

impersonality in the style, and only if we see that the meaning the rite embodies must work on us in ways and at levels beyond our conscious, personal grasp.

# Priesthood: Reflections on the Synod 'Working Paper'

## I. Priest and Parish

by Edward Quinn

Then they sang the second verse of the *Tantum ergo* and Canon O'Hanlon got up again and censed the Blessed Sacrament and knelt down and he told Father Conroy that one of the candles was just going to set fire to the flowers and Father Conroy got up and settled it all right . . . Canon O'Hanlon stood up with his cope poking up at his neck and Father Conroy handed him the card to read off and he read out *Panem de coelo praestitisti eis . . .*

Sunday evening service in a West Riding town forty to sixty years ago was not very much different from the scene in the church at Sandymount on Bloomsday. For the priests it marked the end of a quite heavy Sunday, the climax of a by no means easy week. Two Masses in the morning with a sermon at each, fasting from midnight perhaps until 1 o'clock, baptisms and children's service, rosary—or Vespers—or Compline, another sermon, and Benediction. On the Saturday five or six hours' confessions. In this town as in many others of its kind, from Friday night to Sunday afternoon, all the time left over from church services and absolutely necessary meals and rest, was spent in house to house collecting. The parish priest might reserve to himself the task of counting or he might share it with the curates, thus lengthening the weekend's work to Monday midday. For some this might be followed by recreation on the golf links and dark murmurings with other clerical companions about the tyranny of parish priests. For the rest of the week, two hours of every day would be taken up with Mass and Office, there would be at least one evening service with a sermon, perhaps a confraternity meeting, instruction of converts (most of them marrying Catholics), a weekly visit to the school, visiting both of the sick and well (the latter being questioned, if necessary, about attendance at Mass and Easter duties). A conscientious priest might use some of the time left over to prepare his sermons.

It cannot be said that such priests had an easy life. It was not very different in a large city parish, where I spent my first years as a curate in the thirties. We were mercifully relieved of the task of

outdoor collecting and a particularly easy-going parish priest left us to plan our visiting as we chose and never investigated our work. But the pattern was the same and I certainly enjoyed it and found it satisfying. There were of course priests who had far less to do. Often in remote country parishes, with few parishioners, few demands on their time and with equally few sources of income. Many endured heroically poverty and loneliness, some took to the bottle, very rarely indeed did any of these or the younger priests take to marriage.

Busy or not, some of us however began to have misgivings even then. Today the question is raised more acutely. Just what has the priest to do?

We knew then that we had to say Mass of course, to administer the sacraments—particularly the sacrament of penance and the sacraments for the sick<sup>1</sup>.

Both in order to say Mass and through saying Mass, although we were quite clear about its *ex opere operato* efficacy, we knew that we were expected to grow in personal holiness. We were concerned with sacred things as the layman was not and, like these things, we were set apart. It was not entirely an other-worldliness that we were expected to cultivate: *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, was a motto we were expected to keep constantly before us. But our work was to save souls for heaven and this we did principally by offering Mass and persuading them to come to the sacraments, trying ourselves to lead holy and exemplary lives apart. Celibacy went with that. A woman would have divided our lives. Nobody talked then, as nowadays we do so glibly do, about “eschatological witness”.

Now, even in a busy parish, the cultivation of personal holiness, saying Mass and administering the sacraments, did not take up all that much time. What were we to do with the rest of it?

There was and there still is visiting. The point of this, for the healthy and practising Catholics, is rather hard to see. In a new parish, a new area, with newcomers to the parish, clearly contact should be established and for this one visit is not enough. But after a year or so, does a priest still have to call regularly, interrupt the housewife’s cooking or washing while he sits sipping tea? Anyway, both laity and clergy—today the laity more than the somewhat bewildered clergy—were implicitly agreed that Father brought a blessing with him and almost a presence from another world. Our isolation and what the less devout might regard as our uselessness remained.

This is the priestly image which seems to be behind the working paper. The crisis is essentially a problem of worldliness (though

<sup>1</sup>Moral theology was considered particularly important here: to be able to cope with the problems of the confessional. I think I assimilated reasonably well the four lectures a week for four years and all the necessary reading, but in practice I never needed in the confessional more than a small fraction of all that we studied. Having heard confessions for nearly forty years in three languages, in large cities and in the country, of well-educated and ill-educated, of old and young, I have faced many a psychological difficulty but never more than the simplest *theological* problem.

'secularization' is admitted to have sometimes a good sense) and the priest should be concerned with the other world, with his 'eschatological mission'. The compilers of the document appear to have assimilated long ago a rather limited text-book theology, to have read hastily the documents of Vatican II and to have felt it necessary therefore to widen the concept of priest to something more than 'massing priest' (but not all that much more); above all, to use the word 'eschatological' at every turn.

Perhaps it is the definition of this term which illustrates best the disastrous failure of the working paper even to see the problem exercising so many priests today and to explain just what in the concrete the secular priest has to do.

'The word describes a "reality" which is not of this world, a gift of God present and operating in human history.' The last phrase is promising, but our hopes are frustrated when the whole text and the rest of the footnote make clear that the presence and operation are wholly to turn men's minds to the next world. 'It means that no other new "reality" in the mystery of salvation can be expected after the first coming of Christ and his Church under the Spirit. Only the final consummation is to be expected.' The last judgment in the valley of Jehoshaphat presumably.

Even when we still thought that revelation consisted in a set of propositions, drawn from Scripture and tradition and carefully placed in the deposit of faith, to remain intact and unchanging after apostolic times, we had some idea of 'realizing' the mystery of salvation and we asked the Spirit continually to renew the face of the earth. It is true that there is not strictly a 'new reality' here, but only a continual unfolding of the mystery. Nevertheless, the document seems to work with a very rigid concept of mystery, as something closed up and beyond our grasp in any sense. The newness of grace, the literally infinite variety of the traffic between heaven and earth, the unique call that has made every saint's life a wholly new reflection of the light on the face of Christ; above all, the need to link the varied resources of holiness in a common effort to renew a failing world, which has led to the foundation of religious orders: all these things appear to be outside the scope of this document if not entirely alien to the outlook of its authors.

Yet all these really are the sacred things that should concern the priest above all. And even the slightest understanding of the religious life should have made this document more helpful. It is true that, in the past, a more or less monastic spirituality has been imposed on the secular priest. But the sense of urgency with which individual saints and the founders of religious orders were imbued throws a very great light on the work which the 'secular' priest has to do in the world where he exercises his ministry.

It was out of a sense of urgency, an 'eschatological' impulse, when they saw clearly eternity breaking in on time, that saints gave

up opportunities of possessions, of following their own whims, of marriage. And, for the sake of the urgent and clearly specified tasks before them, religious took the three vows. All is not well of course with the religious life, but that is beyond the scope of the working paper or this attempt to comment on it. What matters here is that the commitment is of a different kind and celibacy is involved in the deliberately chosen way of life.

The secular priest too must have a sense of urgency, but it is a shared sense: shared with the whole people of God. He is the leader in their pilgrimage through the world and he is accepted as such—ordained—not because he has a greater sense of urgency, but because he wants to fulfil this role, is capable of fulfilling it and—under present conditions—is judged by the bishop to be so capable and to show signs of real zeal for the task. But he lives in the same world as the rest of the faithful and his tasks of leadership may vary immensely. To ‘say’ Mass requires no more time, no more energy and little more intelligence than to attend Mass. Other tasks, still reserved exclusively to the priest, may require even less time. There will certainly always be a need of some to spend all their time on essentially ‘priestly’ tasks or with other activities closely linked with these. But the pattern has already vastly changed. Deacons, laymen, can now even as a normal thing do much that was once reserved to priests. And parochial organization will certainly change still more in the very near future. With it the division of labour in church affairs will become more important.

It is not a question of part-time priests as exceptions to the general rule, but simply of parish or congregation leaders who may or may not need to devote their whole time to the work of leadership. The best of them will be tireless in establishing the kingdom of God among men, they will feel acutely the sense of urgency, but there will not be enough urgent work in the concrete to occupy all of them all the time.

Even if not fully occupied, their minds may be so full of this more important work that they simply cannot be bothered with more than a very bare minimum of possessions and cannot share their interests with the most co-operative wife. Vows or no vows, theirs will be a freely chosen poverty or a freely chosen celibacy. And because the Holy Spirit is all in all we may speak of charisms. But there simply is no essential connection between the work and character of a priest—full time or part-time—as described in Vatican II and the vocation of celibacy. For some, marriage may strengthen a man’s commitment and increase his sense of urgency and in itself it is not an impediment to this.

The working paper sees celibacy in quite another light, partly because it still has the image of a priest as a man apart, not involved. Celibacy is said to provide an ‘eschatological witness’, not so much because the priest is intent on the breaking in of the kingdom on the

world as because he is regarded as a kind of visitant from another world 'a living sign of the *future* life.' The authors are particularly worried about the exceptional cases of married priests already permitted to exercise their ministry. This is the thin edge of the wedge: 'this change in traditional discipline might be difficult to contain within the bounds of real and urgent necessity'.

The real problem, not the suitability of celibacy, but its imposition by law, is airily dismissed: 'Since no one is obliged to accept the ministry, the freedom of candidates is in no way offended.' In the last resort that is indeed the choice we made. However idealistic our outlook, however hard we prayed, is it right to speak of a charism when we simply submitted to a law which made marriage an impediment to the priestly vocation we were trying to fulfil? We were free indeed: to take it or leave it. Does this kind of restriction 'in no way' offend against freedom?

Of course it worked for the most part. We do not intrude into each others' lives, but it is obvious enough after forty years of their acquaintance that the vast majority of the secular clergy in this country do much more than observe the law, accepting the burden and often the blessed release of their way of chastity cheerfully and modestly. Utterly kind to their brethren who seem to weaken, they resent over-dramatization of 'departures', solemn criticism of the Church's laws from the pulpit on a Sunday followed by hasty arrangements at the registry office on Monday, worst of all the latter day Heloises and Abelards who insist on sharing with the general public dull little love letters which the most ardent teenagers would soon be glad to forget.

All that is no reason why we should not welcome to our ministry eager apostles already married or to be married, ready to preach the word, to lead the Eucharist, above all to *serve* in their leadership, and in and through their secular calling to bring home the meaning of the kingdom beyond the bounds of their parish or indeed of the visible Church. Still less reason for not welcoming young men who choose to give themselves whole-heartedly to the apostolate, without being distracted either by the sudden charm of a lovely girl or the constraint of laws that hamper the true freedom of the spirit.

## II. Priests or Clergy? by Owen Hardwicke

I recognize at once that any viewpoint I express on the Synodal Document on the priesthood is necessarily unrepresentative. There