



Disunity in the Year of the Priest

ANDREW HAMILTON JULY 30, 2009

Like many other organisations, the Vatican gives names to years. This year has been the Year of St Paul; next year is the Year of the Priest. It coincides with the 150th anniversary of the death of John Vianney, a simple French parish priest who spent much of his life in post-Revolutionary France hearing confessions.

Vianney, known popularly as the Cure of Ars, was a compassionate man, and in a rural France where religious practice was part of society, communities were tight-knit and wounds festered, a confessor who made tangible the love of God was much in demand. His priestly ministry, with its focus on individual confession, was part of a credible pastoral strategy.

Australian society differs greatly from that of rural France. So does the challenge facing church ministers, including Catholic priests. The Year of the Priest offers an opportunity to muse on the questions faced by Catholic priests today.

The reflection may be sharpened by the fact that three out of the four priests ordained for the Sydney Archdiocese celebrated their first Mass in Latin. Given the place of the first Mass as a symbolic statement of how a priest views his ministry, this majority choice is of some significance. The concerted choice of Latin suggests that many young priests share a distinctive vision of the Church, of priesthood and of pastoral priorities that older priests would not share.

It would be easy to pass judgment, either to approve or to condemn, on such decisions and on the pastoral strategies that they reflect. But it may be more helpful to reflect on their significance within all the complex relationships that constitute priesthood within the Catholic Church.

Priests are defined by their relationships. They exist within a church, which in turn is defined by its relationship to God through Jesus Christ. So they are disciples of Jesus within the Catholic Church. Their ordination as priests defines further their complex relationships to other Catholics, including bishops and other priests.

In the Catholic view, the relationship between the bishop and the clergy of his diocese is of particular symbolic significance. The image of the clergy gathered around their bishop expresses the unity of the local church. In the same way, the image of the bishops gathered around the Pope expresses the unity of the universal Church.

Images and symbols tend to be taken for granted until the reality they represent is put under pressure. It seems inevitable that the unity of priests under the local bishop will be put under pressure if there are substantial divisions between them about the desirable form of worship, the pastoral needs of their people, their ways of relating to Catholics and the broader society, and about what it means in practice to be a priest.

When they gathered around their bishop they would be facing in opposite directions, just as they might do when celebrating the Eucharist.

Of course the image of the clergy gathered around the bishop of the area never fully reflects the reality of any church. Catholics who belong to the Ukrainian or Maronite communities, for example, may well have their own bishop in the same city. Clergy in many religious congregations, too, have a more complex relationship with the local bishop. In the Anglican communion, the clergy and congregations that do not accept women's ordination may be placed with a bishop who works across the territory of many local bishops.

But the co-existence in the same church of priests who have a radically different outlook and preference for forms of worship would pose a more radical challenge to the relationships that define what it means to be a priest. It would affect particularly the critical relationship between priests and the people they are ordained to serve.

Will congregations be subjected to the conflicting styles and preferences of priests who succeed one another? Will there be a settlement by which individual congregations are reserved to Latinophile or Anglophile priests? Will Catholics be encouraged to shop around to find priests and congregations that offer congenial brands of Catholic life and worship?

Such questions illustrate the potential for fracturing the traditional image of the clergy gathered around the bishop as a symbol of church unity. They also distract from the central relationship that gives meaning to priesthood — the relationship to Jesus Christ and to the spreading of the Gospel.

Where there are divisions their effects are rarely effectively addressed by ignoring them. It may be better to name 2009 the year of priests, not the Year of the Priest, thus recognising the divergent approaches to priesthood within the Catholic Church.

The year would then be less concerned to unite priests around a single definition of priesthood than to invite priests to speak to one another of where they find energy and life in the different relationships that being a priest involves.

They can then be invited to test these articulations by the reality of Christ found in the Gospel and in the world. That would embody the encouraging conversational style of ministry commended by John Vianney.

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