

SPECIAL NEEDS OF RURAL CLERGY

[This is the response written by Fr John McKinnon in May 1997 to a questionnaire prepared by a sub-group appointed by the Diocesan Council of Priests to explore the changing needs of rural clergy]

1. *From your experience what are the special needs of priests working in a rural Diocese, and especially in isolated parishes?*

Inner strength, and also... **support**

emotional. This is important because access to other priests, at least of similar age and interests, is not always easy. The priest needs to be able to find and form adequate friendship relationships, with both men and women, as well as maintain deeper and more supportive friendships with others who may be further away and less accessible. In most cases family will be quite distant. Another difficulty is that people in isolated areas may not be as well educated as the priest himself, and their political leanings may not coincide with his. He can feel quite isolated and not understood.

spiritual. Always important, but having a special importance because of the isolation of the priest. The health of the spiritual life of the priest will largely determine the fruitfulness of his ministry. He needs to maintain his hope and faith in a scene where communities are generally under stress.

recreational. Not too many other people have the same day off. This can create problems, especially if other priests are a long way away. It can mean a fair amount of extra travelling to relax and recreate with peers.

professional. The priest will need to be something of a self-starter, because of the distance from other easily available resources. It would certainly help if he is able to read well. Opportunities to be informed of what others are doing could also be helpful.

If we accept that our ministry is largely to draw out the giftedness of others, to authorise and empower them, to help them to work together, to discover the power of vision and the value of relating to each other in a truly functional way, we need continuing help and support here.

We need to understand more about how structures operate, and how people interrelate within them. These are management skills, and there is a wealth of experience available for us in the community generally if we appreciate its need and take the trouble to look for it.

I believe that generally we operate as both diocese and as parishes in quite dysfunctional ways. We are “babes in the woods”, and we need help to move beyond this. Certainly the Church is mystery and its needs won’t be met with simple answers, but we are an incarnational mystery, so our handling of incarnational problems of human interaction is part of our essence.

2. What would you like to see available in our diocese to meet some of these needs?

Inevitably some sort of attitudinal change among us priests ourselves will become necessary, both as individuals and as a corporate presbyterate. At the same time, we shall always need to be self-starters, and not expect to have help always arriving from elsewhere.

I believe that to become, or to remain, self-starters, it could be helpful to have some sort of system of “monitors” who would help us regularly review our own lives and ministry, and some kind of evaluation that could provide us with usable feed-back and a helpful degree of accountability.

I also think that the presence of a few more people with spiritual direction skills around the place would make it easier to touch base there.

I think that in the area of our own professional development, we could possibly use better some of the resources already in place. Zone meetings could be opportunities, not just for business directed to and from the Priests’ Council, but especially for exchanging pastoral initiatives and evaluating them together. They could also be occasions for honing up certain skills, such as listening, conflict resolution, meeting management, structural management, etc.. Let the zones be the places for “in-servicing”, and the diocesan assemblies be opportunities for policy making and evaluation, etc..

One way or other we need to structure in opportunities for ourselves as a group of priests to meet seriously with women and laity. Our activities in our parishes in these areas are usually without supervision. We get little feed-back on our own performance, and have little opportunity to observe and learn from how other priests handle these situations.

Priests Support Groups are meeting some needs, possibly mainly relaxation and recreation, with the occasional ones providing more personally focussed sharing. They also serve to strengthen the general cohesiveness of the presbyterate.

3. Given that there are many changes, such as working in Regional Catholic Communities, that are coming into our experience as priests now and in the future, what will make ministry sustaining and viable for you in the mid to long term?

Already I am finding my own activity in my RCC liberating and enthusing.

There has been a need to review the parish structuring. This has proved helpful. I think that the new structure is fairly efficient, and allows energy to be focussed on the areas of real priority and not just frittered away in aimless meetings.

I also find that the need to assist the lay leaders to prepare for the Assemblies of Word

and Communion is helpful to me as well as to them. It is proving to be a valuable exercise of applying Scripture to life for both them and for me. It also has me thinking of the Sunday homily well in advance. I also see the members deepening their own insight into Scripture and growing in their own confidence to listen to the Word, and to share their faith with each other. They comment how much it supports their own growth in faith.

However, I feel tired at times. There is plenty to do, and a lot of extra travelling. I am still to get myself satisfactorily organised regarding my movements around the parishes. As the new structures begin to operate more smoothly and confidently, I hope that my present activity will begin to slow down somewhat and that I shall be able to reserve my time and energy for the really important tasks.

I see the present and future calling me to “work smarter, not harder”. It will mean my spending more time with key people and helping to form them. It will mean surrendering some of the other activities that I used to do and that some people still expect of me. This is helped by a degree of emotional and spiritual support from others.

Obviously I am going to grow older, and even become an old man (if I live long enough!), and that worries me when I think of the parish set-up. Is it good for the RCC to have an old man as its priest? But the more I think of this (and some of the parishioners are asking how long will I be staying), the less it worries me. If I can help the structure to be up and running, and help in the on-going formation of the key people, then my own contribution will be better focussed. As they grow in faith, confidence and ability, they will keep the operation on the road. I shall always have something to give, but I won't be the sole source of energy and direction.

I am also glad the Pastoral Planning Office exists and will continue to operate. I am not in this business of restructuring and reshaping alone. Nor shall I have to tackle alone and unsupported the business of formation of key people.

If our bailiwicks increase in size, we drop in numbers, and distances between us get bigger, then it will become increasingly important that the times when we meet together be useful times and not wasted opportunities. As I said before, zone meetings and in-services need to be closely reviewed, and our own attitudes will need to change.

4. What kind of formation best prepares people (priests?) for ministry in a rural diocese?

What priests will need in the future will be a combination of formation and natural giftedness. I believe they will need real help in praying. This need is on-going as a person matures and faces new life stages, but it needs to be well started.

They will need to have an openness to collaborative ministry and an appreciation of women, indeed not just an openness, but a proven ability. This will probably be best assessed in the field.

They will need a reasonably comfortable independence, or perhaps better, interdependence.

The formation given will need to be given in such a way that it is understood to be incomplete and in need of continual development.

The process of formation needs to be so shaped that it is seen as providing for and assisting not simply preordination formation, but equally if not more importantly, post-ordination formation.

I believe that the major focus of the preordination formation should be the personal formation of the priest and the development of his interpersonal skills.

I doubt the value of a lot of formal theology before ordination, unless formation is happening in the field. Theology should follow praxis and experience rather than precede it. However, a certain amount of knowledge is undoubtedly necessary. I would think that a familiarity with something like the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or McBrien's *Catholicism* could be a sufficient starter. There would need to be some sort of general overview, and some insight into the intricacies of moral judgment and conscience formation, as well as basic counselling skills and some knowledge of the workings of the spiritual life. But there will be a lifetime when these things can be deepened and explored.

My memory of the seminary is that a lot of the students barely passed their theology exams, but were still launched out into the field. There was a lot that they obviously did not know or even got wrong, but most seemed to have coped reasonably well.

I believe that preordination formation would better take place in the field, at least for a major part of the time - something more akin to an apprenticeship. This would require careful monitoring, but it would give people a "hands on" opportunity to assess the suitability of a candidate for ministry in a diocese like ours. There would also need to be special time for more focussed study and skill development, as well as for personal formation. However, human formation is generally better developed in connection with people and the world at large than through withdrawal. Though I make the point again that it would require careful and skilled monitoring.

Opportunities for, and expectations of, further study would need to be built into the structure of post-ordination formation. But adult learning is best when it is tailored to the needs and interests of the individual rather than being a general course for all comers. Some people are more practical than academic. Such on-going formation could be practically oriented as well as academically.

5. *Other Comments*

The question of sexual integration and on-going personal growth across the stages of life. I don't know too much about such things but I believe they are very important. Dialogue with the experts would be helpful here. I simply refer to the crucial necessity of so doing,

and finding ways of making it part of the pre- and post-ordination formation of priests.

Also, we are not in the business of forming clones. Any process of formation should allow generous scope for individuality, and individual giftedness should be encouraged and assisted. However, it remains important that each individual be prepared and able to integrate harmoniously into both the presbyterate and the broader diocesan church.

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