**THE FUTURE SHAPE OF THE CATHOLIC PRIESTHOOD**

*I was ordained in 1964 after spending 3 years in the junior and six in the major seminary of St Cuthbert at Ushaw. I served as a priest for 9 years, teaching back in the same seminary, until I was laicised to marry in 1973. For almost 50 years I worked in the field of education and interfaith dialogue both for a local authority and as diocesan coordinator for interreligious relations until 2011 in the diocese of Leeds.*

*I therefore experienced the priesthood and seminary training, inherited unchanged from the Council of Trent, then as influenced by the early years of the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council and latterly as a laymen, parishioner and diocesan employee. For five hundred years the Tridentine priesthood and its seminary training served the Church well – but no longer.*

*I retain a love of and respect for the priesthood and number excellent priests among my friends and work colleagues.*

*Many elements, not least the clerical abuse scandal and its cover-up, the on-going clericalization and even re-clericalization of many young priests, the increased theological competence of the laity, the on-going emergence of lay women as empowered members of the church – all these and many other factors within a general picture of declining practice and an aging priest population at least in the church of the West, all add up to the need to re-assess the role of the priest in a Church poised to embrace synodality. We are on the verge of a change in thinking, ‘a paradigm shift’ with much uncertainty but with a new theology emerging to support and nurture the future shape of the priesthood.*

*Our present diocesan priesthood and the Tridentine seminary system, even modified by the second Vatican Council is no longer fit for purpose. They can be re-imagined and re-shaped. What are some of the emerging contours of the probable future shape of the priesthood?*

**THE FUTURE PRIESTHOOD**

We can try, with affection and whilst acknowledging the dedication of individual priests, to discern the future role and identity of the priesthood in our church.

**THE SETTING**

We share with all humanity our origin as made in the image of God. We are the gift and product of 13.8 billion years of loving attentive cosmic evolution, culminating in the self-reflecting consciousness we all share, ‘earthlings.’ tied to all earth’s creatures, rooted in the earth as our common home, tasked with growing into a humanity reflecting the likeness of God. Christians make up that ‘companionship of the empowered’ here and hereafter, created by the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. People and priests exist as the ‘People of God,’ invited to follow the Way of Jesus – in worship and loving community to become ‘missionary disciples’ – in the ‘loving service of all that exists’ (St J P 2) in acknowledgement that every human being makes up the ‘people of God’ with no exclusions or exceptions.

Christians are baptised into the Church. We are all as the baptised, as prophets, priests and sovereigns to have a vocation. We are all called to use our individual baptismal gifts – as a community of those empowered to serve the gospel message. We have the gifts of the Spirit of Christ through baptism and confirmation.

**THE SERVICE OF ‘ORDER’**

As a community, we are not ‘ordered’ not in the sense of being ‘commanded,’ but arranged purposefully within a community to fulfil our several destinies and vocations. Our worship, building of loving ‘communion’ must be organised, arranged, ‘ordered’. We can call (going to and connecting with the depth of our 2000 year old tradition) those the community recognises as possessing the gift of so ‘ordering’ – ‘priests’. Priests arise from and are mandated by the community because they are recognised to have the prime baptismal gift of recognising, developing and nurturing the baptismal gifts of all those in the community. They are ‘ordained’ to ‘order’ in the sense of discerning and using the gifts of all the baptised to construct the companionship of the empowered. They exercise this gift in the service of the community. They must therefore not be separated from the very communities they emerge from and are ‘ordained’ to serve. Whatever formation they need must be provided in and by the community they serve. In this way they reflect a solidarity with, not set apart from in any privileged way, the body of all the baptised.

A priesthood thus defined will be open to anyone with the requisite charism, as discerned synodally by the community. All ‘discernment’ here as elsewhere is given as a gift of the Holy Spirit. So the priesthood will be open to all the baptised - men, women, single, married, celibate, who have the gift of discerning and ‘ordering’ the charisms of the people of God by way of service.

**SERVICING THE CHARISMS OF THE COMMUNITY FOR EMPOWERMENT.**

The range of gifts conferred by baptism is wide. Some are only now emerging from under the hegemony imposed by the Tridentine model of the priest and the seminaries. In that model the priest was defined as another Christ ‘Alter Christus’ and gradually took on the total authority of unchallenged, unquestionable, ‘pedestalised’ unaccountable power over the baptised. The gifts of baptism will be discerned by the newly emerging synodal process under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We can list several separate but convergent charisms conferred by baptism:

Charism of Governance: Pope Francis has unlinked this recently from the priesthood. All offices of governance from the Roman Curia to the smallest parish are open to all the people of God. Some present priests may be discerned as having such a charism. Many laity have it and more will be identified.

CHARISMS FOR WORSHIP, SACRAMENTAL LIFE AND FORMATION

Charism of Presiding at the Liturgy: Celebrants of the sacraments, the Eucharist – the friendship meal of the community of the empowered – such will emerge through the synodal discernment of the community. This position is open, as all others, to men and women equally, single, married, celibate - open therefore to those of the present clergy with that charism. Since it will be recognised that this priesthood of ‘order’ confers no ontological character on the soul as hitherto taught, and as it is recognised that it is not through any mystic power conferred by ordination that the eucharistic change is affected but through the invocation by the whole worshipping community of the Holy Spirit and through the power of the Holy Spirit that the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ – the liturgy can be released into the possession of the whole community – presided over by the one who possesses that charism of presiding. These will be people with the gift of linking worship and the Eucharist to life, to love of the first sacrament of creation, to care of our common home and attentiveness to the cries of the earth’s poorest.

Charism of Preaching, breaking the Word, Lectio Divina. The community can discern the mind of the Holy Spirit and mandate anyone who possesses this charism to exercise it for the empowerment of the community.

The charism of Catechesis and Teaching. Many women and men already exercise this charism. The same pattern of synodal discernment and preparation will identify and mandate anyone suitable and willing to exercise it for the empowerment of the community.

The charism of Prayer and Contemplative Meditation. These are the gifts of people able to open the Church’s treasury of prayer in all its rich variety – from the rosary through the Ignatian, the Benedictine, the Franciscan, the Carmelite methods to the various schools of silent prayer – centring prayer, all forms of contemplation.

CHARISMS FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF THE COMMUNITY

Charisms of management, of maintaining buildings, conservation and environmental eco-theology and practice; of finance.as sacristans; musicians, choirs, instruments. Welcoming, of hospitality; of serving young people; school liaison; ministering to the elderly, the sick and aged;

CHARISMS OF MISSION. The raison d’etre of all worship and community building is to equip, mandate and nurture every follower of the Way of Jesus to serve as missionary disciples. The aim of the synodal process is to assist the constant flow of the love of God from parish community to service of the world. This movement defines what we mean by ‘evangelisation.’ All the community is empowered to do this in the name of the Gospel. It has two aspects: proclamation of the ‘Good News’ of the Gospel to all, especially to those who enquire – for the purpose of conversion and joining (or re-joining) the Christian community; dialogue – with the aim of both witnessing to faith in Christ and listening to the ‘other.’ be they members of other religions, or whose lives are spent in a purely secular or non-religious world. Dialogue has at least four forms: of daily life; of action for justice, peace and care of the environment; of theology; of spirituality. Some of the baptised possess and can be mandated by the community to exercise either the charism of proclamation or of dialogue. Some will welcome and guide those who enquire about joining the community; some will Some will be skilled in ecumenism or interfaith dialogue; others in accompanying families, the poor; the hungry, refugees; the homeless; prisoners, the lonely, the frightened and mentally ill. The charisms of organisations which already do this work would be central to the life of the community: e.g. the SVP, CAFOD, J&P, Parish Laudato Si or Green groups; Growing Old Gracefully and many, many more.

PRIESTLY BURDENS LIFTED.

Hence present members of the clergy will be invited to re-possess the baptism they share with all members of the Church. They can be relieved of the burden of trying and too often failing to be factotums of everything and masters of none, many over-worked, over-stretched, over-whelmed. Their newly defined role is that of oversight – ‘ordering,’ arranging the charisms of all the people in an exercise of the charism of service. It will be their privilege to serve, to ‘order,’ oversee, organise, encourage, nurture the gifts and charisms of all the baptised so that worship (‘contemplating the face of Christ’) and ‘building loving communities’, create a community of equals, of those treading in the Way of Jesus in the missionary task of discipleship and the twin modes of evangelisation. They exercise this not by way of power, privilege or from some isolated lonely pinnacle but as integral participants in a synodal process marked by mutual listening, dialogue and discernment of the mind of the Holy Spirit - with mutual affection for all. There are examples of some priests who already have been able to discern that this is their role and vocation.

PRACTICALITIES

What changes in the shape of parishes could facilitate this new shape of ministry? Here the contours of the shape of the future church are less visible, but we can peer!

The parish church could become much more a multi-use building at the service of the wider community. Liturgy and life are all sacred and can be seen to be closely linked. The dichotomy between the sacred and the profane or secular is a false one. More as in medieval times, the church building and its community serves as marketplace, collecting point to support the poor, a kitchen for the hungry etc., a haven for the elderly, the lonely, a café, a meeting and gathering point, where the synodal process become visible; a place for catechesis, meetings, adult formation, prayer, silence, celebrations, socials and social life. Priests become much more closely and visibly members of the community, part of its life, their wives or husbands integrated as equal contributing members. Married or lay, single or celibate their role does not require privileged or lonely, sole occupancy or accommodation. Presbyteries can be adapted for family or multiple use. Priests defined by the ordination of service in and of the community could have secular employment -or not - dependant on their charisms.

Thus would end the ‘cancer’ of clericalism in the Church, the framework for the easy abuse of power, the domination by a privileged clerical cast whereby the laity were rendered emasculated or even were said to have been infantilised or became the subjects for a process of ‘mass lobotomization’ – unintentionally administered by virtue of an outmoded clericalised system. The so-called ‘laity’ are being invited to ‘grow up,’ to become adults empowered by baptism not to occupy docilely an inferior position, free only to obey unquestionably but now to engage in the loving sacrificial following of Jesus Christ and in bringing the love of God to the world. A sense of shared responsibility for the worship, life and mission of the Church would replace a commonly felt sense of alienation, of not belonging to the Church – as if the ‘Church’ is an object over there, somehow disconnected from the lives of most of its members – both clergy and laity.

MIRRORING THE LIFE OF THE TRINITY

Such ‘companionship of the empowered’ served by those skilled to discern the baptismal gifts of all its members – in a re-fashioned and re-shaped priesthood, men and women of faithful prayer – either in permanent or temporary position, would more easily be seen to reflect the dynamic over-flowing relationships of the love of the Trinitarian God whose life of interdependent equality and mutually empowering relationality they are intended to mirror.

CONCLUSION

But there the vision must end – the edges of its outline are not yet fully discernible but some of its contours and features are just beginning to emerge into plain sight.

A PRAYER

‘Come Holy Spirit, clear our eyes, open our ears and hearts and lift us up to take full possession of the charismatic gifts of our shared baptism so that we may enter fully with joy into the empowered life of your community, able to expend ourselves in loving service of all that exists, in the name of Jesus, the Christ, who lives with you and the Father for ever Amen.

David Jackson (On the feast of St Vincent Ferrer who modelled the priesthood of his day, as we are called to re-model the priesthood of all the baptised in ours. April 5th, 2022)