

Priesthood

and the leadership of the Church



Approaching the Topic

'What I like about my five brothers and sisters is that we're all different: personalities, interests, jobs, ideas. Sometimes we joke about it. ("How did you get into this family?!") Our differences cause tensions at times, but mostly we have a great respect for each other. Our parents help a lot. They've always had an uncanny sense of balance and fairness that has enabled us to reach "give-and-take" solutions whenever we've been at loggerheads. "C'mon, team work, guys!" my dad would say. (He always was a dedicated footy coach.) I don't think we would be as close a family if it weren't for mum and dad.' (Steven)

If uniting natural differences in a family unit can take skill, how on earth does a Church of millions of Catholics manage to hold itself together? Steven's comment provides a useful analogy to begin our discussion on priesthood and the leadership of the Catholic Church.

Many gifts, one body

How richly. Diverse are the many gifts of our faith community! We have people who are 'ideas' people and those who are 'action' people. Some love to be 'up front' and others prefer to be 'behind the scenes'. Some reflect in the head, and others shoot from the heart. Some have a keen sense of the past, while others have an eye to the future. Some are loud and noisy. Others are quiet and shy. Black and white. Young and elderly. Male and female. How extraordinary that we profess to be united in Jesus Christ! In human terms it seems an impossible claim. How can millions of Catholics all over the world, from different cultures, experience themselves as a united community participating in a common mission?

An important part of the answer is leadership.

A gift of leadership

Of the many ways the Spirit works in and through the gifts of God's people, one particular gift which gives unity and direction to the whole body is that of pastoral leadership. Just as Christ galvanised a group of scared and scattered individuals into a courageous community of believers, so too does the Church look to its leaders to bring cohesion, collaboration and guidance to its diversity of roles, functions, talents and activities. This is more than a managerial task required by a business or sporting club. It requires people who can embody the mind and heart of Christ, who can act in the name of Christ and the Church, in a way which gives clear expression to the unity between Christ and his people. One might think of this kind of leadership as a 'holy ordering' of the gifts of the Church, and a unifying force through which members of the Church can see themselves as part of the bigger picture of the Christian story.

The people who undertake this role are known as bishops and priests, and we speak of them as having been 'ordained' by the Sacrament of 'Holy Orders'.

Priest as sacrament of Christ

Like all Christians, priests share the same baptism. Like married couples, they are called by God to live out this baptism through a particular state in life. Just as married couples, through their sacrament, are a sign of the love Christ has for us, so too do priests embody the presence of Christ in a unique way through the Sacrament of Orders. The mission of the ordained priest is to be a sign, to make present, the leadership which Christ gives to the Church. Through the Holy Spirit, the priest is ordained as one consecrated to God as a sharer in Christ's mission to serve, teach and lead the people of God. In the midst of the Christian community he is a permanent and irrevocable sign of the saving presence of Christ.

In this sense we can speak of priesthood as embodying Christ as 'head' of the Church, although we must be careful to distinguish this idea from worldly patterns of leadership. Like Christ, the priest is a servant-leader. He is called to be one with his people – walking with them and identifying with them as part of the human family. It is a role of service, not of superiority.

Priesthood in perspective

The role of priesthood does not mean that leadership in the Church does not happen through other avenues as well. By way of analogy we can say that, while the bible is the foundational book of inspired writings that guides the Church, the Spirit can of course speak to us through many other forms of literature as well. Similarly, leadership can be exercised from many different quarters in the Church. It can be felt in overt ways such as a couple heading up the diocesan Family Life Office. Or it can happen in quiet ways, such as a parishioner who influences the whole thinking of a parish through his quiet day-to-day

witness. Another example might be lay individuals and groups who respond prophetically to certain situations and who are recognised (formally or informally) for their ability to move the Church in new and fruitful directions.

When we speak of the leadership role of priesthood, however, we are referring to a distinctive, foundational form of pastoral leadership which has played a central role in guiding the Church for two thousand years and which we recognise as the official voice of the Church community.

How priesthood emerged

From the beginning of the Christian Church, the twelve apostles were recognised as having a distinct role of pastoral leadership. They were the eye-witnesses of Christ's life and had been commissioned by him to carry on his work. Their number was significant as it symbolised the Twelve Tribes of Israel which, according to Jewish expectations, would be restored to wholeness with



the coming of the Messiah.

Another man who emerged with a distinctive authority was St Paul. Under the umbrella of his 'apostolic witness' and his founding of communities, Christians

The Church and the Pope

Catholics believe that the Pope is the successor of the apostle Peter. According to scripture and Church tradition, Jesus gave Peter a position of special authority and leadership among his followers. Tradition also has it that Peter went to Rome – the centre of the known world – and was martyred there. Consequently, the Pope is the bishop of Rome and inherits from Peter the title of 'rock' on which the Church is built. Catholics look to the Pope as the focus of unity within the Church and guardian of the truth of the faith which has been handed down.

Papal infallibility

The meaning of the infallibility of the Pope is often misunderstood. It does not mean that everything the Pope says is true. Nor does it mean that the Pope can never make a mistake or that the Pope cannot commit sin.

Infallibility means that under certain rigorous conditions the teaching of the Pope, under the power of the Holy Spirit, is free from error. Free from error does not mean that the last word has been said on the topic. It simply means that there is nothing erroneous about what has been said. Further insights, however, may develop the teaching to richer depths. The conditions for an infallible statement are these:

1. The Pope must be speaking in his capacity as chief leader and shepherd of the Church.
2. He must be clearly defining a doctrine as being a truth of faith to be accepted by the whole Church.
3. The definition must be concerned with matters of faith and morals.

Over 2000 years of Church history, infallible statements made by Popes have been extremely rare. The ordinary way in which the Pope teaches and gives guidance to the Church is through many sermons, speeches, letters and other statements. Catholics are expected to give due respect to all the teachings of the Pope, whether infallible statements or not.

experienced themselves as gifted and empowered to ministry through the very fact of their baptism. It was to these men that the communities turned in times of decision, for clarification of questions and to confirm the essentials of the Christian life and message. While forms of ministry were spontaneous and numerous, and varied from community to community, these were subject to the good of the community and to the ministry of the apostles who authenticated the community.

As these men died, others were called forth by the community to take their place. A leadership structure began to emerge. More defined ways of appointing leaders appeared, and concern about ordination and who should succeed the apostles intensified. Whereas once the community could simply turn to someone who had known Jesus intimately, now it had to ensure that the original vision of Jesus and his apostles would be genuinely expressed through the person in authority.



And so a unique ministry developed in the Church which involved the handing on of the authority and charisma that had been integral to the apostles' role and which was understood as the commissioning of Christ himself.

What one priest said

'Priesthood? It's a challenging and fulfilling life. It also has disappointments and difficult moments. You have to expect that in any vocation. I like to think of a priest as a person who "gives his all" for God's people and gives life his best shot – like Jesus did. A priest needs to be a man of collaboration and service and not get trapped on some isolated "spiritual pedestal".

'One thing I have always liked in my 20 years as a priest is being a "presence" at those special moments of people's lives like baptism, weddings, funerals... and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The latter is one of the few times people really drop their pretences and allow themselves to be vulnerable to God's forgiveness. It is a privilege and very humbling to be an instrument in those moments.'

These successors were called bishops, and each took responsibility for a particular geographic region where Christians dwelled, called a diocese. As communities grew, to an extent that bishops could not always be present, others were nominated to represent the bishop. They were called 'priests' and the region over which each presided was called a parish. (The word 'parish' comes from the Greek word 'paroukia': 'distinct'.)

What does a priest do?

Today, the specific work of a priest can vary enormously. Many people are familiar with 'parish priests'; however, some are teachers at tertiary institutions, psychologists, lawyers, publishers, overseas missionaries, hospital chaplains, youth ministers, musicians, theologians, and directors of various church organisations.

Like a married couple, their sacramental life is not defined so much as a 'job' but as a relationship. Through the various works and needs of the Church's life, their commitment to God finds expression in their

role as servant-leaders among God's people.

Some common elements that broadly define the ministry of a priest are as follows:

Firstly, he is to be a 'shepherd' to his

people. He is not alone in this. The proper context for understanding the Church's system of leadership is a communal one. It is the Pope surrounded by the bishops, and the bishops surrounded by their priests, that provide the focus for unity and direction in the Church. While the Church is not a 'democracy' in the worldly sense of the word, it is a fruitful collaboration of gifts and insights, roles and ministries. The Sacrament of Orders coordinates and authenticates this family-like community in the name of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, the priest has a special role in preaching the word of God. The scriptures are a fundamental source of nourishment to the Christian community and, while the Word of God is proclaimed by many different people through a variety of different ministries, as the shepherd of a local community the priest holds an official platform in this area. It is the role of the bishops and priests to ensure that the Gospel is preached soundly and widely.

Thirdly, leadership in worship is central to the priestly ministry, most especially at the Eucharistic celebration. Here the faith community experiences the highpoint of its prayers and worship together and the priestly ministry reaches its summit. Acting in the person of Christ, in the midst of the community who is the body of Christ, the priest presides over and celebrates the sacrificial meal in

which Jesus – crucified, risen and glorified – is truly present.

Celibacy

A feature of priesthood in the western Church is the requirement of a vow of celibacy. In today's society, where sex is plastered on every billboard and every TV channel, a commitment to forgo relationship involving sexual activity can seem rather 'out of step'. To some, unthinkable! Yet, even outside a religious context, we know that there will always be people who choose to forgo marriage and adopt a celibate lifestyle in order to invest their creative and generative energies (for that is what sexual energy is) in a life work such as the arts, business or the pursuit of academic excellence. Is it surprising, then, to find such relentless single-mindedness also in the religious

arena?

Furthermore, celibacy does not mean asexuality. On the contrary, a priest lives out his masculinity through non-genital expressions of intimacy, directing his gift of sexual energy towards loving others in a 'broad' way rather than in the exclusive relationship of marriage. Nor does celibacy suggest an undermining of the value of sex which in marriage is a profound expression of God's love and a sign to the Church. Celibacy is a different path, offering another perspective on life from which we can understand God's Kingdom. It reminds us of the transience of our earthly lives, our trust in a reality beyond our material world and the radical edge of the Gospel call to 'give up everything'. We need both in the Church: the sexual witness of marriage and celibate love.



What about nuns and brothers?

Religious congregations (religious orders) of nuns and brothers have also played a key role in the leadership of the Church. These communities of men and women usually developed in response to a particular need of their day. The men and women who founded them were inspired to gather like-minded people to live out a specific charism or vision (eg. compassion for the poor, preaching, education, contemplative prayer). Together they lived a communal lifestyle and took vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience to their

superior. Today religious congregations continue to offer a rich contribution to Church life, although the external expression of their work has sometimes undergone immense change in accordance with the changing needs of the times.

Some men in these congregations are also ordained priests. They differ from other priests (the latter being called 'diocesan priests') in that they are not directly accountable to the local bishop, but follow the rule of life of their congregation.

Your Story

Think ... Talk ... Pray

- What is your own understanding of authority? Who or what has helped to shape your views?
- What leadership models have you observed or experienced at work in the world – eg family, work, politics, sport?
- How does the description of Church leadership in this leaflet resonate with or differ from these models?
- Reflect on the need for stability and direction in your own life.
 - Who or what is currently the stabilising factor in your life?
 - Who or what is helping you to grow and to constructively chart your future?

In prayer, ask God to sustain and lead you and to bring into your life people who can be instruments to help you in this process.

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