

*(Fr. Edward Quinn replies to our Comment on the Report on the living conditions of priests.)*

My dear Herbert,

I was delighted by your Comment in the July issue on 'Co-responsibility and the Clergy', but surprised by the reaction of another secular priest who seemed to think that, being a religious, you could not appreciate the problems arising from our peculiar form of the common life. I still agree with you, but the criticism—from an apostolic minded and forward-looking priest—should not be hastily dismissed. Isn't the real weakness of the document (as you hint) that it is concerned with symptoms and not with the fundamental unease of the secular clergy today?

The truth is that our everyday life is a curious midway state between the religious life and bachelor existence 'in the world'. The working party accepts this and tries to remove some of the anomalies. But if only we could discover what we are really meant to be, most of the anomalies would vanish and our living conditions would become, if not entirely satisfactory, at least more normal.

For a long time we took them for granted. Not as you do, because living with your fellow-Dominicans in houses of a certain stamp, from which you went out to preach (in the widest sense of that term), was a part of your vocation. We were simply young unmarried men with no more thought than other young bachelors about housing conditions, relations with one another or provision for the future. We came out of the seminary, overgrown schoolboys, glad to be freed from its restrictions but willing enough to live with a greater degree of privacy with our fellow-priests. After a while, we found these conditions more irksome and longed for the day when we would have 'our own parish' and our feet under our own table, forgetting that success—particularly in fund-raising—would mean that there would soon be other—not particularly tiny—feet under that table. We would again have to share that life with curates.

Instead of the spirit and rule of an order, we had canon law to make our bachelor existence clerical and respectable. We had to be home by 11 p.m.; for most of my priestly life we were forbidden to attend the theatre, not because of possibly scandalous plays, but because, in the words of a well-known theologian, it was too much of a 'social occasion' for clerics. Housekeepers and other domestic staff had to be of super-adult age. Very often they were not, but no harm was done since the laity assumed that a kind of miracle supplied the place of an operation for turning us into eunuchs. Even now it is remarkable that only a clerical bachelor living alone with a spinster seems to be immune from neighbourly criticism. Mostly however the generous laity make sure that he is also immune from neighbours in a wholly detached presbytery large enough to contain a separate bathroom for the house-keeper.

From that presbytery we sallied forth only in search of lawful

recreation (golf with another priest, for instance), for sick calls or for 'visiting' (inquiring about church-attendance, collecting, or just being condescendingly friendly). For the rest, the laity came to us, for Mass, for confessions, even in pre-Vatican II and pre-TV years for sermons. 'No man is an island' didn't apply to us. We were all islands, set for the most part in a friendly sea of the 'simple faithful'.

This situation is changing and will change still more, with increasing rapidity. Diocesan and parish-structures will remain as they are for some time to come, bishops will continue to select candidates mainly with an eye to their capacity for enduring celibacy, to appoint priests with more or less consideration for their abilities—especially in fund-raising—and occasionally with some knowledge of their adaptability to particular congregations. Tied as they are to even more old-fashioned ideas of the priesthood than the priests themselves, the laity in most parishes are not yet ready to choose their own priestly leader and ask the bishop to appoint or perhaps even ordain him. But surely something like this must be the trend of the future.

'Vocations' will be decided far more than formerly by qualities of leadership and tested by conflict and collaboration with men and women of all types before ordination. Leading a congregation certainly involves leading them in the celebration of the eucharist: it may or may not involve full time work within that congregation. The priest may be financially secure because of his secular occupation, he may be paid as a hospital chaplain or in some similar capacity, or may be content to be supported by those to whom he ministers. If he is wholly content to be so dependent, if he is so eager for the apostolate that he simply has not time or energy for building up a family, and if he is content to temper his zeal in the light of the advice of a bishop well aware of his qualities and the needs of his congregation, then he is in effect accepting the evangelical counsels and problems of everyday life will be at least as manageable as those of the religious orders.

There will be others, equally zealous, equally capable, already married or looking forward to the support of a wife and family in a worth-while priestly life. In their households too the problems may still be great, but they will be normal and not require the investigations of a working party for their solution.

By that time the problem of bishops will have solved itself. There will be more of them, also living with the people (in a parish, community or whatever kind of group will gather round the priests of the future), available for the occasional ordination, making appointments in consultation with their fellow-priests and with the congregation concerned. Some of them may even be 'husbands of one wife'.

Edward Quinn.