

What Do Priests Expect of the Bishop?

[This is the text of a talk given by Fr John McKinnon to the Anglican and Catholic Bishops in Victoria early in 1997]

Priests are not a homogeneous lot. We cover a vast spectrum of personalities, ecclesiologies and levels of maturity. Our expectations of you are correspondingly complex, and many of them are contradictory.

In talking of priests' expectations, I would like to consider these in relation to their relevance primarily to the priests' levels of personal growth and maturity and to your own experience of self in ministry

1. Priests' Expectations of Bishops in Relation to Their Levels of Maturity

To focus my gaze somewhat I shall organise the vast army of priests within three relevant categories, realising of course that each category necessarily leaves endless room for individual personalities. My choice of categories is suggested by the comment made a long time back in 1964 by Pope Paul VI in his first encyclical letter, *Ecclesiam Suam*:

“ Psychological awareness and moral conscience are both called by Christ to a simultaneous maturity, as a condition for receiving the divine gifts of truth and grace ” #21.

Mature psychological awareness and moral conscience are both factors of self-knowledge and inner directedness that permit the internalisation of principles and genuine values. The categories I have in mind deal accordingly with the priests' levels of psychological and conscientious maturity, both of which are seen by Pope Paul as conditions for our fuller appreciation of truth and openness to life.

Fortunately we have access to reasonably recent data that help to quantify our personal observations. In 1985/6, about 1300 Catholic priests took part in a bank of attitudinal surveys, some of which are quite useful to our present task. If you feel wary of psychological inventories, your own general observations of people's attitudes may still provide a sufficient basis for us to proceed.

The Groups

In line with their data we can group the priests into three categories, which in fact turn out to be roughly equal in size.

a) The first group are basically conformist. They are very emotionally dependent. They comprise roughly a third of the priests. Of these, however, only a small number, about 4%, sit comfortably with their conformism. The rest feel basically uncomfortable and have their questions, but have not succeeded, at least as yet, to move beyond their conformist mind-set and behaviour patterns.

b) The second group is about the same size as the first group. These are ones who have personalised their attitudes. They have made a deliberate choice about what they want to be, how they think and why. They are at home within the institution and accept the necessity of law and

order. Their acceptance is not mindless, but they tend to see life pretty much in black and white. They are not well equipped, however, to handle complexity with ease, and generally do not have a nuanced awareness of their own inner world or the inner worlds of others. They are comfortable where they are.

c) The third group is only marginally smaller than each of the other two groups. This is the group who find that a black and white approach to life is not adequate to the complexities of experience. Their view is more nuanced and attuned to detail and individuality. They are more in touch with the complex inner world of motivation and intuition. While respecting law and institution, they also recognise their inadequacies and limits. Most of those in this group do not yet sit comfortably with their perceptions, and have not really integrated them. While about one in three priests belongs to this group, only about one in ten priests altogether seem to have found peace with their own autonomy and feel confident to act on the basis of their own integrity.

Their Expectations

How could we categorise the expectations that these three groups have of you, their bishops?

Somewhat simplistically, I think that the first group unconsciously want you to be their mother, the second group want you to be their father, and the third group see you as their brother.

a) Regarding the first group who would unconsciously like you to fulfil for them a motherly role, basically they want you to hold them by the hand and help them to feel safe.

I find it interesting to note some of the issues that priests in the tests referred to above list as sources of much concern. The four greatest concerns were the following:

- fear of confrontation - two out of three [65%] (probably with laity and peers, but I would also presume with yourselves)
- conforming to the expectations of others - just under one in three [29%]
- lack of appreciation from those in authority - one in four [24%]
- feelings of not being heard - again about one in four [24%]

I see these concerns as pertinent to their relationships with yourselves. Some of these concerns find expression in such comments as:

“The bishop never asks me how I’m going”.

“He should come round and see us more often”.

“He should stick up more for us priests”.

“He should always consult us first”.

“What we want is a strong bishop, one who will speak up, someone like Doctor Mannix.”

Etc..

Of course, it is also true that, while they unconsciously see you as mother and look to you as the source of their emotional security, some relate negatively to that role. In their negativity they constantly avoid you as much as possible; and their conversation is obsessively focussed, and meanly, on what you have or have not done.

b) The second group, again about a third of the priests, unconsciously see you more as father. The role of the father is to bring rationality and order to the chaos and threat of life. What they need and ask for from you is clarity and leadership. In these days of change, uncertainty and conflicting

theologies, they cry out in pain for your leadership. As I stated above, these priests would make up about a third of all the priests, and together with the group mentioned earlier, they cover by far the majority of the priests. These all find it difficult to think and to act from their own inner centre.

Consequently they ask for policies on this and policies on that because they feel unable themselves to stand the strain of the frequent conflict of general principles and personal pastoral charity. Their penchant for black and white cannot deal easily with the complexity of the real human, individual, pastoral situation; and they effectively seek a father figure to show them what to do and to give them permission to act, if necessary, beyond the law.

The call for leadership from the bishop is, however, an ambivalent call. What is unstated is that they want you to lead in line with their own convictions; and in times of change, these are by no means homogeneous. If you give leadership in a direction they do not wish to follow, they may be first to criticise you loudly [to their peers and to others, though not to yourself], precisely because your leadership is so emotionally important to them. Should they in fact disobey your leading, they will be inclined to keep their disobedience quiet, but will feel stress in the process.

Relationships with yourselves from priests in these two groups will almost inevitably show various degrees of dysfunctionality. In areas of disagreement they will play their cards close to their chests, prefer concealment to confrontation, and show various expressions of passive aggression. Their likely expectation of you is “not to poke your nose into” what they are doing.

c) Those of the third group are moving towards, or have more or less arrived at, a more nuanced stance towards life and a more mature capacity for relationship. They have varying degrees of inner directedness. Their needs for affirmation and external leadership are less. However, only about one in ten of the priests act at this level with consistency.

Generally they are drawn to relationships that are adult-to-adult based. They recognise the importance of authority and structure, but are without any, or too great, positive or negative emotional investment in them. They try to eschew secrecy and prefer openness and honesty. They can love without needing to agree or approve, and in turn can accept with equanimity approval or disapproval, love or its absence. For them loyalty is subordinate to integrity and does not require acceptance, agreement or acquiescence, but can express itself in dissent, positive criticism and confrontation. Their reaction comes from a genuine appreciation of authority, rather than from an unconscious and emotional concern for their own security.

I would imagine that for those in this group hopes for you would replace expectations. A shared love for the Church would have them hope for openness and honesty towards them from yourselves, that you be ready to dialogue and collaborate, to trust their own honesty and capabilities. Perhaps they would appreciate from you a broad but clear articulated vision and a patient understanding of disagreement; and in these times of change and uncertainty, a sound sense of discernment and preparedness to give room to others with vision and prophetic gifts.

2. Priests’ Expectations in Relation to Your Sense of Self in Ministry

In the light of the above categories of priestly expectations, how do you react?

The Effect on You of Your Meeting the Priests’ Expectations

To work from externally or internally imposed “shoulds” or expectations is to court paralysis or burnout. Your task is not to meet expectations. That would be to lock you in to immaturity and unfreedom. The starting point of your own pastoral activity is yourself. You have your own personality, your own gifts, your own limitations, your own world-view, your own present level of maturity and your own personal measure of dysfunctionality. Your only life-giving, creative starting point in relation to yourselves, it seems to me, is what you can and want to do. Certainly, this requires that you have some sort of vision, and that it be sufficiently clear yet also flexible enough to guide your choices. Even so, that vision is not your starting point, and may not even be a finishing point. It is more a way ahead.

The Effect on the Priests of Your Meeting Their Expectations

In many cases simply to meet the expectations of the priests would tie many of the priests into their own immaturity. Whatever you choose to do, or can do from where you are, I believe that their expectations as such do not make a good basis or focal point for a pastoral care that opens and leads them to life. Rather than expectations being met, they may on occasion be better confronted for the sake of the priests’ eventual growth. To act in response to others’ expectations would be to compound dysfunctionality.

My own view, then, is that you do not react to the priests’ expectations at all, or at least that you do not make them the basis of your own response to your pastoral ministry to your priests.

It is impossible, anyhow, to meet satisfactorily the conflicting expectations within dysfunctional systems, especially so in our present time of cultural change and chaos.

Your own preferred style will probably reflect where you yourself belong within the three groups that I have broadly defined.

a) You may like, perhaps even feel you need, the personal loyalty of your priests. Nothing wrong with that but, if their warm acceptance impinges on your own sense of personal freedom, this may not be a congenial spot for yourself or a healthy spot for the priests. In today’s world, they may be better challenged to develop their own inner strengths and to trust their own convictions rather than constantly to rely on your support and affection.

b) Alternatively, you may feel more at ease yourself with a clergy who like things to be clear and well ordered, and who preferably look to you for guidance and clear, strong direction. [If you are Catholic, this may reflect your own expectation of the Pope and the basis of your own personal attitude towards him.] However, clergy like this may find difficulty bringing into unity people of differing theologies and ideologies. For men like this, dialogue can prove difficult.

An Alternative Response to Meeting Expectations

The priests may be better helped to meet the needs of today’s Church by being called by yourselves into dialogue. The unifying vision may need to emphasise love and listening before (I do not say above) “orthodoxy”: process before content. I am reminded of the comments of Pope Paul VI in *Ecclesiam Suam*:

“..although our own mission is the announcement of the truth which is both indisputable and necessary for salvation, that mission will not be introduced in the armour of external force, but simply through the legitimate means of human education, of interior persuasion, of ordinary

conversation, and it will offer its gift of salvation with full respect for personal and civic freedom” #75.

He continues:

“... it excludes the a priori condemnation, the offensive and time-worn polemic and emptiness of useless conversation” #79.

And again:

“Its authority is intrinsic to the truth it explains, to the charity it communicates, to the example it proposes; it is not a command, it is not an imposition. It is peaceful; it avoids violent methods; it is patient; it is generous” # 81.2

Further:

“Before speaking, it is necessary to listen, not only to a man’s voice, but to his heart... In the very act of trying to make ourselves pastors, fathers and teachers of men, we must make ourselves their brothers. The spirit of dialogue is friendship and, even more, is service” #87.

Finally:

“Sincere and sensitive in genuine spirituality, ever ready to give ear to the manifold voice of the contemporary world, ever more capable of making Catholics truly good men, men wise, free, serene and strong; that is what we earnestly desire our family conversation to be” #113.

These quotations are obviously selective and would need to be balanced. But they serve to illustrate the point I wish to make.

My own observation after all these quotations is that the exercise of the dialogue described by Pope Paul VI is not really appreciated by those in the first group who make up about one in three of the priests. Some, not all, of those in the second group would see its value. And of those who see its value, many of them would find difficulty in dialoguing in practice, either because of their own insecurity or because of their difficulty in really listening to another who thinks differently from them. Genuine dialogue is problematical, then, it would seem, for about two thirds of the priests.

Your own decision to treat priests as adults and not as children is an important factor in their freedom to grow. Your own modelling of the way of dialogue is as equally important.

The remaining priests, those in the third group, generally are open to dialogue, but many of these still find it difficult in practice. In this, your own openness to those who maturely choose to dialogue with you is important for both them and for you. I repeat the quotation from Pope Paul VI mentioned above:

“In the very act of trying to make ourselves pastors, fathers and teachers of men, we must make ourselves their brothers” #87.

Should this be your own hope, it is good to remember that success calls for an inner freedom on your part and a genuine maturity.

Conclusion

After suggesting that you do not make the priests’ expectations the starting point of your ministry to and among them, have I myself in a devious way laid my own expectations on you? I have tried

to word my comments in such a way as not to make them sound like further expectations. What I hope is that this brief review of what I consider to be a few points relevant to the topic fits the ideal spelt out in relation to all dialogue by Pope Paul VI:

“Its authority is intrinsic to the truth it explains, to the charity it communicates, to the example it proposes; it is not a command, it is not an imposition...” #81.2.

My hope, indeed, is that these comments not only leave you free but perhaps even help you to touch into your own energy sources, as we work together collaboratively in the building of the Kingdom.

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