

Post-Seminary Formation

[In May 1990, Fr John was invited to give an address to the Meeting of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference as they prepared for the international Synod on Priesthood scheduled for October in Rome. He was asked because of his role at the national level with the Ministry to Priests Program promoted by the Catholic Institute for Ministry, and his familiarity with the research carried out in many of the Australian dioceses on the psychological and spiritual situation of priests]

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to present my thoughts to you all this morning.

Relevance. Whilst the Synod in Rome in October is an important factor in focussing our thought and our prayer, I believe that the comments I make today are still relevant to the future direction of our Australian Church whatever the Synod may eventually decide.

Thanks. Much is already happening in the Australian Church in this area of the on-going formation of priests, and I would like to thank you for what you have already done and for your spirit of pastoral concern.

In my reflections this morning I would like to focus firstly on what I see to be some crucial areas for on-going priestly formation. Then I shall make some suggestions for possible response.

1. Some crucial areas in on-going formation

a) Spiritual Formation

Openness. Paradoxically our Christian vision confronts us with the truth that God's strength is at its best in weakness. Christian growth ultimately means making peace with our brokenness, not relentlessly striving for greater achievement and power. Yet to pay more than lip-service to this and to own and love ourselves in our poverty is more difficult than to keep striving for perfection. Formation must aim to help us to let go of our need to fashion ourselves and simply to cooperate with God, so that God may work life - both for ourselves and for our parishioners. Life comes from the new heart God fashions within us, not from our own striving and control. This spiritual formation is basic.

On-Going. Such formation must be on-going because life is on-going. Conversion is not a once and for all call, but is constantly renewed throughout our lives. Conversion is always problematical. It means accepting that what we formerly thought to be virtue may really be vice. As so many mystics make abundantly clear, this continual growth in self-knowledge involves penetrating into our hearts and the cloudy world of motivation. The response to it is confusing and

often agonizing. It does not come easily, and cannot normally be made alone.

Mid-life. The Gospel's call to let go our reliance on self and to believe in the unconditional love of God is something that is felt clearly usually only well on into life, after a clear confrontation with our own messiness and powerlessness, well beyond our seminary years when idealism and achievement were important to draw us beyond our inertia.

Importance. I react strongly against the idea expressed sometimes that, since we diocesan priests are called primarily to a pastoral ministry, our familiarity with the inner journey is not so important. Our pastoral involvement makes it more necessary.

Discernment. In these times of change the task of discerning the will of God is particularly important and particularly difficult. It is not an automatic consequence of the grace of Orders, nor is it exercised adequately by a brief prayer at the start of deliberations, and an honest effort to reason things out afterwards. These may be necessary, but they do not constitute discernment. We cannot claim even to pretend to discern responsibly unless we seriously cultivate a real familiarity with the Spirit's voice.

Prayer. My experience with priests in directed retreats is that a number of them do not know how to pray in a way that they find personally nourishing. They have not been helped to negotiate the journey out of their heads into their hearts. For many of them prayer has become simply a reminder of more and more "oughts" and a relentless and uncompromising accuser of failure. Most claim God to be the God of life and of freedom, but research shows that that is not the experience of God that influences their lives.

Response. A fairly obvious answer to some of these needs is the help of an experienced guide, or at least of a directed retreat.

b) Personal Development

Closely allied to the question of our spiritual development is that of our personal and psychological development. I would like to focus simply on two issues that I believe to be very important.

(i) *Celibacy*

The first is celibacy. A life-giving integration of our sexuality is an on-going task. We can so easily "love" too little as well as too much.

Anger. I also think that we priests need to be helped more to accept that celibacy is painful for most of us and that consequently we feel angry. There is nothing wrong or harmful with pain and anger if we can freely admit them and freely choose to live with them. Pious efforts at motivation that seek to gloss over the pain do not give life. When we repress the pain and the anger, they do not go away but show up again in inappropriate and harmful ways, not least of which are depression and workaholism. These are a powerful counter-witness to the good news of the Gospel and a disincentive to priestly vocations.

Fear. I also suspect that many of us priests have adapted to a life of celibacy out of an unconscious fear of the physical and emotional drives that are part of our sexuality. As long as the fear remains unconscious, it cannot be dealt with. It continues to interfere with our relationships. It inhibits our ability to own and honestly share our hopes and needs with people, especially women, and to accept others as they are.

Importance. Peaceful integration of our sexuality is of real importance when our present work in the Church brings us into constant cooperative contact with both men and women. When most people relate to priests today, they want to make contact with a real person, not with a mask. When we do not relate at a level of intimacy, we inevitably relate from a position of power.

Constant. I want to reiterate that a peaceful integration of sexuality is not made once and for all at some early stage of our lives but must be constantly renewed as we grow and change.

(ii) *Dialogue*

Necessity. The second area of personal development I want to mention shows up in and underlies the ability to dialogue fruitfully. Dialogue is necessary for fruitful interaction among ourselves and with parishioners, and has become particularly important in these days of consultative leadership and consensus-making at all levels of the Church. It is the normal context in which we discern the movements of the Spirit. Fruitful dialogue requires that we be able to listen adequately to others and to state our own position clearly and non-aggressively.

Difficulty. Studies carried out among the priests of Australia show that many of us cannot listen attentively to another person nor express ourselves assertively, at least without considerable strain. To do this, we need to be helped to get in touch with our fears and angers, and to deepen our own personal self-esteem and confidence - to believe that God has chosen and deeply loves us with our particular mixture of strength and weakness.

C) **Theological Formation**

Need. Since we live in a constantly changing world that raises questions that were not raised before and whose answers we were not taught, we also need on-going theological formation. Yet our primary need here is not so much to know the answers as to be comfortable with tension and a degree of uncertainty. It is a question of attitude as well as information.

Realistic. I do not believe that the priest needs to know everything. However, it is helpful if he knows that he does not know, and that it is OK not to know. An instant answer is rarely necessary for the honest enquirer.

Pluralism. It is also important to recognize that theology is different from faith, and that in the area of theology there is place for an acceptable pluralism.

Perplexity. A lot of priests experience stress when their innate sense of compassion conflicts with the objective teaching or laws of the Church. Proper handling of such issues requires both personal

and moral maturity and an adequate moral theology. Many of the priests need to radically review their moral theology and be reassured of the primacy of love and the nuances surrounding issues of conscience. The admirable statement made by the Bishops Conference in 1974 on formation of conscience and the possibility of inculpable dissent has not been adequately absorbed by many of the priests.

Ecclesiology. The difficulties we encounter in working towards common priestly vision and action these days is partly a question of personality. It is also, however, a factor of an impoverished ecclesiology. Many perplexing questions are being acutely felt out in the field.

2. Making a response

Difficult. From what I have said, I hope it is obvious that I believe on-going priestly formation is not a question only for special categories such as the newly ordained or the elderly, or for times of crisis. It is a life-long need. Unfortunately, I think its priority is not recognized by many priests. This raises real difficulties.

No Sanctions. Adults cannot be made to learn; and unlike in many other areas of human endeavour, with priests we lack sanctions. We also lack those other incentives that once existed when certain parishes carried with them financial benefits and prestige.

Busyness. The priest's life is also very busy, and the immature priest finds it difficult to escape from the demands of parish life without feeling guilty. He finds it very difficult to devote time to personal, spiritual and psychological maintenance and growth. The ones who need it most are the ones who feel least free to get it.

Climate. We need a climate that encourages personal and priestly growth. The process needs to begin in the seminary where the message should be conveyed loudly and clearly that ordination is only one more step along the journey of life, not the end, and that what has been learnt needs constant review against the background of experience. Whereas an earlier seminary formation taught independence and self-reliance, today's priests need to be taught inter-dependence and mutual reliance.

Diocesan Policy. It helps when on-going formation is structured into diocesan policy and practice, for example, through regular mandatory attendance at in-services on pertinent subjects. Some dioceses encourage sabbatical study opportunities. I would love to find some way to expose the priests to the experience of a directed retreat from time to time. Next year's offer by the Jesuits may help.

St Peter Centre in Canberra has been a valuable investment. The problem of late has been to encourage the priests to make use of it. I believe the present director would like to research and target special needs of priests and to make the courses better known.

Witness. One factor that should not be underrated is the example that you bishops can give. If busyness is a temptation for the priests, I fear it may be an even greater temptation for you. If many of the priests are to move, you may need to indicate your own priorities and to set an example

of personal freedom that allows you to take time off for personal development courses and study.

Support. Integrating our spiritual and psychological growth within the context of our daily life and ministry usually requires the help of an experienced spiritual director or a mature soul friend. The recent introduction in many dioceses of peer support networks through the Ministry to Priests Program has been an important step in the right direction. Unfortunately, since participation is voluntary, the ones most in need are often the ones who do not participate.

Maintenance. Even with those who appreciate the need, the problem is to maintain their commitment. The honeymoon is over and they run into their own inertia and busyness and personal immaturity that make it difficult for them to say no. There was wisdom in Vince Dwyer's insistence on appointing a fulltime priest to maintain the interaction in dioceses with more than sixty active priests.

Catholic Institute for Ministry. I think it is important that you continue your own commitment to the Catholic Institute for Ministry that provides invaluable support and ideas to priests whom busyness deprives of the energy to dream and to evaluate.

Resources. We should not underrate the value of symbol. If we need post-ordination formation to help us to be sensitive to the Spirit and reasonably at peace with ourselves, then the sense of urgency should be obvious from the personnel, time and finance we are prepared to devote to the task.

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