

The Continuing Dialogue Of Love

Archbishop Vincent Nichols was the Keynote Speaker at this year's NCP. In the first of his two talks he looked at the issues surrounding on-going formation of priests in ministry, underlining the purpose of all formation – which is to help us to discover our God-given vocation and to conform us to Christ.

As a youngster, I was often asked questions that caused me considerable disquiet. Among them was the question: “What are you going to be when you grow up?” It was a difficult question because it seemed so important, so definite: what are you going to be? And I had no idea of the answer. I had some vague thoughts, or even hopes: a long-distance lorry driver; a musician; a professional geographer. But I had no idea or sense of purpose. I suppose the same question today is put less dramatically, more prosaically, more in the mode of the functionalism of our times. The question today is, probably, “What are you going to do when you leave school, when you graduate?”

I recall, too, that in the question of my youth, there was always an all-or-nothing quality to it. It was a ‘life choice’ and, in considering it, we were always advised to think of the long-term consequences. I remember my father telling me to look carefully at pension provision. Clearly I didn’t!

Less About Doing Than About Being

As a response to that question, ‘What are you going to be?’ priesthood is always much more about being than doing. A priestly vocation is not a modern day career choice. The life of a priest, while encompassing a whole range of tasks, roles, skills, has at its heart a sense of identity, identity-in-relationships. It is this that is basic to our lives. And it is this, as I hope to explore, which is central to the formation of a priest, both prior to ordination and in the course of his life.

In exploring questions of priestly formation, I am going to begin with the ‘post-ordination’ issues. It’s always easier to talk about other people, in another place. And much of the discussion about seminaries seems just that. Often the challenges we face today, and the shortcomings we experience, are referred back, very quickly, to the seminary. “It didn’t prepare me for today’s tasks.” “They should do more about school governorship in the seminary; more about youth work, about ecumenism, about inter-faith relations, about globalisation, about social analysis, about understanding gender difference.” We could all add to that long list with which to fill the years of formation in the seminary.

Taking Ourselves Seriously

But the approach I would like to take is to start with us today, here and now. How deeply do we ponder our own on-going formation? How seriously do we take it? How much time do we give? I think when we have some positive answers to these questions then we might have some basis on which to address the task of formation in the pre-ordination years. My own experience suggests that those involved in pre-ordination formation take their tasks very seriously indeed. I think we, in our post-ordination period, have a lot of catching up to do.

In October 1990 a Synod of Bishops was held on 'The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day'. I was a 'hanger-on' at that Synod and remember well some of the dynamic. It got off to a good start with plenty of vigorous speeches laying down requirements for priestly formation. But before long it became clear that issues of formation alone were not going to give shape or substance to the discussion. Rather what was needed – and not evidently present – was a shared understanding of the identity of the priest. The net result was that fully half of the final outcome of that Synod – the Papal Exhortation '*Pastores Dabo Vobis*' - is to do with the identity and life of the priest. After all it is that identity and life which his formation must serve. It is that identity and life which gives shape to that formation if it is to be radically pertinent and not just functionally pragmatic.

Central to *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, and to our identity as priests, is, of course, the notion, the fact, the experience, of vocation. 'Vocation' and 'identity'. Two words with which we're very familiar. Two substantial words. Two words the weight of which we can easily feel – and feel to be oppressive.

Priestly Identity: Being Who I Am By Grace

Let me offer some thoughts. Identity first: priestly identity. I remember reading '*The Agony and the Ecstasy*' and one passage stuck. It was Michelangelo's description of how he approached a block of carefully mined marble, at the beginning of a sculpture. He contemplated the block until he could see the figure he was to fashion encased, imprisoned in the stone. His sculpting was then the work of releasing what was encased in the block. So he could work with a frantic energy, setting free what was already within.

Our identity as priests is like that. It's a mistake to think that our priestly identity is something we put on, like a collar. It isn't. Rather it's something already written within us. It is who we are 'from my mother's womb'. It's not, then, an imposition, a role, an unreasonable expectation – though it can feel like that. Neither is it something, like a collar, that we can put aside for a while. No. Priestly identity is who we are, at the deepest level. It is both self-discovery and self-fulfilment.

Yet being a priest is not something we can produce or proclaim for ourselves. It is a gift. It is the work of God. Priesthood is, in that classically Catholic term, the work both of nature, who I am, and of grace, the intervening presence of the Holy Spirit.

Vocation – The Dialogue of Love

The second word 'vocation' tells us how this identity comes about: always and only in dialogue. Vocation is call and response. Vocation is the eventually unmistakable summons of God and the response of love – at times heroically given (and we've all done that) and at times grudgingly so.

We all, each of us, experience this priestly vocation and ensuing identity differently. But however it comes, and stays, it is at the heart of priesthood. Our living of that priesthood depends on our response to that call and our fidelity to our deepest self. Our priesthood develops accordingly, or it gradually crumbles away. And, from time to time, our priesthood is resurrected precisely from these two sources.

The call to be a priest is not given once and for all. It is proclaimed to me by God, whispered perhaps, every day and every moment of every day. It is God's eternal call to me, never withdrawn no matter how well or poorly I respond within the tangle of my daily life. An on-going call; an on-going vocation; an on-going, ever changing identity; an on-going formation.

Pastores Dabo Vobis has many profound ways of addressing these two words. It's worth reading again. But I want to pick out just three key themes.

'Priestly identity, like every Christian identity, has its source in the Blessed Trinity which is revealed and communicated to us in Christ, establishing in him and through the Spirit, the Church as the seed and beginning of the Kingdom' (Para. 12).

In that quote we have all our points of reference. Our priesthood is centred on Christ, taking on a Trinitarian shape, lived in the Church, directed to the Kingdom.

Yes, the call comes from the Father. That call to life from the Father echoes in so much of what we do: attempting to bring life, healing, new hope. Yes, the identity of the priest is of being drawn into 'conformity with Christ, the Head and Shepherd' as the document repeatedly states. Yes, its setting is 'to live and work by the power of the Holy Spirit' in all the relationships which make up the Church. Yes, the purpose of the call, as of every Christian vocation, is to take a particular part in the mission of Christ in the Church, to be the sign and sacrament of salvation in the world.

This is the identity that lies in the heart of every priest, that I could neither reach nor formulate as a youngster. This is the identity that is released, set free by the grace of ordination. It's an identity which creates a particular bond with Christ – as does every Christian vocation, each in its own way – and which can be sustained only within a living relationship with Christ.

The Fatherhood of the Priest

Now the three particular points from *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. Firstly, the document reminds (cf. PDV n.15) of the action which flows from priestly identity: to be, in the name of Christ, ministers of Word and Sacrament and to have the care of souls. These are our bread and butter: to preach, to celebrate sacraments and to practise pastoral care, pastoral love of the people. And to do all three in the person of Christ, the Head and Shepherd.

Paul McPartlan reflects on that difficult identity of the priest as 'Head' in the August-September, 2003 *Priests and People*. He points out that the life of the Trinity has its centre-point and source in the Father and relates this to the nature of the Christian community. Because it reflects the life of the Trinity:

"Every Christian community rightly has its central figure, for example the priest in the parish, the bishop in the diocese and the pope among bishops, but there must also be mutuality and the valuing of diversity."

This is what we experience. This is what we may properly strive for. Perhaps here we have a hint of the appropriateness of the title 'Father', rather than the alternative 'reverend' which we often are not. Furthermore, this sacramental role, of speaking and acting in the name of Christ, the one sent by the Father as the Head of the Church,

is not something we can avoid, share or delegate. Rather every word and action of a priest is received by the faithful within this framework of belief. Hence our wrongdoings are the more deeply scandalous, our shortcomings, irritability disproportionately hurtful and our kindnesses unexpectedly creative. This is so by the nature of our identity in Christ, because of the call we have been given by the will of the Father, lived under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in as much as we permit.

Members of the Presbyterate

Secondly, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (n.17) underlines the need for ours to be a life to be a life of communion – with both our brother priests and our bishops. One thing is clear: no priest can live his vocation well, nor fulfil his calling, as a solo artist. This bond between us – as priests – is essential. It is a dimension of our identity for which each has responsibility for the other. It can become crucial in times of crisis; it can be a source of joy and encouragement at others. It is a responsibility of each to the other that translates into hospitality, attentiveness, mutual concern. It is always in need of imaginative rejuvenation. It is a crucial part of our identity and vocation.

Being Servants Of Communion

And thirdly (PDV n.18), the horizons opened up by the priest's vocation and identity are widely set. He understands himself, his particular identity and purpose, correctly only in this wide context and in all the relationships it entails. Alongside others, he seeks the truth. Alongside others, he serves justice and builds peace. Together with others he seeks to proclaim the Gospel, construct the Church as a signpost and sacrament of the Kingdom. The priest is, essentially, a man of the communion of the Church: communion of life in Father, Son and Holy Spirit, communion of life with every baptised person, communion of effort in building up the Body of Christ, communion in and for mission, which is the ultimate purpose of it all. To this *communio* the priest brings his identity and calling, which no one else replicates. But he brings it in dialogue, in cooperation, or, as we like to say, in collaborative ministry.

We must hold on to these three points: the priest's identity formed in his sacramental bond with Christ, Head and Shepherd; the priest within the presbyterate; the priest always in the service of communion. These lie at the heart of our ongoing formation. They are its essential focus. In an appreciation of them we must find the motivation, the desire for our own on-going formation. Without a living appreciation of these dimensions of ourselves, programmes of ongoing formation – and they are countless – lie undersubscribed or cancelled. Perhaps those providing the formation opportunities have lost at times this essential and fundamental focus. Perhaps we, the punters, have lost it. Either way – or both ways – we need to recover it.

Hearing Our Call Day By Day

There are many pressures on the priest – and bishops, too. Most of them do not exactly push us in the direction of our 'ongoing formation'. Most of these pressures, but not all, do not directly concern our fundamental identity and vocation. But despite all the pressures we experience, or better still, within them, the one thing that is essential for us is to keep fresh our sense of vocation and identity, from which we will draw strength to bear the burdens of the day.

It is a truth that I acknowledge more and more each passing year: the vocation by which I am a priest comes to me afresh each day. I have to hear and respond to Christ

each day. As Isaiah says, “Each day I awake with a disciple’s ear.” Listening is the mode in which to set out. Each day my deepest identity needs to be set afresh – strengthened in that one-to-one relationship with Christ to whom I will lend my voice, my heart, my hands. In as much as I fail to tap into that call each day, fail to find afresh the response of love, fail to sense again that this is who I most deeply am, then I will be doing no more than going through the motions.

This is what happens: preaching becomes a chore and becomes pre-emptory; celebration becomes dulled and that of an automation; visiting ceases; rings on the bell or on the phone are an intrusion into my private time; collaborative ministry seems like the latest fad and a nuisance because it creates more meetings; and on-going formation, if it is not avoided altogether, is judged in pragmatic terms only: the acquiring of some useful skills or ready-made solutions to practical problems. But let me not continue down this route. We all know it well, without exception. We know how distant we can become from that original enthusiasm. We know how the role of the priest – or archbishop – can take centre-stage, pushing into the background the God-given, Christ centred personal vocation which, in God’s providence, has led me to this day, this set of tasks, this painful dilemma, this joyous celebration.

Developing Our Vocation

The on-going formation of the priest is misunderstood when it is viewed as a task or knowledge-centred professional development. Such professional development has its place, of course, for there are so many tasks which we should carry out with professional competence. To fail to do so is, increasingly, inexcusable. Rather, the on-going formation of the priest is always centred on vocational development: the refreshing, deepening, filling out of the call given to each of us to be bound to Christ in this sacrament; to work together as a presbyterate; to live and act always in the service of communion.

So every opportunity of on-going formation needs to have these qualities or characteristics: Firstly, it needs to be, deliberately, conducive to a deepening of our relationship with the Lord. Whatever the subject matter, whatever the setting, on-going formation needs to recognise and affirm the centrality to our lives of the ‘vocation-dialogue’ with the One who calls. I wonder if, in this, we have something to learn from the widespread practice among other Christians of starting each day with study of a bible text. There a tone is established, and all study set in its primary context.

The second characteristic is that in our continuing vocational development there will always be clear opportunities for deepening the ‘communitarian form’ of our life and work. On-going formation will serve to strengthen the presbyterate.

The third key characteristic is that this on-going formation will help us to understand our ministry, and to act, in service of the communion of the Church. This means, I think, that the ecclesiology of communion will always be central to the themes and manner of study, and indeed of the practice and organisation of the courses.

This last point is relevant in many ways. Think of the way in which we, quite properly, learn from the good management, planning and organisational development practices from other areas of human activity. There is much for us to learn. Yet the

setting, the fundamental relationships within which we live in the Church, mean that those insights and techniques have to be tempered and reshaped in order to be of service to our ecclesiology.

Getting Away and Getting Feedback

These three qualities should characterise our on-going vocational development. They give rise to some further practical pointers. For me, the best kind of formation requires a reasonable period away from the daily setting – not just a quick mid-week break. It requires a setting, context or environment which is genuinely and deliberately ‘religious’. The location and physical setting is important. So too is the encouragement of a ‘community spirit’ a lived spirit of *communio* for the duration of the course. This is supported by a suitable timetable, allowing time for proper rest, for sufficient prayer and for that wonderful personal chatter and exchange which is often the best feature of on-going formation.

I think that we should be seeking to organise ourselves so that such significant periods away can be provided, with a longer ‘sabbaticals’ available every seven or ten years. I know some dioceses are doing this. Then, I would hope, we can begin to make better use of some of the excellent facilities we have, not least those attached to the seminaries abroad.

What might be the content, the focus of study, of the time spent in on-going vocational development? The ‘providers’ of on-going formation, and that includes not only such residential centres, but also diocesan officers and bishops, do spend time trying to assess demand and test the market. They use evaluation sheets at the end of every course and much else besides. Yet in the end it is a buyer’s market. The customer has to be won over. The customer can have almost whatever he wants. But the crucial question is consistently: does the customer actually really want anything?

After all it is not particularly easy for a priest to come to an assessment of his own needs for on-going formation. Clearly some form of feedback helps. But you will know as well as I do that the two most effective forms of feedback are that which is received from peers and from oneself. In the language of management, feedback from supervisors and from customers is generally much less effective. Feedback from self, or careful reflection on my own performance, together with feedback from my peers is always the most significant contributor to change. But how much, within the presbyterate, do we recognise or use those sources of feedback, and then act on what we learn from them?

Attentiveness to our own way of life as a priest is, then, the most important starting point for effective participation in on-going formation. And attentiveness to our self-identity and vocation as priests is the most important motivating factor, too.

Reflecting On Our Liturgical Role

Clearly, given our role in the worship of the Church, liturgy and liturgical celebration should be a vital theme for on-going formation. That is so. But it is also very difficult to effect. Liturgy is so close to the very heart of every priest. It’s what we do and who we are. We all consider ourselves to be experts. I have yet to meet a priest who admits to celebrating Mass poorly. But I could always find people in a congregation who might not agree.

So, we need a certain humility to engage in on-going formation, especially in liturgy. As fellow priests we hesitate to be sources of feedback to one another. We tend not to point out to each other areas for improvement. We are uncomfortable with such feedback. Yet it is crucial for the spiritual lives of our people. Sometimes the resilience of their faith is quite remarkable. But that resilience is not found so easily in younger Catholics who, in the spirit of the age, are more customer-orientated, quicker to criticise and less tolerant. The quality of our liturgical celebration is crucial to the health of our Church. Yet when is the last time that any of us put ourselves under the microscope in that regard?

In his recent book, *The End of Irish Catholicism?*, Vincent Twomey suggests we need to ask whether many of the things which we introduce into our liturgy – sanctuaries transformed into gardens, elaborate offertory processions, children's Masses of a purely didactic character replete with posters, dramas etc – are there primarily to give colour and to entertain, and hold parental attention? Or are they there genuinely to promote a true '*sursum corda*'?

There is much to do in genuine, principled liturgical renewal and in preaching, too. Intelligent speaking about the teaching of the Church, rooted and sustained in the Living Word, intelligent appreciation of the present circumstances of our lives, keen comment on the complexity of moral issues, sensitive spiritual guidance in the context of all three: these are themes enough for on-going formation.

Undertaking Social Analysis

And to add a further, more personal thought on what we might be tackling. An appreciation of all the factors that shape our shared life today is, I believe, a key part for every priest as preachers, celebrant and as the giver of pastoral care. Why are we as we are now? An appreciation of our contemporary culture; an appreciation of our history, our particular local history; an educated sensitivity to cultural and religious diversity: these are crucial to our lives and ministry as priests. These are wide topics and we need wise guides. But they are available and are important in helping us, as a Church, to find the in-roads for the task of evangelisation.

What are such points of entry? Maybe I could make just two comments.

The first is fairly obvious. For many people life is lived much more than ever before on an individual basis. As Vincent Twomey argues in *The End of Irish Catholicism?*, modern trends are not so much liberal as libertarian. He describes what we all know, a radical individualism, displayed in practically every advert, which proposes an almost unlimited freedom of choice. This is quite different from the broader political liberalism which, based on a common moral consensus, helped to mould modern pluralist democracies. But one of the consequences of this individualism is that many sense a real need for a wider community, a wider context, in which to live their lives. That context has to provide the necessary balance to the individualism of our age, which left to itself is isolating and a dreadful burden. So the appeal of the Gospel to enter into a *communio* of life, made visible in the parish, or at least in its networks of contacts, friendships, shared endeavours and its liturgy, is increasingly a point of entry for the Gospel with the people of today. But it needs care and sensitivity. We must respect and give space to the element of truth at the heart of our preoccupation

with the individual. After all our faith is not a following of a book, or a text, or even a law. It is the following of a person, a journey of discipleship which has personal distinctiveness as well as communal strength and wisdom. An appreciation of those tensions and the part they play in accompanying each of the disciples of the Lord is one of the things for which we must be constantly preparing ourselves.

Finding A Common Language To Speak Of Faith

Secondly, and within this same framework, I believe there is a growing readiness for real discourse, real conversation about the things of faith. Perhaps this is expressed most commonly in the call for adult formation in faith. But it could be more sharply focused, more distinctively expressed, than that broad term suggests.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book *The Dignity Of Difference*, points out that the proliferation of modern media can actually impede dialogue:

'... we no longer broadcast. We narrowcast. Today we can target those who agree with us and screen out the voices of dissent.... Television news especially, with its short attention span, is no substitute for rational debate and serious engagement with contrary views. ... Images evoke emotion. They do not, of themselves, generate understanding.'

This, then, can be taken as part of the cultural background for the demand for much greater adult learning and formation in faith. The need for us now is to be able to find a voice for faith in the multiple and sometimes quite separated contexts of modern living. There are now so many separate spheres of contact and communication. People do live in separate worlds and the preoccupations of one touch others less and less. The thinking and public pronouncements of one, such as the world of the clergy, reach through less and less to other distinctive worlds. The only, and proper, alternative for the proclamation of the Gospel is that each disciple is confident and able to express in each of these spheres the life-giving Word of God.

As John Paul II says: 'To believe is nothing other than to think with assent ... If faith does not think, it is nothing at all.' (*Fides et Ratio* n.79) That is a clear expression of one of our tasks: to help, to encourage, to enable the people in our care to be such believers. And to model it ourselves. That can begin, and be sustained, in our on-going formation.

On-Going Formation – Gift & Task

For four years I was Director of the Upholland Northern Institute, responsible for organising In-Service-Training courses for the clergy of the Northern Province. I enjoyed the years I spent there. Hundreds of priests came for week-long residential courses. Occasionally there would be a real buzz, a real sense of success. And I often tried to reflect on that. That led me to these conclusions about on-going formation, or at least about its hoped for outcomes. The outcomes of good on-going formation, on-going vocational development, are, I think, the following:

- the priest returns home more at ease with himself as a priest, more in touch again with the personal vocation;
- the priest returns home more in tune with the wider church and the wider world, more alert to some of its characteristics and challenges;
- the priest returns home refreshed in that one necessary aspect of life: his daily relationship with the Lord who never fails to offer his invitation to priesthood and is always ready to receive and sustain our daily response.

This, then, is what we are striving for in our on-going formation. Whatever the particular subject matter, whatever the make-up of the group living and working together for its duration, if those out-comes are achieved, then a good job has been done and the participants will be back for more.

Vocational development is a necessity for us all. Our lives are lived in that space between what we are today and what God intends us to be, what God wants us to become. Augustine said of the Eucharist on the altar. “*See the sacrament of who you are and what you are to become.*” That’s the setting in which you and I need on-going vocational development. Without it we stagnate. But we must be its first instigators, the ones who seek it out. Not only does our own well-being depend on our doing so, the well-being of the Church is greatly served, too.

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