

A Call for the Return of the Mass Priest

In a previous edition of this journal I wrote a plea for the empowerment of the laity to fulfil many hitherto priestly roles, reasoning that ever increasing costs will inevitably have a negative impact on the numbers of stipendiary clergy that a diocese can afford to maintain. It is conservatively argued that it costs in excess of £40,000 per annum to maintain a priest in place. To this financial imposition must be added the problems of recruiting suitable persons for sparsely populated, vast rural areas, with a concomitant responsibility for multiple charges, which are generally spaced many miles apart. To put this into perspective: our Priest-in-Charge lives over 50 miles and two ferry crossings from our church on Mull!

A priest who is appointed to an area such as the West Highland Region (six mainland charges, one chapel and five islands, in an area larger than many English dioceses, yet with responsibility for less than 250 Episcopalians!) cannot possibly begin to cope with the geographical exigencies of the task without the support of local, retired clergy, lay readers, lay leaders, pastoral auxiliaries and the like. When I explain that the Church of Scotland did not get a single, external applicant for a living that covered only half of Mull (and included residence in a brand new manse) it can be easy to understand that finding a suitable replacement for Peter Rice (who retires on Ascension Day, 2008) will not only be difficult, but may prove impossible. Whether Peter is replaced promptly or not, there will be an inevitable interregnum. There are essential features of the sacred ministry that are unique to those who are in holy orders, and which are warranted to such persons through the sacrament of ordination. As I mentioned in my earlier paper, these comprise the ‘ABC’ of Priesthood – the actions of Absolution, Blessing and Consecration. Empowering the laity to carry out ever more of the functions of the clergy is only part of the solution to their shortage or absence. It matters not how many enthusiastic and theologically trained lay candidates offer themselves for licensing as lay readers and leaders and auxiliaries, there will always be a requirement for ordained clergy. Yes, we manage without them, but only up to a point. Apart from a handful of visits to our church by Bishop Martin there will be no clerical presence there until Palm Sunday, 2008. This means that over twenty Sunday services and the Eucharist on Christmass Day will be conducted by lay persons in that period. Last winter, between the beginning of December and the end of January, over 250 congregational members received the Blessed Sacrament in our church: only 25 received that sacrament at a service celebrated by a priest!

What is the answer to this dilemma? The necessary sacramental activities of the ordained ministry in the provision of pre-consecrated elements for lay led Eucharistic services must not be allowed to founder for a lack of priests. Nor are the long-term problems associated with the bulk storage of communion hosts and the holding of copious supplies of consecrated wine very edifying, as is currently the case at Saint Columba’s. One solution is a return of the Mass Priest.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation the Mass Priest had a bad press (or would have had, if there had been a press!). Such men were employed in many parishes, often those with chantry chapels, to say Mass on a regular (sometimes daily) basis for the repose of the souls of the faithful departed. These ‘departed’ were essentially the wealthy; those who could afford to have a suitable chantry built and pay for these priestly ministrations. The church taught that the more Masses that were said, the less time the respective soul would spend in purgatory. It is no small wonder that the whole theological basis behind these practices was dismissed by the Reformers – chantries were closed and Mass Priests were dismissed or subsumed into normal parish duties. Now, I am not for one moment suggesting that this pre-Reformation system should be reintroduced. Far from it! Yet, one cannot help but admire the dedication of such clergy. They had no other responsibilities except saying Mass for the dead.

To assume that any individual called to ordination will necessarily make a good administrator of a charge, be an inspiring preacher, offer superior pastoral care or be the ‘good all-round egg’ that is expected, is sheer myth. I have known clergy whose managerial skills would founder at the organisation of the proverbial booze-up in a brewery; who had the pastoral sensitivity of a latter-day Genghis Khan; whose sermons would have won gold medals in boring at Olympic standard, if such a competition existed; and whose manner and deportment in church could have gained them immediate and full membership of Fred Karno’s Army! I am delighted to say that I have yet to find all of these distressing traits in any one individual! There seems to be every reason for the various non-sacerdotal functions of responsibility for a charge to be held by those best qualified to perform them. This is, after all, how industry and commerce work successfully.

A modern-day Mass Priest could have responsibility in a Charge, or a small group of Charges, for the provision of the Holy Eucharist, and nothing else. Such an individual would not necessarily be given, for example, authority to preach – others could have that duty. Equally, pastoral care, sick visiting, chairing the Vestry, maintaining the fabric of the building, ordering sacristy supplies, etc, would become lay responsibilities. Such a Mass Priest would, of necessity, be fully and completely ordained – there is no half-way house in this matter – a priest is a priest is a priest! Authority to Absolve, Bless and Consecrate would automatically be mandated at ordination. Academic and practical training would be that necessary to support this unique role – although, of course, such a person could ‘develop’ and have accountability for other clerical functions, perhaps eventually being given authority for other sacraments, or, indeed, for full responsibility of a charge.

It would only take a handful of enthusiastic, non-stipendiary volunteers to offer themselves, after careful and prayerful consideration, to their Bishop for ordination as Mass Priests to solve many of the financial and sacramental problems faced, or about to be faced, by this diocese, and, I suspect, others. I commend discussions on this important, if innovative, development to the College of Bishops. In the meantime, talk to your priest (if you still have one!) or your bishop about your prospective participation in such a specialised and vital Christian role. The future of our church may depend on you!

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