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Priesthood and Community: Reflections on the Vocation Crisis

Thomas P. Rausch

Loyola Marymount University, trausch@lmu.edu

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Priesthood and Community

reflections on the vocation crisis

THOMAS P. RAUSCH, S.J.

We are all familiar with the conventional wisdom which holds that the greatest obstacle to vocations to the priesthood is the obligation of celibacy.

Celibacy is a difficult question for many young men thinking about the priesthood today, as indeed it should be, but I wonder if this question, once raised, does not blind us to other concerns of potential candidates which need to be considered.

Recently the National Catholic News Service published a letter (*Origins*, January 3, 1980) by a committee of bishops appointed by the bishops of the New England region in which they attempted to articulate the qualities the Church seeks in candidates for the priesthood.¹ Their effort is a good one and will be widely read but it also raises a second question.

Has the Church attempted to identify what these same candidates are looking for in the priesthood they are considering?

What follows is an attempt to answer this second question, based on my own experience as a teacher and counselor in a mid-sized Catholic university, and to reflect on what the expectations of potential candidates might suggest about the priesthood today.

Interest Shown

For a long time now I have sensed, first, that, at least among college students, a good many more young men are attracted to the priesthood than are actually committing themselves to it.

Second, I suspect that of those who are making a commitment, considerably more are entering religious communities than are entering diocesan seminaries.

Third, it seems obvious to me that considerably more young people today show a genuine interest in community life than the number of those actually entering religious communities.

Is it true that more young men today are entering religious communities and fewer are entering diocesan seminaries?

According to the *CARA Seminary Directory* for 1978, the answer is yes.

On the basis of what it calls "regression analysis," a projection based on trends shown by an analysis of the data for the years 1974-1978, the *CARA* analysis predicts a slight general decline by 1982 of one percent in the total number of seminarians over the average of the last five years.

The overall projected change for 1982 is a 17 percent drop for diocesan seminarians and a 16 percent increase for religious.²

The *CARA* Directory only points to trends; it does not explain them. However, the projected increase in religious seminarians, along with a continued decrease in diocesan seminarians may offer a clue as to what candidates for the priesthood are looking for today.

I would suggest that among the concerns of those considering the priesthood, three distinct but related values are characteristic.

They want to be part of a community of shared faith; they hope to gain a familiarity with prayer, and they are attracted by a simplicity of life.

In the theological and pastoral literature since Vatican II, "community" has been the operative

²William J. Mehok, "1967-1978 Summary of U.S. Seminary Statistics," *CARA Seminary Directory 1978* (Washington: U.S. Catholic Institute, 1978). pp. iii-xxix, p. viii.

word. What is, perhaps, less obvious is the extent to which the desire for an experience of community describes so many today, both within and beyond the Church. The phenomenon is general.

Our age experiences itself as fragmented; we speak of the crisis of family life, the inability to make commitments, the superficiality of our relationships, and of unfilled intimacy needs in ourselves.

Although we describe our parishes as communities and seek to build them up as such, many Catholics rightly or wrongly continue to experience them as anonymous and impersonal institutions. The success of movements such as the charismatic renewal, marriage encounter and cursillo, among others, is their ability to mediate an experience of faith in the context of a community.

Word Overused

On our own campus, I am constantly amazed at the number of young people who come back to the Church precisely because their faith has come alive for them for the first time as a result of their becoming involved in a highly emotional, evangelical community.

Unfortunately, there are others who do not find their way back.

Community, of course, is an overused word, often even a cliché. Endless talk about community can create unrealistic ideals or lead to self-centered groups of like-minded individuals in which enormous amounts of energy and time are invested in meeting each other's emotional needs, without any real challenge to growth.

In pointing to a community of shared faith as something looked for by many interested in the priesthood today, I mean not just a community of interest or convenience but, specifically, a community of men or

women (or men and women) who support each other in their vocations and live together regularly, freely their own lives.

Like the '70s, the Latin American community movement that its members have found other on a personal level should be centered on God's living word and its members daily living communally.

Finally, the community we seek is one in which their shared life is

This kind of shared faith is synonymous with religious community, apostolic work, a university or

Most religious communities today are engaged in examination, learning how to pray, support one another, share more of

Functional C

In some large movements toward communities, location, with the same values realized in a local environment.

No one fails to claim that the ideal of a community provides an experience in the sense of often theological with an individual to religious life, community that its members are task to be done of unity that communal pr

What is the question of vocations communities c

¹Juan Luis Sepúlveda, *Characteristics of the Sacraments Today* (New York: Orbis Books, 1974).

¹"Priestly Formation: Discerning Vocations," *Origins* 9:29 (January 3, 1980) 467-476.

women (or men and women) who support each other in their Christian vocations and missions by praying together regularly and by sharing freely their own faith experience.

Like the "base communities" of the Latin American Church, such a community must be small enough so that its members can relate to each other on a personal level. Its life should be centered on the Gospel as God's living word, addressing its members daily both individually and communally.

Finally, the members of such a community will want to celebrate their shared life of faith liturgically.³

This kind of community of shared faith is not necessarily synonymous with the traditional religious community serving an apostolic work such as a high school, a university or a parish.

Most religious communities today are engaged in a process of self-examination, their members trying to learn how to pray better together, to support one another in faith and to share more of themselves with each other.

Functional Communities

In some large houses, there is a movement toward small communities, usually in a separate location, with the hope that these same values might be more easily realized in a less institutional environment.

No one familiar with active religious communities today would claim that they have all achieved the ideal of a common life that genuinely provides an experience of shared faith in the sense I have described. Too often theological pluralism combined with an individualism not uncommon to religious life has resulted in a community that is chiefly functional; its members are united by a common task to be done, not by an experience of unity that grows out of their communal prayer and reflection.

What is significant for the question of vocations is that religious communities offer at least the

³Juan Luis Segundo describes the primary characteristics of a base community in his *The Sacraments Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1974), pp. 32-34.

possibility for an experience of community.

On the other hand, many young men do not perceive the diocesan priesthood as offering that same possibility. They see the young priest, closest to themselves in age, living in a rectory, usually with a pastor who is considerably older in both age and mentality and, perhaps, another priest somewhere in between.

These priests do not pray together, they take their recreation separately and watch their own TV sets in their own rooms. If the old, authoritarian pastor is gone, his successor often keeps an uneasy peace in the house by adopting an attitude of disengaged tolerance, out of fear of a bad report to the personnel board.

The rectory itself often functions as a misunderstood symbol. Most American Catholics, young or old, do not usually realize just how accessible the average Catholic priest is, with his home easy to find next door to the Church. They have not had to deal with the transients who call at the door, the meetings that fill up the evenings or the telephone calls in the middle of the night.

When they call themselves, they are frequently put off by a secretary who requires identification. There is a problem of perception.

The perception, unfortunately, too often agrees with the reality. A rectory too comfortable and too large, in which several priests live under the same roof but not really together is a sign of contradiction. How often is it true that those whose mission it is to build and lead community are the least familiar with living it?

While this is not always the case, what is at least perceived as an absence of genuine community life and fraternal support among diocesan priests is a significant reason for so many young men choosing priesthood today in the context of a religious community.

The relatively large number of young diocesan priests entering active religious communities in the last two years may be an indication that this perception is not so far from the truth.

Many young people today are increasingly coming to expect of priests the ability to help them with their own prayer. They want to find

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priesthood and community

priests who can not just talk abstractly about the different kinds of prayer but who can guide them as spiritual directors. These young people want to be able to share what is going on in their own lives with someone who is able to recognize how the Lord is present in their experience and where He may be leading them.

This means that priests themselves have to be men of prayer, comfortable with silence in the presence of God, capable of what Henri Nouwen describes as the essence of both contemplation and celibacy, a *vacare Deo*, a vacancy for God.⁴

Priests who are not able to recognize the movement of the Spirit in their own lives through a sensitivity to their feelings, their hopes, fears, dreams and relationships, who are not able to talk about their own

religious experience with another, will not be able to minister as guides and directors to those who look to them for help in prayer.

How often do priests today open themselves to and exercise this kind of ministry for one another?

Many priests would like to; they want to be able to share their own loneliness, their struggles with celibacy or their efforts to find the Lord in prayer with someone whose experience is similar. The great appeal of a writer like Nouwen is precisely his ability to be in touch with and share his own interior life with his readers and to discover therein the moments and patterns that reappear in their own personal journeys.

The Genesee Diary is a splendid example of this.⁵

Even today's style of preaching and liturgical leadership demands this

ability to speak and pray out of one's own experience, without which preaching becomes abstract and impersonal and liturgy the wordy formalism which leads some to a reliance on groovy gimmickry.

One hopeful sign of a deeper level of communication among priests is that a significant number of them are becoming more comfortable in talking about their own religious experience through directed retreats or by joining support groups of priests who meet once a month to pray together and reflect communally on their lives and ministries.

Another good step in this direction is the increasing emphasis on spiritual direction in seminaries today.

A third value one often finds in young people interested in ministry and priesthood today is the desire to lead a more simple life or "life-style."

Simplicity of life is a broad concept. It means simplicity or frugality in the areas of food, clothing, living situation and recreation, not only as a rejection of the affluence, the materialism, the false values and superficiality of our consumer-oriented society but also as a way of identifying with the poor, both symbolically and symbiotically.

It means freedom from the temptation to seek security in things rather than in people.

It also can mean a break with the clerical culture which raises walls between priests and people.

A Powerful Sign

Many young people want to be able to practice a kind of hospitality that has not always been traditional, to be able to bring others into their homes and lives more easily. Many young people welcomed Pope John Paul II's challenge to the American way of life during his recent visit here.

A more simple life can be a powerful sign.

The ancient Church was a counter-cultural movement. When the community gathered for morning or evening prayer or to celebrate the liturgy, those Christians did so conscious of their need to support

⁴Henri J. Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1979), pp. 45 ff.

⁵Henri J. Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976).

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each other's faith in the midst of a hostile environment.

Today being a Christian is again coming to be understood as requiring a counter-cultural stance supported by a community of people who are truly brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Many young people grasp this instinctively and they seek ways to live their faith within the context of a supportive community which is both genuinely communal and counter-cultural.

Certainly our celibate priesthood can be a powerful counter-cultural sign but how many will be willing to risk this commitment if they suspect that they will have little opportunity to share and express the faith that supports it with those with whom they live?

A pastor once told me that he became a diocesan priest precisely because he did not want to belong to a community. He wanted to be free to pursue his own interests.

I doubt that many men thinking about the priesthood would say that today.

Many Possibilities

Theologically, priesthood is essentially related to community. If there is an image problem in respect to the diocesan priesthood, this should be of serious concern to bishops and parish priests. They need to be much more creative in establishing and expressing community with each other.

Bishops are especially responsible for among their roles is that of pastor of priests.

In the fifth century, St. Augustine, as bishop of Hippo, gathered his priests together into a community. The monastic model he followed would be inappropriate today but his instinct was correct.

There are possibilities.

Priests from several neighboring parishes could join together for prayer and reflection, perhaps even living together.

An alternative might be to meet once a week to share their reflections on the readings for the following Sunday's homily.

There could be more experimentation with the team-ministry concept, rather than the traditional pastor-assistant model. A base community could develop within a parish, consisting of its ordained and lay ministers gathering regularly for prayer, perhaps centering on the Liturgy of the Hours.

Karl Rahner, in attempting to envisage the Church of the future, says that it will be built from below; it will gather together base communities arising from the free initiative and association of believers within the boundaries of today's territorial parishes (which Rahner describes as "administrative areas of the institutional Church.")⁶

Some day the Church may choose to acknowledge the leaders of these base communities with sacramental

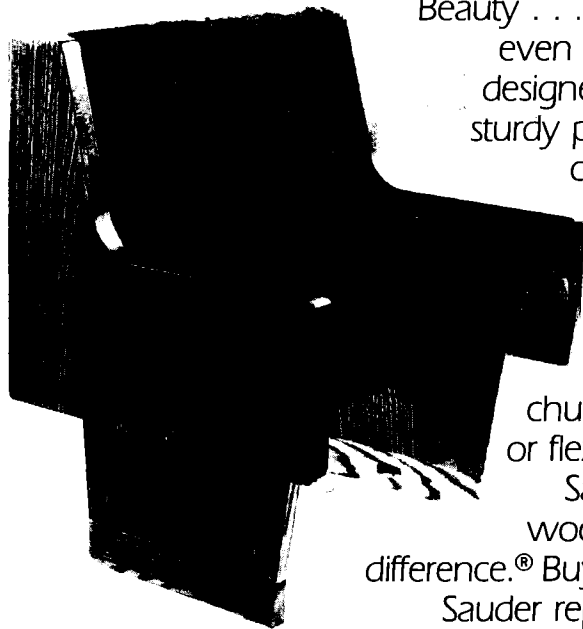
ordination. They will be the priests of tomorrow.

Until that day comes, however, those choosing priesthood today will increasingly want to exercise their ministry within the supportive context of a genuine community of shared faith.

⁶Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), pp. 108-109 ff.

Father Rausch is an assistant professor of religious studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, CA, and a member of the Los Angeles Lutheran Roman Catholic Committee. Born in Chicago, IL, he entered the Society of Jesus at Los Gatos, CA, in 1960 and was ordained in 1972. He has an M.A. in philosophy from Gonzaga University, an S.T.M. from the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley and a Ph.D. from Duke University where he was awarded a Kearns Fellowship. A teacher of philosophy for three years and a parish assistant for three and one-half years, he assumed his present position in 1976.

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