

The Life of the Priest in the Diocese Today - a Reflection

1. Introduction

At a time when vocations to the priesthood in our country are scarce it is important that we have honest and realistic conversations about ways to encourage, support and sustain priestly ministry in our diocese. All this with the conviction that the Holy Spirit overshadows such conversations and is guiding and renewing the Church. And that the Holy Spirit is 'the life and vitality of every priest' (Pope Francis).

2. What has been said?

From Diocesan Synod Report:

Responses highlighted the importance of the role of the priest in gathering and forming community.

The priest groups spoke of the privilege of preaching the Gospel and "the power/value of [celebrating] the liturgy" as one of the joys of the priesthood.

However, both clergy and people spoke of the increasing workload of priests and the fear of burnout.

Many reflected concern about the shortage of clergy in our country and diocese. Decreasing numbers of clergy leads to a nostalgia for times when priests could get to know their communities, visit homes and know people by name: "Priests don't know me now."

Concerns were expressed over dwindling vocations, seminary training and ongoing formation. There was a call for preaching to be more relevant and engaging "homilies must reflect how scripture is working in my life".

There was anxiety expressed from priests facing retirement.

3. Where are we now?

We need to ask for some statistics to get an accurate picture of present trends in order to plan for the future: eg. What is the trend in Mass attendance in parishes across the diocese?

Here are some of our findings:

Number of principal parishes:

69 parishes (85 churches)

Numbers of active priests serving in our parishes:

"Home-grown" including 3 recently incardinated

44

From religious orders/missionary societies

25

From other Dioceses

8

Total

77

Of these 57% are "home-grown" or incardinated.

So at present we depend on "external sources" for 43% of our



priests. (Though this does not take account of those retired priests who are still active).

Age of priests: Of the currently-active priests whose ages are readily available

- 7 (28%) are over 70.
- 3 are 75 or over.
- None at present are over 80.
- 6 are under 40.

4. How can God's mission be served?

In order to discern pointers towards a healthier and more flourishing presbyterate, we decided to focus on three themes: A/ The life of the priest today. B/ The relationship between the priest and the lay faithful, C/ The relationship between the priest and the diocesan curia.

A/ The Life of the Priest Today:

In the light of this Working Party's conversations:

Here are some of our hopes:

Set priests free to pray and preach - unburdening them from so much administration.

Need for more fraternal support (building a stronger culture of priestly fraternity across the diocese and in the pastoral areas). Reviewing and renewing the role of the Deans in this regard.

A more thoroughgoing induction programme for priests joining us from outside the diocese.

That in their appointment to parishes and institutions the variety of priests particular gifts, ages, backgrounds, strengths and limitations are acknowledged and taken into account. (Not one size fits all).

That we recognise those priests belonging to religious congregations and those from other countries will have different perspectives and responsibilities.

Here are some of our challenges:

- Assuring effective sacramental and pastoral provision with fewer and fewer priests.
- The shortage of permanent incardinated clergy can be considered the biggest challenge we face in that it impinges on every aspect of Church life.
- More and more work for fewer and fewer priests means a sense of plate-spinning (juggling various responsibilities).
- A sense of isolation felt by some of our priests both active and retired.
- Seeking to ensure that retiring priests are made to feel less anxious about their future.

Here are some of our questions:

- Are our priests (and deacons) at present best placed to further the mission of the Church?
- What can be done to lift strain and stress from priests, given the things we can change?
- Why is there such a shortage of 'homegrown' priests?
- How can we build a vocational culture within our parishes?

- How can we attract more vocations to the priesthood?
- Why do the new movements and religious communities seem to be attracting more vocations than the diocesan priesthood?
- Is the seminary the best way of forming priests for the future?
- What can we learn from other Christians around forming communities?

Here are some of our convictions:

- The celebration of the Eucharist and therefore the role of the priest is pivotal in our communities.
- There needs to be a clearer teaching and appreciation of the theology of the priesthood.
- There is a crisis of family/community/belonging: in parish/diocesan priesthood /seminary.
- Vocations to the priesthood are the fruit of a healthy church/parishes/families.
- We have to work to build healthy communities which then produce vocations and mission.
- Seeing priests who are happy and fulfilled in their priesthood attracts vocations.
- We need to acknowledge the nature of conversations that are happening at a parish level around the shortage of vocations (eg compulsory celibacy, women's ministry).
- We need to address the particular needs of retired and retiring priests.
- We want to be fathers and pastors not functionaries or chaplains.

B/ The Relationship between Priests & the Lay Faithful:

This is a huge but significant area in the life of the Diocese. Both good and bad relationships have been cited in all parts of the Synodal conversations:

From the priest groups:

Some of the joys: Encountering and accompanying God's people.
Connecting/reconnecting people.

Some of the sorrows: Feeling used and taken for granted as a service station.
Reluctance of people to get involved – erosion of a volunteering culture.

Some of their dreams for the Church: A more vibrant laity embracing their baptismal calling
Greater role of women in the Church.
Increased lay leadership.

From the Diocesan Synod report:

There were concerns around the expectation of priests as managers (something they had not necessarily been trained for) rather than being able to focus on pastoral and spiritual care.

Are seminaries really preparing priests for whom service is a priority? *"We need men who choose the smell of the sheep"*.

Ordaining married priests was hoped to bring the benefit that married clergy can bring to the Church: *"for priests to have a life just like ours"*.

Lay people do not always find it easy to speak courageously within the community of our Church. There is an attitude of *'the priest knows best'*. Some priests act as mini-dictators and there's a lack of consistency from priest to priest.

If we are to move forward with clergy and laity together, we must find better ways of treating people.

From the Continental Stage Document:

Priestly formation prepares us for the priestly life but does not prepare us for pastoral cooperation, spiritual discernment.

In the light of this Working Party's conversations:

Here are some of our hopes:

- A vibrant and well catechised laity embracing their baptismal vocation.
- An empowered laity leading naturally with confidence.
- Mutual trust needed - between lay faithful and priest in the Church's mission.
- Revitalising of parishes through a new sense of co-responsibility.
- Gospel-focussed leadership training is needed especially in recognising and encouraging each others gifts and charisms.

Here are some of our challenges:

- Knowing how and when to encourage laity to take up/lay down particular roles/ministries.
- Avoiding the trap of clericalism and 'Father knows best' but also the danger of 'clericalising' the laity.
- Priests and laity able to hold with respect the tensions that come with difference.
- Need to understand the difference and complementarity of women and men.
- Helping the newly ordained make the transition from academic formation to pastoral life.
- Sensitivity to those who feel excluded, including abuse victims/survivors, divorced & remarried, LGBT+ community, and those who feel marginalised by the recent regulations around the Traditional Latin Mass.

Here are some of our questions:

- How do we communicate and express that our relationship begins in Baptism?
- How do we build the necessary trust between priests and laity?

- How do we discern people's gifts and encourage the use of them?
- How do we engage our young people?
- Does priestly formation include learning the necessary skills in groups and collaboration?
- How do priests lead without being controlling, defensive and stifling?
- Lay ministries - lector, acolyte, catechist - how do we develop these?

Here are some of our convictions:

- Priests and people are co-responsible in communion and mission.
- We all belong to the People of God but have distinctive roles.
- The synodal process is about priests and people walking together and making decisions together.
- Priests and lay faithful help each other to be holy.
- It is important for priests and laity to ask whether we have put ourselves into each other's shoes. Do we really seek to know how the other feels?
- The laity are not volunteers/helping the priest.

C/ The Relationship between Priests & the Diocesan Curia:

This relationship is not always an easy one. Currently many clergy feel over-burdened by the demands of the administrative centre, at the same time as having their own ability to administrate at parish level called into question.

From the priest groups:

- The burden of administration taking us away from pastoral care.
- Introduction of new procedures for which we have no training.
- Unjust interference in parish finances.

They dream of:

- More transparency.
- Less red tape, bureaucracy, hurdles and hoops.
- A curia that serves the parishes, not the other way round.

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In the light of this Working Party's conversations:

Here are some of our hopes:

- More mutual respect in dealing with each other.
- More consultation and a synodal style in diocesan appointments and decision-making.
- More mutual trust and transparency.

Here are some of our challenges:

- A key issue is clear communication.
- To understand more clearly people's roles, remits and responsibilities in the Curia.
- Better induction of priests from outside the diocese.
- Clash between the business model and pastoral/family one of the Church.
- Perception of Diocesan imposition without consultation.
- Priests must not load what they find difficult onto people who also are not trained.
- The excessive number of emails from the Diocese demanding attention and action.

Here are some of our questions:

- How can we make the Curia more synodal?
- Whom do we approach when we have particular questions? Clarification needed.
- How do we make compliance issues less threatening and overwhelming?
- What steps might we take to relieve the administrative burden on priests?
- Are we too acquiescent and unquestioning as clergy about what is decided at diocesan level?
- Do we need a priest as moderator of the Curia who looks at things from an ecclesial viewpoint?
- What is the Bishop's vision for the vicariates? How can they be more synodal?

Here are some of our convictions:

- The principle of subsidiarity whereby many decisions can be made locally has long been a cherished principle in the Church.
- That we need to safeguard against using a purely business model in financial matters.
- The synodal style should shape the way the Bishop works and governs the diocese.

5. Summary of Our Findings Leading into the Diocesan Assembly:

In the light of the three areas we focussed on in our conversations the priests want to listen and be listened to

- so that resources and structure are made available generously to strengthen joyful priestly fraternity and promote local priestly vocations.

- so that recognising the baptismal vocation of all God's people (including ourselves) we can celebrate and engage co-operatively with the lay faithful in mission.

- so that we can benefit from a gospel focussed curia working to serve the local church.

7. Conclusion:

In our conversations we became acutely aware that the key theme that kept emerging was *trust*. We all agreed that narrowing the discussion down into proposals at this stage would be to preempt what might emerge at the Assembly and afterwards. We need to bring more and more people into these ongoing conversations. We must keep the Lord at the heart of our conversations and the living out of the gospel as our goal.

It is a such blessing that this synodal journey has begun and that voices are now being heard. There can be no going back. It is becoming clear that this “walking together” and co-responsibility is an ongoing task and something we need to seek to embed in the life of the Diocese at every level.

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