

## **Maintenance or Mission**

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I think that all institutions face the trap of easily forgetting their original purpose and becoming predominantly self-serving, more focussed on their continuance and survival than on their mission. I suspect that this is a problem constantly affecting our parishes and particularly our smaller faith communities.

From what I read, Catholics seem to be little different from the general population in their attitudes to issues involving social justice. Their political allegiances seem to be more powerful than their faith convictions.

I wish I were more constantly alert (and able) to find ways to nurture, educate and support gospel leadership and the prophetic voice within the faith community. In the increasing challenge to find ways to provide even the minimal service to communities, I easily lose priorities.

As a priest I can use my homilies to apply the gospel to real situations: local, national and international. Who knows how effective these are? In Mildura we have a Social Justice Group, but the response has not been overwhelming. We have involved others in political action through signing of petitions, etc..

I like the idea of Gospel Reflection Groups. I tried last year, succeeded briefly, but interest has waned.

I found that by sitting in on teams preparing for lay-led liturgies I could sometimes sensitise the members to justice issues embedded in the scripture readings. This was a fruitful opportunity. But since Ouyen's needs are now being met by the generous ministry of a semi-retired priest, lay-led liturgies in Mildura have temporarily ceased.

The literature says that the priest is to be a leader; better, to develop leadership from among the parishioners. Some priests are better at this than others. I was encouraged recently when reading the text of an address given by Timothy Ratcliffe to the National Conference of Priests in England. He said we might lack the skills or even the necessary energy to detect and form potential leadership in others, or people may be reluctant to follow. But at least we can ourselves do what we believe in and we can talk about our convictions in our homilies and at other opportunities. We can walk in front, even if no one seems to follow. We can be leaders in that sense.

What does concern me also is the smaller isolated faith communities that do not have the on-going ministry of a priest, the places that are already valiantly doing their best with their lay-led liturgies and occasional Mass. I am concerned that they may wind down, but particularly that they may not be aware that the big issue is not primarily survival but continuing mission.

I think that this problem needs to be addressed in a structural way at diocesan or regional level. Someone needs to have the authorisation to look to the on-going gospel-based formation of local lay leaders and communities. It is not fair to leave them to the wolves.

On the basis of my own experience, I also think that it would be helpful for us priests to find ways to keep on reminding each other of the priority of mission. Some form of modified maintenance is necessary, but only if it issues forth in commitment to mission.