

FIVE FAILINGS OF THE SECULAR PRIESTHOOD

*Do you truly speak justice, you who hold divine power?
Do you mete out fair judgment to the sons of men?
No, in your hearts you devise injustice;
Your hands deal out violence to the land.*

(Ps 57: 2)

He is a hireling indeed, who holds the office of pastor, or shepherd of souls, and yet does not seek their good, but prizes his life of ease, rejoices in the honours due to his prelacy, lives off the temporal assets, and enjoys the spiritual dignity, the reverence lavished on him by men . . . his concern is with mere outward appearance and creature comfort; not for him to fret about his flock, their discomfort and their inward suffering.

(St Gregory the Great, Hom IV in Evangelia: PL 76, 1127-1129,
trans. *Word in Season, a monastic lectionary*, St Bede's, 1981)

Priesthood in crisis

In 1832 Anthony Rosmini completed the manuscript of his shocking book *Of the Five Wounds of The Church* (ET, London 1883] which was subsequently put on the Index of Forbidden Books by Rome. He loved the Church and he wrote his book to draw attention to the need for some serious reform. He was effectively punished for it. Today we need a new book entitled *The Five Wounds of the Secular Priesthood*. Everyone accepts that there is a crisis in the priesthood today. Numbers are declining by resignation and failure to recruit; those remaining are getting older and being given more responsibilities but prove reluctant to implement collaborative ministry as mandated by their bishops or see it as pointless within the present structures; initiatives by laity to serve are thwarted or discouraged; incidences of sexual and other abuse by clergy are not unusual; given the teaching of Vatican II on the priesthood of the baptised and their greater involvement in ministry, the ordained priest is less certain how he is different and what his role should be.

Much good material is available analysing and discussing all this. Michael Richards wrote an important book (*A People of Priests – the Ministry of the Catholic Church*, DLT, 1995) that outlines the role of the presbyter (ordained priest) and distinguishes it from the priesthood of

the baptised, developing the insights of Vatican II. He emphasises that the priest is primarily a pastor, caring for those to whom he ministers. Is it true to say that the ability to be a *pastor* is the principal criterion for selection and formation of the clergy? Is not compliance considered a more essential quality?

In addition *Catholics for a Changing Church* in the United Kingdom has published some valuable booklets examining the whole issue of the ordained priesthood and related issues such as Giles Hibbert's *Apostolic Succession*, Rafael Esteban's *The Future of the Ministerial Priesthood*, Owen Hardwicke's *Being Church*, Adrian Smith's *From Hierarchy to Communion*, Paul Hypher's *Ministry for a Changing Church* and Michael Winter's *Training for Future Priests*. Also relevant is Kenneth Wilson's *Power in the Church*, detailing the sad consequences of clerical domination.

Our own bishops of England and Wales published in 1995 *The Sign We Give*, suggesting that it is time we move away from a church where the parish is a clerical fiefdom under the potentially despotic control of the clergy, where the laity are tolerated rather than involved in decision-taking and sharing responsibility, to a genuine community where the involvement of all is welcomed and encouraged. They envisage a future where a change of parish priest never again leads to an overnight wrecking by a new broom priest of a parish's existing structures and traditions.

A failing priesthood

The question is, what is the reality of our experience? What sign do we as a Church actually give? It is fine to read about the ideal, but what actually happens? There are undoubtedly remarkable priests working in our parishes. One thinks of Bishop Untener, lately dead, of Saginaw in the USA. He had no episcopal mansion but moved about his diocese in his car, living for weeks at a time in the various presbyteries of his diocese – and more and more bishops are doing the same. I can think of a parish in St Leonard's-on-Sea

and one in Forest Hill in London for example that are led by open-minded priests assisted by understanding, committed and supportive parishioners. Readers will be able to point to others. I suspect however that these are the exceptions. I believe that the experience of most Catholics in England and Wales today is that their priests are failing.

Interestingly, regular priests, those who belong to religious orders, particularly those that require them to live in community, are often but not always able to avoid the failings which characterise so many of their secular brethren. Because a religious priest is not the kingpin in his community, but subject to an on-the-spot superior, because he regularly observes other priests preside at the Eucharist and hears them preach the Gospel, because he sees how other priests perform their duties and relate to those they serve, he is constantly being reminded of the ideals. Our strictures will apply less to religious clergy therefore, unless they have moved out of community and have spent years living alone as masters of all they survey, with all the attendant temptations of the secular clergy.

The first wound: presumption

And this is the main problem, the first wound in the secular priesthood – the betrayal of the priesthood of Jesus, shared by all the baptised, by the essentially subordinate ministerial priests. The servants have taken over from those they are supposed to serve and have made themselves into a privileged caste. Jesus said, “Call no man on earth Father” (Matt 23: 9) but some of these men *insist* on that title. Others love the honours, the status and the power-dressing that goes with ordination. (Luke 22: 25-27) Priests see themselves as having jurisdiction, the power given them by Canon Law to make decisions and impose their will. Canon 536 makes parish pastoral councils optional and only consultative – the parish priest makes the decisions. In consequence any sharing of decision-making can be seen as a diminution of their prerogatives, a grudging concession to modern ideas of democracy, or a privilege to be dispensed only to those the master considers worthy and unlikely to rock the boat. Even when a parish priest introduces parish councils and committees, these are

sometimes used simply as a gesture to democracy and consultation, so that consensus (defined as concordance with the will of the priest) is achieved after endless intimidating ‘discussion’ and the bullying of opposing voices into silence or submission. Jesus got it wrong; welcome to the real world.

Take money. How many parish priests are entirely open with their people – the ones who fund them – about how much money the parish has and how it is spent? How many priests use the funds at their disposal to build up their fiefdom without regard to the moral rights of parishioners to be consulted and perhaps even veto grandiose or inappropriate plans? Do you know whom your parish priest has chosen to be members of his finance committee (Code of Canon Law 537) and do they actually supervise his spending or simply rubber-stamp it? Do you or your fellow-parishioners know how much he takes from the parish funds as pocket-money and what expenditure he considers fair for the parish to pay for – his gin perhaps? Who else in the parish has the authority to sign cheques and where does the money go? Most of the secular clergy jealously cling to their canonical rights here and decline to be open and transparent. And how many take more holidays than they are strictly entitled to? Secrecy is the preferred option. Such men are not good and faithful servants of the type Jesus called for (Matthew 24: 45).

The second wound: abuse

The second wound is abuse by the clergy: abuse of alcohol, sexual abuse, financial abuse and abuse of power. Some have suggested that the pressures of living alone are the reasons for priests going off the rails in these ways. The sad fact is that abuse is widespread and only if it becomes too public does anything appear to be done by bishops who otherwise condone it or at least seek to conceal it.

The subtlest form of abuse, and the least immediately scandalous, is the abuse of power. A priest arrested for drunkenness or sexual delinquency is seen as a grave scandal. Such flaws in

the secular priesthood are too painful and too notorious to dwell upon here, but a man who abuses his power as a sort of Divine Right and who relies on the tendency of his people to defer to their priest in order to impose his own personal wishes is a more insidious abuser. One hears of devoted parish workers summarily removed from ministry on a clerical whim or eased out, often most unjustly, who then feel obliged to remain silent in order to preserve perhaps the possibility at some future date of a return to ministry rather than scandalise others by protest. The reliance of clergy on the reluctance of devout and abused parishioners to protest publicly borders on blackmail.

How many clergy have examined what signs their treatment of parishioners give, what attitudes they betray? As already mentioned, the bishops of England and Wales have drawn attention in *The Sign We Give – Report from the Working Party on Collaborative Ministry* (1995) how easily power is abused. Do people in your parish work together on equal terms or are some allowed to dominate (p 17)? Are all willing to face and work through conflict or do some seek to impose their own solution and ignore the reasons for conflict (p 17)? Are those in leadership willing to share responsibility, trust others and take risks or do they cling on to power, treat with suspicion others wanting to help and use the risk of failure as a pretext for preventing change (p 27)? Are those in leadership willing to accept and able to live comfortably with decisions they may not personally have chosen to make or do they fight tooth and nail to win every battle and insist on their view prevailing (p 36)? Are they willing to make space for newcomers or are they tenacious of their power and convinced that they have nothing to learn (p 36)? Has your parish tried reaching decisions by consensus or are decisions left to the few (p 37)? Are people encouraged to contribute ideas, suggestions and criticisms (p 37)? One could go on to list more ways in which power can be abused, and it must be noted that such abuse is not necessarily the prerogative of the clergy. There are many bad habits to be unlearned both by clergy and those they enlist as their collaborators in parishes.

The third wound: defiance

The third wound is the sad fact that the secular clergy are out of control and quite often in defiance of their bishops. What happens when things go wrong, when the priest's drinking, idleness, profligacy or even sexual misbehaviour excite sufficient comment for there to be a scandal? The truth is usually that the bishop, short of clergy and without the resources to get rid of the few he has however bad they are, falls over himself to find excuses to retain the services of those who have proved unsuccessful or even abusive leaders of a succession of parishes.

When a bishop seeks to suggest that his priests must change their ways and attend courses to improve their skills, many refuse and the bishop is powerless. This is pure clerical arrogance, from a position of strength. In some dioceses no opportunities are even made available for clergy to take study leave to update their skills and knowledge or work on their personal development. When a bishop seeks to ensure that his priests honour their commitment to collaborative ministry, many just smile and resist any attempts to make them share responsibility and decision-making. As a result quite often in fact a bishop sees his main object that of pastoring his clergy rather than pastoring his much more numerous people. When things go wrong in a parish, rarely does the bishop descend to conduct an enquiry and the presumption is that the priest must be defended however unacceptable his behaviour. The possibility of a pastoral response seems almost incompatible with the overall responsibilities of a diocesan bishop and recourse to an independent arbiter is rarely even considered.

The fourth wound: sin against the Holy Spirit

The fourth wound in the secular priesthood is the thwarting by those in power within the ranks of the the secular priesthood of the charisms and vocations of many of the baptised, eager to exercise their part in the priesthood of Jesus. There are men called both to marriage and to the ministerial priesthood who are told that, in the Western Church (but not the Eastern

Catholic churches quirkily) this is denied (except for married Protestant clergy converts, who get special consideration denied to our existing clergy). There are women convinced that they are called to serve in the ministerial priesthood who are told to remain silent and not even mention their apprehension of a divine calling. There are married Catholic priests, men who have found paid employment but who yearn to exercise their ecclesiastical office, but they are told that they are not needed – when it is abundantly clear that they are.

What is the point of praying for vocations when those God gives us are denied, many say? No wonder many parishes and clergy hesitate to make a big thing now about the need for vocations, knowing that we are not using the ones God sends us. And then there are activists in parishes who are often inhibited from exercise their gifts of ministry simply because it does not suit Father. Trained and skilled parishioners find that their gifts are ignored or seen as a threat to the amateurishness of their cleric. As a result, the parish community is deprived of their ministry, even in those cases where parishioners regard a particular layperson as a more obvious manifestation of Jesus than some clergy. This is profligacy and a sin against the Holy Spirit.

The fifth wound: incompetence

The fifth wound in the secular priesthood is the manifest managerial incompetence of the majority. (Rosmini's second 'wound,' over 150 years ago, was the insufficient education of the clergy.) What training have they had in managing a parish, its finances, and its personnel? Have they even been taught the social graces, how to interview, how to chair a meeting, how to motivate? Quite often they find themselves in a parish where the congregation contains numerous people better qualified and more skilled than they are themselves, and yet these are invited to offer their gifts in the service of the Church at the whim of the clerics. Gone are the days when the eldest son of a duke could expect the world to lie at his feet; gone also should be the days when the fact that a man who has been anointed by the bishop is astonishingly

assumed to be suitable for a crucial management position. The supposition would be laughable if were not sadly being implemented around us all the time.

In some parishes there are even people better versed in spirituality, scripture and theology than their priest, usually women. There should be a more honest assessment of what skills a priest brings to a parish and a deliberate attempt to ensure that his deficiencies are recognised and appropriate steps taken to ensure that adequate alternative provision is made from the skills available among the baptised. It is also sadly true that today many of our priests are lacking in a proper foundation in spirituality and prayer. Usually living alone, they are tempted by the easy option to do nothing or to concentrate on secondary tasks such as preparing the weekly parish newsletter or attending the Brownies. Some genuinely do not have the energy and the time, whereas religious have usually been formed in the discipline of quasi-monastic practice.

It has to be conceded that some inadequate priests, unable to accept that they are collaborating with competent and efficient parishioners who are more skilled than their parish priest, fall back on the law. "I am parish priest," such a man says, "and this is the way I intend it shall be done." Too many British Catholics lack the courage to challenge what is seen as a divine right, thus appearing to be disloyal or bad Catholics, and so they yield to what is essentially an abuse of power.

Servants off the rails

One comes across so many horror stories of clerical misbehaviour but out of misplaced loyalty we rarely make a fuss and find reasons for staying quiet. It is common talk among women's religious orders for example that in Africa it is not unusual for their members to be sexually harassed by the clergy - and yet their religious superiors prefer to remain silent. Those who protest soon find the wrath of the men in the Vatican falling down heavily upon

them. Our parishes too usually prefer to remain silent about the deficiencies of the secular clergy.

I am not a secular priest, so it may be argued that I have little right to utter criticisms of the kind I have. But I claim an even stronger right to give my views and insights: for three years I was employed as a *servant*, a manservant to a businessman. It was my duty to facilitate his life, for I had many skills and competencies that he did not have and for which he was happy to pay me. I did not presume to tell him when to eat (unlike those clergy who decide what times the Sunday masses will be without even asking their people); I did not seek to hold the floor at social functions when I was clearly stage-managing the event but made every effort to sink into the background and unobtrusively facilitate the celebration. My skills were put at the service of my employer and I did not presume to lay down the law. I did not feel humiliated by being a servant; on the contrary I gained great satisfaction from providing a back-up, and indeed a *leadership* in many areas which enabled and was a true service.

Our secular clergy do not in general see themselves as *paid servants* of the faithful, 'leaders who serve' (Luke 22: 26). Perhaps they need some time working in Macdonald's, or experiencing the rigorous training in humility of most forms of religious life and learning what it means to be *in the background* facilitating, encouraging, consoling, quietly covering up the deficiencies of others and doing what one can to keep the show on the road without anyone noticing. That is the concept of *servant leadership*, which should be the ideal of our secular clergy. Jesus called for this when he said, 'Among pagans it is the kings who lord it over them and those in authority are given the title Benefactor. This must not happen with you.' (Luke 22: 25)

A renewed priesthood needed

Perhaps at the root of all this malaise and failure is fear. There is such a conflict between the ideals and theory envisioned by the fathers of the Second Vatican Council and the practice of

the institution today, that the result is dishonesty, internal conflict and enforced commitment to behaviour which is at variance with the ideals to which all good clergy are ultimately committed. This conflict leads to deep-seated fear. Only the perfect love of which St Benedict speaks can cast out such fear (Ch 7, *Rule of Benedict*).

It seems to me that the Spirit is saying to the Church now that we must abolish the secular priesthood as we know it. We need to develop new forms of ordained ministry which are not clerical and which are based on New Testament models. After all, it was not Jesus' idea to have this priestly caste of men called 'Father' (Matt 23: 9) lording it over those they claim to serve (Luke 22: 25-27) At last we are admitting that Jesus is the only priest and we *all* share in his priesthood by our baptism. The ordained priesthood is a later development and distortion of what the New Testament and indeed the documents of Vatican II call the *presbyterate*, modelled on the synagogue ministry and *not* on the, in Christian terms, superseded Hebrew priesthood. Today its members have become corrupted by power and fear just as at the time of the reformation the secular and religious clergy and laity (nuns and brothers are laity of course) were seen as corrupted by their wealth. At the time of the French revolution the French clergy were hated for having become too close to the abusive royal power and they were deservedly in most cases swept away. Tellingly, when they lost their money and position, the enthusiasm of many of them for their calling soon evaporated.

Young men are less willing to offer themselves for the secular priesthood, even if it does mean one day getting their hands on parish funds to spend without effective supervision. They want to get married and have a family. Many young women too have a calling to serve the Church (not *rule* a parish!) and they look askance at a profession that excludes them simply because of their gender - in this day and age for God's sake! There are exceptions to this dearth of vocations, largely in places where ordination offers status, education and a higher standard of living, such as Poland and Africa. But most of our young people today are not interested. We also have thousands of married priests, some of whom would be willing

to serve, many as part-timers without payment, but their services are declined by the clergy currently in power, whatever the wishes and needs of the people; they are not to be re-admitted to the caste, the ranks of those who rule, the privileged and the superior. Young people do not see this type of 'priesthood' as an adequate reflection of Jesus' ideals. It is withering away and the sooner it disappears the better.

History shows that in the past there have been many different forms of ministerial priesthood in the Catholic Church. In New Testament times there were itinerant preachers, not members of religious orders of course. Later came the monk scholars of Celtic and mediaeval times. Perhaps the disappearance of the chantry priests is no great loss – those men who for a modest income committed themselves to celebrating one mass every day for some rich dead person but otherwise had no other duties. The parish priest we know today is essentially a relic of the time when society was arranged around rural society with village churches. Today most of us in the developed world live in cities and the parish system is often inappropriate. We need a wide variety of ministries now and it is far from clear that the clergy, exercising a veto and retaining all the decision-making, should dominate them. Pastoral visits are already often done by parishioners rather than the parish priest; preaching in some parishes might be better done by suitably trained men and women, and the management of the parish, its workers and its finances, call for professional expertise. Obviously we need people ordained by the bishop to provide the sacraments, but they need not necessarily be given a mini-diocese of their own. They could earn their living by teaching or writing perhaps, by counselling or a special ministry or chaplaincy to specific groups for which they are particularly suited and trained, such as the bereaved, students, the divorced, homosexuals, the disabled, various foreign communities living in this country. The models are already there and sensitive priests already have their eyes on a future when the secular priesthood is renewed and reformed.

Catholics for a Changing Church, with organisations such as *Catholic Women's Ordination* and *The North Atlantic Federation for a Renewed Priesthood* (now *The International Federation for Renewed Catholic Ministry*), to name but three organisations with which I am privileged to have an association and which I am able in some ways to serve, are also clear that we need a new vision for the secular clergy. It stands accused of presumption, abuse, arrogance, incompetence and sin against the Holy Spirit. God is letting the old order wither. On with the new!