

Last year the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, prodded by the National Conference of Secular Priests, set up a working party to examine the 'conditions in which priests are living in this country'. It is plain that for this working party, whose Report has just been published, discussing these living conditions means discussing how priests can make contact with other priests, how parish priests can get on with their curates, how priests can manage to make personal contact with their bishops, how far priests can be consulted by their bishops about their appointments, whether priests can pray with other priests without 'embarrassment', how much money priests should get, what kind of houses priests should live in and how priests should be provided for in their old age.

Reading the Report generates a nightmare impression of a world inhabited solely by bachelors in black suits—though, to be fair, there are two references to priests' housekeepers. To be rather more fair, let us admit that to abstract is not to falsify: it is possible (and often necessary) to deal with a problem in artificial isolation, and this is not in the least to deny that there may be other more important problems. The Report itself is very careful about its terms of reference and it must be said that, within these, its recommendations are good as far as they go. It is suggested, for example, that a priest should always be 'consulted' before being moved from one parish to another. Evidently such a consultation might cover a multitude of pressures; more to the point might be an interview in which the priest is accompanied by some of his fellow-priests or even, dare one say it, just by some of his fellow-Christians in the parish. But at least the practical suggestions are roughly in the right direction and Fr Sean Kearney, who was a member of the working party, put on his other hat as chairman of the National Conference of Priests and welcomed it warmly.

The concern about retirement and pensions is extremely sensible and, as the figures quoted in an Appendix show, extremely realistic. Already one in five of our secular priests is over sixty-five and in any other job would be thinking about retiring. Most of our priests are now over fifty and, more significantly, there are considerably more in their sixties and early seventies than there are recently ordained in their twenties and early thirties. If we are simply concerned with domestic arrangements for priests it is common sense to devote a lot of thought to the care of the aged. One essential feature which is not mentioned is that any national pension scheme must include provision for those who leave the ministry: a demand of natural justice that has not always been observed by other Christian Churches.

When all this is said, the depressing thing is that the Report envisages a priest who lives in his presbytery and works in his parish; it does not envisage a priest who lives in his parish. The problems are those of the presbytery and the Curia rather than those of his neighbours. It is surely this assumption, and the fact that it is a

perfectly valid one in so many cases, that accounts for a lot of the malaise among priests. The belief that the inhumanities of his life will be alleviated simply by greater contact with his fellow-priests, by re-creating the camaraderie of the seminary, is surely an illusion. What is needed is more contact at an ordinary human level with people in general. Something is bound to go wrong for the priest if the laity enter his life simply as objects of his care.

Of course it is immensely important that there should be closer relations between all the priests of the diocese, including the bishop, but even on this point the Report does not seem to have got to the roots of the matter. Speaking of the 'close bond of knowledge and trust between bishop and priest', it goes on: 'many priests in the larger dioceses felt that such a relationship, based on personal knowledge, was impossible'. This makes the diocese sound as though it were some enormous institution like, say, a university. In fact the three largest dioceses have only about 450 priests each and have respectively four, three and two diocesan bishops. The next four largest have 350 each and all save one have two bishops. The remaining thirteen have an average of 150 priests and some of them have more than one bishop. In fact, overall, there is one diocesan bishop for every 150 priests, most of whom spend from forty to fifty years in the same restricted region. There must be other factors that prevent priests from developing a close bond of knowledge and trust with their bishops. To speak of appointing an official whom, the Report is careful to say, must not be *called* a clerical 'ombudsman' is to admit defeat. The real question is: What is it in the training of priests or the selection of bishops that makes it impossible for a man to establish friendly and easy human contact with most of his 150 assistants, all of whom are, like himself, convinced of the over-riding importance of such relationships?

You cannot talk seriously about the living conditions of priests unless you are prepared to ask deeper questions about their role in the Church and the world. Apart from the rather perfunctory suggestions about prayer in common, practically everything in the Report could have been said about a group of celibate doctors or teachers. Does being a priest have to mean going into a church in the morning to celebrate the Eucharist, driving around the parish to perform certain almost equally ritual gestures and finally retiring back into clerical life in the evening? A decreasing number of young men can believe that they have been called by God to do this. The objection is not that it is a dull routine but that it does not seem to have enough to do with preaching the gospel. The saddest thing about this Report is that it can talk about the lives of priests without ever once finding occasion to mention the fact that they are preachers. Its title is 'Co-responsibility and the Clergy'. What are they supposed to be co-responsible for?

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