

NON-PROFESSIONALS AS PRIESTS?

Local 'Fathers of the Church'

THE staple personage of the settled ministry in the New Testament was the presbyter (as he still is to-day)

He was by definition an older man, already widely respected and experienced before ordination, with a family and household to supervise, and for that very reason deemed the better equipped to exercise oversight in the family of God.

Learning and teaching figured largely in his calling, but at ordination his knowledge may well have been less than that of the average lay reader to-day. Apparently it was necessary sometimes to ordain presbyters who did not "labour in the word and doctrine" (I Timothy, v, 17), but had sufficient spiritual insight and local standing to take their place alongside the presbyters who did teach.

Fluidity's Value

That was in a fluid situation, it is true, but fluidity may have its own value in keeping us sensitive to what God may be prepared to use, however alien to our traditions. It seems to have been a failure to test the validity of our traditions which has obscured both practical possibilities and theological principles in our ordination policy.

There has been a great reluctance to ordain non-professional presbyters for fear of devaluing the professional training which is now the norm. This devaluation need not occur, provided we give full recognition to two things.

(1) Experience may be a proper equivalent to academic training (this is already recognised in a small way); and (2) younger men who have the opportunity and gifts to study the

faith in a more academic way should do so, not because it is essential for ordination, but simply to exercise their gifts for the glory of God and the benefit of others. What does seem intolerable is that God's people should go short of Word and Sacraments because ordination is chiefly considered as a career for bright young men.

Few things could be further from the New Testament picture of the presbyterate. The full use of God-given gifts in all age-groups provides a key to many a dead-lock concerning the ordained ministry, and enables us to think of "maintaining the standards" not only in terms of degrees and diplomas but in terms of the wider challenge of "my utmost for his highest" according to varied gifts and circumstances.

If the ordained ministry is truly God's gift to the Church, then we need to ask ourselves the real meaning of "shortage." Is it God who is niggardly in giving, or we who are niggardly in recognising what he gives?

Two other factors should give us pause before we insist on college-training.

(1) The secular calling of a man may still be God's calling for him even when he is also called to ordination, and there is no theological reason why the world should be deprived of his gifts in the secular sphere.

(2) The current attention to family life and to the ravages in mental health due to childhood insecurities should make us careful of taking a man away from his family for long periods unnecessarily. Widows and the wives of seamen necessarily suffer deprivation of the husband's support,

and no doubt the wives of ordinands could testify to receiving special grace in any hardships attendant on the training period, but it remains true that God's norm for the family is a constant "living together after God's ordinance."

In infancy, when the child is so demanding, the mother needs her husband's moral and emotional support; in later years he assumes more

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and more a direct rôle of his own in moulding the developing life of the child. Young children, moreover, do not understand that love can be consistent with prolonged physical absence. To them it appears as the failure of love. The uninterrupted, free-flowing uninhibited love and oversight of both parents is meant to mirror the abundant grace of God.

In the New Testament family responsibilities are a positive qualification for ordination. Too often we have regarded them as a hindrance, or at least as something that can rightly be sacrificed on our altar of academic training.

These problems have not appeared frequent because older men have been prevented from ever thinking in terms of ordination by our presentation of the call in terms of professional training for a paid career. To make these things normal or essential was no doubt an attempt to secure adequate and diligent pastoral oversight, but, insofar as it went beyond scriptural requirements, it has been defeating its own object. The Church in Wales may find it not

such a tragedy after all if its priests are being forced to take secular employment, provided it leads the bishops to ordain many more of the mature Christians in each congregation without requiring them to give up the career in which they are established. Such a course was prefigured in the last Lambeth Report and developed in a recent issue of *Theology*.

Some contend that you cannot be a "part-time priest" any more than you can be a part-time Christian. This is true, for "presbyter," like "Christian," is basically a status word, so that you are or you are not a presbyter. Now the status may carry with it very demanding obligations, but it involves no necessary specification as to how one's time is to be filled or one's living earned. It becomes clear, then, that, though you cannot be a part-time priest, you can be a priest and earn your living in a calling usually regarded as secular.

Are not many of our senior lay readers the very people who in New Testament times would have been ordained? Indeed, is not the modern reader something of a theological anomaly? Certainly his work represents a most untheological severance of Word and Sacraments. A Bible only is given to the priest at ordination, presumably because the ministry of the Word and the ministry of the Sacraments are but one ministry.

Our readers already preach acceptably—a task requiring much wisdom, initiative, discretion and knowledge. Could they not also minister Holy Communion acceptably when form and matter are pre-determined? The art of individual counselling which Anglo-Catholics practise in the con-

fessional and Evangelicals in what they call "personal work" is admittedly more subtle—perhaps even than that of preaching; but what grounds have we for supposing it can only be exercised by professional clerics?

Once it became the accepted norm that there should be one or more professionals and several non-professionals in charge of the average congregation, the baneful effects of the excessive mobility of professionals would be much reduced. The laity would at least have some clergymen who were committed to the local church in the same way that layfolk are, and the ordained ministry would appear less of an unpredictable careerist caste.

Less Temptation

The comparative stability of the non-professionals might even infect the professionals with a greater tendency to stay! Certainly there would be less temptation to assume that the incumbent's work in a particular place was done after a few years, if it could be clearly seen that it is not his work alone but the work of the whole congregation under its college of presbyters.

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It seems necessary to draw a distinction between what is outlined above and the worker-priest movement. The ordination of senior Christians in the congregation is primarily for the benefit of the Church; the sending of professional clergy into industry is primarily for the benefit of the world. It seems to me that the theological presuppositions of the latter operation need careful scrutiny, and as a stimulus to

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further discussion I would like to put forward the following proposition: *Presbyterate is a status vis-à-vis the Church, and presbyters in industry contribute valuable insights to the Church, but it is simply as Christians that they confront the world.*

True, the priest in industry could minister sacramentally to his fellow-workers, but this would only be proper when the task of evangelism is done and they are, spiritually speaking, within the Church, which is the proper sphere of sacraments. Till this happens his task in the world is identical with that of any other Christian—to witness, to woo and to win.

In his essay in *Priest and Workers* (ed. D. L. Edwards) the Bishop of Middleton states that, when workmen are ordained, "as evidence of what laymen can do they are lost." How far is this so? Provided they do not earn their living by their

ecclesiastical status, their ordination is likely to make little difference to the impression they make on their fellow-workmen, who care little for distinctions within the Church. They will still see what a Spirit-filled man can do in the rough-and-tumble of industrial relations.

The Bishop pertinently asks, in reference to another essay in the same book, whether industry is not the very field for the apostolate of the laity. If it is, then is any special spiritual purpose served by a college-trained man taking his place at the work-bench when a "native" missionary can do the work so much better (other things being equal)? Should not the college man be either in a Church living or else doing a secular job suited to his gifts and training?

These questions are by no means answered by pointing out the impact made by the worker-priests. The following description of the effect in France needs careful pondering: "... the esteem in which the masses held the worker-priests was reinforced by the deep and immense disgust, the fathomless scorn of the workers for the pomps and trappings of the Church—pomps which in their view the Gospel itself condemns."

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Such disgust and scorn are not unknown in England. Here we already have many Christian workmen, and it is not likely that the addition of a few college men will make much difference to their evangelistic impact when great barriers lie in the deadness, the worldliness and the hide-bound divisions of the Church at large. Perhaps what is most required is a real "dying" to worldly splendour, ambition and privilege on the part of our ecclesiastical corn of wheat before it will bear much fruit among the masses.

So, without expecting much direct benefit to the world, the ordination of the local "fathers" of the Church may be recommended as offering speedy and considerable benefits to the Church at large—more people sharing in the grace of orders, a drawing nearer to New Testament patterns of ministry, a reduction of the "two-nation" canker which makes too rigid a division between clergy and laity, and a fuller realisation of the nature and calling of the whole people of God.