

RE-STRUCTURING: LOOKING AT THE ISSUES

by John McKinnon
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These reflections have been stimulated by on-going re-structuring needs within increasing numbers of parishes in the diocese. They have been helped by my reading of a recently published book by Fritz Lobinger: "Like His Brothers and Sisters" [Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1999]. They are also a response to the invitation, made a few years ago at a Priests' In-service Seminar, to take steps to shape our own future rather than to be led backwards into a future shaped by other forces and people.

I see the reflections as somewhat tentative and as one contribution to an on-going process of wider reflection on ever-changing experience.

Re-structuring is happening fast enough in our diocese for us to step back and to consider closely the directions we wish to follow in the future. I believe that God's Spirit is leading us to a critical time in our history and is calling us to take hold of the opportunities for renewal and re-founding that it offers. However, the patterns that we set in place now may perhaps be hard to change later on, and the attitudes fostered by whatever changes we make may be similarly hard to reverse.

A General Passivity

Among the attitudes that we are facing at the moment are a passivity among parishioners to take ownership for and leadership of parish pastoral life, and a pervasive passivity in the celebration of Eucharist. There are people making sterling efforts in both these fields, but they stand out from the great mass of the unmoved and unmoving. This general passivity is like a giant "black hole" that sucks into it whatever draws close to it. It is enormously powerful, and affects even the few committed ones, only too capable of siphoning off their energy and joyfulness.

A number of factors have contributed to this passivity, not least the customary mind-set developed over centuries. The Vatican Council of forty years ago tried to change the direction. Individuals have listened to its teaching. The great mass has been interested but unwilling or unable to change. The present urgent situation of shortage of priests is challenging the present passivity. It may well be a sign of hope (and a desperate measure on the part of the Holy Spirit!) and one that we need to use carefully.

Experience seems to show that the very presence of a priest in a parish scene is another factor that discourages ownership and leadership, even when the priest has tried to encourage such ownership and done his best to discern and form leaders. Leaders have sometimes accepted the role on the basis of their respect for the priest. Their involvement has not always come from a sense of personal ownership stemming from their baptism and their own personal giftedness and vocation. Generally people have adopted the attitude that, while the priests (or even the professional Parish Leader) are there, that is "what they are paid for".

As priests are gradually being withdrawn from parishes, or spread more thinly over them, the entrenched attitudes of passivity are still strong and active and will have to be faced head-on. Now is perhaps the God-sent opportunity to turn around the culture.

I wish to raise a number of questions that I think should be discussed in the diocese, and some effort made to reach general, if not universal, consensus.

Options for Leadership

To begin: Is it better to leave a parish without a Parish Priest than to have a priest become Parish Priest of two parishes? A priest in that first case would provide sacramental ministry to some agreed level to the deprived parish but would not have pastoral leadership of it.

I personally believe that it is preferable to leave a parish without a Parish Priest than to spread one more thinly over two parishes. This may lead to a certain amount of heartburn in the parish left without a priest in residence, but the pain would have to be faced eventually anyhow.

With regard to a Parish Leader, is it better that the appointment be a short-term appointment for a predetermined length of time on the understanding that the Leader's presence is to facilitate on-the-spot discernment and formation of leaders and the determining of appropriate pastoral structures? or may the appointment be open-ended and possibly even renewable?

Personally I believe that a Pastoral Leader's presence should be for a determined length of time with the purpose of preparing the parish to function well without professional leadership.

My reason for both these preferences is because I believe that experience has shown, and continues to show, that the presence of a professional, remunerated leader (priest, religious or lay) feeds the general attitude of parishioner passivity.

Obviously priests will continue to live in parishes. They may do their best to form leaders and encourage ownership by all parishioners, but further success in this enterprise will remain as difficult as it has been in the past. Perhaps the evidence of the hoped-for release of vitality of the neighbouring parishes may eventually be of some help in changing the ingrained attitudes.

Lay Leadership

Again due to the propensity of the innate passivity to inhibit change, it is also imperative that alternative structures of lay leadership are not exposed to the probability of parishioners still leaving things to any leader who might emerge. Parishioners are used to leaving things to the priest or Parish Leader who has been "up front". They will naturally want to continue to leave things to any lay leader who finds himself or herself "up front". The powerful weighty inertia of deeply inbred passivity is hard to counter.

In this light, structures of pastoral care and of leadership must provide for multiple leadership, and not just have one person in control. Like it or not, a single person would inevitably be "clericalised" to some extent. Clerical leadership is the only model of Church leadership that people are used to. And the temptation for some leaders to move in that direction themselves could also be strong. Power can be quite attractive.

It is also important that in no way should the team of lay leaders be remunerated, or otherwise parishioners will have further excuse to leave ownership and responsibility for leadership to them as "it is their job and that's what we pay them for".

For the Church to be renewed and refounded, faith communities will need structures of multiple leadership, where all the leaders are voluntary and unremunerated, like the rest of the parishioners, and everyone is encouraged to exercise pastoral care for each other in one way or another. To be accepted these leaders would need to emerge from the communities and be discerned for suitability on the basis of past performance. It is hard to see otherwise how parishioners can be encouraged to accept ownership themselves for the vitality of the faith community.

Inadequate Responses

The pervasiveness of this attitude of passivity would rule out a number of tentative solutions to the “priest shortage” that have been mildly canvassed over recent years.

- Relying on one person, perhaps though not necessarily a self-funding retiree, to be the local faith community leader, with (or without) the hope, perhaps, of eventually ordaining him (married or unmarried as the case may be).
- Hoping that former married priests could be readmitted to the exercise of their priesthood, even if they were initially to work only part-time at the priestly role and support themselves and their families by their secular employment. Whatever about the broader issue of their readmission to ministry, the current structural stresses should not provide the motivation. It would only slow down the process of Church reform and encourage people in their passivity.
- Bringing in priests from overseas. The cry for them can easily conceal the unarticulated desire of a parish to remain looked after and passive. The desire to remain helpless and to be looked after under all circumstances seems to be able to command boundless resources, and be ready even to pay big dollars in order to be satisfied. There are other reasons, of course, why the call for priests from overseas needs to be discerned carefully.
- Seeking religious or qualified lay people as Parish Leaders with the understanding that their appointment is open-ended and that they do as much as possible of what was previously done by resident priests. Unless it is clear that their presence is a temporary measure only, with the purpose of preparing for local ownership and participation, and facilitating their implementation, it is simply a further sop to the all-absorbing need to remain passive.

If the future for most parishes lies in the direction of such shared, multiple, voluntary and unremunerated leadership, it makes sense to do as much as possible now to provide opportunities and structures for such leadership to emerge and be formed.

While the priest is still resident in a parish, his initiatives in this direction will remain hard work and will reach probably only a small elite. Still, it is important that as far as possible potential leaders be given the opportunity to develop their skills. This also gives to congregations the opportunity to discern on the basis of their performance those leaders whom they would like to see exercising fuller leadership once the priest is withdrawn. Any efforts geared to getting across the message of shared ownership and responsibility are worth trying.

Formation

In the formation of such leadership emphasis needs to be put first of all on helping the leaders to encounter and listen to God in prayer. Their role is really a vocation and as such needs to be felt to have come from God and not be a merely natural response to structural needs. It will meet difficulties. Leaders’ perseverance will very much depend on their relationship with God. A familiarity with prayer will also be necessary for them to discern accurately the call of God in the many alternatives they will face.

It is easy of course to stipulate the need for formation without having a clear idea of what we are talking about. This is a further issue that deserves closer attention by the diocese. I believe that we need to share at length our ideas and experiences on formation, and to be open to keep on learning from each other.

Without believing that I have the answers at all, I think as of now that, in addition to an ease with prayer and familiarity with Gospel reflection, the following elements are involved in various mixes and to varying degrees:

- an agreed vision of Church
- a clear sense of the mission (purpose) of the Church
- a sense of how Church becomes real in an individual faith community
- a good practical acquaintance with the faith community in question
- adequate knowledge in the areas of sacraments, morality, ecclesiology and scripture
- sufficient levels of the skills of listening, community bonding, conflict resolution
- familiarity with the basics of the “inner journey” and spiritual companionship
- some sense of how structures operate as sources of support and life.

Availability of Eucharist - The Questions

I believe that there is also another important issue on which we as diocese need to reach some consensus. The issue in question is the availability of the Eucharist.

I heard a lay leader say recently that the Lay-led Assemblies of the Word are as good as the Mass. While not disputing the unfortunate fact that for some people that may be in reality the case, I think it would be a pity and perhaps a betrayal of our genuine tradition if we are satisfied with that attitude. Whatever was intended by the comment it would seem to indicate a lack of understanding, appreciation or experience of what Eucharist could and should be.

We are facing the situation where local communities are unable to have the Eucharist consistently. This raises quite a few questions:

- What criteria do we use to determine which faith communities are serviced at all? and which communities are serviced more regularly than others?
- Is it appropriate to provide Eucharist irregularly to a community that chooses not to gather at other times for Liturgies of the Word at all, particularly if their occasional Eucharist is at the expense of another active community’s having it more frequently?
- Under what circumstances, if any, should a lively community, for the sake of preserving its community identity and mutual support, continue to gather for Liturgies of the Word if it can hardly ever have Eucharist, when it could, with a little effort, travel to a Eucharist celebrated in a neighbouring community?

It seems appropriate that in order to avoid confusion in people’s minds there be some flexible diocesan policy to assist discernment on some of these matters

Significance of Eucharistic Celebrations

As background reflection before attempting answers the following considerations are perhaps pertinent. The Second Vatican Council made the point that “...the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the source from which all its power flows” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, para.10). Consistently it later affirmed that “full and active participation (in the Liturgy) by all the people is the paramount concern; for it is the primary, indeed the indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit” (S.C., para 14). Those coming from an Irish tradition will have heard the comment: “It’s the Mass that matters”. It has been said that the Eucharist gives us our identity as Catholics. An unnuanced reading can mistakenly give the feeling that people have an undisputed right to the Eucharist.

It is important not to absolutise this consideration. Vital faith communities have lived without Eucharist for long periods and still do in many places, particularly in mission countries. It is not an

ideal situation but it remains a fact. If active participation in the liturgy is the “primary, indeed the indispensable” source of the true Christian spirit, the fact that it is “primary” implies clearly that it is not the only source; but in calling it “indispensable” that means we need to look at what it is referring to quite seriously.

The Council is talking about liturgy. This is a broader concept than Eucharist, though Eucharist is obviously its climax. However, the Council had earlier stated that Christ: “...is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church. ... he is present when the church prays and sings, for he has promised ‘where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them’ (Mt 18:20)” (S.C. para.7). In the context cited, the Council was not referring to Liturgies of the Word, but to the word as it is proclaimed in the Mass. The more does not exclude the less.

It is also true that not every participation in Eucharist nourishes the true Christian spirit. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, who were not sensitive to each others’ needs, that their celebrations of Eucharist were not really Eucharists at all, and in fact were lethal in their effects, precisely because of their insensitivity to each other. (I Cor.11:17-32)

“Full and active” participation would seem to be the crucial qualifier. In fact, the better translation of the Latin word used by the Council is not so much “active” as “effective” or “vital”. After Vatican II “active” was sometimes understood as referring simply to the exercise of different ministries or even the external dialogue with the priest or the occasional changing of posture. The real meaning was more extensive, and pre-supposed among other things a willing acceptance of the meaning of the Eucharist:

- a close identification with Christ in his surrender in trust to the Father in the midst of the painful reality of the consequences of his commitment to love, non-discrimination and community,
- a “yes” to the covenant of intimate love and trust between God and ourselves,
- a recognition that Jesus’ “yes” to God, that cost him his life, had been expressed by his sense of mission to the world, and his insistence on justice and mercy,
- and an attitude of sharing, on the basis of equality, in the invitation to friendship and love with the other participants in the action.

Authentic Eucharist is the liturgical expression and celebration of a life of active pastoral caring and participation, and of clear service to the world.

It would seem to me that a local Catholic community that is unwilling to take responsibility for its own pastoral care, or that is not interested in the sharing in faith and trust that happen in gatherings for Liturgies of the Word at times when there is no Eucharist, loses whatever claim it might otherwise have to Eucharist in a time of scarce resources.

People may love the Mass but, if they are not prepared to move beyond a quite passive participation in it, it is hard to see that it could mean little more to them than a pious private devotion, the fulfilling of an obligation or a congenial habit developed over the years. When it comes to deciding preferences, it would be better to provide Eucharist for a community that accepts ownership of its own pastoral life and that gathers regularly to celebrate Liturgies of the Word than for a community that is not prepared to service its own needs to any reasonable extent.

In the light of these reflections, my own responses to the questions raised earlier would probably be as follows.

Regarding the criteria determining the offer and level of service of the Eucharist, I believe that the major criterion would be the readiness of the community as a whole to accept ownership of their mutual pastoral responsibilities and to provide the necessary leadership for effective vitality and

unity. I could easily understand the reluctance of a priest to put himself to considerable inconvenience to provide sacramental ministry to a passive community.

There are other criteria of course that are hard to quantify:

- the size of the community and, connected with that, its realistic viability
- the inconvenience to the priest providing a sacramental presence
- the degree of isolation and the distance from another Mass centre.

Concerning the servicing of a community that does not have sufficient interest to gather for Liturgies of the Word on the Sundays when there is no Eucharist, I would see this as one illustration of the point raised above, and consequently I would perceive little obligation for a priest to provide Eucharist for them.

As to the circumstances under which a community might prefer to gather locally for its own Liturgies of the Word rather than travel to another location for Eucharist, I would consider that the goals of maintaining community identity and fostering mutual pastoral support would need to be balanced against the value of touching into the “primary, indeed the indispensable source of the true Christian spirit”, the acme of which is the Eucharist. Each community would need to discern that balance for itself.

Ecumenical Gatherings

Another possibility on which some policy should be reached is that of ecumenical cooperation. In many smaller places, a number of struggling Christian congregations gather in their different buildings for their separate Sunday liturgies. At times the very smallness of the congregations can have a demoralising effect on their members. Should the diocese encourage these communities to band together for Liturgies of the Word, at least from time to time?

As has been mentioned above, the reason that small local Catholic faith communities are encouraged to meet together for Liturgies of the Word when they cannot have the Eucharist, rather than travel to a neighbouring place where Eucharist is celebrated, is for the sake of preserving their Catholic identity and for mutual and more effective faith support. Similarly there would need to be some balance between the separate and combined gatherings of the different congregations so that the identity of each is maintained but also that the advantages of mutual encouragement between the different congregations be explored. Indeed, the on-going general ecumenical task may effectively be seriously undertaken only when urgent situations such as these encourage it. Bigger, self-contained congregations have been slow to participate in the ecumenical endeavour.

The Changing Shape of Priesthood

Lay leaders will need to be increasingly and proficiently formed and supported in an on-going way. Structures for leadership and active pastoral participation will need to be devised or refined. The implications of these developments on our understanding of the priestly task are considerable.

At the moment the diocese has looked largely to the Pastoral Planning Office to provide professional formation for community pastoral leaders. However, as the shortage of priests bites more deeply, and as the need for formation is seen to be on-going, this outreach will be beyond the capacity of the Office. There will be a need for multiple roving animators with not just the skills but also the authority to carry out the necessary tasks of continuing formation and coordination.

And yet communities with lay leaders only, however well formed, must surely be seen as purely a temporary arrangement. The Church is meant to be a eucharistic Church, and the many, sometimes small, faith communities should be serviced by their priests. Given the fact that few candidates are

choosing full-time, professional, celibate priesthood, the best alternative seems to be that some of the local leaders be ordained priests for their communities.

If and when this should happen, they too will need initial and on-going formation, coordination and support.

This may well confirm the continued place and need for full-time, professional, remunerated and celibate priests, whose primary orientation is to the bishop and the diocese and not immediately to the local communities which would be the focus of the ordained community leaders.

These animators and coordinators of the locally based and orientated priests would need to be priests themselves in order to have the necessary authority to represent the bishop, to carry the diocesan vision, to oversee its practical implementation and to secure the necessary cooperation. They would probably need to be celibate because they would not be based in the local communities nor have their support; and to avoid the stress of isolation they would better live together in community and look to each other for emotional and spiritual sustenance. They would need to be remunerated because their task would be full-time and they would have no other source of income. In some ways they would be like Education Consultants who, as an extension of the Director of Education, animate and coordinate the teachers and staffs working in a variety of local schools spread over a considerable area, having the experience of teaching without still working as teachers themselves.

In the meantime, well-formed unordained leaders are needed in the local faith communities; and only from among these would it make sense to choose candidates for any eventual exercise of priesthood in the small communities.

At the moment all the priests of the diocese were ordained with the understanding that their primary role would be exercised within parish communities. Many priests feel that their identity as priests is still closely tied to ministry within these parish communities. Their ministry should be left largely undisturbed, though they may be asked to provide sacramental ministry within reason to neighbouring parishes should there be no priest in residence there.

However, some priests would be quite interested to extend their activity to the formation, animation and coordination of local leaders in parishes where there are no longer other priests in residence. This could in time become their primary focus, though they may also need to provide sacramental ministry to some extent to other parishes as well. They would probably still need to be based in a particular parish, though their activity would range beyond it.

New candidates seeking ordination to full-time, professional, remunerated and celibate ministry would be ordained with the understanding that their role may be less parish based and increasingly that of mobile animators and formators of leaders. Their formation would need to be geared to their new role.

Conclusion

We are living in an important moment in the Church's history. Change is happening rapidly. We can be victims of change, constantly applying "band-aids" to continually worsening situations; or we can take control of our own future. This will call for enlightened adaptation to the changes in culture and society that are beyond our control.

We need to meet, reflect and pray together as a diocese that we may discern the call of the Spirit. This will mean effort and some degree of sacrifice. We do not ourselves have to manufacture our future. We simply follow where the Spirit leads us.