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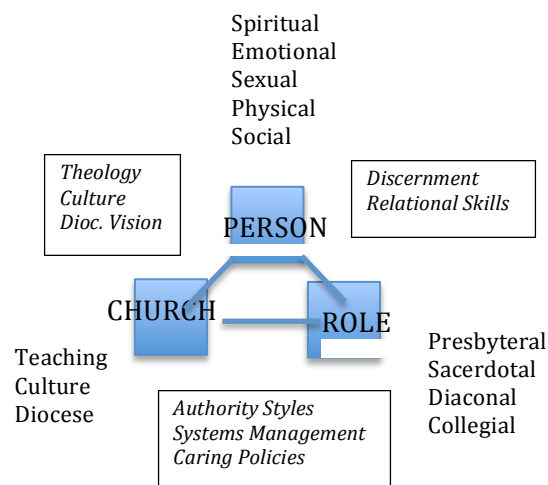
PRESSURES IN PRIESTS' LIVES - LOCATING THE AREAS OF TENSION

by John McKinnon

(The following comments are an effort to bring some clarity to the consideration of pressures and tensions confronting priests in the Church today. From the outset I would like to insist that pressures need not be seen negatively but as invitations to sort out priorities and to focus energies as we grow into maturity)

Priests are human persons. Along with all other human persons, they are called by the creating God to live life to the full. They have human needs and human potential with the consequent responsibility to allow that potential to unfold. They have also been baptized into the Body of Christ, which is not an amorphous movement, but an organized and structured body of people, the Church. Within this Church they have been gifted by God's Spirit with specific gifts, and ordered to a specific responsibility and role: they are ordained priests.

Their sense of wholeness as persons and their subsequent sense of satisfaction depend on their working out a balanced harmony between (i) their human needs, (ii) their responsibilities as priests within the Christian community, and (iii) their experience of the institutional Church.



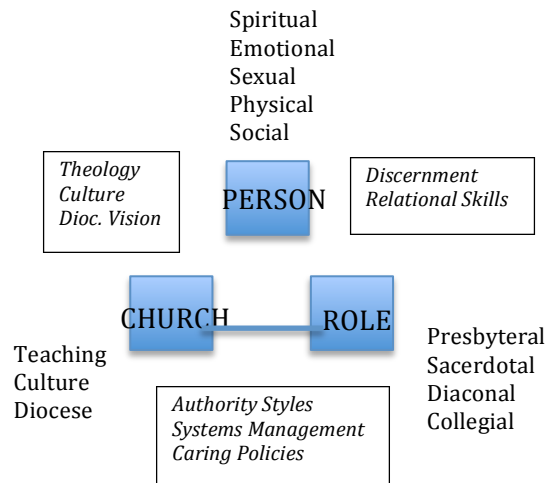
Where these three factors interact, they give rise to three areas of tension. We need then to examine the interaction of (i) the institutional Church and the determining of the priestly role, (ii) the responsibilities arising from their priestly role and their human needs, and (iii) their human needs and their experience of the institutional Church. [iv] A further source of pressure arises from the fact that both Church and priest exist in the world, which in turn impacts on expectations and possibilities.

1. The Interaction of the institutional Church and the Priestly Role.

Many priests are asking what is their role in the Church of today. The teaching Church, the culture and the diocesan community together contribute their answer to the question.

a) The theological definition.

The deeper question is not simply one of priesthood. It involves the wider issue of Ecclesiology. How does the Church view itself today? Where does the priesthood fit into this contemporary understanding of Church? What does a priest do?



This question of role identity can be a burning issue. Some priests have worked out their own theology of Church and priesthood with a sufficient degree of confidence. However, when their solution is not generally agreed upon, they do experience the lack of common vision shared by other priests and the consequent sense of isolation.

Many, however, are not able to arrive at their own theology of priesthood and to sit with it confidently. They depend on what the wider community thinks and how it acts. At present there is no single theology of Church or of priesthood that has gained ground incontrovertibly.

The Vatican Council document on priesthood, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, evidenced an evolution of thinking on priesthood. It distinguished the presbyteral and sacerdotal roles of the priest. In his presbyteral role the priest oversees the life of the Christian community. He is the one who calls to community by his preaching, and by his teaching confirms the identity of the community. He is the community-builder who calls forth the ministerial gifts of its members. He is a man in relationship, a "people-person". His sacerdotal role as minister of the Eucharist and the presider over the sacraments is only one of his presbyteral responsibilities. An earlier theology focussed more on the sacerdotal role of the priest, and was inclined to ignore his presbyteral responsibilities or to see them as secondary.

b) The cultural definition.

The widely accepted cultural expectation of the priestly role includes a diaconal dimension — his more mundane service of the community. In practice much of the priest's time is taken up with activities that are not essential to his ministry. People can expect him to be available for twenty-four hours of each day: to be "all things to all people".

c) The diocesan definition.

Another factor that affects the priestly role is the presence or absence of a diocesan vision. Where such a vision is clearly articulated, priests can more clearly determine their role in its implementation. Where such a diocesan vision is lacking, priests are less likely to know what they are expected to do and where they fit in.

d) A further theological question.

The Vatican Council made it quite clear that the priest is not a lone operator but belongs firstly to the community of all the priests around their bishop, the presbyterate. His priestly activity is not an isolated factor. He is ordained into the priesthood of all the priests of the diocese. Though his activity is often actually focussed on a special local area, the parish, he belongs firstly to the diocesan Church. His role, therefore, includes a special responsibility to his brothers in the priesthood.

Conclusions.

The issues of ecclesiology and theology of priesthood need to be clarified. More particularly, dioceses need to take steps to clarify their own vision and agree on strategies so that their priests can determine more clearly their place in the implementation of this vision. The questions of the inter-dependence of priests need to be faced and the consequences explored in terms of attitudes and time management.

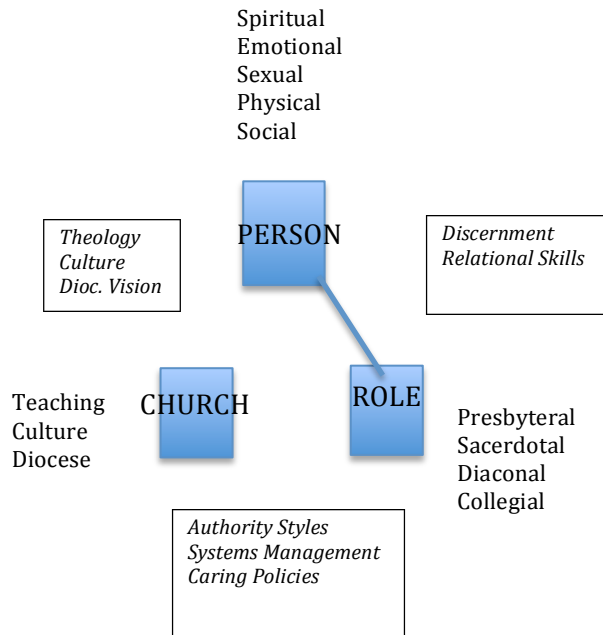
Priests need to be helped to become more self-reliant and more inner-directed in order to cope with the unreal expectations of people and to focus their ministerial involvement on the areas of their real competence and responsibility. There is a further need to foster at a diocesan level the recognition that their presbyteral role needs to be expanded and their diaconal role reduced.

These things will not happen over-night. Many priests do not feel secure enough to revise their theology. A clear theology, anyhow, is still over the horizon. And dioceses may take time to work together to formulate their vision and determine their strategies. In the meantime there will be a degree of confusion, beyond the capacity of any single individual to resolve. Efforts must be made to hasten the process, but a certain insecurity, dissatisfaction and plurality of vision and focus will be inevitable.

2. The Interaction of Personal Human Needs and Role Responsibilities.

As human persons priests have been called by God to human wholeness and to fullness of life. They have basic human needs: spiritual, emotional, sexual, physical and social. Unless these basic human needs are adequately satisfied, their own experience of life will be unsatisfactory and their capacity to be life-givers and exemplars of the good news will be seriously impaired.

Priests need to grow in their intimacy with God. They need to be adequately in touch with their deepest fears and desires, their hurts and their joys. They are sexual persons and need to understand and integrate the constantly changing requirements of their sexual identity. They have physical needs for health and fitness which impact considerably on their spiritual, emotional and sexual well-being. (Psychosomatic and stress related tensions have debilitating effects.) They also have needs for friendship and to receive and to give love. It is by their love for each other that they will be known as disciples of Jesus. These needs all make demands of time and of energy.



At the same time, the responsibilities arising from the priests' role also take time and energy, both of which are limited. In our days these responsibilities — though many of them may in fact be more diaconal than presbyteral — seem to be multiplied by the drop in the number of priests. The problem can be compounded by the expectations that people have of the priest. The question may be raised whether some expectations really are such or whether they are what the priest thinks people expect (projections of his own imagination). Whatever be the answer, the less that priests are inner-directed, the more potently do they feel these real (or imagined) expectations.

As a member of the diocesan presbyterate, he has a right to support from his brother priests and a responsibility and accountability to them. Their support is an important factor in his growth to maturity. At the same time, such mutual support and accountability also take time and energy.

All these competing demands are a constant source of stress.

a) Discernment.

Among the competing demands of his presbyteral responsibilities and his personal needs, the priest must determine his priorities and achieve an appropriate balance. His ability to do this will be in direct proportion to his inner-directedness on one hand and his sense of presbyteral support and example on the other. He needs to be helped to set his own goals and to be accountable to himself.

Whereas at the beginning of priestly life, the call of God may involve the ability and readiness to say a generous "yes" to the demands of ministry, the same call of God may later on, with the demands of maturity and in the interests of effective focussing of energy, require the freedom and courage to say "no". What the secular world might call self-management, the Christian calls discernment. The priest today needs to distinguish between the demands of the superego, the unreal expectations of people, and the life-giving, liberating and empowering call of God. A mature self-knowledge and a genuine intimacy with God are crucial in discerning God's will.

To assist this growth in personal and spiritual maturity there is a constant need for personal mentoring and friendship. Where these experiences do not happen informally there can well be a need to structure them.

b) Relational skills.

Whatever theology of priesthood eventually holds sway, the truth of contemporary ministry is that the priest is called to a presbyteral role within his Church community. He is the community-builder, the discerner of gifts, the facilitator of ministry, the communicator and preacher of the Word.

A life-giving presbyteral ministry requires a number of relational skills. In relating with people the priest needs to be able to listen to them. For this he needs to be sufficiently free from emotional stress. He also needs the personal freedom and trust to express himself honestly, and to be able to avoid both submission on the one hand and aggression on the other: he needs to know how to be assertive. Uneasiness with confrontation is a source of real tension for many priests. They need skills of negotiation and the ability to forestall confrontation. In today's world these skills are often not developed naturally and may need to be consciously learnt and practised.

More important even than these skills is the priest's own personal maturity without which his skills may become means of manipulation and an inappropriate exercise of power.

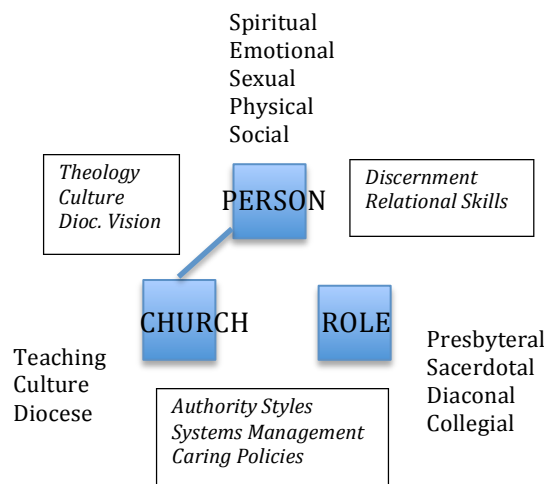
Whereas much of this growth can only happen over time, these tensions are to some extent within the power of the individual to face. There is much he can do himself, irrespective of whether others move or not. The experience of tension can be a spur to life. And God is present in the "chaos".

3. The Interaction of Church Structures and Personal Needs.

a) The exercise of authority.

The ways in which authority is exercised in a diocese impinge quite considerably on the personal experience of priests and can give rise to tensions. How to exercise authority is often a matter of personal judgment.

The bishop's judgment can differ from that of the priests who are affected. The decisions of personnel and other diocesan boards can impact considerably on the lives of priests.



There is no one right way to exercise authority consistently. At times it needs to be directive, at other times consultative; at times the focus needs to be on the task, at times on the persons involved, depending on such factors as urgency, the need for consensus and collaboration etc.. Whatever is done, dissatisfaction and tension can result.

In today's Church emphasis is given to consultation and collaborative ministry . Presbyteral Councils are only one case in point. Where consensus is important, such an approach can be helpful. The fact remains, however, that some priests are not comfortable with the process of consultation, and find the trust and honesty, as well as the responsibility required, to be beyond them. Generally they have not been trained for this, and some may need further personal growth and healing. Even those who are open to consultation need to face the inevitable cost of more preparatory work, more information-sharing, indeed, more of the "paper warfare".

b) systems management.

The complexity of the mission of today's Church means that more people are involved in its day-to-day operations and their servicing. New structures come into existence. One difficulty with bureaucracies is their seeming impersonality. Another can be the apparent avoidance of final responsibility, both can be sources of irritation to priests.

The effective running of the Church as institution, even at diocesan level, calls for skills in systems management.

c) caring policies.

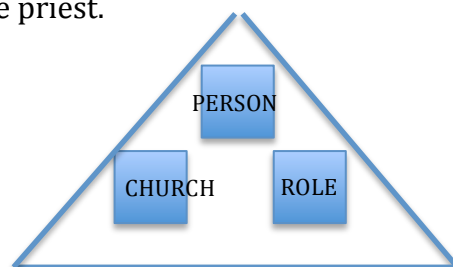
In some dioceses policies are in operation that look to the care of priests in such areas as health care, sabbatical leave, etc.. The existence of such policies can do much to ensure the well-being of the priests and to reassure them that they matter and are supported by authority.

Conclusions.

The tensions arising from the interaction of priest and institution are often beyond the control of the individual priest. However, steps can sometimes be taken through presbyteral councils, for example, to protect the rights of the priests and to set in operation policies that are supportive.

4. The Impact of the World

The Church and its members do not exist in a vacuum. They are immersed in the world to which Christ has missioned them. In its turn the world impinges on the Church and affects the overall experience of the priest.



a) The mood of the world — the growth of democracy, the movement towards freedom of conscience, the availability of education, the context of atheism, materialism, and social injustice — affects the self-awareness of the institutional Church, and consequently affects the emphases and priorities it gives to the various responsibilities of the priest and the way it understands his role. The mood of the world can even tend to undermine completely the value of the priestly role and the relevance of celibacy.

b) Attitudes of people within the general culture affect the way in which the priest recognizes, evaluates and actualizes his own human needs. They affect, for example, how he feels about his own sexuality. The busyness, too, of western society rubs off on the priest who can also find himself stressed and stretched. A pervasive materialism affects his personal perception of failure and can put pressure on his morale, especially when his self-esteem has not matured and is still tied to his role-identity.

c) The shape of the Church as institution and the way that it exercises authority over its members are inevitably affected by the current models of other institutions in society at large. The expectations that the priest has of authority are affected by his experience of life in his world. The experience of democracy in the western world, for example, makes autocratic decisions by the Church seem unacceptable.