

Full, Active, Conscious Ministry

At a recent Presbyteral Council meeting we received a report from the archdiocesan parish life office with projections about the number of priests we can expect ten years from now. Our archbishop made a comment to the effect of: "This report is sobering. It is becoming clear that we cannot keep doing parish the way we have been used to." We did not have time on that occasion to discuss how we might approach parish life differently, but we certainly need to, and I have been fermenting some ideas. Today's date is my ordination anniversary.

Like most priests of my generation, my notion of what a parish is and what a priest does was shaped by my childhood experiences. I attended a parish grade school and I was an altar server on Sundays, at weddings, funerals, even the baptisms of my younger brothers. By the time I entered the diocesan high school seminary in ninth grade, I was becoming aware that a parish priest is present at all the important events in peoples' lives. In actual practice, most of my 50+ years have not been much different from what I was expecting – as a jack of all trades, helping people do their faith. For people, "church" is a very immediate experience, where they go to mass, have their children baptized and make first communion, lay their loved ones to rest – "the parish."

There has been one significant difference. I was ordained ten days after the conclusion of the Vatican Council, so my theological formation was guided by that experience. My activities as a parish priest are shaped by *Gaudium et Spes*; and I try to maintain a

style of leadership inspired by *Lumen Gentium*: "The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the church's mission of salvation and everyone is commissioned through baptism and confirmation. ... The laity have the specific vocation to make the Church present and active in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth. ... The apostolate concerns every one of Christ's faithful; the laity can be called in various more immediate ways, like those men and women who assisted the apostle Paul, working hard in the Lord" (#33, lines 26-42).

So what does this mean for the Church ten years from now, with a smaller number of priests? "The priest" will no longer be the single representative of the teaching, healing, forgiving, consoling Church of Christ. There are no longer three or four priests at the rectory, ready to answer the door or the phone for every concern, from blessing a medal to rushing to the home of a dying parishioner. No longer do all the priests in the whole diocese spend First Friday mornings bringing Holy Communion to all the home-bound parishioners.

There is no going back. We have to be open to new expressions of ministry that are prompted by the Spirit. One suggestion might be to organize "mega-churches," but I do not support this. Their "entertainment" format is attractive to younger people, but not very conducive to the "sacred mysteries." We already have a problem with priests delivering didactic and moralistic lectures, and rambling reminiscences, rather



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This was his reflection on the 53rd anniversary of his ordination on December 18, 2018

Full, Active, Conscious Ministry:

than true homilies based on the Scripture. We would have even fewer priests who are good at large auditorium preaching. I, for one, could not lead a mega-church.

Rather than making fewer parishes to match the diminishing number of available priests, I suggest re-formatting the ministries. The ministerial staffing of parishes is now already quite variable: Religious Education Director, Christian Service Coordinator, parish manager, even the person(s) answering the phone and door are more than “receptionists” – they spontaneously do ministry at random occasions throughout the day (at least, I think they should). In the Vatican Council’s desire to “go back to the sources,” *Lumen Gentium* suggested three significant ways to assist the bishop as leader of his particular church:

- a) it restored the order of deacon as a distinct ministry in the church rather than a pro-forma step “toward” ordination;
- b) it reverted to the title presbyter for the order of ministers who used to be called priests;* and
- c) it emphasized the responsibility of all the baptized and confirmed members of the Church to assume full, conscious and active roles in growing the Church.

* [Technical note: John Dearden reminded us: If you want to know precisely what we meant, read the Latin. But in the case of presbyter vs. sacerdos, the Latin reveals that the Council documents are not consistent. *Lumen Gentium* begins to use presbyter in #20, where it says that bishops choose coworkers: presbyters and deacons. It tries to reserve the term sacerdos for a description of Christ’s priestly action or priesthood. But *Christus Dominus* and *Presbyterorum Ordinis* refer to priests with both terms, seemingly at the luck of a draw. *Optatam Totius*, interestingly, does not use the term presbyter at all.]

I would propose the following strategies.

1. Elevate the diaconate to a full-fledged parish ministry.

Our diocese has an excellent program of spiritual, psychological, educational and pastoral formation for prospective deacons, but we have a hard time recruiting candidates. I think one reason is that the diaconate appears to be no different from a layperson volunteering a few hours of spare time. I think we could recruit a wider pool of qualified candidates, especially in minority communities, if we made the diaconate a full time professional vocation, compensated with a living wage.

Lumen Gentium lists many ministries that deacons could do: “administer baptism, reserve and distribute the Eucharist, assist at marriages, take viaticum to the dying, read sacred scripture to the faithful, instruct and exhort the people, preside at the worship and prayer of the faithful, administer sacramentals, and preside at funeral services and burials” (#29). This is more than a part-time volunteer; it presents the deacon as a significant “face” of the church. Note that I am not saying that all deacons should be full time. Deacons with a secular job are an important witness that everyone should contribute some time and effort to growing their church. We need both.

2. Consider the rationale that moved the Vatican Council to designate priests as presbyter.

In the early church, presbyters were “elders,” who had their feet on the ground and who advised the bishop in his role as overseer. In the Church at Rome, there were many deacons, and it was the deacons who were doing most of the Church’s work – most of the things that we have been doing as parish priests. Not much is said about the number of presbyters, or their daily activities. Maybe the bishops in Council were being prescient. Maybe we do not need so many presbyters, but more deacons who are more active.

An Elder Speaks to his Bishop

And Vatican II certainly called for a more active laity. In Catholic places like Belgium and Quebec lay ministers baptize, bury, marry and hold communion services when no priest is available on weekends. This already exists; we should evaluate and consider these options.

3. This leads me to consider the Vocation Office and the Seminary.

I suggest the Vocation Office spend an equal amount of resources recruiting presbyters, deacons and lay ministers; and that the seminary open its whole education and formation programs to everyone – all potential ministers, rather than separating the priesthood candidates into a closed specialized group exclusively for themselves. Everyone would benefit from their interactions with one another.

The Decree on Priestly Formation instructs that the teaching of philosophy to priesthood candidates be relevant for the present time, enabling students to apply eternal truths to the changing conditions of human affairs, learning how to communicate these truths in a way that is suitable for their contemporaries, learning to dialogue with people in a capacity to listen to people, opening their hearts to various circumstances of human need (*Optatam Totius* 15,16,19).

It also suggests that bishops consider raising the minimum age for a priest's ordination, and prolonging the diaconate as a more meaningful internship (#12).

If the seminary were wide-open with students at all stages and preparing for all ministries, there is no need to guarantee any candidate a specific ministerial role in advance; that discernment is part of the formation process. A person ordained deacon need not presume that he will automatically transition to be a

presbyter. Let him serve as a deacon in a parish, along with other deacons, with systematic supervision. He may be ready to be ordained a presbyter sometime in the future – or he may not. But if that becomes evident, there may be diaconal ministries that he can continue to engage in, without doing harm to the People of God.

Conversely, a man preparing for permanent diaconate, over the test of time, may be eligible to be called as a presbyter if it appears that his life experience would make him a good pastor and an “elder” to the bishop.

If he happens to be married an indult can be received, just as a married Episcopal or Lutheran pastor who becomes Catholic can be ordained presbyter as a married man. The very fact that seminarians are treated as a separate class (interpreted as superior) promotes clericalism. An open-program seminary would help dissolve the culture of clericalism.



Full, Active, Conscious Ministry:

4. Consider an indult to allow deacons to anoint the sick in danger of death.

Lumen Gentium said that a deacon could bring Viaticum (obviously irrelevant if a priest were available to anoint). A frequent complaint is that no one was able to locate a priest for a dying family member. This frustrates both the family and the health-care staff. Granted, some people are not active in a parish; but then this is an ideal time for the church to reach out in healing – both for the dying person, and the estranged family. Even when people are active parishioners, it is commonly the deacon who visited the sick person – and he feels helpless when he cannot locate a priest for anointing. In the early centuries only bishops forgave sin; eventually priests were delegated to administer this sacrament. Also in the early years, holy men and women (not priests) anointed the sick; later on priests were delegated to do it. Practices change over the centuries, supported by new rationale. We always make accommodations for pastoral care in danger of death; we can develop a convincing rationale to evolve the Sacrament of Anointing. A smaller number of presbyters cannot be expected to be on call 24-7, over a large geographical area.

5. The most critical issue we face as presbyters decline in number is the availability for Eucharist – the center of any Catholic community.

It is technically possible to distribute Holy Communion at a mega-gathering, as when a pope visits or a canonization happens; but this is not practical for the weekly Sunday Liturgy, nor liturgically suitable. In rural villages, people can become accustomed to one circuit-riding priest serving several parishes, with one weekly liturgy at a more-or-less convenient time, from 4:00

pm Saturday to 6:00 pm Sunday. But this is not ideal when we try to evangelize new members, especially in urban areas, where potential members expect to go to church at 11:00 am on Sunday. And it is far from ideal if the celebrant has to pop in at the last minute, and leave soon after, with little time to mingle pastorally with people. And of course, in larger suburban areas where three or more weekend masses are needed, this sort of scheduling will not work at all.

Closing two or more small parishes into a single large one has a significant disadvantage. *Christus Dominus* (#32) advises that

when a bishop opens or closes a parish, he must keep in mind “the welfare of souls.” Our experience suggests that when a parish is closed, many, if not most parishioners, do not go to the new church where they “are assigned;” they simply drift away from church altogether – or stomp away in rejection. Finally, importing foreign-born presbyters, beyond the needs of their ethnic communities, is also an unsat-



isfactory stop-gap strategy. It can remind us that we are “catholic” in the universal sense, but when the celebrant has minimal language and enculturation skills, it frustrates people trying to engage in full, conscious and active participation in a meaningful celebration, and it inhibits motivation to engage in the parish. We need to raise up pastoral ministers from our own congregations to serve our needs.

I propose that as the supply of presbyters declines, two or three presbyters be assigned to each vicariate, with each one being the responsible pastor for three or four parishes, visiting them on a rotating basis for one of their scheduled liturgies, at least once a

An Elder Speaks to his Bishop

month (similar to the “station churches” in ancient Rome). The parishioners would know the presbyter, and he would get to know them (at least as well as he currently does in a large parish with 2,000 or 3,000 families). In regard to pastoral matters, the presbyter would be the ultimate authority, representing the bishop in each parish, but he would not be responsible for many of the day-to-day pastoral ministries. He would certainly not be burdened with maintaining buildings. Delegated laity, who have a sense of mission as well as managerial skill, can do that as a regular practice.

6. I propose that the deacon who is assigned to a specific parish be delegated to celebrate Eucharist in that parish whenever the local presbyter is not present.

There will be some assistant priests, but there will not be enough to provide all the parishes we need with sufficient weekly Eucharist celebrations. *Lumen Gentium* proposed that deacons reserve and distribute the Eucharist, read scripture to the faithful, instruct and exhort people, preach, and preside at the worship and prayer of the faithful. We have the emergency communion service in the unexpected absence of a priest; but that is not a sufficient liturgical provision on a regular basis. The people would be served on a day-to-day basis by deacons and lay ministers, administering sacraments, evangelizing, and nourishing the sense of community in the neighborhood community of faith. This multiple-agent ministry in the parishes is another way to dissolve the clerical culture.

7. I propose that the bishops get serious about opening the diaconate to women.

It is abundantly clear that Paul and the Apostolic Church appreciated women co-workers. Over the years, the rationale for excluding women from the sanctuary arose from cultural modesty, fed by a visceral male-female discomfort, which turns it into the discrimination it is today. In contemporary society, any mother of child-bearing age will not encourage her son to become a priest as long as she has to tell her daughter that she cannot be ordained. Moreover, young women are dropping out

of the Church altogether; they are universally critical of our all-male autocracy. We are not only facing a clergy shortage, we are in danger of an empty Church altogether. But if the diaconate is a full ministry, open to men and women, this would at least offer a visible presence of the whole Church proclaiming the Good News, standing at the altar, and engaging in the daily pastoral needs of the faithful.

8. Finally, I propose that bishops keep questioning mandatory celibacy for the diocesan clergy – a wonderful ideal, but it has become an ideology that does more harm than good.

Celibacy began in monasteries, where it is appropriate, and where it will continue. But it is a major obstacle in recruiting candidates. When I approach talented young people who are leaders in the youth group, who have known me since their childhood, who are often considering medicine or law, and suggest that they would be a good priest – as a way to achieve their desire to heal or be advocates for people, they respond, “Yeah, but you can’t get married, right?” For talented young people, this is a non-starter.

Moreover, I think mandatory celibacy is a factor in the sex abuse scandal. Celibacy itself does not cause sex abuse; but abusive behavior (sexual and relational) correlates with immaturity. Likewise, celibacy itself does not cause immaturity. But a person who has difficulty forming mature relationships with adult men and women may find shelter in a sub-culture where sexual relations are out of the question, contacts with women are discouraged, and male relationships are interpreted in a competitive “please the superior” hierarchy, rather than mature masculine agency. An immature person can tend to find emotional support in his ministry with adolescents and children; this emotional gratification sometimes becomes erotic. Seminaries are trying to be somewhat more enlightened regarding sexual identity, but I question whether they are really ensuring personal maturity. The reports about younger priests treating the people with arrogance and lay ministers with disdain, while being overly scrupulous and pious, are indications of immature self-concept – “obedient sons,” but defensive about their identity.

Full, Active, Conscious Ministry

Celibate men need to develop a mature masculine identity; making it a free choice would diminish the frequency of celibates looking for sensual satisfaction in a double life, and diminish the occasions of clerics treating the laity as if they were bothersome children.

I think we should promote the spiritual rationale for celibacy as a real possibility, but it should arise from freedom and personal strength. Religious communities like Jesuits and Salesians would most likely maintain the practice – although religious orders now accept married “associates.” Over the years in my ecumenical contacts, I got to know Episcopal and Lutheran pastors who were celibate. We discussed this, because they were interested in my motivation, and I was interested in theirs. They saw it as a free choice, even though they were in the minority, and it seemed to be working for them. But when I read descriptions of the joy of celibacy in statements like #16 in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, I roll my eyes. I have lived a very satisfying life in my ministry and my prayerful identification with Christ, but I cannot say that I have been blissfully joyful at not having a spouse and children.

If we assertively promote lay responsibility in the Church, along with formation in an open-program church ministry seminary I described above, a fair number of single persons would enroll in formation – as one response to our widespread efforts of evangelizing. These candidates would consider all sorts of spiritual practices, looking for ways to integrate their proposed career in church ministry with their own personal growth and maturity. Some will choose celibacy, as an integrated part of their maturation, rather than as an escape from intimacy. Moreover, if it becomes “normal” for presbyters, deacons and lay persons to consider celibacy, it would become clear that sexual orientation is irrelevant to one’s choice to be celibate. And this would be another way to dissolve clerical culture.

I offer these reflections as I begin my 54th year as a presbyter, trusting that parishes in the future will make the Church be present with people at all the important times in their journey of faith – even though “priests” may not be doing much of it.

*We cannot attain the presence of God
because we're already totally in the presence of God.
What's absent is awareness.
Richard Rohr*

