

Are we Killing our Priests?

Introduction

Last week I got an email from an elderly Australian Priest who is working on a monograph on priesthood and he wanted my comments on his text. The time could not have been more opportune for this text to arrive as it reminded me that the struggles that clergy face in Ireland have universal features – certainly in the Western World. Interestingly the monograph is titled ‘A Priesthood Imprisoned’. I borrowed his title for my talk today ... as my own view is that I am not sure whether we are Killing our Priests as is the title of this AGM but I am sure that we are imprisoning them in a prison of invisibility, silence and to a great extent impotence.

Philosophy is Not a Luxury

I was also helped in preparing for today by the writings of a colleague in the US, Jeff Carreira, a writer whose work I read often, who was reflecting on the outcome of the Presidential election. Jeff has been writing a blog for the past decade called ‘Philosophy is not a Luxury’ because he believes that in challenging times philosophy is the first thing we need... and it is not a luxury. He maintains, rightly in my view, in the face of challenging times we are often tempted to think that philosophy is a luxury for which we don’t have time, and instead we often prefer to jump into action to address the perceived threat.

He and I share the view that in challenging times the challenges can only be successfully met with a level of thinking that is deeper than what we have been doing so far. And that is what we must do today in relation to priesthood. If our current thinking didn’t avert the crisis then why would more of it bring resolution?

Philosophy as you well know is not just an academic subject taught in universities and seminaries. It is the process through which we try to make meaning and to figure out the way forward. In doing so it consists of the stories we create to help us understand the meaning of events and circumstances ... and the stories we tell ourselves about our ‘realities’ ... and these in turn help shape the unfolding of our future. And there are many stories we can tell about any event or events, such as priesthood today, the

challenges and opportunities, as the facts can always be made fit many different conclusions depending on how we think about them. In challenging times deep thinking and reflection is not only a necessity, it is unavoidable. So let's have a philosophical discussion on priesthood ... one that might throw new light on events of today and might elevate from the pain of despondency.

The Rhetoric of Priesthood and the Catholic Church

With some exceptions the rhetoric of priesthood and the Catholic Church in Ireland today is that they are kind of irrelevant ... especially in the Western World. Priests are depicted at best as benignly innocent and kind or as evil and cunning, but generally not really relevant to the Modern Ireland – apart from some ceremonial duties that are part of both tradition and / or faith for some. The Catholic Church itself is often depicted as a place of cover up and political manoeuvrings.... with little to recommend it ... perhaps apart from some of the statements of Pope Francis – for those with the interest to note what he says. Within this perspective and the tone of it – the dominant one in Ireland – it is of little surprise that priests and religious leaders have and are living through an emotional rollercoaster with extreme lows and some highs and we have heard Brendan articulate the lived reality of many priests in such circumstances in Ireland today. So what can priests do? Are you to sink with a ship (the Institution of the Catholic Church) that at times appears to be sinking – at least in public support and credibility (in the Western World where you live) or can you find the Rock that will keep you strong and maybe even thrive through such apparent adversity. How can this be achieved?

What I think is necessary is the capacity to think outside the box – to think and feel deeply about what is happening to priesthood in your times... to mourn the loss of what has gone, individually and collectively so that it can be let go without trying to cling on, and to enable the new Light of renewal to shine. Renewal comes in the wake of our grieving. Psychologists and psychotherapists teach that abnormal or complicated grief reactions occur when we cannot grieve and let go ... when we want to cling on to what is no longer there, when we pretend that the past is the present and we can see no future, when we live out of outdated philosophies and approaches to our lives. In essence, complicated grief reactions occur when we are defensive and when those wonderful

defence mechanisms that protect us so well at times of acute crisis start to turn into our enemy. In essence we become the Living Dead.

Maybe it is time for collective grieving for clergy for the Church they once knew, for the priesthood they originally entered, for the congregations they once served, for the relations with bishops and superiors they once lived so that they can emerge refreshed, renewed and invigorated, with increased depth of wisdom and gratitude that we know come in the wake of our grieving and the letting go and letting in. New ways of seeing and new ways of being can be born. Perhaps priesthood needs to be re-imagined for the 21st century, but this cannot occur without the necessary grieving for what has gone and without making room for new insights and philosophical perspectives to emerge.

So what I want to offer today are three streams of thought that are guiding my thinking in relation to this matter [and that is from one who has never been a priest but a mere observer – which is of course a very tentative place to stand and in which I stand in humility]. These thoughts however might help with this process of reimagining... that all of us in this room as philosophers in our own lives might pick up and consider alone and in dialogue with each other.

1. The Changing Theology of Priesthood, the Impact of this on Priesthood today

The first stream of thought is on the changing theology of priesthood that has come in direct relationship with the child abuse situation. The once ontological change at ordination that was thought to be forever and of God's grace is now of man and a reversible gift that is dependent on human behaviour. I cannot but imagine that the reversing of this most sacred of certainties has created turmoil and turbulence at the very core of what it means to be an ordained and consecrated member of the Catholic priesthood for many. Irrespective of what side of the argument one was on in relation to the Ontological Change at ordination – this retrospective seismic shift in what it means to be an ordained and consecrated minister of the Catholic Church cannot but have created 'despondency' 'depression' and great uncertainty in many who believed what

they were told in seminaries and places of formation. With the stroke of a pen such a fundamental can be wiped away, a position that I believe has created an unspoken rumbling earthquake under the very fabric of priesthood as once understood and believed to be. Has this making secular what was once holy any relevance to the death and depression experienced in priesthood today? I certainly believe that it has.

My belief is that all or most of you in this room took your years of seminary training seriously and when you took up your first appointment believed you were well equipped with the answers you would need for a life of ministry - or at least you knew where and how to find them. Priesthood of the seminary years was presented as secure and stable and premised on truths that could serve in all eventualities. The ontological change that occurred at ordination secured this 'truth'. However my experience of many priests is that the security of the knowledge of the newly consecrated and ordained began to be challenged by the changing face of ministry in an increasingly complex world of the twentieth and now the twenty first centuries. Add to this the aftermath of Vatican II with the challenges it posed to the 'certainty' of 'truth' of seminary training and the new needs of priests as they readjusted - or not - to the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit and all that was to go with this.

In Ireland at least, it is my belief that the prime source of what priests need in a changing world of ministry lies in the hearts and minds of priests themselves, but it is my impression, especially today, that you are rarely consulted in the task of identifying what those needs might be. Too often the 'formation' processes of seminary years which were top down, even oppressive, something to be endured, with a kind of censorship of particular topics such as love, relationship and relational living, sexuality, and especially any questioning of mandatory celibacy or blind obedience has become the mode of governance and relational living that is leaving priesthood in the Western World in such disarray. It is little wonder to me that numerous studies on priesthood from the time of Vatican II and since then in the United States and Australia always seem to conclude that while the majority of priests are coping they show signs of needing professional or emotional attention and organized help if they are to adjust adequately to the challenges of modern priesthood. Terms like emotional immaturity, (that does not prevent them from exercising their priestly function, but precludes them from being

happy men and effective priests) continue to emerge in study after study. Study after study also suggests that a large proportion of priests are lacking emotional nurturing to enable mature development and that such incomplete personal development results in distant, unrewarding relationships and uneasiness about intimacy. So is this the situation in which you find yourself in today ... only you know (maybe it is time for a study of priesthood in Ireland – and I would be very happy to undertake such if you were to commission same).

So let us think then what is to be done. How can priests separate from such states of 'emotional dependence' on an organization and institution that is not taking care of them – and maybe never would – that was an adolescent dream and misguided promise that 'we' would become your 'family' - and how can priests become more independent and autonomous within a collective community of the People of God - in such a way that they are 'grown up', are able to exercise 'voice', understand their limitations especially in the face of the structural limitations that a diminishing clergy population brings for them. How can priests learn to say yes to God but no to unreasonable human expectation? In all my years of working with priests No is the word I would most like to teach them to say..... not a cold No but a warm No ... not No as reflex but as part of the language repertoire of human skills that comes from the knowing of how to be human *and* serve God.

2. Human Growth is a Decision in God's Grace

My second stream of thought is in relation to human growth and what it means to be human *and* work for God. Human growth is possible at every stage of life – and without growth we die – if not physically then emotionally, mentally, spiritually and if you like we become like 'The Living Dead'. While I am sure that many of us agree that human growth belongs to the dynamic of God's grace, it also requires courage at an individual level and an infrastructure of support. However, no one can make an individual grow, probably not even God, as it is basically an individual's choice and decision. How often have you heard parents say to you I wish my son or husband or wife would change their ways, especially if their lives were destructive for themselves and others. How often have you felt impotent because ultimately despite your best efforts you know it was

their choice? Families of people suffering from addiction problems know this only too well. They need to reach their rock bottom before they change. We all do and the same holds for priests. Making the choice to change and go for growth is difficult, even when those around you are encouraging. The shackles of the past, the myth of the good old years, avoiding the pain of realizing what has died, keeps us in a kind of 'frozen limbo of hope', and it is understandable.

Many priests with whom I have worked were brought up in a church which cherished the will and intellect. The theology was a rule based one, saturated with reason and law, devoid of a theology of love and relational living. These men were further expected to submit their minds and will to authority in obedience. They were rendered dependent – on those above, on bishops and their congregations for affirmation and approval, and on the public to keep believing in what they were doing. In this, the uniqueness and autonomy of the individual, God's individual son, was to be eroded. Feelings and emotion were to become suspect. Love, apart from spiritual love, was for other people. So how has this education left its legacy on priesthood today? Well that is something for you to tell me. But I have some observations from my vantage point. I believe this education and way of life long living has left priests bereft ... fearful of intimacy and with the breakdown in community living feeling isolated and alone. It is devastating to the morale of priests for them to feel isolated from one another, to feel isolated from the self, not understood by superiors and left alone before criticism and complaint. We only have to reference Alan Hilliard's work on the experiences of clergy (see *Studies*, 2014, Winter Edition) and my own with senior clergy following the publication of the Murphy Report (see *Studies*, 2014, Winter Edition) to know what isolation is like when standing alone before criticism and complaint. I remember Dermot O'Mahony at this time. Alan's study articulate this point when following the publication of the Murphy report the first item on the agenda of some deanery meetings was the clustering of parishes!

It is not easy to be constantly available to others without recharging one's own batteries. That is a human need. It is never too late to learn how to do it. And it is worthwhile. Authentic knowledge of and care for the human self allows us to recharge our batteries without any sense of guilt and makes it possible to continue to love others

without resentment or fear.

We know from what Brendan has said in his paper today and from the comments from many clergy that priesthood is undergoing a professional crisis in terms of the demands made on priests in their everyday ministry and the lack of support offered to them. Many priests report that they are extremely stretched by the workloads, feel marginalized from decision-making processes, and have little confidence in the direction in which those who do make the decisions are taking the church in this country. However, while joining together in solidarity in organizations such as the Association of Catholic Priests can help with this in finding voice, this is not an alternative to going for personal growth and development. That is your wellbeing imperative. Clergy suffer depression through inertia.

While we know that the Church needs systemic changes that take account of such matters and it is good to keep pressure on for same, I now have a question for you. Are you going to sacrifice more of your precious time and life in waiting for 'them' to take care of you? Is it not now the time for you to go for personal growth, healing and well being with all that this entails within the context of working for the God that you love without your sacred life being sacrifice to an institution that is so much in need of reform and transformation that it has even become an enemy of those who set out to serve it. The choice is yours. However, we are reminded in the gospels that unless the grain falls to the ground and dies it cannot bear fruit while psychologists remind that there is no gain without pain! Change cannot come from certainty – only from the search that uncertainty brings. The time is now. Resisting the change or defending the “status quo” arising from fear and/or reluctance to face the challenge of change, will not enhance your life but may cause you more stress and strain as everything changes all around you and nothing changes in living your sacred life.

3. Trauma – The Body Holds the Score

My third and final stream of thought concerns trauma and its impact and how the body keeps the score. I don't know if you have felt traumatized by events that have occurred in the revelations about child abuse in the Catholic Church in the past decade or more.

From my vantage point the stories told by victim survivors of what they had endured brought reality into sharp focus of a Church that had failed them and human experiences that no children should have had to experience. Irish society was shocked by hearing their accounts and rightly Irish society eventually got behind the victim survivors in joining in solidarity with their outrage. This is as it should be ... as we know for these victim survivors the body held the score and many of them brought the trauma of the abuse that they suffered into adulthood and into old age. With love, help and the grace of God thankfully many have and are finding peace and healing in their lives. Love is always the antidote to trauma.

Psychiatrist Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk's 2014 publication *'The Body Keeps the Score'*, shines fresh light on the effects of trauma and abuse, based on brain imaging and neuroscience, and other scientific research in the field of trauma, which greatly helps those of us who study the long-term effects of trauma and are trying to develop strategies to minimise and even stem those effects. Some of this work involves the talking therapies and others bypass speech with some techniques from Mindfulness and Yoga. The basic premise of all of this work is that trauma leaves an imprint of the events on body, mind and soul – that trauma lives on in the body while the mind and brain try to manages the perceptions. For real change to occur the body needs to learn that the event has passed and that the world is safe again.

However, sometimes trauma stuff attracts trauma stuff and we are catapulted back there without sign or warning. But with healing comes the change in the memory card and the knowledge that the world is safe. Sometimes trauma is also referred to as 'the unexperienced experience', 'unassimilated happenings' or in the words of Prof Ivor Brown 'the frozen present'.

So why am I mentioning this today? Well I am mentioning this because I feel certain that many clergy and many church leaders have been traumatised by the events that have unfolded in their lifetime in relation to child abuse. And that trauma is unacknowledged - the unexperienced experience', 'unassimilated happenings' 'the frozen present'. In addition how has it been for you to be accountable for the sins of your father, for the sins of your brother, for the sins of neglect by your church? Difficult I would imagine

and the body holds the score. And how has it been for you to accept or live with some of the inaccuracies of the various reports, some of the injustices in the name of justice that were done to some participants, without redress, unlike Alan Shatter this week for whom the courts found that he was wronged in the Geiran report? The body holds the score.

I was always concerned that in the wake of the Murphy Report, Ryan Report and Cloyne report that clergy [as well of course as victim survivors and offenders] would need spaces in which the trauma of what was unfolding could be held. I am not sure what spaces you found in which to be held. The men in Alan Hilliard's study found few if any places to be held following the publication of the Murphy report and one would want to be dead not to be deeply moved, as I was, by the stories of senior clergy and some bishops who told me of how some were abandoned and isolated, desolate and in consoled in the wake of the publication of these reports. I often wondered if sickness and illness would take hold on the bodies of such unsupported men – including yourselves – if the trauma was not acknowledged. And it is never too late. Something to think about Maybe a project of Healing Circles round the country for clergy could be next on the agenda of ACP? I will help you if you need.

And so to Conclude

In this paper of looking back and looking forward I encourage you to go for growth and healing. I urge you to consider a nationwide campaign of healing circles involving clergy - and later involving laity, victims and offenders. I urge you to reinstate forgiveness and redemption as being of God and something which we might all work to with courage. And most of all I urge you to take care of yourself in this time of uncertainty and challenge.