

# THE PRIEST IN COMMUNITY

By KEVIN KELLY

**O**F COURSE, the big difference is that unlike religious we diocesan priests are not bound by vow to living in community. We have a very different spirituality. We have to be able to live alone'. The words are mine; the sentiments are those of most diocesan priests. Something equivalent to this is said every time the issue of community is raised among diocesan priests.

In reality, a diocesan priest without a community is just as much a fish out of water as is a religious — perhaps even more so. As Schillebeeckx has pointed out in his recent book on ministry, in the early centuries of the Church a priest could only be ordained to the service of a particular community. This was because the very essence of priesthood involved a role in the community.

Deep in his bones the diocesan priest today still feels this need to 'belong'. Sometimes it is expressed very crudely ('have my feet under my own table') but ultimately it is a need to exercise one's ministry among a particular group of people. This has been borne out by the experience of the group of six priests who began the Skelmersdale Team Ministry of which I am now a member. For a while they all tried to be available to all the seven eucharistic communities which make up the Catholic Church in Skelmersdale. They felt that this was what team ministry was about. However, they soon discovered that the special contribution of the 'team' factor lay in co-operation and sharing between the different communities. This had introduced a style of ministry which was very appropriate to the Skelmersdale situation. But it was still dependent on the 'belonging' element which lay at the very heart of ministry. Each community still felt a need to identify with a priest who 'belonged' to them ('our priest') and each of the priests felt a similar need to 'belong' to one of the communities. This experience was not invalidated by the fact that it was necessary for one of the priests to belong to two communities nor by the fact that a subsequent reduction in the number of priests has meant that three of our four priests now have to belong to two communities. The very fact that we were forced to make such an unnatural arrangement (rather akin to polygamy) is clear evidence that a christian

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community needs a priest who 'belongs' to it and that somewhere in that lies the core of what being a diocesan priest is all about.

Community, therefore, is ingrained in the very bones of a diocesan priest. Without a community he is like a plant pulled up out of the soil. Of course, I am not suggesting that every diocesan priest has to be attached to a parish. But at the very least he needs to feel that in what he is doing (teaching in the seminary, curial or commission work, etc.) he still belongs to the family of communities which make up his diocese. Keeping in contact with his former community or with his fellow-priests is a way of maintaining that sense of belonging. If a diocesan priest loses this sense of belonging, I would fear for him. I do not mean that he is likely to resign from his priesthood. That might happen in some cases but I would be more afraid that his priesthood might lose its magic touch of 'personal community service' and instead be exercised as something which belongs to him as an individual rather than to the community he serves. Would there be some truth in saying that when the sense of 'belonging' goes clericalism enters in?

Community is at the heart of the spirituality of a diocesan priest. But it is a different form of community from that of the religious and therefore its practical results will also be different. For instance, for a diocesan priest living in community is not a necessary consequence. In fact, those of us who live in community (in Skelmersdale four of us live happily together in the same house) know the obstacles this puts in the way of our really 'belonging' to our local communities. I am not using that as an argument against living in community. I am merely suggesting that living in community, though it can offer great personal support to the priests, can also to some extent work against the deepest meaning of community in the life of the diocesan priest. Likewise, of course, living on one's own can also work against community. There are definite 'pros' and 'cons' for each style of life. But in the end whichever is chosen (or forced upon a priest by circumstances beyond his control), what really matters is that his style of living should help him belong to his community rather than escape from it. In other words, the argument in favour of living alone is that it enables the priest to live among the people and this can foster fuller insertion into and participation in the life of the local community; and the argument in favour of living in community is that, as well as offering a level of friendship and mutual support (depending on the quality of living in community, of course), it can prevent the local communities from becoming too separatist. A separatist christian community is not a living christian community. If a priest draws his personal identity from 'belonging' to such a community he might eventually discover that he has been buried alive.

*The priest's role in the community*

A few days ago our Skelmersdale team met with a similar team of priests and sisters from Liverpool. One of the group led us into a discussion about kingdom and Church and challenged us all to face the truth that the kingdom is where God's spirit is at work and this includes all men and women, the whole world and all levels of human activity. The kingdom is making itself present in life wherever and whenever injustice begins to give way to justice, hatred turns to love, enmity is replaced by forgiveness and reconciliation and so on. The Church is a much humbler and more modest reality. It is the little group of people who have been entrusted with the good news that the kingdom really is coming and that at the root of everything is a force for good which is 'personal' in the fullest sense imaginable and which, or rather who, is totally committed 'on our side' (that is, on the side of humanity) and in whose loving hands lies the final outcome of human history. Therefore, the Church's role is to spread this 'good news' so that those actively involved in kingdom-building may be affirmed and so that those who are the victims of anti-kingdom forces may be given hope and encouragement. Its role is also to acknowledge (or 'celebrate' through liturgy) the action of God's spirit bringing the kingdom into our history through the action of every man and woman struggling to promote justice and love at any and every level of personal and social living.

This has profound implications for the life of the christian community and for the role of the priest. First, the christian community does not exist for its own sake. 'See how these Christians love one another' is far from being a compliment if it means 'See how these Christians look after their own and are not concerned about anyone else'. A christian community is not a group of people who love each other. It is a group of people who want to share the good news that God loves everyone, especially those who might seem unlovable and who might even believe themselves to be unlovable. If a christian community only loves its own members, it is a living denial of the good news it claims to believe in. If a christian community has a special care for its own members, perhaps this should be because they also are neighbours rather than because they are fellow-Christians. This means that it is not necessarily a sign of a vibrant christian community if it has a whole network of caring services to look after all the needs of its members. Maybe the lack of such caring agencies for its members could be a sign that a local Church has reached such a level of maturity that its members are all involved in their own neighbourhoods and in local action groups and voluntary services and are thus more effectively loving all their neighbours both by personal caring and social and political action.

I am writing this a few hours after sharing in a most moving funeral Mass for Agnes, a greatly loved wife and mother in one of our local eucharistic communities. This leads me to question whether I really believe what I have just written. Does it ring true to the experience of the Church in Skelmersdale? Agnes belonged to St John's, a community which has a great bond of love between its members. There is a very deep level of caring and sharing among them. There was a tremendous turn-out for Agnes's funeral because she was very much loved by her community — as are her husband and her many sons and daughters. She was not just a 'neighbour' to be loved as part of one's christian duty. She was loved because of the person she was and her community loved her because they are a loving community.

Does that contradict what I have written earlier? Strangely, I do not think it does. The more I think about it, the more I come to understand what is unique about St John's community. It is not that it loves its own members, though it certainly does that. What is unique is the way in which this love has developed. Among many factors, two strike me as being particularly important.

First, Father Mac, the priest who 'belonged' to that community, enabled many of that community to share in a unique experience which has had its effect on the community as whole. He developed some major initiatives which were designed to give an experience of affirmation to a whole variety of disadvantaged men and women, young and old, from the general community at large. Quite naturally Father Mac's own community of St John's got involved in this work more and more. Whether or not they drew a salary for this was to my mind irrelevant. What really mattered was that they were *all* inspired by the 'good news' that these disadvantaged people were especially precious to God and had every right to a human experience which affirmed their dignity.

I feel that one thing which is unique about St John's community is that Father Mac led them to discover their own loveliness by encouraging many of them in kingdom work outside the normal Church structure. By involving them in loving the disadvantaged, they discovered in themselves an unsuspected ability to love. Consequently, when they met to celebrate the coming of the kingdom (slowly spreading like yeast in the fermentation process) through the memorial of the eucharist, they met as a group of people who were gradually growing more and more loving — and this made them all the more appreciative of each other too.

This introduces the second unique factor in St John's community, the character of its liturgy. St John's community liturgy with Father Mac presiding has never been an 'other-worldly' celebration. It has

always been a celebration of this life and therefore deeply rooted in what is happening in people's lives. People felt it relevant to their everyday experience and they also experienced the power and reality of the liturgy in the key moments of their lives. Father Mac's style of liturgy enabled them to appreciate (and celebrate) the presence of God in life. In fact, St John's have never had a church; their liturgy takes place in the hall of the Junior School. The liturgy did not distract them from the kingdom happening around them in real life. Rather it made them all the more aware of its gradual in-road all around them. It opened their eyes to where 'love' was really happening in their own lives and in the lives of their neighbours and it led them to active opposition to any forces working against love. So once again when they gathered to 'celebrate', they experienced their community (including Father Mac) as a group of people struggling to let love happen in their everyday lives and appreciating each other all the more for that. In such a context 'see how these Christians love one another' really is a compliment. It is recognizing the action of God's spirit of love. It is completely devoid of any sense of exclusivity. Anyone who wants to join in celebrating the action of God's love in his world will feel very much at home in St John's. That is why Agnes's funeral was so moving and so real. Father Mac's words made a deep impact on everyone. That was not because they were eloquent or clever words — it was because they were *true*. The community knew that from its own experience.

I feel this gives an important insight into the leadership role of the priest in the christian community. His leadership involves enabling the community to become more loving. But a deep love between the members of the community will only grow out of their shared experience of loving others, especially those most in need of love. They will only discover their true identity as Church by getting involved in kingdom-building activity and most of that will take place outside of Church structures and premises. Such involvement will give new and deeper meaning to their community liturgy — and will probably alter its form quite radically. They will be celebrating God's presence in their lives, not his absence away in some place quite outside of life.

All this might sound very idealistic but I have been privileged to catch glimpses of just how real it can be. Father Mac and St John's are a challenge to me as a priest. I use the word 'challenge' in the sense of encouragement and invitation. If I feel an element of threat too, perhaps that is no bad thing. Without acknowledging threat and allowing it to be transformed into its positive counterpart of liberation from a false security, there is little chance of growth in ourselves and in our communities.

That points to another important aspect of the priest's leadership role in the community. Because the good news of the gospel involves conversion, seeing things in a radically different way, the priest has to allow himself to be disturbed and he has to have the faith and courage to help others be disturbed too.

*Ministry rather than priesthood*

In the last few years I have found myself feeling very uneasy with the term 'priesthood' and I now prefer to think in terms of 'ministry'. This is not just a matter of semantics; it has very far-reaching pastoral implications.

'Priesthood' gives the impression of separating off a group of people who become different in kind to the rest of God's people; and this is especially marked in the Roman Catholic Church where this group is exclusively male and celibate. Clericalism is almost an inevitable development of 'priesthood'. 'Ministry' is more of a continuum. It denotes service with the Church and in the Church's mission and it is shared by a whole variety of people, men and women, married and single, in different ways and in varying degrees. Ministry is more about sharing than separation.

One of the services needed in the Church is that of presiding at the eucharist and breaking the word of God. Because the eucharist is so central to the life of the christian community, this service should not be approached too lightly. It is a ministry which needs proper ordering (ordination?) and that implies adequate preparation to develop understanding of the meaning of christian liturgy. It also implies a good grounding in interpreting the bible in the light of life today — and vice versa. What level of preparation is thought necessary for this ministry will vary from church to church and from community to community.

There is nothing in the nature of this ministry that demands that it should be a full-time ministry or that it should be confined to men and only to men who are not married. In fact, I would suggest the following list of priorities regarding the ordering of this ministry:

- (i) Since celebration of the eucharist is such an essential part of the life of the christian community, the ordering of things should be such that a community is never prevented from celebrating the eucharist for lack of a presiding minister.
- (ii) Since it is a celebration *of the community*, it would seem appropriate that normally the one who presides should actually 'belong' to the community.
- (iii) Since communication is so much at the heart of liturgical celebration, the one who exercises the ministry of presiding should be in tune with the thinking, feeling and experience of the community.

Leadership in the community is not the same ministry as presiding at the eucharist. According to modern theories of leadership, effective leadership in a community may often be shared among different members of the group.<sup>1</sup> However, I am not denying that presiding at the eucharist is *part* of the leadership role to be shared.

What I feel gives me my greatest personal identification with my ministry is the fact of my being a *full-time* minister. Full-time ministry is a pastoral disaster if the ministry being exercised is only part-time in its actual demands or if the full-time minister begins to take over the various part-time ministries which can be effectively exercised by others in the Church. To me the main role of the full-time minister will normally lie in fostering and supporting the various part-time ministries in the local community. The full-time minister will not *automatically* be *the* leader in the community, although if there is integrated leadership in the community, it would be surprising if he or she did not exercise some leadership roles.

I do not think that 'celibacy chosen for the kingdom' is in any way essential for the full-time minister and still less for the one presiding at the eucharist. However, I do believe that a 'celibate for the kingdom' has something of particular value to bring to the full-time ministry. This is not denying that the married full-time minister brings something to his or her ministry which a celibate person does not and cannot bring. Nor is it denying that in individual instances both celibacy and marriage can be a pastoral disaster seriously affecting the effectiveness of a person's ministry. I suppose that what I am saying at an experiential level is that for me personally my choice of 'celibacy for the kingdom' is intimately linked with my full-time ministry; yet even there the two are not absolutely inseparable since I hope that the 'heart' will not go out of my 'celibacy for the kingdom' if I become too old or too infirm to continue in the active ministry.

### *Support communities*

To say that a diocesan priest is rootless if there is no kind of community where he feels he really 'belongs' is not to say that that community provides him with all the support he needs. Because of the nature of his relationship with that community there will be times when he needs to get away from it if he is not to be totally devoured by it. Paradoxically perhaps the more he really 'belongs'

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Vollebergh's comments on 'integrated leadership' in *Minister? Pastor? Prophet?* ed. Grollenberg, *et. al.* (London, 1980), pp 47-52.

to his community, the more need there is for him to create some personal space for himself.

Where does a priest go when he gets away? Everyone is different, obviously. But I feel that the experience of 'belonging' enters in here too. Wherever the priest goes, he needs to feel that he 'belongs' there too. He needs to feel accepted and secure. For some priests where they most deeply experience 'belonging' is among a group of fellow-priests who have developed a good friendship between them. This is good. It would be unfair to dismiss it as clerical exclusiveness. Other priests find this sense of 'belonging' among their own family. However, the needs of ageing parents and the changing family situations of brothers and sisters will alter the nature of this relationship from time to time. After all, the support of a community where we 'belong' is not a one-way street. To 'belong' implies sharing; not just sharing my own joys and sorrows but also sharing the joys and sorrows of other members of the community where I belong. There can be phases in life during which a priest's family responsibilities make major inroads not just on his time but also on his emotional and even physical energies. This can be hard for us but we should not resent or refuse the demands put on us. Perhaps a sign of 'clericalism' is when a priest's relationship with his family is purely one of receiving everything and giving nothing. A 'cleric' does not really 'belong' to his own family.

Some priests experience a sense of 'belonging' among a particular circle of friends. Such support communities can be a tremendous help to priests, especially when the circle of friends includes married couples and are not just male enclaves. Once again the two-way traffic of 'belonging' will enter in here very deeply.

Some priests find a sense of 'belonging' with a particular family or even with a particular person. To draw all one's support from such a particular relationship might be more problematic. This would be especially true if the only place where a priest felt he really 'belonged' was in the company of a particular woman. It seems to be an incontrovertible fact that many very good priests gain tremendous support in their priestly ministry from a deep relationship with a woman. Such a deep relationship is possible without its inevitably leading to marriage, though popular expectations regarding the lifestyle of a priest may bring in all sorts of unnecessary complications for such a relationship. Sometimes an element of clandestinity has to be introduced and this creates special tensions and problems within the relationship. Possibly a number of such relationships end in marriage because an enforced clandestinity begins to corrode the goodness of the non-marriage relationship. Nevertheless, I believe that ultimately it is the current discipline of obligatory celibacy

which creates and sustains this unhealthy situation. Those defending the present discipline argue that celibacy is still a free choice and so priests should be expected to be faithful to their life-commitments in the same way as married people are. Leaving aside the marriage parallel (I have explored the question of lifelong love in marriage in my recent book),<sup>2</sup> I think that this argument is a little out of touch with real life. It is truer to say that the basic commitment made by the one being ordained is to be a *loving priest* and celibacy is accepted as a way of loving. If in the course of his growth in the priestly ministry a man finds that celibacy is becoming an obstacle to his growing as a loving priest (and this seems to happen to quite a few priests), then it would not seem to be a retraction of his original basic commitment if he decides to marry. This is where the inhumanity of the Church's present discipline is seen most clearly. Many priests are crucified by the process of having to wrestle with a dilemma which is unchristian — and which should be quite unnecessary. These priests want to continue to grow as loving priests (and some I have known personally are exceptionally loving priests who 'belong' to their communities). However, they are put into the terrible dilemma of having to choose either to continue to grow as a loving person (and cease working as a priest) or to continue working as a priest (and cease growing as a loving person). It would be unfair to suggest that the first of these two choices is for a purely human value, whereas the second is specifically christian. This would imply that the only christian choice would be to choose the second, that is continue in the priesthood but gradually dry up as a loving person. On the contrary, it could be argued that to choose the second alternative is to choose something anti-human. And what could be more unchristian than that? In fact, owing to the unwanted, radical upheaval of life which the current situation forces on any priest who makes the first choice, it could be that such a decision draws him to a deeper act of faith in God than any he has previously made.

### *Conclusion*

There is a whole host of other issues which need to be looked at when the subject of the priest and community is being examined. I have merely touched on a few issues which seem to be to be linked to the roots of many of our problems. It might be objected that for the most part what I have written is not of any immediate pastoral help to us diocesan priests. Perhaps this is true. But in the long term it is only by going to the roots of our problems that we are able to work out any really satisfactory practical pastoral solution.

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<sup>2</sup> Kelly, K.: *Divorce and second marriage* (London, 1982).