

EXTENDING ORDAINED MINISTRY

By MARGARET ULLOA

I RECENTLY ATTENDED AN ORDINATION which said much in the drama of the liturgy about how the Church has come to expect its faithful to view priesthood. In word and dress and movement, the small and powerful clerical group made statements to the large, mostly passive, congregation, statements which thirty or forty years ago might truly have expressed the understanding of both clerics and lay people. Now, however, as the response to the ordination showed, many of the 'faithful' are no longer able to offer the old unquestioning acceptance of what has become the standard perception of the priestly role during this century.

The candidate for ordination was a widower, being ordained in the parish where he had lived, and the ceremony was attended by many people who had known him and his wife, as well as by his adult children. Much love and care had been lavished by the parishioners on the preparation of the liturgy, and it was clear that there had been a real desire to incorporate his children, who sat at the front surrounding their father, although throughout the ceremony there was no reference to them in words.

The first impact came when he was called from the side of his daughters, on to the physically separate sanctuary, to join a large and visually very impressive group of ritually robed males into which the ordinand in his alb blended perfectly. This conveyed an almost tangible sense of 'other', heightened when one daughter was allowed (unobtrusively) on to the sanctuary to help him to vest – the only woman, incidentally, who passed the altar rail at any stage of the service. But it had a sense of being a farewell to her father, a giving up of 'dad' as he became one of this powerful group whose distance from us was emphasized by every part of the ceremony. The homily, beautifully given and in many ways thoughtfully personal, made no reference to the ordinand's marriage or family other than to say that he had his own special saint in heaven – there was not so much as a suggestion that his experience of family life might have given him something extra to offer in his ministry, nor that it represented an unusual degree of sharing in the real-life experience of most of those who were present.

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More striking than all of this for me was meeting one of his children afterwards. She said quite quietly, with an air of being caught between anger and resignation, 'They've taken our dad away,' a statement revealing a definite feeling that she was not personally connected to that 'They', the hierarchical Church that her father had now joined. And, listening to parishioners, it was soon clear that for every person who still wished to kiss his hands with the old awe of his new mystical power, there were two or three left with a sense of unease and discomfort despite the real beauty of the ceremony and their own unfamiliarity with articulating their sensations.

It seems to me that these reactions say something about a ground-level change of feeling regarding the nature of the ordained ministry. They encapsulate a sense, still not very coherent, that this narrow range of possible ministers, and this separation of those ministers from 'ordinary' people, is somehow not meeting the needs that those people are experiencing in their daily effort to live the Christian life. 'I can't talk to Father about that!' is not such a rare comment; in the preparation of this article many people were asked whose advice they might seek under different circumstances, and the questions often brought answers such as, 'Oh, I'd rather talk to a woman about that', or 'Well, the priest wouldn't be able to understand me, so I wouldn't bother him'. The speakers had not necessarily got as far as concluding that women or married men should be ordained, but there was certainly a consensus that what the official Church deems to be an all-sufficient pastoral ministry is not fulfilling that role.

It might well be argued that such inarticulate expressions of uncertainty about a ministry which is so central to our present understanding of the Catholic Church should not be taken too seriously. A feeling, a disquiet, is after all hardly grounds for theological or disciplinary change. But perhaps this movement, hardly more than a murmur in Britain although much louder elsewhere, should be heard as the murmur of the people among whom Christ chose to live and work and to whom he preached in a language they knew.

While he was on earth Christ revealed himself as the perfect communicator. Through his incarnation, he utterly identified himself with those who were to receive his communication . . . He preached the divine message without fear or compromise. He adjusted to his people's way of talking and to their pattern of thought. And he spoke out of the predicament of their time.¹

This article looks at the question of whether the Roman Catholic Church is justified in the restrictions it places on eligibility for ordained

ministry, and looks, not with the eye of theologian, sociologist or philosopher, but with that of the plain people of Jesus, who, living bound by 'the predicament of their time', are often the first to perceive the needs of the Church of *now*, but whose way of talking is not always easily heard and understood by those who should have the overview and who do have the power to answer those needs.

It is sometimes suggested that the restrictions placed by the Church on those who qualify for ordination are not justified when considered in the light of the decrease in numbers of those offering themselves for ordination at the present time. It is of course true that there has been a sharp decline in ordinations in certain countries, and an even sharper decline in the proportion of ordained priests to the rest of the Catholic population. There has also been a huge exodus from the ordained ministry, with somewhere between 90,000 and 110,000 priests who have left the official ministry in the last thirty years. The consequence is that large areas of the world, such as the United States, clearly do not have an adequate number of priests to permit the form of eucharist-centred and priest-centred parish life to which we have become accustomed as the standard practice of Catholicism. Even in this country, parishes which twenty years ago were staffed by two or three priests are now staffed by one, or share a priest with another parish. Daily mass, or a visit from a priest during a period of sickness, which used to be regarded as the norm, are now something of a luxury.

Despite the success of attempts to increase lay participation in such ministries as giving communion or visiting the sick, the central role of the ordained priest as organizer, supervisor, and indeed permitter of such activities, has very often meant that the role of lay ministers is at best secondary, certainly in the western world. Even the introduction of the married diaconate has done little to alleviate the lack of ministers. As with lay ministers, the control exercised by the priest has been paramount: in fact, in many parishes, the married deacon has only been permitted a marginal role, and the lay people have rarely been encouraged to view his ministry as particularly significant. Much is said about sharing ministries; much is proclaimed about the importance of lay people in the running of parishes and of the Church. Most priests and bishops speaking of this refer to the 'vocations crisis' making lay participation essential, a rationale which implies that lay people are second best, but we now have to make do with them. Few indeed are the priests and bishops who are willing to accept parish councils and deanery meetings where the opinion of lay participants is given equal status with that of clerical participants, and fewer still those who have

the courage to release any of their power in reality. As a result, the introduction of lay participation has in some ways served to underline the centrality of the ordained priest, and to reinforce the received notion that the functioning of the Church and most of our spiritual lives revolve around this essential sacred figure.

This has in many cases resulted in a sense of great loss and need on the part of lay Catholics, and in the United States has actually given birth to a movement called 'Celibacy is the Issue', better known as 'Rent-a-priest'. This organization, which is attracting increasing numbers of supporters, was started by a very determined Catholic business-woman, Louise Haggett, who was appalled by the fact that her elderly and infirm mother was unable to receive the attentions of a priest when she desperately wished for them for the simple reason that there was no priest physically near enough to attend to her. She was led to investigate the shortage of priests and came to the conclusion that mandatory celibacy was the principal cause. She discovered at the same time that large numbers of those who had left the active ministry were still deeply committed to the notion of priesthood, so she put her considerable organizational talent to work to bring the need and the desire for service together, creating a directory of married priests who now perform weddings, baptisms and funerals, and are available for all pastoral services. The organization claims a justification in canon law for these activities, but what is interesting from the point of view of this article is not whether or not their actions are licit. It is the incontrovertible fact that a very large number of American Catholics find that this directory of trained and available ministers fulfils a real need for them.

In reality, however, this group, which seems so outrageous and daring in its approach, is actually very conservative. It breaks little new ground other than in its willingness to be less dependent on the hierarchy and in its acceptance of married men as ministers, and both of these have plenty of historical precedent. What 'Rent-a-priest' is doing is plugging gaps in the leaking wall instead of looking at the building materials and replacing them. Nevertheless, they should not be blamed for this, since those who express these needs have been taught and encouraged from childhood to be dependent on the ministry of the priest, and the Church is not offering them realistic alternatives now that these ministers are no longer freely available.

When any section of the Catholic community expresses pastoral need, it should certainly lead us to look for ways of caring for those who are feeling that need, and a decline in numbers entering seminaries should cause us to ask questions about why candidates are not coming

forward. Moreover, the large numbers of women who *are* presenting themselves for ordination should also give rise to questions, especially since believing communities all over the world are beginning to make known their acknowledgement of the vocation of these women. We should however be aware of the danger in simplistic answers to such questions. Even if the ordination of women would give the Church sufficient pastors, or mandatory celibacy were the main cause of the present decrease in numbers – a very debatable point – justifying a change in restrictions on ordained ministry because there is an insufficient number of the accepted type of ordained minister is unsatisfactory. In the first place, qualifications for ministry should be based on the nature of the ministry itself. The Driver Vehicle Licensing Centre would not change its demands on the skills needed to become a Heavy Goods Vehicle driver if only a few were coming forward. Neither should the Church change standards simply in response to a crisis: although in the light of the crisis it might well look at the appropriateness of the standards it is setting, it is not the crisis which has caused the standards to be inappropriate.

Moreover, to extend the categories of people eligible for ministry in its present form is simply a case of looking for new ways to provide the old answers. Such an attitude will only serve to close us in upon our ‘problems’ and make us look for sticking-plaster solutions which do not touch the real challenges that these questions could potentially lead us to address. Maybe we are being asked for a little bit of gospel courage and open-mindedness here, like those experienced fishermen Peter and Andrew whom Jesus asked to make a leap of faith which defied all their previous knowledge of the fishing industry. They had to cast their nets according to the time and place set by the lateral thinking of Jesus, even though this meant breaking the established rules and leaving behind practices hallowed by the wisdom of years. ‘And when they had done this, they netted such a huge number of fish that their nets began to tear’ (Luke 5:6).

The first question which we need to address, in the spirit of risk-taking shown by the Apostles, is whether the accepted model of the ordained priest is still the model that the Church needs. Other articles in this issue deal thoroughly with this question, but it must be touched upon here, since the ‘male and celibate’ restriction implies a specific sort of priestly ministry. In this model, the priest is set apart, the powerful, male, ritually pure mediator between God and the ‘ordinary’ members of the community, namely, the males of less consequence and all the females. In consequence of his freedom from sexual ties, he is

seen to be free to serve. But there is also, however much this is denied in theory, the implication that the celibate state is holier. There are clear traces here of the old belief that women are impure; copies can still be found of lives of the saints which tell admiringly of such purity as that of St Aloysius, who refused to look at his mother while taking the breast. Impure woman, therefore, cannot aspire to priesthood, and the priest preserved from contact with women is as a result in a state of life superior to the rest of us. This is an untenable position from a theological point of view but it is life for a great many Catholics: how often do you hear someone say, 'Ah, Father Joe's a great bloke! He's good for a laugh, and he'll have a smoke and a drink with anyone!' The unspoken part of such a comment is that it is *despite* his holy state that Father Joe does such things, and that he is something of rarity in this respect. The general expectation of the priest is that he lives in a separate realm from those over whom he exercises his benevolent powers; he is not necessarily to be expected to have a deep understanding of the lay person's life. There is more than a grain of truth in the old chestnut about the elderly lady commenting to her friend about a sermon on marriage: 'Wasn't that a lovely sermon, now! I wish to God I knew as little about marriage as Father!'

Not every lay person finds this unsatisfactory, of course; to be ruled by kindly authority is a very secure position which takes away the uncomfortable demands of decision-making and taking active responsibility in the Christian community. But there is an increasing number who do find it unsatisfactory, and who are not content with the 'power' model of priesthood. It is instructive to listen to priests who have left the active ministry. Commonly they are supposed to have found the strain of celibacy too much to bear, and so they leave to marry. In fact, while a few do leave because they do not accept compulsory celibacy, the majority leave because they have come to reject a clerical system of which compulsory celibacy is merely one expression. While most of these men feel the desire to serve which took them into ministry in the first place, they do not feel that it can be properly exercised within the present church system. Even in the unlikely event that they were asked to return, very few of them would be willing to return to a full-time priestly ministry in the present hierarchical structure, because such a return would not address fundamental problems about clericalism and the precise role of the priest in the community. On the other hand, many of these men are now ministering in different ways in response to the demands of particular communities, sometimes more or less within the church structure and

sometimes out of it, but always in response to what seems to be the call of the gospel through the needs of the people. It is too glib an answer to their actions to write them off as renegades; the Church should really be taking seriously the fact that approximately *one-fifth* of its trained and dedicated élite personnel are making the most effective comment possible on their role by leaving it, usually at great personal cost and frequently material cost too. No other human organization would choose to ignore so clear a statement.

It is also interesting to look at the evolution of thought in the Federation of Married Priests' organizations. This Federation represents about 30,000 married priests and their families and sympathizers in about thirty countries. They do not all have the same theological or pastoral outlook, and they have very different levels of involvement in the official Church, both as groups and on a personal level. Its members represent those for whom ministry within the Church is still a vital issue. Every three years they meet for an International Congress, and a clear development of understanding of ministry has been visible in the final statement from each Congress. Initially they accepted the *status quo* about the role of the priest and regarded 'as indispensable the reappointment of all married priests who are willing to serve into the official ministry'.² But even at their first meeting there was an awareness that 'the Church must give greater consideration to the particular charisms of women and should initiate full equality for women in the Church'.³ The experience of marriage had changed their attitudes; living among the people was beginning to awaken them to an awareness of the needs of the people.

Subsequent Congresses have shown these first thoughts opening up into something much more far-reaching, and far less clerical, in orientation. Few Federation members now demand reintegration into the system. Instead, they have become more and more aware of the realities faced by Christian communities, and freer and freer in their willingness to respond to their needs, so that the last Congress in Madrid in 1993 stated: 'We are conscious that we form part of the people of God because we intend to create communities of freedom and justice in which it is possible to live the message of the Gospel'.⁴

This changing attitude was not merely the result of a great deal of thinking, but also of a great deal of living. Leaving the official ministry threw most of these priests into a hitherto unknown world in which they had to struggle to live out their Christianity without status or power. Often, to the very great surprise of some of them, they found it easier to meet with and live gospel values away from the church

institution. At any rate, within and without the institution they began to perceive needs for ministry and community leadership which did not correspond to what they had learned in the seminaries, and to become aware that the ordained ministers that the Church has at present are frequently not meeting the needs of many sections of the Church. Most national organizations of married priests now campaign for the rights of *all* suitable candidates to ordained ministry, and publicly support the movements for the ordination of women. The statements of their organizations are part of that murmur of the people which has gone for a long time without a clear voice, but which is beginning to force itself to be heard.

The powerful and paternalistic model of priest may have been appropriate when society consisted largely of people who had no access to education and only a very narrow range of personal experience on which to draw. The rejection of the possibility of inherent goodness in sexuality based on false assumptions about the relative roles of body and spirit can be explained in terms of an earlier worldview which has long since disappeared. The non-status of women was understandable in an age which almost never gave them the chance to show who and what they were. But society has changed. The fundamental change that has taken place is that the old negative attitudes to women, to sexuality and to things of the body, which led to the notion that the ordained minister must demonstrate a heroic asceticism to be worthy of his role, no longer match the lived experience of thinking Christians. Education, at least in the west, is available to all, and we are encouraged to think. Even within the Church, we are asked to think for ourselves. But this has far-reaching consequences. We can see that our leaders and pastors are educated to maintain a traditional pattern of discipline and practice no longer relevant, despite the cosmetic changes brought about by encouraging later entry into the seminaries, and talking to them about understanding their sexuality. We can see too that a great many, even of those who remain in the system, do not live according to that pattern, and that the lives of many women are deeply damaged by this – a situation which is a scandal and a cancer in the heart of the Church.

We have access to media that bring the world to our living-rooms and force us to look for ourselves. We live in a society full of racism and injustice, with marriages under pressure and parents fighting to bring their children safely and thoughtfully into the adult world. We know of the efforts made to establish the rights of women, and the struggle to make those rights into a reality. We live among the

cardboard cities and the dole queues. Ministers, however good their intentions and however great their desire to serve, if they speak to us from a position of security and superiority which does not share our experiences, will continue to lose credibility and will not be joined by those young people who might otherwise seek to serve the Church.

There is little point in rehearsing the arguments in favour of optional celibacy or of ordaining women. Both of these have been thrashed out over and over again. In the case of optional celibacy the presence of increasing numbers of married convert priests accepted as Catholic priests makes it impossible to take seriously any argument in favour of compulsory celibacy. In the case of ordaining women, the arguments against, largely based on a mixture of tradition and fear, do not stand up when looked at in the light of the Anglican experience. But the point is not that the Church should ordain this or that category of person: we need to be more daring and to look further than this.

A structure based on the large centralized parish run by the decision-making parish priest imposed on that parish by a higher authority no longer fulfils our needs. We need to look at the kind of eucharistic communities that our present lives require, and not be afraid to say that the pattern of Catholic practice may need to change. It is the celebration of the Eucharist in the believing community which is essential; that community may take many forms other than those to which we are accustomed. Why should we not have a variety of types and sizes of community? Why should those communities not return to an earlier practice of the Church and propose to the bishop for ordination those leaders who emerge naturally, or who are perceived by the community as having the requisite gifts, or who feel called to offer this service to their own brothers and sisters? These small communities, maybe base communities, street communities, a house of enclosed religious, a group united by a particular apostolate, could be part of a network of communities that would parallel the present parish. The essential requirements in each community would be met by the gifts of that community, with responsibilities shared between a number of members, not asking of the one ordained to preside at the Eucharist that he or she be all things to all people. The needs of such communities would differ, and the qualities necessary to their pastors would vary.

It is the contention of this article that the sex or marital status of the one who presides at the community's Eucharist is an absolute irrelevance. Instead of having a set of rules about who may be ordained to serve the community, we should have instead a list of abilities and characteristics that would be essential to an ordained minister, leaving

each community to decide for itself the particular characteristics which its members require in a pastor. In this way we would permit the Spirit to distribute 'different gifts to different people just as he chooses' (1 Cor 12:11) without impeding the Spirit's work in the community by our fearful clinging to what has served us in the past.

NOTES

¹ *Pastoral instruction on the means of social communication*, no 11 in *Vatican Council II: the conciliar and post-conciliar documents*, ed Austin Flannery, p 297.

² Synod of Chiusi (1983), 'Message to the Church' in *The Church and married priests* (Paris: IFMCP, 1993), p 10.

³ *Ibid.*, p 10.

⁴ Final Message of the Third International Congress of the IFMCP, Madrid, 1993.