, n.15

It is Jesus’ love that alone can make this possible, and nothing can separate us from his love unless we choose to separate ourselves from him. Teresa of Avila reminds us: ‘Keep your eyes fixed on him. He never takes his eyes off you’ (*Way of Perfection*, 26.3). Whatever joys we are now experiencing in our ministry, we know that they are a privileged sharing in the joy of the Heart of Jesus. Whatever difficulties or disappointments we are having, we know that they are a privileged sharing in his cross. So let us accept his invitation to come aside for a short while and rest (Mark 6:31). Rest in his company. Enjoy in prayer a quality of communion with him that will draw us nearer to his heart and that will enlighten and sustain us when we return to our current ministry and life. Pope Saint Gregory the Great has a warning that we would all recognise:

We shall never be in a position to correct the lives of others as long as we neglect our own. We are wrapped up in the cares of this world, and the more we seem to busy ourselves with external affairs the more spiritually insensitive we become.

– Homily 17.14

The document on the priesthood from Vatican II went through a number of drafts. A significant change was in the title which took the final form of ‘Decree on the ministry and life of presbyters’. It was recognised that our spiritual life happens in the real world of our ministry.

Pope John-Paul II speaks of the ‘spiritual life that grows through the exercise of the ministry’ (PDV n.25). Tony Philpot, in his book ‘Priesthood in Reality’ (Kevin Mayhew 1998, page 79) uses the image of a car battery which charges itself up when the car is

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running. Our ministry is about communion. We come to others from our communion with God and Jesus draws them into deeper communion through our ministry. Saint Dominic spoke of our vocation: ‘contemplata tradere’ (to hand on what we have received in contemplation). Saint Ignatius of Loyola used a similar expression: ‘in actione contemplativus’ (contemplative in action). In prayer we are drawn deeper into communion with God. It is from this communion that we are sent into mission. John O’Donohue writes:

The priest is drawn to the frontiers ... where divinity suffuses humanity. In order to attend to these frontiers, the priest must be alive to the depth and complexity of his own interiority.

– The Priestliness of the human heart, page 48

Let us reflect again on Paul’s words to Timothy:

Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the council of the elders laid their hands upon you.

– 1 Timothy 4:14

I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of temerity, but a spirit of power and love and self control.

– 2 Timothy 1:6

We can reflect also on the following exhortation from the Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church:

The forms and tasks of life are many but holiness is one – that sanctity which is cultivated by all who act under God’s Spirit, and, obeying the Father’s voice and adoring God the Father in spirit and in truth, follow Christ, poor, humble and cross-bearing, that they may deserve to be partakers of his glory. Each one however according to his or her own gifts and duties must steadfastly advance along the way of a living faith which arouses hope and works through love ...

Priests partake of their grace and office through Christ the eternal and only mediator. They should grow in the love of God and of their neighbour by the daily exercise of their duty, should keep the bond of priestly fellowship, should abound in every spiritual good and bear living witness of God to all, imitating those priests who, in the course of the centuries, left behind them an outstanding example of holiness, often in a humble and hidden service. Their praise lives on in God’s church. They have a duty to pray and offer sacrifice for their people and for the whole people of God, appreciating what they do and imitating what they touch with their hands. Rather than be held back by perils and hardships in their apostolic labours, they should rise to greater holiness, nourishing and fostering their action with an overflowing contemplation, for the delight of the entire church of God.

– Lumen Gentium, n.41

### Note on the value of silence

Because of the demands of our ministry a large portion of our waking hours is spent in activity and mostly with and for others. We need to make opportunities in which we can remind ourselves that only when activity is in accordance with God’s will does it

have value. We need to allow God to draw us into silence. John O'Donohue sees the elimination of the rhythm created by silence and stillness as 'the most destructive force of alienation today' ('Priestliness', page 48). 'The wells of our psyche have become silted' ('Priestliness', page 50). Let us dare the darkness and the solitude to rediscover the spring from which alone the pure waters of inspired action flow.

'I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her

– Hosea 2:14

The Lord will fight for you. You have only to keep still.

– Exodus 14:14

Be still and know that I am God.

– Psalm 46:10

What I say is what I have seen in the Father's presence.

– words of Jesus: John 8:38

Teresa of Avila writes:

We must be careful, in doing good works, even those of obedience and charity, not to fail to have frequent inward recourse to our God. And, believe me, it is not length of time spent in prayer that brings a soul benefit: when we spend our time in good works, it is a great help to us and a better and quicker preparation for the enkindling of our love than many hours of meditation. Everything must come from the hand of God.

– Foundations 5.17

We must take care lest carrying out our duties leads habitually to neglect of prayer.

Activism takes cover under numerous and often noble excuses: necessities of life, urgent duties of one's state, fear lest a certain milieu win and dissipate people. joys to be had in generous action which opens up and enlarges one's power, the aridities and apparently useless abjection of prayer, and above all a great pity for those around us whose extreme material or spiritual misery is a constant appeal to our Christian charity.

– Marie-Eugène, *I want to see God*, 420

In his *A Letter to John Dryden*, James McAuley writes:

Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,  
Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives  
Among us, men who walk within the fire

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Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.  
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land:  
Distracted men that sow their hopes in sand  
Will sometimes feel an evanescent sense  
Of questioning, they do not know from whence.  
Prayer has an influence we cannot mark,  
It works unseen like radium in the dark.

### Note on the value of sharing

We are ordained into a brotherhood of priests. There is a special value in sharing our journey with our brothers, for our experiences have much in common and there is much to be gained from shared wisdom. Cardinal Newman writes:

I consider that Christians, certainly those who are in the same outward circumstances, are very much more like each other in their temptations, inward diseases, and methods of cure, than they all imagine. We think ourselves isolated in the world; we think that no one ever felt as we feel. We do not dare to expose our feelings, lest we should find that no one understands us. And thus we suffer to wither and decay what was destined in God's purpose to adorn the Church's paradise with beauty and sweetness. We deny ourselves the means we possess of at once imparting instruction and gaining comfort ...

Perhaps the reason why the standard of holiness among us is so low, why our attainments are so poor, our view of the truth so dim, our belief so unreal, our general notions so artificial and external is this: that we dare not trust each other with the secret of our hearts. We have each the same secret, and we keep it to ourselves, and we fear that as a cause of estrangement which really would be a bond of union. We do not probe the wounds of our nature thoroughly; we do not lay the foundations of our religious profession in the ground of our inner person; we make clean the outside of things; we are amiable and friendly to each other in words and deeds, but our love is not enlarged, our bowels of affection are straitened, and we fear to let the intercourse begin at the root; and in consequence our religion, viewed as a social system, is hollow, The presence of Christ is not in it.

– 'Christian sympathy' in *Parochial and Plain Sermons V*.  
Oxford: Rivington, 1876, pages 123 and 126