

A Europe without Priests?

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A Europe without Priests?

Eamonn Conway

The roles of bishop and priest are still pivotal authority positions in the Roman Catholic Church. Those who hold these positions need the qualities which inspire people, which can draw the best out of them, and which can free people for full relationship with God and with others. Recent Church documents acknowledge this when they list the kind of skills and qualities priests and bishops require. These include the ability to embrace, announce and explain the Word of God, the skill of interpreting the 'signs of the time', the maturity to avoid the danger of mere *exterior activism*, the personal warmth which enables them to unite people and be brothers to them. Bishops and priests today are to be prayerful, holy, knowledgeable and discerning. They should be balanced people, strong and free, and capable of bearing the weight of their pastoral responsibilities. They are to have undergone a thorough intellectual formation which enables them to proclaim the Gospel in a manner which is credible to the legitimate demands of human reason. At the same time they must be open to ongoing education and continual conversion.¹

There are many committed Catholics who have these qualities. However, not all of them may become priests and bishops. For in addition, the Roman Catholic Church insists that bishops and priests must be male, celibate (some exceptions), and make a life-long commitment to their ministry. Today these three requirements are coming under increased scrutiny and compelling arguments are being presented which threaten to undermine their legitimacy. The matter is all the more serious when it is taking place within a European Church whose mission, even in this decade of evangelisation, seems to have come to a standstill, whose clergy will soon have an average age of seventy, whose seminaries are emptying and whose younger priests are allegedly

1. Cf. *Directory on the ministry and life of priests*, Rome: Congregation for the Clergy, 1994, nn. 13, 34, 40; *Pastores dabo vobis*, chapters V and VI.

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conservative and generally lacking in the kind of leadership and personal qualities required to build and nourish Christian communities.

EMPTY SEMINARIES

Why are most seminaries in Western Europe declining? There would seem to be five key factors: secularisation; the Church's more positive view of marriage as a vocation and also its openness to lay ministries; the crisis regarding the credibility of Christian faith; the Church's structures; and the break-down of influential role-models.²

Before secularisation, to be a priest was to be a member of a powerful and revered élite. The priest was considered to be the expert on everything from 'womb issues' to 'tomb issues'. Because of the power he was presumed to have, and indeed believed he had, power 'to bind' and 'to loose', the priest enjoyed great status and prestige. Today he is no longer the uncontested wise man; there are many other sources of 'wisdom' which claim authority in people's lives. And there are other easier ways of attaining status and prestige.

The Second Vatican Council and post-conciliar documents also contributed to making priesthood and religious life less appealing by taking a much more positive view of Christian marriage and by opening the way for recognition of lay ministry in the Church. It is now clear to committed young Christians that there are other vocations in the Church besides priesthood. Understandably, for the thinking seminarian this raises questions of identity, questions which have not yet been satisfactorily resolved. In any case, given that the average European couple at present is unlikely to have more than one or at most two children, how many such parents will encourage their one son to choose life-long celibate service in the Church?

There is also today a crisis regarding the credibility of the Church. This crisis did not originate in the bad publicity, whether merited or not, which some members of the clergy have been getting recently. Its roots go much deeper. Among the reasons for this credibility crisis is the failure of Church teaching to evolve and find expression in such a way that stands up to the legitimate critique of personal experience, and also the retention of medieval and patriarchal structures which have long outlived their usefulness and which in fact alienate people. The result is that people whose hearts are restless for some deeper meaning

2. Some of these factors are listed by Jan Kerkhofs, SJ (Louvain) in his paper *The priest in Europe at the end of the second millennium*, delivered at the All Hallows Annual Developing Parish Week 1995.

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and sense of purpose in life search for it elsewhere. But the credibility of Christian faith itself is also in question. There is an increasing number of people whose hearts do not seem to be restless for God at all and who seem to be able to live quite comfortably without any explicit awareness of God's presence. It seems possible in our post-modern world to exist without really addressing the God-question: to exist without any explicit engagement with the mystery and wonder of life, and thus to exist without the need of religion. After all, the purpose of a religion is to help us to account for, express and celebrate religious experience. This double credibility crisis, of Church and of Christian faith, is a further significant factor in making a choice of priesthood unappealing today.

I have referred to the structures of the Church as somewhat medieval. This is not a bad description when one compares the authority structure of the present Church with how authority is exercised and decisions are arrived at in society as a whole. Team-work and collaboration, accountability and transparency, participation, the principle of subsidiarity, justice in the workplace etc. are 'in'. 'Lone-ranger' operations, dictatorships, subordination, autocracy, blind obedience, 'putting up and shutting up', are all 'out'. The way in which authority is currently exercised in the Church is just as likely to be off-putting to outgoing, intelligent, energetic and creative young people who might consider priesthood, as is the requirement of celibacy. And the way in which authority is currently exercised in fact might be proving very attractive to the wrong kind of candidate.

Finally, the break-down of influential role-models is the kiss of death for traditional vocations. Most of us who became priests will admit that at some stage we were greatly influenced by a priest we admired and looked up to. Young people may still admire some priests and religious, especially their commitment and perseverance, but the gap between their world and ours is steadily widening.

These are some of the key reasons why seminaries are emptying. I find it hard to accept that young people are less self-giving or generous than before. There are many fine young men who are very committed to the Gospel and to Christian values but who are equally convinced that priesthood is not for them. Consider for a moment the number of young people who still go to Mass each Sunday here in Ireland, and who take part enthusiastically in the life of their local community. They do not see themselves taking on the life and the role of the priest as it is presently constructed and understood.

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Vocations to priesthood are in sharp decline and there are no 'signs of the time' which indicate that this trend will be reversed.³ It is important to face up to this fact. This is not to say that the vocations of those currently in seminaries, and of those of us who are now priests are without worth. It is merely to point out that the context in which we work is one of transformation and that participating in this process is a key part of our vocation. In any process of transformation there is both joy and bitter agony, birth and death. Grieving is important – it honours the good in what has been. At the same time, however, it is important to be open to the new evidence of God's Spirit re-creating the Church, lest we lose heart. The stance called for is well described by Eliot:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in the theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of
darkness on darkness,
And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant
panorama
And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away –
. . . I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without
love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the
waiting.⁴

LETTING GO IN ORDER TO BE FAITHFUL

In this time of transition the key question which needs to be addressed is: what must we do in order to be faithful to Tradition? The recently published collection of essays *Europe without priests?* edited by the Louvain sociologist and pastoral theologian Jan Kerkhofs, SJ, considers this. Referring to the practice of the early Church, Peter Neuner, who teaches dogmatic theology at the Catholic faculty of theology in Munich, points out that

3. Sometimes attempts are made to detract from the seriousness of the problem here in Europe by pointing to the vocations situations in other continents. Leaving aside the obvious ecclesiological problem if an established local Church cannot provide its own ministers, in point of fact Europe still has approximately three times as many priests per Catholic as Latin America and four times as many as Africa (one priest per 3,360 Catholics in Latin America, in Africa one per 4,400, in Europe one per 1,250. Statistics recorded in 1992 and reported in the *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae* 1994).

4. T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*.

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In the encounter with Hellensim, Christianity was challenged by new questions and problems with which the earliest community had not yet been confronted and which Jesus himself had not yet given an answer. These questions were new and the answer was given to them in faithfulness to the tradition in a creative process.⁵

In another essay, this time by Peter Schmidt, professor of New Testament and rector of the major seminary in Gent, we read that

. . . the 'will of God' does not impose any pre-existing and already fixed structural mould on history. Rather, a particular development was accepted as the best translation of the Gospel in certain circumstances in the Church and it was therefore read as the historical expression of God's will (as tradition). An eternal immutability of structural forms is not part of this attitude of trust in the original inspiration – preparing a covenantal people for God.⁶

Neuner and Schmidt emphasise that loyalty to Tradition demands developing structures and ministries which best serve the communication of the Good News in the context of the culture and the time, trusting that God is with the Christian community in its efforts to remain faithful.⁷ This is central to the tradition which is received and handed on. From its past the Christian community learns the art of searching out what is needed to achieve its task. It inherits a tradition of determination and persistence in realising the Good News. It rejoices in the history of its efforts which proved successful. It bears the burden of its failures. But the Church lives and breathes in history and has its own history. Each generation, to be faithful, must be prepared to take the risk of evolving new forms which serve its mission here and now, inspired by and in keeping with, but not imprisoned by, what has happened in the past.

It is important to note that the Council of Trent considered the priesthood to be of divine origin but that 'in order that it might be exercised in a more worthy manner and with greater veneration', it regarded the Church as free to work out a number of concrete and distinct orders of ministries.⁸ In fact, not only has

5. *Europe without priests?*, 129.

6. *Europe without priests?*, 62.

7. One particular application of this norm would seem to be the appointment of 'deacons' in Acts 6:1-6. Raymond Brown ('Church in the Apostolic Period', *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1341) points out that this was a kind of test-case for pluralism in terms of structures for ministry and that those appointed were more likely to have been presbyters or bishops than deacons.

8. Twenty-third session of the Council of Trent, Doctrine on the Sacrament of Order (1563).

the Church the authority but also the responsibility to do so in order to realise its mission. The fact that Vatican II suppressed some of the orders established by Trent only highlights the fact that ministries can and must be established and later dissolved in the course of the Church's history. In this context both Karl Rahner and Peter Huenermann, for example, as far back as 1977, suggested that the role of pastoral assistant in Germany could quite easily be considered sacramental.⁹ Our own efforts here in Ireland to evolve new, more 'collaborative' ministries should note the considerable difficulties which the division of ministries into 'lay' and 'clerical' entails and in so far as possible seek to overcome this, realising that the Tradition might well allow for greater flexibility and creativity than might at first be assumed.

The main point being made here, however, is that genuine fidelity to Tradition means letting go of particular forms of ministry which stifle the Church's mission and creatively establishing new forms which facilitate it. And in discerning the right thing to do the Christian community must, just as in New Testament times, be open to learning from the culture and the context in which it serves, trusting that these reveal God's presence and purpose.¹⁰

THE TIME IS NOW

We urgently need a very open, honest, and intellectually responsible discussion on ministry in the Catholic Church today. Bishops and theologians need to talk to each other and hear each other, and also to listen to the experience of Christians and pastors 'on the ground'. In such a discussion the voice of the Spirit will be heard, and we have to learn to trust it. This discussion cannot be avoided, and history will take a dim view of those who attempt to stifle it. Such attempts offend against the quest for truth and therefore against the truth itself. They also constitute an ear deaf to the cries of a world badly in need of Good News. Such discussions should not take place only in Rome. Each local Church has a responsibility to examine these issues.

The Irish Church is possibly the European Church which has most to benefit from a re-ordering of ministries now. Other Churches give ample testimony to the failure of partial remedies and patch-up solutions. Steps, such as the merging of parishes, and the effective handing over of parishes to lay people who are permitted to do only a half-job – for example, to distribute communion but not celebrate Eucharist; steps which clearly lack any

9. Cf. *Europe without priests* 138-40.

10. Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 11.

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coherent theological underpinning, have done nothing to stem the ebbing tide of dynamic Christian communities.

Here in Ireland we still enjoy quite an extraordinarily high regular practice rate, for however much longer. There is much that could be done relatively easily if we took the initiative now. Concretely, what is needed is to match the resources, still considerable, both personal and material, to the energy, which is also considerable, among very gifted and committed people whose giftedness and commitment is largely ignored.

THE STUMBLING BLOCKS

But whatever concrete steps are taken, first and foremost we need a shift in consciousness away from an understanding of Church as made up of 'clerics' and 'laity' to Church made up of God's gifted people with a particular mission in and to the world. An example: it is sometimes claimed that the Irish Church would love to employ more lay people in ministries except it lacks the financial resources. In the future, as practice rates decline, this may well be the case. But finance is not the main obstacle at the moment. At present there is a reluctance to allow lay people to exercise ministries even on a voluntary basis. In addition, if twice the number of candidates for priesthood were to present themselves for admission to our seminaries next September, the funding, which is considerable, would be found, even if with difficulty. When lay people are employed, it is usually for a fixed term which provides limited opportunities for them to get 'stuck in' to their work. With little prospects and security, they usually have to move on, often reluctantly, to something more steady. From the Church's point of view the issue here is partly one of control. At a deeper level it reveals a frame of mind which values more the contribution of ordained male celibates than that of many single or married men and women who also have the skills and knowledge, the faith, hope and love needed for the service.

There are two stumbling blocks to the development of new forms of ministry: fear, and a poor sense of mission.

FEAR – THE OPPOSITE OF FAITH

Those currently in authority, as most people in authority, fear disorder and loss of control. Structural changes are always messy. Mistakes are often made in a period of transformation. People understandably feel uncertain, insecure and confused. And if people feel that a great responsibility rests on their shoulders they may well choose to do nothing, or at least nothing radical, rather than take the risk of doing the wrong thing, just like the

young man with the one talent: 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man . . . so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground'.¹¹

It is said that the top business people today are those who have a great sense of confidence in the future of their business, and who don't mind taking the risk of making the odd mistake. That Church people would be paralysed by fear is sadly ironic when one considers that the opposite of fear is faith. Surely the conviction that the Spirit is with us on our journey as a Christian community gives us the courage to leave behind structures and forms of ministry which are stifling the gifts of people rather than nurturing them. The absence of such a conviction reveals a very static notion of revelation, a subordination of the present activity of the Spirit to a system for 'preserving the deposit of faith'.

RECOVERING A SENSE OF MISSION

Fear can hold us back from change. So also can a lack of sense of purpose or of mission. Some years ago Johann Baptist Metz suggested that the Church has lost its appeal not because it is too demanding on people, but rather, because it is not demanding enough.¹² The excitement, the sense of drama, perhaps the 'romance' which was once there, has gone out of missionary activity. This is at least partly due to a lack of confidence on the Church's part that we still have something worthwhile to offer. We clearly no longer have a monopoly of salvation. We acknowledge that there are many people who encounter God and respond to God without any explicit reference to the Gospel or to the Church (even most of humanity). We even accept that many people who specifically claim to be atheists are not necessarily rejecting the God of Jesus Christ but rather reacting against a false God we also are called to reject. As Christians we even take some responsibility for the fact that worship of false gods abounds.¹³ But all of this does not have to weaken the Church's sense of mission. Rather it provides an opportunity to re-locate it.

The Church's mission begins with Good News: the resurrection of Jesus. The Christian community is commissioned to witness to the resurrection, which is the ultimate assurance for humanity and all of Creation that life has purpose and depth which even death itself cannot destroy. The Christian community mediates 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction

11. Cf. Matt. 25:24-25.

12. *The emergent Church*, 119.

13. *Gaudium et spes*, 19.

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tion of things not seen'.¹⁴ People do not therefore have to rely on their intuitions alone, graced though they are, for a sense of the meaning and purposefulness of life. Nor do they have to shy away from investing too much of themselves in life, fearing that at the end of it all, a life lived fully will make death all the more bitter and absurd. Nor do people have to continually run away from the darkness, the apparent hopelessness, which is part and parcel of every human life, settling for anything, however eventually self-destructive, which temporarily eases the pain of existence. The Christian news is that even the darkness is a redeemed place, a place of unique encounter with God and with oneself. Christian companionship gives people the courage to take a walk 'on the dark side' of their lives and their universe.

It is good that the dark side of the Irish Church has been exposed recently and that all of us have had to confront the dark side of ourselves. As a Christian community we have felt uncertain, confused, fearful, angry and hurt. We have had to look for the help of others – the media, medical and legal people. We have had to face up to the reality that we are not a *societas perfecta* and that we do not have all the answers. Perhaps only now we communicate with people for whom darkness and despair is their daily lot. Now we have earned the credibility to journey with them, to share their path, still learning from them. With them, no longer arrogant or triumphant, we seek out the light, our service to them sharing in love our faith and hope that there is a light which darkness cannot overpower.¹⁵ Is this the way forward by which we can re-build a Christian community?

MISSION: THE CONTEXT FOR MINISTRY

The mission of the Church is the context in which all discussion regarding ecclesial ministry has to take place. Against this horizon we recover a sense of perspective and sense of urgency. We're lifted out of our 'ecclesiastical armchairs' and forced to acknowledge that, viewed from the point of view of the Christian community's responsibilities before humanity and all of creation, concerns about whether people are male or not, celibate, single or married, cannot be the determining factors in choosing leaders. The Christian community has a task to do. It needs people who, by word and deed, can enable others to see the light in the darkness of their lives. It needs people who can witness convincingly to their faith in a God who has loved humanity unto death; who can help people to accept God's unconditional acceptance. It needs people who have the courage to challenge

14. Hebrews 11:1.

15. Isaiah 9:1; John 1:5.

that which diminishes people, which binds and blinds them. It needs people who stand up for the dignity of creation and who tackle the social and political structures that compromise it. And the Christian community needs people who can lead it in celebration of all of this, in liturgies which are spontaneous gestures of praise and of joy.

In its pivotal leadership, then, the Christian community needs people of faith, hope, and love who can take the risk of letting go, of journeying with, of listening and learning, of dialoguing and challenging. It needs most a leadership which can inspire and encourage God's gifted people, freeing them, blessing them, to exercise their gifts in God's name. The people who provide this kind of leadership, whether or not they hold formal authority positions, will be the *real* authorities in the Christian community.

Where his wisdom came to him . . . It reminded me of a night my father came in from feeding the cows, from closing the door on the hens. Hanging up his quenched lantern, his back still turned to me, he said, 'I've come to dh'end a thinkin, John, and I shtill haven't found dh'answer.' . . .

My mother crossing the yard, holding turf and eggs, fire and life, in her upturned, cross-over apron, and cows coming up the road, my father's eleven cows, and my father walking behind them, walking slowly, because cows in calf, old short-horn cows that are heavy in calf, that's how they walk, to watch them walking you'd think 'twas the Dingle mountains they were carrying inside them.

That's how my father learned womb-waiting. That's where the dangerous wildness that used to be in him left him. Sitting on a three-legged stool against the stall wall behind his cows, sitting there at night, listening to them chewing the hay or chewing the cud, that's where my father came to dh'end a thinkin. That's where his wisdom came to him.

—JOHN MORIARTY, *Turtle was Gone a Long Time* (The Lilliput Press), p. 188.