

In Tears With His People: Reflections on the Role of the Roman Catholic Clergy in four English Parishes

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I *Introduction*

In this article, a number of findings of a series of focussed interviews with fifteen Roman Catholic clergy associated with four English parishes will be discussed in the light of a recent survey of clergy from three denominations.¹ It will be shown that in a number of important respects the findings of this mail questionnaire survey were not supported by the evidence derived from taped interviews in the present research.

All the priests interviewed were or had been recently associated with one of the four parishes selected for the study of change in the Roman Catholic community in England.² The parishes had been selected to reflect as far as possible with the resources available, both regional and social class variations. Two parishes were in the London area. One was a middle class commuter parish covering an area of some fifteen square miles, about 20 miles outside the city and with a Catholic density of around 8% of the population. The second was an inner-city parish occupying under one square mile in area with a large proportion of both Irish and New Commonwealth immigrants. In this parish Catholics comprised some 18% of the population. The remaining two parishes, both covering under one square mile in area were in Preston where Catholics comprised between one quarter and one third of the population. Relatively few Catholics in Preston admitted to having any Irish ancestry. One parish was an inner-city, traditional working class parish in a state of population decline and aging associated with massive but arrested urban redevelopment programmes and the second, on the outskirts of Preston consisted mainly of new housing estates occupied by upwardly mobile people in professional, managerial and technical occupations. No claim is made that these four parishes were in any way representative of all the parishes in the country. Between them, however, there were significant social class and regional variations. It is also probable that in their openness to social research in their parishes, the parish priests were not typical of all parish priests in the country and that the priests in the research parishes were more sympathetic to the

changes resulting from the Vatican Council reforms than parochial clergy generally. That the priests interviewed were relatively independent in their views is indicated by the response of one parish priest who, on being asked whether it would be necessary to ask the bishop for permission to conduct the research in his parish responded:

'No. You can ask too many questions and you can get the wrong answer!' (Priest No 9)

The interviews focussed around four main areas:

- 1 The religious career of the priests, their family background and early religious socialisation, schooling and seminary education.
- 2 Their responses towards the reforms emanating from the Second Vatican Council, their general religious beliefs, attitudes and values.
- 3 The role of the priest in a parish, role conflict, and aspects of the routine organisation and life style of the priest including aspects of risk-taking, the question of celibacy, relationships within the presbytery, parish visiting and so on.
- 4 Observations on the patterns of social and religious behaviour in the local parish and in particular on its styles of liturgical worship.

An interview guide and check list was employed flexibly in order to facilitate as far as possible a free-flowing conversation. The interviews which lasted on average over 1½ hours were all tape-recorded and transcribed later. Several priests were interviewed on more than one occasion. The priests were all assured of anonymity and they were generally prepared to discuss their work openly. Only occasionally did a priest appear to be defensive. Thus one priest joked at the commencement of an interview:

'Do you want me to lie on a couch or something?' (No 1) and later commented strongly on what he regarded as the sociologist's interest in conflicts and tensions within the presbytery which probably gave a quite erroneous impression of the way things really are.

Apart from the interviews, all the priests were invited to complete as detailed a diary as they could for one working week during school term. The purpose of this was to obtain some indication of the variety of activities undertaken by them in a typical working week, including time of getting up, prayer, saying Mass, reading, relaxing, unexpected sick calls, meetings attended, school chaplaincy work, hospitals visited, representations made, and so on. In this way it was hoped to obtain some information about not only the routine framework of the work of the parochial clergy, but also about the unexpected calls made on them, for example, street accidents, help with marriage problems, sick calls during the night, occasional activities like fetes or meals with friends and so on. It was suggested that the priests completed the

diary every mealtime, breaking the day into fifteen minute periods. In the event only seven of the priests completed such a diary after several reminders.

II *The Sample*

Although the sample of priests was small it contained men with a very wide range of experiences. Three priests were still in their twenties, five in their early thirties, one in his forties, three in their early fifties and three were over sixty. There were four parish priests, one of whom retired during the course of the research, and one former priest now married with a baby. Of the ten assistant priests one became parish priest and a second an acting parish priest during the course of the research. A third priest was the chaplain of a national Catholic organisation and a fourth was an experienced man who had previously been the director of another national organisation and seminary professor. A fifth had been a member of a national ecumenical working party. Two of the parish priests had held important diocesan appointments. Four of the sample had been born in Ireland and at least three others were either second or third generation Irish. One third of the priests had fathers who were farmers or small proprietors and two fifths had fathers who were in managerial or clerical occupations. Only one priest, however, appeared to have a father in a manual occupation. In summary this small sample of priests in the four parishes of this present research had a higher proportion of younger priests than the sample of 412 priests surveyed by Ranson and his colleagues.³ At least three of the priests' fathers in the present study were farmers, a proportion similar to that reported by Ranson. All three priests had been born in Ireland.⁴

III *The Socialisation of Priests*

Nearly all the priests described their home backgrounds as fairly or very religious and several had a life history of activity as altar servers and so on so that:

'The religious life was just part of the air we breathed in the home' (9)

In the case of ten of the priests, both parents had been Roman Catholic and family prayers were an every day routine:

'It was like doing the washing up and leaving it until after the TV programme; it was inevitable' (9)

For four of the priests one parent had been a convert to Roman Catholicism. One priest was himself a convert and former Anglican clergyman. About one third of the priests came from large families with seven or more children and at least four had one or more brothers who were priests also. Just under half of the sample had attended junior seminary, in some cases from the age of eleven. Apart from the convert priest, one other man had been a late vocation. The priests had attended a range of seminaries in England, Ireland and on the continent.

Becoming a priest seemed for most priests a natural process in their life history. A sense of conscious choice or decision was rarely mentioned. For example the late vocation commented that his life had increasingly appeared to be somewhat aimless so that he was 'firing on only one cylinder' (1) and that he had come to see the priesthood as the most likely way of improving things. Only one other priest indicated that a conscious choice of alternatives had been made:

'I was very much involved with a girl whom I had known since we were at school ... together ... I loved her and she loved me. It would have to be a thing that we would have to test over a period of courtship which I didn't have time to do. I wasn't prepared to give the time because I felt that at the back of my mind I had to give the priesthood a try. That was the great thing about (the seminary) because you came from this very strict life to complete freedom and you made a lot of mistakes and it clarified things for you' (11)

Other priests added that their mother or the prayerful atmosphere of their home had been influential factors in their decision and one priest gave the impression that status aspiration – being recognised by deferential and respectful children saying 'Hullo Father' – was an attraction. (3)

Priests' reactions to their seminary training varied considerably. Some enjoyed enormously the opportunities for sport and guided recreation in an isolated public boarding school type of environment. Some were aware of the sacrifices made by their parents to ensure that they conformed to the norms of boarding schools:

'My father couldn't really afford it but he ... bought everything on the list that was given and he had to pay for it on hire purchase. But he said he was determined I wouldn't feel deprived when I went there. They made a lot of sacrifices that way. I discovered later that half the stuff was unnecessary.' (11)

Most priests were highly critical of the rigidity of the seminaries they had attended. They were seen as highly bureaucratised organisations for producing priests. For example one priest suggested that his seminary:

'produced priests like ... Heinz factories produce so many tins of baked beans; they just kind of spill out at the end and off they go into parishes ...' (14)

Others complained that their seminaries had been rigid, traditional, unthinking, bound by frustratingly petty rules like only walking to the college gates and back and only going out in threes. One priest observed:

'I was immensely happy at (my seminary) in the last stages, but I couldn't help having second thoughts about the whole

system, as so many priests do, really. You are taught certain virtues: community and obedience, at the cost of initiative. I think I lost a lot of initiative at (my seminary).' (4)

This criticism of being treated as immature boys was made by several priests:

'I felt that we were treated as little boys and that then suddenly on the day of ordination we were expected to be men.' (7)

'The main trouble was that in the Sixth form at (the junior seminary) we'd had a lot of freedom and a lot of responsibility and we felt that going to (the senior seminary) that ... we'd have even more. But, in fact, we were treated in the same way that we'd been treating kids in the years below us. We were not allowed to go out except in threes – only go for a walk ... We used to make jokes about taking the wrong turning ... when we were in the security wing of (the local prison). It came as a big shock to us. We couldn't believe that human beings of our own age could be treated like that.' (14)

Not surprisingly, seminarians had developed their own strategies for coping with authoritarian regimes. One priest described his strategy as 'keeping his nose clean' (1) while other priests admitted they:

'bent the rules as much as we could ... we rejected a lot of the traditions that made it almost like a public school. We were mainly from working class families (and) didn't want to pretend we were anything else.' (14)

The younger priests referred to the relaxation in the seminary regimes in the years following the Vatican Council. Most expressed a strong preference for the greater openness but one did voice reservations about the changes:

'There were several crises at (the seminary). Whether you mean the Rector' influence and authority over the seminary at the time or it happened to be the general changes within the Church which were traumatic experiences, I was very much in the conservative or traditional camp ... I was against such a rapid "over to you and your own responsibility" philosophy particularly from 1965 to 1968 ... One had been told "you do this and that" up to that time. I felt that there was still a certain amount of room for some of that, perhaps not in the small niggling ways we had it up to then, but I didn't feel that "from two o'clock to seven o'clock you have got to get your studies in and it really is up to you how you place it", I didn't think we were quite ready for that and I think there is a bit of both which ought to come in. There is what I would call applied discipline and this brings obedience and all the rest of it and I felt that that was rather being chucked out of the window too rapidly.' (5)

Several priests were critical of various aspects of the seminary

curriculum. The priest who had been a late vocation observed that the Moral Theology course had been particularly poor and had seemed to bear no relationship to the world of real human problems which he had experienced both in the services and at work. He bemoaned what he regarded as the terrible waste of time and energy expended on useless things such as learning everything in Latin. Priests trained in Irish seminaries commented that nothing was done to prepare them for the pastoral scene either in Britain or in Australia and the other countries to which they were sent. The seminary training 'wasn't sufficiently pastorally orientated' (2) was a general view. Several of the Irish priests suggested there were class based antagonisms between Maynooth and the other Irish seminaries:

'I never wanted to be a priest in Ireland ... because I think one of the main requisites for being a priest in Ireland is the ability to pay the bills at Maynooth perhaps, and I wouldn't have had the intellectual qualifications.' (3)

The selection of an English diocese by the Irish also seemed to be a rather haphazard affair. One priest commented that he resented his diocese even before he came and contrasted the 'long-winded' and 'unrealistic' pastoral letters of one bishop with the 'pithy little ones' of another bishop. There were criticisms, too, of the slightness of the contact between the seminarians and the bishop of the diocese they were going to:

'Then when he came himself with his entourage of monsignori it used to be a bit of a joke in the College. The high fliers are coming and you would be interviewed for one minute and he would have nothing important to say to you, just a word of encouragement, but showed no interest in your personal life or anything.' (7)

While it may seem at times that the isolated seminary with its strictly controlled regime, hierarchical authority structures, and pervasive system of routines, regulations and rituals, shares many of the characteristics of a total institution, it is clear from the responses of these priests that their definitions of the situation varied widely, that they adapted to their seminary regimes in widely different ways, that they evolved a range of coping strategies designed to ensure their successful graduation, but also that they expressed in a variety of ways, covert forms of resistance to the more coercive aspects of seminary life.

IV *Responses to Changes*

One of the key findings of the study undertaken by Ranson and his colleagues was that

'Roman Catholicism is a unified belief system within which theological nuances are relatively few.'⁵

'We found considerable uniformity in the manner in which priests expressed their theological cosmology, a uniformity of

style and tone unparalleled in the other Churches: the certainty of "knowing" their Church to be the one, true, authentic Church as founded by Christ.' ⁶

'Priests present no clear and distinct categories of doctrinal belief, no differentiated theological cosmologies.' ⁷

This uniformity of belief is attributed to the effort made to achieve a consensus in the theological socialisation of the priests and the fact that very high proportions of them are trained in their local seminaries.⁸ It is one purpose of this paper to suggest that these findings must be treated with caution and to illustrate the wide variety of theological beliefs held by the priests interviewed in-depth in the present study in contrast to the priests surveyed by mail questionnaire in the former study. It can, perhaps, best be illustrated in the first place by various comments made by priests on contraception, pastoral responses since the publication of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, and the matter of papal infallibility. Thus one priest considered that:

'The Church is so much imprisoned by past pronouncements and ... desperately needs to regain a bit of credibility. Its credibility has been terribly damaged by *Humanae Vitae*, but how can the Church do anything about what it has already said?'

(3)

In an observation on marital difficulties another priest observed:

'that difficult period when they begin to have more pregnancies than they want and that I imagine must be a source of great trial for the faith, especially if they have a confessor who regards it as an intrinsically grave sin ever to use artificial contraception. That must be a thing that drives people out of the Church but I haven't experienced that very much.'

(4)

A third priest explained his own response to ambiguity:

'I would underwrite completely all the things that were said at the time of the *Humanae Vitae* business. I never wrote nor did I put signatures at the bottom of letters. Many of those who did now aren't functioning as priests. Now it may be that I hadn't quite the guts to join the flag-wavers but, in fairness to myself, it might also be that I felt it didn't help to rock the boat completely. At a time when there was great unease and unhappiness that it was God's work to keep what stability could be kept. So my own practice has been never to pull my punches privately — and I might add no matter to whom I had been speaking — but not to preach outright in a way that would provoke a storm. And this could be described as dishonest. There you are, that's life ... but it is nevertheless a path, I think, which an awful lot of clergy have taken.'

(1)

In response to a prompt asking for his views on *Humanae Vitae*, the same priest volunteered:

'My view is that I cannot see and I do not believe that contra-

ception is intrinsically wrong. I believe that a person can be selfish in sexuality, obviously, and that insofar as he is selfish, he is sinful. But I believe that a full sexual relationship is for most people a vital necessity in marital life and nowadays when you can have four babies in four years quite comfortably and inevitably, what does happen for the rest of your married life?"

He went on to contrast this situation with that experienced by his grandmother, only six of whose thirteen babies lived to adult life. He also referred to a rebuke he had been given when at the seminary only sixteen years ago for suggesting the importance of preaching on the infertile period. He did not rule out the choice of periodic abstinence by a married couple but added:

'I just wouldn't be dogmatic to the point of saying that contraception was intrinsically wrong and I certainly wouldn't say to a married couple who had problems in this matter "it is venial" because it seems to me that to say to someone that it is only venial at moments when they are closest to each other is almost criminal.'

He continued to suggest that although the issue had been defused 'by the universal clerical approach, which is to say "well if there are good reasons, it is only venial" ... there are an awful lot of Catholics who are still carrying a great burden of guilt in this matter. I think it can greatly harm their lives.'⁹

Finally, in response to a question asking him his views on authority in the Church he said:

'Well! I really find it difficult to believe – this is lining myself up for the firing squad – that the Pope is infallible in faith and morals – full stop! I am very happy to hear an infallible statement about the Trinity or things of this sort. But when it comes to morals I think you have got to do your social homework. I don't think you can pull a solution out of the hat. I think you have got to look at the world as it is. Now if you have got a commission sitting on, talking about contraception for a good many years and, if after having expanded the commission because it looked as if it was coming out with the wrong answer, if at the end of all that you wind up with a view that there is nothing intrinsically wrong in contraception, I really cannot see that it is within the competence of the authority of the Church to go clean against it. I don't think it is a matter of revelation. It is not revelation. I think you have got to look at the evidence. Now, if authority pronounces on the matter in a sense which is clearly contrary to the evidence which has been examined, it seems to me that authority has lost its authority.'

He went on to say that he recognised that the Pope was talking to the whole world and that many parts of the world did not hold

with contraception. Again, he was talking in a historical situation in which Popes had been expected to pronounce on all sorts of topics. But he opposed the waving of authority 'with a big A' in cases like this. In his view the overwhelming majority of priests were treating contraception as 'only a venial' matter and he thought that the bishops were of the same mind, adding:

'I think we are, in large part, saving face at the present time ... I believe that it can be a person's duty to practise contraception — absolute duty — for the sake of the marriage in every sense. And the only difference between me and the absolute orthodox person is that the absolute orthodox person will say "Oh well! it is only a venial — not much wrong — it is the less perfect way".'

A second area which illustrates the range of beliefs held by Catholic clergy relates to their responses to the Second Vatican Council and to changes emanating from it. Far from being uniform and agreed, these fifteen priests expressed a variety of views ranging from enthusiastic support but some frustration at the slowness of change or a desire for more thoroughgoing change, to opposition but conformity in obedience to authority or thinly disguised hostility. One priest expressed reservations about

'This preoccupation with the Church as a community within itself'

He thought it was time to say that:

'the effect on the Catholic Church in this country so far, of the Vatican Council, has been to make us more "churchy" than the Church was before the Vatican Council came along. (There was a) great preoccupation with liturgy and the parish community and the humanism and all those things of Church concerns and a certain loss, I think, of a sense of responsibility for the world outside, the secular order and secular structures etc.' (8)

This view was echoed by another priest who thought the Church 'should become more daring in its involvement ... it needs to be much more overtly caring ... far more involved in the problems, far more of the visible force for Christ.' (15)

Against this view, another priest who had been amongst the pioneers in the promotion of house Masses expressed reservations about recent liturgical changes though he said he accepted them 'because the Church says so' (9). In his view most people would have preferred the old ways and he pointed to a decline in the number of conversions in his parish to only one twelfth of the level of fourteen years earlier as evidence that the changes had not been self-evidently successful. This again can be contrasted with the observation of a priest who was 'bubbling over with the new liturgy' but who realised that at the parish level

'the Vatican Council had to filter through (and) it is still a long

way from filtering through in some places.’ (7)

On the whole the priests in the four research parishes were accommodating to the liturgical changes without undue difficulty. While some of the young curates felt frustrated at the fact that the “boss” (i.e. their parish priest) reserved final decision-making to himself and sometimes was not prepared to innovate as rapidly as they would like over matters such as the introduction of the “kiss of peace” or the introduction of Mass in day chapels. On the whole they recognised a preparedness on the part of the senior priests to accommodate and adjust to new ideas. At the same time there was, among some priests, a recognition that liturgical change by itself was not sufficient to change the nature of Christian commitment. In other words there was no support for a sort of “liturgical determinism”. Rather it was suggested that

‘The changes in the Mass remain sterile unless there is the whole spirit of the parish which is more dynamic.’ (7)

‘... I never saw this as being a solution to the problems. It is just a thing that I thought ought to be done that the Mass had become a pure ritual, something that was done by the priests and the people were just there ... Now there have been tremendous difficulties (with liturgical reform); people got used to a passive way of carrying on, on the one hand. On the other hand, many older priests have found it very difficult and have just substituted one ritual for another ... it was brought in far too quickly ... On the other hand, you do occasionally pick up from people: one woman said to me “We have a lot more of the Bible read to us now”....’ (12)

This same priest went on to observe that different liturgies were required in different settings:

‘A House Mass is not the sort of thing you would put in a cathedral and the Cathedral liturgy is not for the small parish church.’

The most traditional of the priests interviewed in this research commented that some of the critics of the Church in the mid-sixties were

‘an insult to our parents and grandparents ... In other words there was tremendous criticisms of what was done in the past rather than see that this was a development of the past; the present and the future must go on developing. In my eyes the Vatican Council cannot be seen in terms of change when we mean a change of expression. The essence of the Church does not change and did not change at the Vatican Council. I think I would have objected to a thought pattern in people’s minds where we get the impression that this was the idea of the Vatican Council and now there was something fresh but not something new.’ (5)

This priest was opposed to the model of the priest as ‘a glorified

social worker', had a strong sense that the parish priest 'is the boss', was opposed to anything 'gimmicky in the way that one would approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation', accepted a form of liturgical pluralism at different Sunday Masses though he was not very keen on Folk Masses, and was suspicious of the Charismatic Movement though

'rather like all things in the Church from St Bernadette to everything else, it will be proved in time.'

These selections from the interviews with priests on *Humanae Vitae*, papal authority and liturgical change indicated a greater variety of theological positions than was suggested in the study by Ranson and his colleagues.

V *The Role of the Priest*

In the course of the interviews the priests discussed, among other things, various aspects of their work roles, areas of role conflict, the fragmentation of their work lives and the constraints on them and their relationships with other priests and with housekeepers in the presbytery. In addition, the priests were invited to comment on the conflict between the priest as an official in a hierarchically organised institution where the parish priest was the superior of the assistant priest and the fact that they were both professional colleagues with specialised role skills obtained after prolonged training. Ranson and his colleagues have commented on the fact that promotion to the position of parish priest is relatively slow in the Roman Catholic Church and suggested that

'in general where relatively elderly people have been kept in positions of inferiority and subordination for long periods one might seriously expect to discover attitudes of dissent, resentment or disenchantment.'¹⁰

One very experienced priest did make a wry comment about his being the longest serving curate in the diocese and did wonder whether he would celebrate his silver jubilee in the priesthood before he obtained his first parish. He added:

'The interesting thing about a priest's life ... is that you can get all sorts of jobs and find yourself back where you started. Here I am back as a curate almost as though the intervening years hadn't been there ... most of us don't want to be a bishop or a dean ... we don't have that ambition, so you are very much thrown back on faith. The only reason you do it ... is because you believe in Jesus Christ; that's what it's all about ... You have to go through the various stages of life even though they are not the same centred, so that I could imagine that is why perhaps priests desire to become a monsignor or to become a canon to receive some recognition of what they are or what they have done and in that way to fulfil ambition. You can't escape that in many ways you are going to suffer that kind of thing.... why was he made a canon and why wasn't I? and that

sort of thing. You are not going to escape that sort of thing and it is as well to realise it!' (12)

A sense of resistance to the intrusion of bureaucratic relationships among professional colleagues is also apparent in the frustrations expressed by one of the younger priests:

'I feel very strongly about the lack of sharing of responsibility. We started a weekly meeting here between the priests in the presbytery and after we got it established we wanted to involve others who work in the parish, teachers and all the different strata of parish society but the boss won't come to them. He escaped the first two and then he decided he wanted to do (outside visiting) work at that time. We want liturgical change. We want to ban confessions on a massive scale. We want baptisms changed and many others. But all these things he says you can't change overnight and it is very frustrating and leads to an awful lot of tension. There is more tension inside the house than outside. You could say it is a generation gap; there is certainly a clash of temperaments. You can't choose who you are going to live with; you are just sent. We are responsible men ... but you are still treated like you are ...' (11)

A parish priest was sympathetic to the problem and suggested that one difficulty was that

'a priest has all his eggs in one basket: his work life, his home life, his whole life is in one particular area and activity ... if he doesn't survive, the work doesn't survive and I think it is particularly vulnerable there ...' (1)

This situation is contrasted with that of a married professional man who had alternative spheres of emotional support, tension release and status in home and leisure activities outside the work situation. For the priest, however, where two or more professionals are living under one roof and where there has to be one coherent parish policy, for example in regard to liturgy:

'It is very difficult for a man to be ... at least forty before he is in a position of having the last say ... I see it as inevitable ... but I don't really think I have known of any parish situation where there wasn't a degree of tension ... If you look at any photograph of a class at a seminary, you've got there up to twenty jolly nice people who, by and large, are jolly generous but it can well happen (that) by the time they have weathered the storm of fifty years, they are pretty difficult, edgy, crusty old chaps.'

One curate who had had several parish priests commented on the difficulties and isolation of a young curate with some parish priests:

'We never had a row but there was always a tremendous distance because we had nothing, really, in common. He was ... more elderly than his years and never moved out and knew

only a very small clique and he had no interest at all in the parish. It was really a terribly deadening experience for a person who was groping with himself and felt that he could not get any help at all and no understanding or friendship.' (3)

A retrospective view was provided by a retired parish priest who argued that:

'like married life (the relationship between priests in a presbytery) needs a lot of hard work to preserve an even, loving relationship because you know when you work close to a person you are very alive to their defects and these are a cause of irritation. But there is a difficulty now that my curates used the argument with me they said "You don't expect me to live cooped up in this house. Isn't it much better for me to spend my evenings with people, families?" So I said there was a lot in that but I tried to furnish a very nice common room and have a colour television with a view to offering them something like a pleasant kind of community life in the evening but encountered this argument. And I don't know how you resolve that one. I am old fashioned enough to think that people can't preserve celibacy without being a community of bachelors, but if you are a community of bachelors it rather restricts your social life and there is no doubt about it, that these visits of priests to families who welcome them does a lot of good to both parties. It provides a substitute for the female companionship they sacrifice and it also acquaints them with the attitudes of people because they are the "good" Catholic families who want the priest usually ... I don't know what the answer really is. Of course, you can (create) community life over the dinner table. Another thing is that the generation gap has been usually very much exaggerated because of the changes in the liturgy and the reluctance and frank dislike of old priests for changing everything. It worried them and distressed them, and to find young priests who are enthusiastic about it all and want it to go further even would very likely produce contention in the house. I think with an effort life at the presbytery can be very pleasant but it is awfully difficult when it is two, one older priest who claims authority and one who is much younger. I have never had that. I have always had three (priests in the parish) and that is much easier because you can discuss with your fellow curate the idiosyncrasies of the other man and they can soften your attitudes.' (4)

Against this view a young curate explained how he and a second young curate used to enjoy visiting friends in the parish and found the constraints of the traditional model of the socially distant priest irksome:

'We were the two lads ... (we) believe in enjoyment in having our own friends. We resented very much the idea that a priest

must mix with his other priests and play golf on Mondays. We resented that whole concept of the priesthood, at least on the social side. We also resented that when it was the parish dance we stood at the back of the hall being nice to everybody. We got in there and danced and we had enough confidence in our relationship with the people to accept us as human beings. We liked racing and we used to go off to race meetings. Because we combined so well we became efficient in missing people from Mass. People were very flattered that we missed them whether they just didn't go or whether they were sick.' (7)

That the generation gap could be bridged, though, was attested to by one young priest who indicated that:

'the PP couldn't have been a nicer companion. We did look on each other as companions and colleagues, even though he was so much my senior.' (6)

These examples illustrate strategies for coping with the loneliness of the priest. Given this loneliness it was a surprising finding that in none of the four presbyteries did the priests appear to come together in the house for prayer. There seemed to be no attempts made at shared prayer for God's guidance in their search for solutions to the pastoral problems of the parish including, for example, their need to reconcile their frequently acute differences over the liturgical style of the parish. Occasionally attempts were made to read the Office or Rosary together in a formal way:

'At one time we had the family rosary here and, incredible as it sounds it broke down because of the utter impossibility of finding the necessary quarter of an hour ... doorbells would go, telephones would go, in and out, so by the end of the rosary hardly any of the congregation were left.' (9)

One can, perhaps, only speculate about the reasons for this lack of a communal, spontaneous, prayer life within the presbytery. It seems likely that the broad pattern of a seminary education in the past prepared the priest for subsequent independence and isolation so that he had a 'trained incapacity' to pray easily with other priests. In the parish situation the stress on the bureaucratic official rather than the professional colleague relationship was also not conducive to the development of an easy, shared prayer life between a parish priest and his curate.¹¹

The question of loneliness is also related to the question of celibacy¹² and the married ex-priest observed that:

'companionship made me a fuller person and it improved my personality ... I resented the fact that I had to leave the priesthood to get married.'

For several priests celibacy was something they tolerated as part of the job specification. Several priests referred to a long process of decision making between a girl with whom they were develop-

ing a close social relationship and the completion of their seminary training. Others

‘regarded it as a price to be paid to become a priest.’ (2)

‘I accepted the fact that there wouldn’t be marriage; this was part of the package deal. But if you ask me whether I believe I would be more effective in my job, vocation, whatever you are going to call it, as a married man, I believe that I would be more effective.’ (1)

Another priest did, however, argue that celibacy was important while admitting:

‘nothing in the priesthood itself ... says you must be celibate. The whole vocation to the priesthood is a call to complete commitment and I think celibacy is an aid to that commitment.’ (6)

One of the most interesting comments made in the course of these interviews concerned the question of the priest’s relationships with women and the consequent elements of risk attached to aspects of his pastoral role. One young curate observed that:

‘You get into many, many risky sorts of situations, especially with women. I don’t seem to be able to avoid this. I certainly don’t desire it at times, but nevertheless it happens. The great thing is that I can come down in the morning and say my Office and say my prayers and I feel confident to face the day ... I go to the (parish club) and about three quarters are lapsed, not the bad lapsed, but those who are just lazy and have dropped off. I can see most of my pastoral work there (and) I have had quite a few converts. It is pastoral work of a nature, being able to sit down and have a drink and talk and even get up and have a dance, which still raises eyebrows. But nevertheless, how I justify this, perhaps it is not justified every time by no means, is that Our Lord went down into the hovels of the people too. He was happy with them. They were His people and it was their way of enjoying themselves, what they looked forward to. The difficulties are there but you are still very conscious of being a priest and that you are doing a job. People have accused me of really enjoying myself and they don’t realise that I am still working ... Many a time I have conversations with women ... The dangers are that some people then start calling you by your first name and while in one sense I don’t mind ... it does automatically drop barriers which I prefer to be up when I am trying to do a job, and so there are difficulties that way.

‘My big difficulty comes with women, especially in this parish. It is very difficult to let them know ... the most difficult part is dropping them gently ... there are quite a few that I’ve had problems with. I don’t think they look at me as a priest at all. They do in a sense; they won’t touch me. They just see the

man, I think, and it makes things very awkward at times. The difficulty is to keep them coming on, coming to Mass, showing them their responsibilities towards their children, and yet not get too close, too involved, because it just impedes you.' (11) Other young priests similarly stressed the importance of seeking out the people where they were.

'We made sure we danced with everybody, grannies and everybody, so it wasn't that we were after the nice bird and once people saw that they were quite flattered to be danced and the men saw us as no threat ... We used also to go into pubs as well ... We were very conscious that the Church was unrealistic and that preaching or standing about or hearing confessions was one side of things, but that we weren't where the people were. And especially in an Irish population ... we wanted to be where people were, which a lot of the time was in the pub. Again, we made sure not to be spending all our time; it was a conscious policy. We would meet, for example, at lunch time ... I would go in and have a beer and meet half a dozen people, fellows that were (working locally). There were no great conversions. I don't think they got an opportunity to talk and we made sure, as well, to wear our collars in the pubs and it became acceptable. And then "Where were you last week? I didn't see you" and we got very well in with the managers of the pubs. This had the effect that we always got a bottle of whisky at garden fete time, and you got the licence for the dance bar, and in some places we arranged for a catechetical course for the kids over a pub, and we would hear confessions upstairs in a pub and things like this. Again we were very wary of that because sometimes you get people at an unfair advantage. But we did it by appointment when they were sober and it must be at the beginning of the night, not towards the end of the night. We were very conscientious like that.' (7)

Given this attempt by priests to try to integrate prophetic witness into their official roles, the apparent decline in the level of parish visiting is striking. None of the four parishes of this research approached the level of home visiting reported by Ward in his study of a Liverpool parish in the 1950s.¹³ This is a matter where there appears to be a considerable gap between the ideology and the practice. In consequence priests either express guilt at their failures regarding parish visiting or else construct an elaborate structure of excuses to explain the impossibility of regular visiting in the light of recent social changes. Some of these responses are reflected in the observations made by priests in the present study:

'My own visiting record is abysmally poor. By and large I visit those where there is a specific matter to be dealt with. I do realise, and I do believe, to see people at home is of paramount importance, but one way or another, I am never doing any-

thing.' (1)

'(Visiting is) very important. Unfortunately, in practice it is very difficult. (This parish) has a lot of people coming at evening time, lots of meetings, committees. (Yet) the only time, apart from the old people, is to visit in the evening time, try to visit husband and wife and children, but at that time you are involved in meetings ... I like visiting but at the practical level ... one doesn't have the opportunity ...' (2)

'Often visiting in those (tower) blocks ... I wonder now why should I keep on going to these flats where nobody is interested in me and I am not really welcome, and I am not invited in. Is there any good going round and round them? And yet this is what that kind of apostolate means that you try very hard offering them goods even if they refuse you many times.'

(4)

Several priests broadened the discussion and stressed the importance of being available at the crisis points in the lives of their parishioners.

'I began to preach the idea that the job of the Church was to go to the people where they were. It was useless trying to get people to Church until they could see something of the relevance of the Church in their lives. Now there are certain times, and this is where visiting and the priest knowing his people and being in contact is so important, where there are certain areas in their lives in which religion is going to touch them. The obvious one is death, there is sickness, trouble and so on. And that is the place where they see the Church, they see the point of the priest as someone to whom they can open their hearts, someone to whom they can give their complete confidence, who is with them in their present difficulties. In other words it is what the priest is. He is seen as someone who has a meaning in their lives at those points. There is still something there that they recognise and hold on to.' (12)

'I am a people's friend. Even if you can't do anything about it, if you are with them, with the sick, the people in distress, if you haven't done a useful thing by utilitarian standards, you will be amazed ... how grateful they are ... (there is) nothing to take the place of real steady visiting of your people.' (13)

This priest, however, admitted that he was not successful at visiting his parishioners in their homes, pointing out that many mothers are now working. People did not return home from work until late, and that with various other regular responsibilities, for example hospital visiting, he had lost the rhythm of regular home visiting. A young curate, however, saw this as evidence:

'that priests are out of touch with people. For example, there is not much point in visiting people at four o'clock in the afternoon ... when they are getting their tea or Saturday afternoon

when there is sport on. I think the reason is that priests are out of touch and don't know when is the right time to visit people. Also because there are so many stupid set ups in the parishes, they can only visit at certain times because they have to be back for a meeting in the parish that about a dozen people in the parish will come along to.' (7)

This priest saw no point in returning to the presbytery through rush hour traffic for an inflexible evening meal time and often invited himself out for supper with a family he had got to know. In his judgment:

'one good night's visiting is better than visiting twenty people in one road for five minutes to talk about pleasantries.'

Finally a senior priest articulated the view of the priest as a father of his parishioners and sharply distinguished his role from that of the social worker:

'A priest is involved in society ... but he is not expected by any Catholic to be a social welfare expert. They will come to him for difficult things and he knows where to send them if he listens to them. If they know they have got his sympathy and compassion that is what they want.' (9)

A flavour of the fragmentation of the working lives of priests was given by the same priest in his description of an evening's work:

'Somebody the other night came (when) I was doing confessions by myself. The front door went; I had to run down quickly, answered the phone: "Can you give me ten minutes?" I went back and finished off confessions, dashed into the waiting room and this poor girl told me her trouble, marriage trouble, drinking trouble, and she talked for three quarters of an hour. There was nothing I could do. She knew I couldn't do anything (but) she was most grateful and when she went off she said she would come back. I suppose I did help her in one way. That's what they (the people) want a priest for and you get examples of that day after day ... Whenever I am going around the parish in my car (there are kids) on every corner. This is being a priest, being a father of the kids. There is no disgrace in being a father. It's not being paternalistic ... if you get a priest ... who goes about his work with insensitivity and ruthlessness, trying to be professional, he has missed the notion of what a priest is. A priest can't be ruthless or be insensitive. He has got to be in tears with his people. He has got to have that much sympathy that he can identify himself with their problems. Their problems are his problems; they are not for the social worker.' (9)

VI *Conclusions*

In this paper fifteen priests, who were associated with four English parishes with different social class compositions and in different areas of the country, and who were interviewed in 1976/7,

have been allowed to speak for themselves. They discussed their home backgrounds, education and seminary training and commented at length on various aspects of their role as priests. A major purpose of this paper has been to indicate that the suggestion made by Ranson and his colleagues that Roman Catholic priests have a uniform belief system is not supported by the evidence from the interview transcripts with this present sample of priests. On the contrary, the priests demonstrated a range of different evaluations of their seminary education, assessments of the debate over contraception and *Humane Vitae*, orientation on the question of papal infallibility, and responses to the changes emanating from the Second Vatican Council. These views were by no means simply a reflection of generational differences between the priests though in the second half of the paper, evidence was given that there is considerable conflict and tension between the older parish priests and the younger curates. This reflects different attitudes on the matter of decision making, particularly about liturgical style and innovation. In the main the younger priests were more ready to go outside the formal parish institutions to meet parishioners not only in their homes but also in the pubs and the parish halls or clubs. The older priests on the whole defined their roles more formally as being available and sympathetic listeners for parishioners who came to them in trouble. Tensions between priests appear to be the inevitable consequences of the very long apprenticeship tradition for priests and the frustrations of well-trained professionals institutionally denied access to significant decision making until early middle age.

Three alternative possibilities for enriching the job satisfaction of priests might be considered. Relationships between parish priests and curates in the larger parishes seem likely to be eased where two or more young curates can provide each other with friendship and support. On the other hand, with a falling clerical labour force, opportunities for promotion to the role of parish priest at an earlier age than hitherto should improve, though some means of providing social support for single priests would then be necessary. There is no reason in principle why such support could not be forthcoming from the lay people in the parish. Finally, various forms of team ministries have on occasion been suggested. One of the priests in this present study expressed considerable doubts about this alternative on the grounds that priests specialising in particular tasks were not familiar with the eucharistic community on Sundays. Given that many parishioners wish to identify with "their priest" some cautious experimentation would seem to be necessary before judging between these alternatives.

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I am deeply grateful to the fifteen priests who not only allowed me to interview them in the course of this research, but

also were prepared to be remarkably open in their observations on intimate personal issues relating to their work. In offering this article to them I hope I have treated their confidences with the respect which they deserve and have fairly taken into account their comments on the earlier version which was presented to the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group Conference on "The Sociology of Roman Catholicism in Britain" which was held at the University of Surrey in March 1979.

- 1 S. Ranson, A. Bryman and R. Hinings, *Clergy, Ministers and Priests*, London Routledge, 1977.
- 2 The study of "Tradition and Change in the Roman Catholic Community in England" was carried out with the support of a grant from the Social Science Research Council.
- 3 53% of the present sample were under the age of 40, compared to 27% of the priests surveyed by Ranson et al, op. cit. p 24.
- 4 Overall Ranson reported 20% of priests had fathers who were agricultural workers though in an urban diocese the proportion rose to 35%, op. cit. pp 28-9. These proportions clearly reflect the social origins of Irish priests, a point overlooked by Ranson.
- 5 S. Ranson et al, op. cit. p 49.
- 6 Ibid. p 51.
- 7 Ibid. p 154.
- 8 Ibid. pp 50, 154.
- 9 One priest commented on these views:
'I wonder if your quote on the infallibility of the Pope would find many echoes. Maybe it would, but I doubt it.'
- Another priest urged that:
'to keep the balance it would be good to have the views of a priest who is just as explicit about the orthodoxy of the Pope's teaching, i.e. myself.'
- A third observed:
'today my impression from the Deanery meetings ... is that the issue seems less of a problem. I would like to think that priests generally accept *Humanae Vitae* as being the present moral position and merely interpret it with great compassion (elasticity?). Some would agree with Cardinal Hume: "the last word has not been said on this".'
- 10 Ibid. p 24.
- 11 Some interesting illustrations are given in R. V. Bogan, "Priests' Alienation and Hope", *The Month*, June 1973, pp 195-201. One priest was quoted as saying 'Celibacy does bother a lot of priests: not lack of a sexual outlet but lack of companionship which is not supplied by deep relationships with other people. I was so lonely I got a canary, but put not your trust in canaries'.
- 12 One of the priests who agreed with this interpretation wrote that:
'it has been my experience that there is very little forward planning by the clergy in a parish as a team, possibly, and in fact ideally, involving the laity. What I mean is something along the classic lines of identifying problems or problem areas, e.g. Where are we now? Where are we going? How do we get there? Obviously I do not expect fool-proof solutions, but there might just emerge more of a sense of direction.'
- 13 C. K. Ward, *Priests and People*, Liverpool University Press, 1961. One priest who agreed that 'people are not being visited in the way they used to be' observed that 'perhaps we should be thinking about developing lay ministries more, and far more real lay involvement.' Some helpful suggestions on this can be found in B. O'Sullivan, *Parish Alive*, Sheed & Ward, 1979.