

Answers to a Letter from Bishop Fritz Lobinger

Mildura
2001

Dear Fritz,

You pose some good questions. I give my own responses for what they are worth. But before that, I shall give you a bit of biographical information that might help you to know where I am coming from and to evaluate what I have to say.

I was ordained priest in Rome in December 1957, so have been a priest now for over 43 years. During that time I have worked in the diocese of Ballarat, a rural diocese in the state of Victoria. Much of my time has been in parish ministry, with a period of about six years when I was working fulltime on the on-going education of priests at a diocesan and national level. During that time I was able to meet many of the priests around Australia.

While the rest of my time has been largely parish based, for most of those years I have also worked at other things at the same time. During the 60s I was the diocesan chaplain to the Young Christian Workers movement. I have lectured, also part-time, at the Catholic Teachers College in Ballarat. More recently I was chairman of the diocese's Pastoral Planning Taskforce seeking ways to face our future as a diocese. At present I am working in a Pastoral Team situation with another priest, a religious and two laywomen here in Mildura, a reasonably large parish at the edge of the diocese with about 7000 parishioners. We also provide sacramental ministry to a neighbouring parish where there is a full-time religious as Parish Leader, and share with two other parishes in providing fortnightly mass to mass centres in another parish with no formal leader as of yet.

Now to your questions. In our rural diocese, we have only about 80,000 Catholics with more than forty priests in full time ministry. What makes our situation a bit different, particularly in our northern part of the diocese, is the distances we cover. We are about 450 kms away from the diocese's centre in Ballarat. The parish of Ouyen where we have just begun to provide sacramental ministry is 100 kms distant from us, and has four other mass centres, the furthest of which is another 60 or 70 kms from Ouyen itself. People do have cars, and roads are in good condition, but communities have identities of their own, largely because of their isolation – which is why we suggest that they continue to meet as faith communities as much as possible. All this is going on at the same time that isolated communities feel they are being neglected by government, and suffering a degree of loss in morale. Many of the Australian dioceses are rural dioceses like us. Some of them would encounter even greater isolation. Some of these mass centres have quite small Catholic populations. I was at one of the Ouyen parish ones a couple of weeks ago and there were only about 20 people present for the mass. That is not uncommon, though not quite the norm.

The shortage in priests has crept up on our diocese fairly quickly. Thirty years ago there would have been more than twice the number of priests working in the diocese.

We have only found ourselves unable to fill spaces in the last few years. Because of that there has been no real tradition of other forms of leadership other than priestly. We have very few lay people in professional lay ministry, though religious have been filling auxiliary roles to some extent for some time now.

I think that because it is a fairly recently felt problem and we have no other tradition, we are open to seeking alternative forms of parish leadership. Which may be one reason why we in Australia have been more responsive to your suggestions than places with a longer history of priest shortage and with a tradition of paid alternative ministry.

Our situation is also different from that in expanding missionary countries in that our small faith communities have become used to having ready availability of eucharist. They now feel the deprivation. This may mean that they are open to finding alternatives that work.

There is much talk about bringing priests in from outside, ordaining married men, or readmitting to ministry priests who have married. These are usually knee jerk reactions and cries of pain, rather than thought-out suggestions. You have addressed these difficulties well yourself. I very much doubt whether we would have a queue of married men lining up for ordination if it were suddenly open to them. With wonderful exceptions, most men in the parishes where I have had experience are hard to get involved whole-heartedly in anything much. Many in the rural communities lack confidence. Australian males are much more reluctant to assume leadership in church activities than women are. They will take on leadership in sporting and civic bodies if they have to, but church is another matter. They would need a lot of encouragement and formation.

Apart from the unfairness of bringing in priests from outside when needs are obviously so much greater in other parts of the world is the question of their inculturation. Apart from a residual racism that they might encounter in many Australians, the foreign priests themselves would experience insufferable isolation and would need enormous support, but from where? We are finding that one of the problems in rural dioceses is that younger priests, and perhaps not just the younger ones, find the isolation and the lack of support too much.

Another reason why some shy clear of the thought of leadership is that their only experience of church leadership has been in parishes where the priest has been the provider. They already have responsibilities to their wife, their children, their work or profession, and their civic responsibilities as well. The thought of bearing the burden of parish leadership is overwhelming. They do not have the energy to motivate, to cajole, or to push reluctant starters.

They have not experienced a parish where all or most of the baptised assume their responsibilities and where the leader's role would be largely one of coordination. They have not experienced a parish where leadership is shared among a team of leaders.

So we have a lot of ground work to do.

If we were to adopt your suggestions, the question of the existing priests is a difficult one to address. Australian priests generally have taken great pride in their closeness to and pastoral care for their communities. Many would find their sense of priestly identity closely tied to their being part of the local community. I suspect that many would have a greater loyalty to their local community than to the diocese. That attitude would be very difficult to change, perhaps impossible, particularly with the senior priests. And in smaller places they have been able to manage quite well with an individualistic rather than a collaborative style.

I think a fair number would find the kind of ministry required by animators beyond them. They did not need those special gifts when they were ordained, and cannot necessarily find them now.

I believe with you that the animator role is already particularly necessary and will become increasingly so. My own thought is that we may have to leave the existing priests the option to continue ministering as they have always done if that is what they choose. There would be a few able and willing to adopt the animator role. It may also be possible to combine both roles, the traditional and the animator, as an interim arrangement. In my own experience, as I indicated at the start of my letter, I have had a community pastoral base at times but have also been able to exercise other part time roles as well. I would still be open to that possibility with the animator option. Indeed, given the financial constrictions of our own diocese, it may be difficult to finance full time animator priests immediately while most priests are still continuing full time in parishes and absorbing the parish contributions for their own sustenance.