

Trying to Diagnose the "Institutional Alienation" Felt by Priests

(Text of talk given by Fr John McKinnon to the Ballarat priests at their Annual In-Service Week, Ballarat, April 1994)

My review will focus particularly on our experience as priests, but what I am to say applies with appropriate adjustments to the laity as well and to the Church at large. We feel victims of "institutional alienation". Others often see us as the villains.

At the meeting in Canberra early last year of the then Directors of Continuing Education of the Ministry to Priests programs in a number of the Australian dioceses, we tried to put words on where we felt the priests of Australia were at. The words that surfaced were the following:

- general malaise and tiredness,
- pressure from too many jobs,
- need for vision,
- unhandled grieving from the experience of change,
- stress from overwork and dwindling numbers of priests,
- conflict,
- confusing roles,
- use of time,
- stress from the vocal "right wing" in the Church,
- stress from fulfilling the expectations that the unchurched put on us, lack of meaning etc..

This year back in Canberra there was a different grouping of priests, this time representing all the dioceses of Australia but still charged with the on-going formation of priests in their dioceses. Their description was the following:

- The priests feel overwhelmed, depressed, not coping,
- confused about their identity,
- dissatisfied,
- isolated,
- lost the plot,

on the treadmill going faster and faster.

My role over these past ten years with the on-going formation of priests, particularly on the national scene, has led to me reflect and to read around the issues we are facing. I believe that much of what we feel is also felt by other people otherwise committed to the Church.

Surprisingly I have found that something similar has even been felt by people involved in the secular business scene. Recently I read a book on business management written by a professional consultant. I was amazed by what he was saying. Change the words and the examples and he could have been writing about the Church. He talks about the experience of life within many business organisations. It sounds familiar.

- Confusion, stress. No one knows what is going on. Everyone blames everyone else for the situation. People do things that don't really work but never honestly evaluate their activities. No one accepts responsibility for the futility.
- People seek to control their own turf, and maintain the control by no longer sharing honestly with their partners, withholding information that those above won't want to hear, keeping their head down and their nose clean, etc..
- In such an organisation loyalty is maintained by vague promises and expectations of future security, etc., and in lieu of the intrinsically fulfilling values of a sense of meaning, self-esteem, and service found in the work itself, they are distracted by extrinsic factors of wages and the hope of promotion.

The malaise he found in the business world of the corporations was due to what he called the patriarchal organisation. The word was his! Personally I think it is an unfortunate word. It is highly emotive and tends to put us on the defensive, especially if we hear it from the mouths of feminists. A better substitute could be the word authority-from-above model, though that too has emotive overtones in the Church.

He contrasts the patriarchal mode with what he calls the entrepreneurial. A business starts off with in the entrepreneurial mode, but often within a generation or so, the business moves away from its initial entrepreneurial stance to adopt a patriarchal mode. The instincts for security and self-preservation take over. The result, he says, is an inevitable wind-down over time until eventually the business is taken over by a more entrepreneurial corporation and disappears.

His answer to the problem:

- Rediscover the vision, clarify it, and work from it. And by vision he is talking about such things as: What kind of person do I want to be? What kind of activity satisfies me? How do I choose to define myself? What am I prepared to commit myself to? And do I value these things enough to accept for myself, my actions and how I experience life from within?
- He says we need to face the issue of control. Despite strong instincts to secure and maintain control, in the things that matter - how others really think and what they are prepared to give their hearts to - we have no control whatever. Control is an illusion.
- If people cannot find the reward in the living out of their vision in the here and now, they are fooling themselves, he says. Extrinsic substitutes are addictive, and do not satisfy. People honestly committed to authentic vision of themselves and how they want to be do not need a pat on the head; and when the going gets tough, they don't have to go shopping; nor do they need a Public Relations firm to persuade people to think well of them!
- In line with their vision of themselves and what they are on about, people in the entrepreneurial mind-set share openly and cooperatively with each other in honesty. They let people know where they stand, but they do not try to control.

When a business consultant speaks of two models of corporations as patriarchal or entrepreneurial, we in the Church could equally speak of maintenance or mission.

My reading of the Gospel is that Jesus intended his Church to be missionary. My reading of life in the Church at the moment is that we are heavily into the maintenance mode (what he calls the patriarchal). The issues that seem to matter are control, future promises of security and salvation with little present experience of life to the full, doing your own thing, minding no one else's business, putting blame everywhere else, avoiding responsibility for our own lives and our own experience of life, wanting a lead from above but rejecting any system of accountability, wanting someone else to tell us who we are and what we should be doing. No wonder that we feel confusion, loss of morale, etc..

If the business consultant were speaking to us, perhaps he would suggest that we take time to shape our own vision of who we are and how we want to be; that we get in touch with our real heart desires that give meaning to our lives, set free unexpected reserves of energy, and lead us to realistic love and service in freedom; that we take responsibility for ourselves and commit ourselves to what we see gives meaning to us; that we relate honestly to each other; and that we accept responsibility for each other, expect accountability, while steering clear all the time from the desire to control.

We don't have to wait for the next Pope.

Another fascinating factor is that we do not even need to succeed. When we have a sense of meaning in what we are doing, when we are acting with integrity, success is not crucial. Nor is it essential that others share our vision, though it increases our joy when they do. Michael Mason made that point yesterday about the power in a sense of meaning. Victor Frankl had made the same observation years before that: a sense of personal meaning enabled him not only to survive but also to live fully alive even a Nazi Concentration Camp.

If all this is true, then why don't I live out of my vision, with honesty and integrity? Why don't we?

Over the last ten years many of us have taken part in one or more structures set up by the Ministry to Priests program; the one-to-one visit, Support Groups, Growth Plans, In-service opportunities.

Much of my own activity, especially outside the diocese, was directed to motivating priests through retreats, etc., to open themselves to the possibilities of further growth and freedom. As I reflect on it now, I see that these efforts were largely directed to helping individuals as individuals. Helpful and all as many found it, I don't think it was enough.

We are not individuals acting in isolation. We are inevitably in relationship - to authority, to our peers, to parishioners, to other friends and to society at large. We live in a network, within a structure. Some of my friends have said that we have to change the structures to enable personal change. My response has been that it is individuals who make up structures; so start with the individuals and the structures will change. I think now there is a middle course: the individual within the system.

Further reading that I have done of late has given me a diagnosis and a language that make sense of so much of what I observe within myself and in others. Clarifying the diagnosis has given birth to new energy. It has given me hope to break through the "impasse" that Michael Mason was speaking of yesterday.

The model for the diagnosis is a family where the members act addictively and co-dependently - what the books call a dysfunctional family. The Church is like an extended dysfunctional family. The Church I am speaking of is the world Church, the diocese, and the parish. I belong to all three levels myself, and am becoming increasingly aware of both my own addictions and particularly my own codependence.

The addictions in question are not so much the substance addictions: to alcohol, drugs, sex, etc.. They are what the literature calls the process addictions: perfectionism, workaholism, and a compulsive need to control based on what is probably a deep distrust of people and of human nature. The recent Directory for Priests released from Rome seems to illustrate my contention perfectly.

What I think is more deeply embedded in myself, however, is the common failing of the family members of the addict - codependence. The codependent's energy is focused on the mood and the need of the addict, in adapting to it and trying to control it, yet at the same time tends to deny, to cover up, to pretend it is not there. In the process the codependent closes off awareness of personal needs and feelings, and loses contact with the real self.

In the effort to keep the situation under control and to some extent predictable and bearable, the members of the family fall into a series of rigid roles, as saviour/hero, peacemaker, clown or rebel, scapegoat, dropout, etc..

This type of response subverts honesty and openness, requires secrecy, produces confusion and powerlessness, and the loss of any sense of identity or of meaning. The codependent loses the plot, and doesn't know what is going on.

I notice numerous indicators of codependence in my own life, and see what I believe to be equally numerous indications of it in the lives of others in the Church at all levels: the world Church, the diocese and the parish.

What I am talking about is behaviour like the following:

- Keep busy. Feel busy, even if you're not. Feel the kudos of saying how busy you are.

- Don't rock the boat. Be internally critical of Church laws, or, depending on the company, belly ache about them, but do nothing to have them changed. If I don't observe them, keep it quiet.
- Don't speak the truth if it is going to disturb or offend anyone: the parishioners, the bishop (What he doesn't know, won't hurt him!), other priests (It's not my business. Avoid mutual responsibility, accountability). All this because I addictively feel that I need their approval. Their possible responses are the focus of my life.
- Suppress feelings and personal needs. Be a nice guy. Never be angry. Be all things to all people. Apologise if I'm never at home; apologise if I'm not out on the beat.

I am not surprised that priests are confused, sense real powerlessness, don't know where to turn next, want someone to spell out the role required of them (as if someone could and as if there were one definite role).

You might recall some of the data from the Diocesan Profile that came out of the Ministry to Priests Program. Our sources of concern in order were:

confrontations,
 use of time,
 sexuality,
 loneliness,
 lack of appreciation from parishioners, authority and peers.

On the scale of inner-directedness two out of five of us were clearly dependent on others and another two out of five of us experienced tension in this area.

We feel trapped, compromised, victims, and we resent it. We resort to passive resistance or soul-destroying cynicism. Not only are we celibate, but we have made ourselves impotent as well. And not eunuchs for Jesus's kingdom but possibly for someone else's. This might explain Michael O'Toole's point about "the fire in the belly" being missing.

The shapes our addictions and codependence take are many. You may not identify with the ones I wrestle with. One book I read on the subject, speaking of America, estimated that 96% of the population were into addictive codependence. The problem is structural, cultural, and of epidemic proportions.

I feel frustrated. I feel compromised. But I lack the courage and freedom to change.

Why do I/we find it hard to set my own direction, to act from my own vision, to be my own man?

The literature says that codependence is itself an addiction and needs to be treated as such, as an addiction. My own experience confirms that. I can't beat it by myself. It is too strong. If we are all into it, we can't beat it alone, either.

Others among us can probably speak with greater authority and experience on the breaking of addiction. I gather that if we are not consciously and actively into recovery, then the addiction has us by the "throat". And every addiction is ultimately fatal - either to our bodies or to our spirits.

The enlightened wisdom of Alcoholics Anonymous would say that among the steps needed to break free from an addiction are:

- the need to recognise the addiction, to name it and to own it;
- the need to recognise our own powerlessness and inability to beat it by our own devices;
- the need to hand over to God;
- the need to accept what we are guilty of and to make up for it;
- and also the need to accept that we have to deal with only one day or one choice at a time.

And the experience of Alcoholics Anonymous would indicate that real recovery seems to call for peer support.

Allow me to summarise my diagnosis of the ills of the priesthood and of the Church at the moment:

- We are addicted to control (under the mistaken guise of authority), perfectionism and workaholism (under the equally mistaken guise of holiness), and particularly a corresponding codependence that result in chronic dysfunction.

- The disease is fatal if it is not treated.

- Healing will move us from dependence to autonomy and from anarchic independence to responsible interdependence. This will be achieved through the expression of our vision and commitment to its values, honesty and openness with each other, awareness of personal needs and feelings, and freely undertaken service.

- We wake up to the illusion of the need and desire for control. We share honestly and openly with each other but we surrender the urge to try to control those who don't think our way or who don't move in our direction.

- Success will be helped by the support and companionship of like-minded travellers.

- We begin with ourselves. There is nowhere else.

- We entrust the care of the broader picture to God who is the author of our "deeper desires". That does not mean that we do nothing...