Mission of the Clergy

1 Nature of Priesthood

Jesus, the Anointed One, was sent into the world by the Father. The Church, which is the Body of Christ, shares in that anointing. Every baptised person shares in the priesthood of Jesus. This consecration of all the faithful is called the *common priesthood*. However, God also desired that a smaller number of baptised men be called to a particular ministry known as the *ministerial priesthood*. The ministerial priesthood shares in Christ's priesthood in a different way from the common priesthood. *"Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ".*[1] Ministerial priests are to serve and help the lay faithful grow in holiness so that they too can live out their own priestly function.

The ministerial priesthood is received through the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Holy Orders has three degrees:

i) Bishops as Successors of the Apostles share in the fullness of the priesthood.

ii) Priests *"by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are signed with a special character and are conformed to Christ the Priest in such a way that they can act in the person of Christ the Head".*[2] Priests do not share in the fullness of the priesthood but they have received *"a special grace to be ministers of Christ among the people"*[3] who have a responsibility for building the People of God through the Eucharist, forgiveness of sins, teaching and pastoral work.[4]

iii) Diaconate is the third degree of Holy Orders. Deacons have the important task of serving in *"the liturgy, of the word, and of charity to the people of God".*[5] Although deacons participate in Holy Orders they do not participate in the ministerial priesthood.

2 Priests' Call to Holiness

In 2009 Pope Benedict called a 'Year of the Priest' marking the 150th anniversary of the birth of St John Vianney (Patron Saint of Parish Priests). In his letter to priests Pope Benedict reflected on the good, humble, caring priests he had known throughout his life and the difference they had made to people. He reminded priests that St John Vainney's greatest attribute was his personal example. He reminded priests for the need of authenticity today and he encouraged their daily renewal and deeper conversion. He encouraged priests by reminding them that St John Vianney was also aware of his weaknesses but trusted in God: when he said *"There are no two good ways of serving*

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[1] Lumen Gentium,10
[2] Presbyterorum ordinis, 2
[3] Presbyterorum ordinis, 2
[4] Lumen Gentium, 28
[5] Lumen Gentium, 29

God. There is only one: serve him as he desires to be served". Nothing is more important for a priest than discerning and doing God's will and not his own.[6]

Priests are called to act *'in personae Christi'* – in the person of Christ. God will work through sinful people but his grace works most effectively through those who are conformed to him. Priests therefore are to grow in holiness.[7] There are many ways to grow in holiness but a principal path is to faithfully live one's vocation. *"Priests who perform their duties sincerely and indefatigably in the Spirit of Christ arrive at holiness by this very fact"*.[8]

Priests have very busy lives and their ministry has many calls upon them. *"Priests….certainly have reason to wonder how they can coordinate and balance their interior life with feverish outward activity. Neither the mere external performance of the works of the ministry, nor the exclusive engagement in pious devotion, although very helpful, can bring about this necessary coordination. Priests can arrive at this only by following the example of Christ our Lord in their ministry. His food was to follow the will of him who had sent him to accomplish his work……. Christ works unceasingly through the Church. He operates through his ministers, and hence he remains always the source and wellspring of the unity of their lives".*[9]

Growing in conformity with Christ, although a gift of grace, does take time and effort. As well as the daily spiritual exercises priests should participate in annual Retreats and regular Spiritual Direction.

3 Priests' Ministry is Missionary

Pope Francis wrote a letter to parish priests in 2024 in which he began *"It is so obvious as to sound almost banal, but that does not make it less true: the Church could not go on without your dedication and your pastoral service. So before all else, I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation for the generous work that you do each day, sowing seeds of the Gospel in every kind of soil (cf. Mk 4:1-25)"*

Through their sacred ministry priests baptise, celebrate the eucharist, reconciliation and other sacraments, preach, teach prayer, catechise, form mature individuals, minister pastorally, pray the Divine Office, ensure the Church is worthy for divine worship, serve the poor, sick, youth, married couples and families, build Christian community (not just parish, but diocesan and universal), and reach out beyond Church members. Vatican II's teachings on priesthood consistently states that priests are called to preach the Gospel to all people. People have the right to hear the Gospel. It is a direct command from God which priests, as well as all the baptised, are obliged to fulfil.

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[6] Presbyterorum ordinis,15 See also Optatam totius, 8

[7] Presbyterorum ordinis,12

[8] Presbyterorum ordinis,13

[9] Presbyterorum ordinis,14

Pope Francis continued in his letter: *"Parish communities increasingly need to become places from which the baptized set out as missionary disciples and to which they return, full of joy, in order to share the wonders worked by the Lord through their witness" (cf. Lk 10:17).*[10] *He invited priests to help this become a greater reality through:*
1 Being open to and utilising the charisms given to the laity
2 Communal discernment through the use of Conversation in the Spirit
3 A spirit of sharing and fraternity with fellow priests and bishop

4 Priests and Communion
Building communion means creating intimate or deep bonds. Priests are not to live by worldly values but they do live in the world. *"However, they are not to be separated from the People of God or from any person; but they are to be totally dedicated to the work for which the Lord has chosen them".*[11] Priests must connect with people at the human level, know their sheep including the weak as well as non-believers so as to be able to help open them to Christ.

The Council highlighted the following relationships for priests as essential:

i) **Bishop***: "Therefore, on account of this communion in the same priesthood and ministry, bishops should regard priests as their brothers and friends and be concerned as far as they are able for their material and especially for their spiritual well-being. For above all upon the bishops rests the heavy responsibility for the sanctity of their priests. Therefore, they should exercise the greatest care in the continual formation of their priests."*[12] Priests are to dialogue, co-work, respect, stand in charity with and be obedient to the bishop.

ii) Fellow Priests: *"Priests by virtue of their ordination to the priesthood are united among themselves in an intimate sacramental brotherhood. In individual dioceses, priests form one priesthood under their own bishop".*[13] This is symbolised by the laying on of hands by the other priests, after the bishop, at his ordination. *"Each and every priest, therefore, is united with his fellow priests in a bond of charity, prayer and total cooperation. In this manner, they manifest that unity which Christ willed, namely, that his own be perfected in one so that the world might know that the Son was sent by the Father".*[14] Priests are to build and develop fraternal bonds between each together. This is more than team building among colleagues but fulfilling an integral element of Holy Orders and for which the Sacrament bestows grace.

Life as a priest and the mission itself are more complicated today. *"No priest, therefore, can on his own accomplish his mission in a satisfactory way. He can do so only by joining forces with other priests under the direction of the Church authorities."*[15]

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[10] Pope Francis' Letter to Parish Priests 2nd May 2024
[11] Presbyterorum ordinis,3
[12] Presbyterorum ordinis,7
[13] Presbyterorum ordinis, 8
[14] Presbyterorum ordinis, 8
[15] Presbyterorum ordinis,9

iii) Laity There is a direct link between communion among clergy and communion with the laity. During the ordination of priests Pope Leo encouraged those being ordained to be close to Jesus, close to their brother priests and their bishop. *"For the more we are united among ourselves, the more we will be able to lead others to the fold of the Good Shepherd, and to live as brothers and sisters in the one house of the Father".* He then spoke of Jesus' joy when bringing back one lost sheep. If priests' hearts are like Jesus' heart they will rejoice too and want no one to be lost.

Priests were baptised long before they were ordained and so are brothers to the laity. They are also to serve the laity. Furthermore, *"Priests must sincerely acknowledge and promote the dignity of the laity and the part proper to them in the mission of the Church"*[16]. The laity are to be listened to, the use of their charisms to be encouraged and be accompanied in their spiritual life etc. Pope Leo has said that *"the vocation to ordained ministry grows as a gift of oneself to God and, therefore, to his holy People".* He described the priest's life as *"being for".*

The Council also said that priests had the right to a sufficient income, including for a holiday. Parishioners should ensure that their priest is adequately provided for.

6 Exchange of Gifts

Foreign clergy minister more frequently in our parishes today. While this practice demands discernment (just as abroad the use of European missionaries is also discerned) it should also be seen as an exchange of gifts:

"Priests who belong to religious orders and congregations enrich the presbyterium with the uniqueness of their charism. These, along with Priests who come from Eastern Churches sui iuris, be they celibate or married, the fidei donum Priests, and those who come from other countries, assist the local clergy in opening themselves to a whole Church perspective. In turn, local Priests help clergy from elsewhere to become part of the history of a concrete diocese with its distinctive spiritual richness and traditions. In this way, the presbyterium, too, experiences a genuine exchange of gifts in the service of the Church's mission".[17] It should not be forgotten that Robert Provost was an American working in Latin America who both greatly enhanced the local Church and received much from it in return.

7 Administration

Although spiritual and pastoral duties are paramount for a priest governance of his parish is also a key responsibility. The scriptures note the importance of administration. We live in an age of greater accountability and transparency both within the Church and society: finance, fabric, safeguarding, Health and Safety etc. Therefore, a Parish Priest's responsibility has grown and can easily become a great burden. Although the Parish Priest is ultimately responsible for parish administration he should not be administering alone because parishioners share in this responsibility. The more support the priest

[16] Presbyterorum ordinis,10

[17] Synod of Bishops Final Document, 72

receives his burden lightens which frees him to concentrate on pastoral and spiritual matters.

8 On Going Formation

"Animated by the spirit of Christ, this sacred synod is fully aware that the desired renewal of the whole Church depends to a great extent on the ministry of its priests".[18] The Council recognised the importance of on-going formation for priests which has been further highlighted by subsequent Popes.

In 1992 Pope John Paul II wrote an exhortation on the formation of priests called Pastor Dabo Vobis (I will give you shepherds after my own heart). John Paul reflected on the challenges facing priests today and their need to be well formed humanly (mature and well balanced), spiritually (close to the Lord), intellectually (well versed in theology) and pastorally (learning the necessary skills for ministry but also doing so lovingly). These four areas were to be integrated so that the priest was holistically formed. Crucially, Pope John Paul stressed the necessity for priests to engage, after ordination, with meaningful formation for the rest of their lives.

Sometimes Clergy Gatherings can be seen as a distraction from parish duties and burdensome. However, subsequent Papal teachings and the new *Norms for Priestly Formation in Scotland* emphasise that they are essential for formation - building community among clergy as well as deepening spiritual, intellectual, human and pastoral skills. Priests need time for formation though Clergy Assemblies, Retreats, Spiritual Direction, Courses, Sabbaticals etc. Similarly, priests need time to rest and recharge their batteries. Parishioners too should appreciate the value of further formation and rest for their priests and make it easy for priests be away from their parish. In fact, the parishioners will also benefit from a refreshed parish priest.

[18] Optatam Totius See also Presbyterorum Ordinis,19