

OF PRIESTS AND PRIESTLY PEOPLE

I CAN IMAGINE some readers picking up this issue of *Compass* and saying, 'Priest shortage? *What* priest shortage?' Perhaps they have not yet experienced a situation in which no priest is available to serve the community—they might at least be encouraged to consider the age of the priest they now have and draw the obvious conclusions.

Or perhaps they have heard that after years of decline the number of men training to be priests is on the rise in Australia. Certainly this news is true. A heartening number of young men in the last year or so have felt a call to priesthood and have responded to it. Seminaries around Australia have reported a significant rise in new admissions this year. A few weeks ago an inter-seminaries football carnival brought together 160 students from Victoria and New South Wales.

The rise in numbers of trainees for the priesthood is seen as in part the result of recruitment and evangelization efforts over the years, including World Youth Days, but also as a sign of a reaction to the bleak non-religious and even anti-religious culture of the last decades. In my ministry I am discovering that some young and not-so-young adults are critical of their parents for not giving them any religious experience when they were children—they feel deprived. One can sense the Spirit at work there.

Whatever the stimulating influences, and the Holy Spirit is to be counted as the principal stimulating influence, the new surge of candidates for the priesthood is very good news indeed.

Nevertheless, it is far too early to declare that the crisis has passed. As with the global economic crisis we may say that there are some green shoots of recovery appearing, but the present and the future are and will still be dif-

ficult. Ask any bishop in Australia, especially a bishop in a country diocese, and you will learn that the priest shortage is already a fact of life.

Hence this issue of *Compass* which focuses on priests and the shortage of them, and on animating other forms of leadership in the Church, is still timely. We are invited to review the many ways in which, and the variety of conditions under which, communities of the People of God can survive even when priests are in short supply. Clearly, some of the solutions for survival that may be forced on communities are quite depressing to contemplate. The priest is truly essential for a community's existence. A community can function without a priest for a time, but not permanently.

In his letter proclaiming the Year for Priests on the 150th anniversary of the birth of the Curé of Ars, Patron of Parish Priests, Pope Benedict quoted a few startling passages from the saintly Curé's biography. The language and sentiments may be of another era, but there is no doubting the fervour:

O, how great is the priest!... If he realized what he is, he would die... God obeys him: he utters a few words and the Lord descends from heaven at his voice, to be contained within a small host... (*Le curé d'Ars. Sa pensée—Son cœur. Présentés par l'Abbé Bernard Nodet, éd. Xavier Mappus, Foi Vivante, 1966, p. 97.*)

Concerning the sacraments and the Sacrament of Holy Orders, John Vianney stated:

Without the Sacrament of Holy Orders, we would not have the Lord. Who put him there in that tabernacle? The priest. Who welcomed your soul at the beginning of your life? The priest. Who feeds your soul and gives it strength for its journey? The priest. Who will prepare it to appear before God, bathing it one last time in the blood of Jesus Christ? The priest, always the priest. And if this soul should happen to die

[as a result of sin], who will raise it up, who will restore its calm and peace? Again, the priest... After God, the priest is everything! ... Only in heaven will he fully realize what he is. (*Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.)

And, concerning the absolute need of the priesthood, he affirmed:

Were we to fully realize what a priest is on earth, we would die: not of fright, but of love... Without the priest, the passion and death of our Lord would be of no avail. It is the priest who continues the work of redemption on earth... What use would be a house filled with gold, were there no one to open its door? The priest holds the key to the treasures of heaven: it is he who opens the door: he is the steward of the good Lord; the administrator of his goods. (*Ibid.*, pp. 98-100.)

‘These words, welling up from the priestly heart of the holy pastor, might sound excessive’ Benedict conceded, ‘Yet they reveal the high esteem in which he held the sacrament of the priesthood.’

Pope Benedict acknowledged the need to balance St John Vianney’s words about the priesthood with a statement about the role of the lay faithful. He recalled the words of the document of Vatican II on the Priesthood (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) which encouraged priests to appreciate and promote the dignity of the laity and their special role in the Church’s mission, something which the Curé of Ars modeled in his own way:

They should be willing to listen to lay people, give brotherly consideration to their wishes, and acknowledge their experience and competence in the different fields of human activity. In this way they will be able together with them to discern the signs of the times. (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, par. 9.)

Benedict went on to point out that ever greater co-operation between priests and lay faithful still needs to be promoted in our time. And so, he affirmed, the statement of the same Decree of Vatican II needs to be heeded:

While testing the spirits to discover if they be of God, priests must discover with faith, recognize with joy and foster diligently the many and varied charismatic gifts of the laity, whether these be of a humble or more exalted kind. (*loc. cit.*)

‘These gifts’, Benedict states, ‘which awaken in many people the desire for a deeper spiritual life, can benefit not only the lay faithful but the clergy as well.’ Quoting himself, he goes on to state that such co-operation between priests and faithful can provide ‘a helpful impulse to a renewed commitment by the Church in proclaiming and bearing witness to the Gospel of hope and charity in every corner of the world’. (Benedict XVI, *Address to Bishop-Friends of the Focolare Movement and the Sant’Egidio Community*, 8 February 2007.)

Thus, the lay faithful need priests and priests need the lay faithful. There is no community without priests and likewise no community without the lay faithful.

In Australia we have always relied on priests from other lands to supplement those who were born here. In the early days the Irish-born priests came to our rescue. In later times we have priests from many lands working here, and they are much needed for our multicultural society.

But both priests and lay faithful, both native born and those who have come from other lands, have been diminishing in Australia for quite a few years now. Would it not be wonderful if the current rise in numbers of seminarians were accompanied by a proportionate rise in the number of committed lay faithful. The priest shortage is a challenge for the whole of the Catholic community.

As Ron and Mavis Pirola affirm, families are where the best communication of human and Christian values is done. What is not important to the parents will not be important to the children.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor.