

PARISH MINISTRY

By MICHAEL WINTER

ARCHBISHOP TEMPLE once said that the Church exists principally for the sake of those who are outside it. The document *The Church 2000* stated that the clergy exist for the sake of the laity, and not vice versa. Armed with these two concepts, let us examine the possibilities in a quest for a truly effective pastoral ministry.

Is the present form of ministry adequate? Clearly it is not. The fact that most of the parochial clergy celebrate three masses each Sunday shows that they are outnumbered. The ideal ratio of priests to laity is difficult to establish mathematically, but the niceties of an ideal Church need not detain us now, as we are so far from their attainment. Most priests are dealing with something like five hundred practising Catholics and perhaps a thousand who do not attend Mass. The number of the latter category is hard to determine. It may be as high as two thousand for each priest in some parts of the country. With numbers like these, effective spiritual care is impossible within the conventional framework.

If we look for results the picture is disquieting in the extreme. Conversions number a little more than five thousand each year, which is virtually negligible in a population of more than fifty million. Lapsing from the Church cannot be measured easily, but A. Spencer's article, in *The Month* of April 1975, indicated that we may have lost a quarter of a million from effective membership each year since Vatican II ended. The catholic community in England and elsewhere has shown surprisingly little influence on major social issues such as war, slavery, the evils of colonialism, exploitation of industrial workers and racial hostility (notably against Jews and blacks). In short we have not acted as the leaven. Even on purely internal issues the parish clergy have manifested a baffling reluctance to accept anything new. There was the hostility to the Young Christian Workers in the 1930's, followed by reluctance about the covenant scheme, and then resistance to dialogue Mass, evening Mass, ecumenism and communion in the hand. This widespread resentment against all change would seem to go beyond the bounds of normal temperamental conservatism. It seems to indicate that the structures produce massive inertia. This suspicion is borne out by a glance at the background of the most cherished institution, the parish.

read more at www.theway.org.uk

The parish, as we know it now, was established on the european religious scene long after the period of conversion to christianity. According to the widely held theory of Ulrich Stultz,¹ its origins go back to the duties of the teutonic landlord who had to provide a priest (in pagan times) for his tenants. The third Lateran Council of 1179 secured for the bishop the right of instituting the incumbent. The clergy of this institution have never been missionaries, any more than the structure which they serve.² In the millenium which stretched from roughly six hundred to sixteen hundred, the principal force which sustained religion was the state. Concordats and the Inquisition are really nothing more than the logical consequences of that basic alliance between the Church and civil society. In general it can be said that the parish was fashioned for the purpose of giving the sacraments and simple teaching to those who were already converted.

The law of universal celibacy for the latin rite priests came in the twelfth century with the first and second Lateran Councils. The motivation behind the law is clear. At that time the moral evaluation of marriage was disputed. Although its status as a sacrament had recently been recognized, a large body of opinion considered that the sexual aspect of it was at best imperfect if not venially sinful. In addition to this the success of the cluniac and cistercian movements, coupled with the reforms of Pope Gregory VII, gave such prestige to the monastic way of life that it seemed almost natural to model the life-style of all the clergy on that of the monks. It is useful to recall that the advocates of compulsory celibacy were equally enthusiastic that the priests should live in community. Even if Genesis had not said it, experience makes it clear that it is not good for man to be alone. Unfortunately the rural clergy could not be grouped into communities.

There can be no doubt that the medieval clergy needed reform, but was celibacy really the answer? The true solution was found by Trent in legislating for professional training. That was the insight of true brilliance enshrined in the Tridentine seminaries, namely professional training.

That briefly is the origin of our present-day parishes and the clergy who work in them. The Council of Trent and the Code of Canon Law (promulgated in 1918) retained the fundamental structure of the parish unaltered.

¹ *Die Eigenkirche als Element des mittelalterlichgermanischen Kirchenrechtes* (Basle, 1895).

² Cf Bardy G.: *Prêtres d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1954), p 53.

The conditions of twentieth-century England are so different from the period which gave birth to the parish that we must ask if the ancient institution can be modernized sufficiently for it to be the vehicle of a realistic apostolate today. If we are to answer that question we must first look at the world which is to be evangelized. Being a small minority in society without government backing, we are in a radically missionary situation. The medieval patterns of life and work have little to offer us. We must look to the first four centuries to find any other period in which the Church was in a comparable missionary situation. There are, however, two important differences which must be borne in mind. In England at any rate we have no legal disabilities against our existence and work, but society in general is no longer religious. I use the word religious in the special sense which it enjoys in the writings of men like Bonhoeffer and Harvey Cox. In the past, men readily attributed to the action of God natural phenomena whose functioning was a mystery to them in their ignorance of science. Modern discoveries have altered that world view, but the believer has nothing to fear. The New Testament has virtually nothing of religion in that old sense, and many so-called religious attitudes bred of scientific ignorance were far removed from the authentic life of faith. We are now in a purely uncomplicated missionary situation.

Before asking what sort of ministry the modern missionary Church needs, we must first enquire what sort of community should be provided for the laity. Is it the parish? the monastery? the commune? or what? I take it as basic that there must be some sort of community. The mission of the Church cannot be limited to the distribution of bibles and tracts to the human race. How exactly should we present the gospel if we are aiming to invite the response of faith?

May I put forward a purely tentative theory at this point. Hiring Wembley stadium or fleets of loudspeaker vans is not the answer. The gospels give us a useful pointer. Admittedly Jesus did speak to large crowds fairly often, but merely to attract their interest. The real invitation to belief was given in private to serious-minded enquirers, for example, to those who stayed behind to ask the meaning of the Parable of the Sower. There is a clear theological motive for this. When the act of faith is asked for seriously, the enquirer must already be strong enough to have a reasonable chance of saying Yes. (Otherwise it would be rather like entering pupils for 'A' level exams without their having studied the syllabus.) If he is not strong enough, then his answer to the practical invitation must inevitably be a refusal. This means that the indiscriminate invitation to believe in profound doctrines

about the person of Jesus is dangerous. We would be putting people in a situation in which they would almost inevitably say No. (Was this the real motivation behind the ancient *disciplina arcani*?) In twentieth-century Europe everyone has heard of Christ. The preliminary announcement no longer needs to be made. We must devise methods of bringing people to the profound practical choice of belief or not. This I suggest requires a small community. We must therefore establish communities whose dynamism will attract others to join them. Once inside they can ponder the great decision. The concept of goodness acting as a magnet occurs in many walks of life. People will move house in order to send their children to schools which are known to be efficient. The same applies to good regiments, good universities, and good employers. Their reputation is quickly noised abroad and people make great efforts to get in. This dynamic seems to me much closer to the norm of christian activity than persuasion techniques which are akin to commercial advertising.

The nature and size of the basic ideal community is determined by considering the convergence of its normal requirements. By definition a community differs from an administrative unit because of the face-to-face involvement of the members with one another. This means basically a much smaller size than the normal parish. If the group is to carry out works of witness and charity, it means that there must be a fair amount of dialogue at the normal meetings so that simple local needs and problems can be discussed in the light of christian principles. Finally it must be remembered that of the three possible models which were available to Christ for the exemplar of the christian liturgy he chose only one. Judaism offered the temple type of worship which gathered virtually the whole nation, the synagogue which assembled the whole village, or the passover which united just one family. It was the supper gathering which he chose as the matrix of christian worship. All of these considerations point to a small community whose regular meetings cater for informal dialogue as well as the Eucharist. To state an exact figure is hazardous, but to refrain therefrom makes the discussion unreal. I will therefore suggest twenty people for the Eucharist. This means the catholic population of one street meeting in a private house. It would involve throwing together incompatible neighbours who would rather not speak to one another (and who are not brought face to face with the duty in the present parish liturgies). But if we cannot effect reconciliation at that level, what hope have we of achieving it in Ulster, for example?

In contrast to this ideal community the shortcomings of the present parish need no elaboration. Its sheer size keeps it as an administrative unit which inhibits community life. The liturgy being of corresponding dimensions must inevitably become a ritual which keeps people apart and prevents intimacy.

Having examined the world which must be evangelized, and the community which could bring it the gospel, we are now in a position to ask what kind of ministry could best serve that community. This long preamble has been necessary to establish the life and function of the lay people in the Church. We cannot delineate the clergy's role until that of the laity has been specified.

It will be obvious by now that the minister's basic qualifications will be the ability to create and animate a missionary community. Basically this could be done by a priest, nun, or lay person. The first requirement of the ministers will be experience of the world which is being evangelized. Normally this will mean professional training such as university after leaving school, or an industrial apprenticeship, or training for nursing or some other career. This should be followed by a period of normal wage-earning employment. Without it the aspiring apostle would be at a disadvantage. Christ himself set the pattern unambiguously. (It is worth observing too that the post-religious world which has no natural place for priests, also finds it hard to accommodate kings. That is most probably the reason why King Carlos of Spain and our own Prince Charles have been put through the universities and military academies, so that they can speak to the modern world on its own terms.)

The second requirement is spiritual formation. Space does not permit a detailed programme here. It must suffice to say that the lay people will need something different from the priests and nuns, who in their turn will need a formation different from that suited to an enclosed monastery.

Theology is essential for preachers, and for any others its acquisition will not go amiss. Ideally it should be done on a full-time basis, but the married deacons in England are receiving theirs through evening classes and individual tutorial supervision.

Next we must ask the interrelated questions of whether the ministers of these communities should be full-timers, or wage-earning workers as well? Whether they should be priests, nuns, or lay people? It is clear that however many nuns or lay people became involved, we would still need many priests, and indeed far more than we possess at the present. This requirement, coupled with the need for involvement,

will mean that many of them must be wage-earning workers. This is closer to the authentic christian ethos than the present pattern. Although the jewish and pagan priests were a separate occupational class, christian theology provides no adequate basis for such an institution, since the christian ministers are not a class of mediators between God and mankind.

Would it be necessary to have one priest for each small Eucharistic community? Not necessarily. The animator of it could be a nun or a lay person. A priest from another group could be called in for the Eucharist, and it would be a satisfactory arrangement provided that he knew them personally. What we must avoid is the employment of the supply priest like an automaton, who is summoned as a total stranger to the group because he alone is empowered to pronounce the words of the sacraments.

There is no need to predetermine a fixed pattern. We must experiment. One can envisage communities being animated by lay people, nuns or priests. The latter would be the most in evidence on account of the Eucharist, and they could be wage-earning workers or full-timers, married or celibate.

As a postscript one must say something about the debate on marriage or celibacy, but I have left it to this point because it is not the most pressing requirement: that is, authentic involvement. Even within the clergy we must preserve variety. Consecrated virginity will always have an honoured place in the Church. We need the diversity of monastic communities, active orders like friars, and secular priests who may be married or celibate. Would it harm the work of priestly ministry if the law of universal celibacy were modified? (Theoretically it ought not to reduce the number who receive the vocation to celibacy from God.) The question can best be answered by considering the role which it plays in the priest's work. There are two kinds of qualifications for most jobs, those which are indispensable, and those which relate to the well-being of the work (which the text books used to describe as the *bene esse*). Doctors could not be exempted from the full course of medical studies, nor could teachers be excused their professional requirements. Yet there are other niceties which are not so vital. The Guards' regiments and the metropolitan police will employ only those men who are more than six feet tall. Nobody pretends that this is an essential requirement; and during the war, at a time of urgency, at least one of the Guards' regiments relaxed the requirement. Celibacy was never regarded as being more serious a requirement of the priest's life than the *bene esse*, since it could not be denied that for the first millenium

of the Church's history most of the parochial clergy were married. It is difficult to maintain that evaluation today, after Vatican II asserted the moral goodness of sex.³ The theological underpinning of the medieval legislation has vanished. It is now widely agreed that there is no convincing reason which can be invoked against the ordination of married men. It is invidious to ask whether the celibate clergy of the catholic Church show more devotion to their work than the married clergy of the other Churches. It cannot be proved theoretically, and no one who really knows the clergy of those Churches is likely to subscribe to it.

In practice there are some simple pitfalls which must be avoided. If the priests opt for celibacy in preference to marriage they should live in communities, as the early medieval reformers urged. No one should be compelled to live alone. It has many problems for psychological and emotional normality and is too negative to bring spiritual enrichment. Moreover there is little to recommend the life style of the average presbytery. It can so easily become a sort of selfish bachelorhood. Recently I was speaking to a group of catholics at a certain university. One of the post-graduate students remarked that the present life style of the secular clergy left them neither sufficiently involved in ordinary life to lead the apostolate nor adequately removed from it to assume the role of the prophet speaking from the desert.

It is important too that the Church as a whole must not preserve the law of clerical celibacy as an end in itself. *The Tablet*, of 26 March 1976, reported that the asian provincials of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate have asked the Vatican for permission to ordain married catechists. There are regions like Laos, under their care, where the fewness of priests has left the laity almost bereft of the sacraments. I leave this thought with you as a conclusion to this paper, since the wheel has not come full circle. As I said at the beginning, the clergy exist for the sake of the laity and not vice versa.

³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 49.