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Help for Priests

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Over the past five years I have met most of the priests of the West of Ireland, and those in many other dioceses as well, and I have listened to them articulate their needs. Almost without exception they have spoken of the need for ongoing formation, even if that was not the precise term that they used. They have spoken of the need for confidence building so that they might have a better sense of their own personal resources and an opportunity to use their gifts and talents to the best advantage of their communities. They have spoken of the need for more help in developing their prayer lives and having some process in place to facilitate their ongoing spiritual renewal. Most spoke of the need for help with the scriptures in order to improve their preaching and liturgical celebrations. They spoke of the need for help in clarifying their understanding of the mission of the Church and for a clearer theology of priestly ministry and how it relates to other ministries.

Obviously, there is a real cry from the heart for some kind of ongoing formation among Irish priests. Yet there is a paradox in all of this because when programmes or opportunities are offered it is then very difficult to motivate priests to participate in them. And to complicate the paradox further, those who do participate in any kind of formation programme do so enthusiastically and always acknowledge how helpful the experience has been to them in their ministry.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

Since the Second Vatican Council there has been no coherent or systematic approach to the ongoing formation of clergy in this country. In the past, bishops conducted conferences as school-

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masters and the priests like Shakespeare's 'whining schoolboys' attended in fear of being humiliated during the public interrogations that took place. Thankfully that era has passed but it has not been replaced by a positive approach that encourages serious reflection or analysis of contemporary theological and pastoral issues. This serious deficiency is now evident in the poor standard of preaching, liturgical celebration and methods of evangelization practised in this country.

Piecemeal efforts cannot be a substitute for a systematic approach to any kind of renewal or ongoing formation strategy. Over the past twenty-five years or more there have been various worthwhile initiatives undertaken by dioceses or groups of priests but very few, if any, have won general support by either priests or bishops. Apart from the content of any of these initiatives there seems to be a more fundamental problem with diocesan planning and policy regarding any projects undertaken. Most groups are quite good at identifying and evaluating issues that need addressing. They are reasonably good at making recommendations as to how the issues can be addressed. They are poor at committing themselves to decisions about following through on what needs to be done. And they are really ineffective in doing an evaluation of the success or failure of the initiatives undertaken. This is a serious problem because the less follow-through there is from one stage of that process to the next the more energy is drained from the group and the seeds of cynicism are planted. If a project is not carefully evaluated and its strengths and weaknesses identified then the energy cycle is not kept revolving and there is leakage of enthusiasm and commitment. Some initiatives fail because they are not appropriate to the needs of the moment, others fail because of laziness, bad management or organisation, lack of leadership, a poor team or some other identifiable reason. Unless there is an evaluation there will be no way of distinguishing between what deserved to be abandoned and what deserved support and commitment. If the causes are not identified the next initiative to be proposed will be damned before it starts. It is possible that because there is so little evaluation done by bishops and clergy that we have so much cynicism about processes of personal and diocesan renewal. A serious approach to evaluation in ministry may be an important first step in the creation of a culture of ongoing formation among diocesan clergy. Where evaluations are well done accountability should follow. This is also important because another value that is not part of clerical culture is accountability, especially in areas of management or leadership.

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THE MEANING OF ONGOING FORMATION

One of the most comprehensive and useful explorations of the topic is a document produced by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States, namely, *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests*. In that document the bishops define ongoing formation as 'the continuing integration of priestly identity and functions or service for the sake of mission'.¹ Each of these terms deserves attention. Ongoing formation is a process or progressive activity that continues throughout life. There is no period or phase of a priest's life that is excluded from this necessity. It is a process of integration and it aims at facilitating a unity or harmony of life, drawing together who the priest is and what he does, thus attempting to overcome the fragmentation that can be the scourge of his life. It is about achieving a focus in life, centring on Christ and following him ever more closely. It is a task of integration, bringing together who the priest is as a human person and who he is as a sacramental person. Priestly identity is shaped by all one's natural traits as well as by the grace of ordination. The functions or service the priest offers are varied but they are concerned especially with the teaching of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments and the exercise of leadership in the community. The mission names the purpose and direction of the priest's activities, commitments and responsibilities. It is to participate in the mission of Christ himself, which is the mission of the Church.

Even a brief examination of the term 'ongoing formation' indicates the seriousness of the task. It is not just a professional requirement; it is also a deeply theological imperative for each priest. At root is a process whereby he listens to the Word of God on the one hand, and listens to the needs of the people on the other, and then discerns in what way he can best respond to these two realities of his existence. This is a very dynamic process because God's word to us changes as we move through life and so do the needs of the people change as shifts in society and culture continue to accelerate. If priests are to remain in tune with this dynamic process which governs their lives there seems to be no alternative for them but to be in a state of ongoing formation throughout their lives.

REASONS

Pope John Paul II made it clear in *Pastores dabo vobis* that there is a certain urgency about the task of ongoing formation of priests. He said, 'There is no profession, job or work which does not

1. *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests* (Washington. DC: USCC, 2000). p. 9.

require constant updating, if it is to remain current and effective. The need to "keep pace" with the path of history is another human reason justifying ongoing formation.² It is demanded by *faithfulness to the priestly ministry* and part of the *continual conversion* to which every priest is called.³

There are many reasons that one could advance to support the case for engaging in ongoing formation. I will attempt to list some of them:

- In general terms, one can say that the contemporary approach to the sacraments sees them in dynamic terms as unfolding their effects over time rather than as static events celebrated at a particular moment in time. This impinges on our understanding of priesthood. It is a sacramental reality to be lived out each day, not something that was conferred in the past. Priesthood is a continual embodiment of the presence of the Good Shepherd in the midst of the Church. If this is the understanding of the sacrament the priest lives then it is a reality that calls for constant nurturing and support.
- In the concrete expression of priesthood today there is a greater emphasis on the role of leadership that the priest is called upon to exercise. Previously the priest was granted a role of leadership by virtue of office. This can no longer be taken for granted and a priest must demonstrate his skill for leadership if he is to be taken seriously by his community. The acquisition and development of this competence is an ongoing task, a formation agenda.
- The decreasing numbers of clergy and their ageing profile are creating new demands on those who continue to minister. The average age of priests in Europe is over seventy years; but it is only in the past few years that decreasing numbers of personnel are beginning to impact on the Church in Ireland. Most parishes have less personnel than they had fifteen years ago and some parishes no longer have a resident priest. Many adjoining parishes are now forming clusters to ensure that basic sacramental services can be provided with reduced personnel. This in turn is paving the way for more serious collaborative styles of ministry among priests themselves and between them and other ministers. All of this calls for a radical change of mindset, from being a lone ranger to being a team player. It requires skills for participative styles of leadership and ministry and unless there is effort put into facilitating the transition it will be a painful experience for priests themselves and also for the communities which they serve.

2. . PDY,

70.

3. Ibid.

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- There can be no denying the toll that the current spate of revelations about clerical child sexual abuse has taken on most priests. These have damaged their confidence and have impacted on the natural bonds of trust that obtained between priests and their parishioners, especially with children and young adults. It has raised questions about the value of celibacy and even if it were not understood in the past at least it was respected. This is no longer the case. In addition, we live in an explicitly sexualized society where the previous supports of community and tradition are dramatically weakened. Therefore, proper systems of support need to be put in place if priests are to live their celibacy authentically and fruitfully.
- It is widely acknowledged that one of the important contributors to the emergence of the Celtic tiger economy has been our highly educated workforce. Our standard of educational achievement is generally very high. Unfortunately this does not hold for our religious education. Knowledge of Christian doctrine among our educated elites has not kept pace with their knowledge in other disciplines. Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that there is a sizeable cohort of theologically educated people in this country at the moment, whose theological expertise often surpasses those who may be preaching to them on Sunday morning. These are people with high expectations of their clergy. All of this poses a challenge for priests whose primary task it is to be teachers of the Word of God. Priests need help in appropriating contemporary theological approaches if they are to be credible proclaimers of the Gospel in post-modern Ireland. They also need sound leadership skills if they are to facilitate parish development in this new context. We all know how important a role the priest plays in the development (or retardation) of a vibrant Christian community. Without renewal in priestly leadership the pace and quality of parish renewal will inevitably suffer.
- Over the past few years the Pope has been calling the Church to a renewed effort at evangelization and especially for an outreach to those whose connections with the Church have become loose. It is a common task for all members of the Church, but once again priests are expected to be leaders in this process. Fresh approaches are needed in connecting the quest for spirituality manifesting itself in many areas of life today, with the wider tradition of Christian experience. There is no crisis of spirituality but there is a crisis of religiosity. In other words, many of the spiritualities on offer today are simply another manifestation of the individualism of our culture,

they lack any connection with a praying, worshipping, serving community. In order to meet the challenge of this situation priests need to review their own approaches to prayer and to their style of liturgical celebration. Visitors to Ireland comment regularly on the poor quality of our liturgical celebration, and with justification. The Sunday liturgy is still a key moment of evangelization – good liturgy will encourage people to remain within the worshipping community. Poor liturgy will be accompanied by loud petitions for a faster Mass – people do not like being subjected to prolonged tedium. Special celebrations like weddings, baptisms and funerals, when some of our more alienated relations visit the Church, are key moments of contact and unless the congregation is engaged by the quality and authenticity of the celebration the visitors will not be encouraged to reconnect with the worshipping community. This is only one dimension of the task of evangelization, albeit a very central one, and if it is to be done effectively then those leading the effort will need renewal.

-As Ireland becomes a more multicultural society new demands are being made on the traditional parish. Practically every parish now has residents from several foreign countries in its midst. This situation presents a fresh challenge to the pastoral work of the parish. It demands initiative and creativity on the part of parish leadership, which in turn means that the leaders need help and support in devising appropriate pastoral strategies to meet this new challenge. It is an example of how changing social circumstances constantly nudge priests into a process of renewal and ongoing formation.

THE DIMENSIONS OF ONGOING FORMATION

Pastores dabo vobis provides an indispensable structure for any programme of ongoing formation. It divides the programme into four key areas that should form the basis of priestly formation at any stage. Those areas are human formation, spiritual formation, theological formation and pastoral formation.

1. *Human Formation*: Human development is foundational for an ongoing formation programme. This is made quite clear in *Pastores dabo vobis*:

Fuller development is first required in the human aspect of priestly formation. Through his daily contact with people, his sharing in their daily lives, the priest needs to develop and sharpen his human sensitivity so as to understand more clearly their needs, respond to their demands, perceive their unvoiced questions, and share the hopes and expectations,

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the joys and burdens which are part of life: thus he will be able to meet and enter into dialogue with all people.[•]

Given the complexities of contemporary life it is self-evident that priests need proper support structures in place to enable them to cope with their own developmental issues and with their personal questions and dilemmas. It is also important that well-proven experts in the area of human development be engaged to assist priests in this work. Poor psychological resources may be worse than none and it is important that those who work with people of strong religious convictions be respectful of that life-stance. This is certainly an area requiring real sensitivity. A very telling remark by Peter McDonough and Eugene Bianchi in their recent book, *Passionate Uncertainty: Inside the American Jesuits*, makes the point about a therapeutic culture: 'The process of *cura personalis* (personal care) is two-edged. The therapeutic turn does not encourage collective mobilization against the ecclesiastical structure, but it doesn't foster loyalty to institutions either.'⁵ The implication is that many therapeutic approaches enable the preservation of institutions and the survival of individuals within them but the dynamism of the Christian mission is often diluted. Despite the difficulties of getting this agenda right these are not an excuse for neglecting it.

2. *Spiritual Formation*: Spiritual formation is essentially about growing in discipleship of Jesus Christ, a task the priest shares with every other Christian. The priest is asked to become an ever more credible sacramental sign of Christ, in whose name and person he acts. This happens through a life of prayer and reflection, through attentive celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. It is developed through the life of service that the priest provides for his community and particularly when this is done in a spirit of selflessness in imitation of Christ. Integral to the spirituality of the diocesan priesthood is the call to celibacy. This is a dimension of his vocation that has to be appropriated consciously and continuously if it is not to lose its power in the priest's life. But it is also one that needs support from the community and especially from the bishop and the rest of the diocesan presbyterate. Many priests experience isolation and loneliness with the result that their celibate commitment is not as life-giving for them or others as it was intended to be. There is then a serious responsibility on all concerned to explore ways to strengthen the support systems in dioceses so that their presbyterates can live celibacy with a sense of its value and power in their lives.

3. *Intellectual Formation*: Intellectual formation is not an

4. Ibid., 72.

5. Berkeley and Los Angeles, Ca: California University Press, 2002, p. 9.

added extra for the preacher of the Word. Some years ago in a letter to all the Dominicans, their Master General, Timothy Radcliffe, stressed the importance of study and said that if they were to be messengers of hope to a broken and troubled world then they needed to engage in serious reflection not just on the Scriptures but on the social, political and economic realities of contemporary life. He said, 'Our world is being reduced to a cultural desert through the triumph of consumerism. The cultural poverty of this dominant perception of the human person is ravaging the whole world, and "the people perish for the lack of a vision" (Prov 29: 18). There is a hunger not just for food but for meaning ... We ponder the Word of God, seeking to know his will rather than to discover evidence that God is on our side.'⁶

One of the great weaknesses of the old seminary formation was that it gave the illusion of completion, that one was equipped for life with all the knowledge one would ever require. Today we are aware that theological insights are developing in response to the exponential growth in knowledge in other areas and that there is a need to be in touch to some extent with these developments. Otherwise our preaching will be little more than biblical clichés without any connection to the struggles for meaning and value that many of our parishioners are experiencing.

4. *Pastoral Formation*: Pastoral formation is about 'the development of skills and competencies that enable priests to serve their people well'.⁷ The changing climate in which priests find themselves today only serves to remind them daily of their need for new skills, to be more attentive listeners, to be better leaders or managers of teams, to be better facilitators of meetings, to be better administrators or delegators and to be more adept in the use of the multimedia means of learning and teaching. In a number of dioceses priests are beginning to get together to engage in pastoral reflection on their own ministry. This provides fresh perspectives on the issues encountered, support for the priest in his pastoral response, and the beginnings of a sense of accountability for his ministry. All of these developments are positive but they need further development, expansion and encouragement from priests and bishops.

AFFIRMING IDENTITY

One of the great advances of *Pastores dabo vobis* was that it affirmed the necessity of an anthropological starting point in any formation programme for priests. If priests today are experiencing

6. *Sing a New Song: The Christian Vocation* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1999), p. 77.

7. *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests*, p. 23.

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a crisis of identity they too must begin by recognising their own identity as human persons and that must ground any other dimension of their complex identities. In other words, they must recognize that they have physical needs that have to be attended to for their most basic functioning. They have psychological needs which include their intellectual and affective needs. They must be able to make sense of their lives, form mature affective bonds and be able to direct their commitments in a purposeful way. Closely connected with these two needs are sexual needs. All persons need intimacy and some expression of their generativity. Unless maturely addressed these sexual needs will distort the priest's relationships and his spirituality. So, too, have they social needs, where bonds of relationship and position in family and the wider society are established. Identity is also shaped by the culture of which one is a part and one needs to have a grasp of its meaning and values in order to have a sense of identity within it. These issues cannot be leapfrogged because they are so central to the identity of every human person and provide the basis on which we can begin to construct an understanding of the priest as a sacramental person. Clarity on this point will bring further clarification to the theological issues of identity and it may be that part of the confusion about priestly identity today is rooted more in anthropological issues than in theological issues.⁸

Theologically, too, a priest has to explore his life of discipleship: how he lives out his baptismal call and the extent of his growth in faith, hope and love. This is a challenge he shares with every other disciple of Jesus Christ. In virtue of his ordination this challenge is intensified because now he is asked to be 'a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ, the Head and Shepherd, authoritatively proclaiming the Word of God'.⁹ His role of representation and leadership in the Christian community confers an identity that is unique and therefore requires serious attention and nurturing on the part of those who exercise it. A priest's identity is also shaped by his membership of a presbyterate, that is, a college of co-workers with the local bishop – an identity to be reflected upon by both sets of partners. There is a deeply communitarian dimension to a priest's identity that is often overlooked by diocesan priests. They have operated for a long time with the loner mentality. A renewed theology of priesthood invites a much more collaborative approach to living priestly life not just with the faithful at large but also among priests themselves and with their bishop and he with them.

8. These issues are more fully explored in *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests*, pp. 11-12.

9. PVD, 15.

This identity must then be integrated with the mission which the priest is called to serve. He is primarily a proclaimer of the Gospel. On the basis of his proclamation of the Word he gathers the assembly to offer its sacrifice of worship and praise to God through the celebration of the sacraments. He continues to nurture and support these communities of faith through his pastoral care and leadership in every aspect of life.

Any ongoing formation programme for diocesan priests must help them in exploring the various dimensions of their identity and in clarifying their roles within the mission of the Church. It must also enable them to reach some integration of these so that they are strengthened in their confidence to proclaim boldly the Gospel of Christ.

OPPORTUNITIES

Ongoing formation is a process of integration occurring throughout the life of every priest. It begins once he leaves the seminary. We all know the major transition that is involved in moving from a college environment to a parish, from a tightly organized structure to a very fluid one. It involves, among many factors, forming new sets of relationships, assuming serious responsibilities within a new community, and encountering the tension between theological theory and pastoral practice. It is a time of novelty, excitement and vulnerability. It is a time when the young priest needs mentoring and support as he climbs a steep learning curve in terms of redefining his identity and coming to terms with a new role. There is need for a structure to be put in place to provide this support and encouragement for the newly ordained. In the past three years a monthly forum has been provided for the young priests of the Western province, which many of them have found beneficial.

Priestly ministry involves many transitions in the course of a lifetime. Each of these can bring opportunities for human and spiritual growth or regression. There are the temptations to discouragement, to rest in old securities, to feel disappointment about unfinished business or projects, to carry past hurts forward and to be gripped by fear and uncertainty. On the other hand it can be a time of grace, to renew one's commitment, to extend the reach of one's mission and to see one's journey as a sharing in the very rhythm of the paschal mystery- dying and rising with Christ. Making the transition from one assignment to another is a natural time to engage in renewal, to take stock, to renew one's idealism and commitments, and to revisit the questions of one's identity and role.

Life expectancy continues to improve and people in their 'third age' are living longer and leading more active lives. There is need

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for ongoing formation for those aged sixty-five and over. Retirement or a scaling back of one's ministerial activities can impact greatly on a priest. He still retains his sacramental identity, even though what he does may have changed dramatically. Ongoing formation can speak to the concerns that accompany this transition. Here there is a need for integration as much as at any stage of life. It is a time for harvesting life's experiences and wisdom, for sharing these with those of a younger generation, and for facing the ultimate surrender that one has to make into the hands of the Good Shepherd. 'Structures and structured responses to senior clergy need to confirm them in their particular life and vocational situation ... The bishop, other priests, friends and family of senior priests, and young people need to take conscious hold of the presence and gifts of senior clergy. In this way, theirs will never be a forgotten grace in the Church.'¹⁰

CREATING A CULTURE OF ONGOING FORMATION

Creating a culture is about creating and shaping an entire way of life. It involves 'the total body of beliefs, behaviours, knowledge, sanctions, values and goals that mark the way of life of a people.'¹¹ It is a force for directing action, for shaping our expectations and creating a sense of responsibility and accountability.¹² There is a need for a culture change among diocesan priests with regard to the issue of ongoing formation and they, together with their bishops, have a responsibility to effect this change.

Ongoing formation has not been a high priority up to now among presbyterates in this country and the lack of it leaves them ill-prepared for all of the changes with which they have had to cope in recent years. Leadership is needed in this agenda. Individual priests still have a primary responsibility for their own ongoing formation, as is clear from what has already been said. *Pastores dabo vobis* is also very clear on this point that 'unless the individual priest is personally convinced of its need and is determined to make use of the opportunities, times and forms in which it comes',¹³ no amount of canonical regulations will have much effect. However, the document also places a serious onus of responsibility on the diocesan bishop to ensure that his priests are of the quality to which the people of God have a right. It is a task that can be shared among dioceses, as was done over the past few years in the Western Province, when the six dioceses pooled their

10. *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests*, pp. 69-70.

11. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 27.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

13. PDV, # 79.

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resources and ran a twelve-week programme in Galway. There are several renewal programmes available both in Ireland and overseas that attend to the variety of needs outlined above. However, there is need for courses that are specifically designed to meet the needs of priests engaged in routine parish ministry.

The task of creating a culture of ongoing formation among priests will have to be supported by the entire people of God. They have a right to well-formed priests and they have a responsibility to support their ongoing formation and professional development.

If serious renewal is to happen in the Church in Ireland, as it needs to, then a renewal of its priests will be integral to that goal. A common sense of study and prayer among priests in a diocese will provide them with a common language and vision of their mission and ministerial purpose. More common efforts in these areas will engender a spirit of support, challenge and mutual accountability among the priests of a diocese. In this way, they can become more credible sacramental signs of Christ in the midst of their communities and the longed for renewal can gain momentum.

Rhubarb. A second-level problem [in Confession] is the priest who talks rhubarb. This can take a number of forms. Perhaps it is facile 'advice' from another, simpler world, the spiritual equivalent of expecting a drug addict to be free of his or her cravings by saying, 'Drugs are bad for you.' People often ask how a celibate man, protected from many of life's knocks, can expect to talk sense about the everyday problems of family life. Another, slightly less raw, form of rhubarb is what might be called 'ritual pronouncements'. You are given a little homily on preparing for Easter or whatever, and told to say one Our Father and two Hail Marys. The experience can be arid, a perfunctory anticlimax to all the careful preparation and steeling of nerves that can go into entering the confessional.

-LAURENCE McTAGGART, OSB, *Being Catholic Today* (Fount/Harper Collins) p. 72