

Radical change

Last weekend, I took the place of a priest in one of our parishes. He was in his 80's and hadn't been able to take a weekend off in years. Previously, he had spent decades serving in the missions. Now he was tasked with serving the main parish church as well as two mission parishes about ten miles away from each other.

On Saturday evening, I celebrated Mass for twenty two parishioners who attended at one of the missions. Not one of them seemed to be below the age of seventy. The next morning, following celebrating Mass in the other mission parish, I drove to the main urban parish for Mass. I was expecting good attendance, given it was the main town parish but was shocked when just twenty showed up for the only weekend Mass there. The participants were all in their late sixties if not older.

On my journey home – some fifty miles away – I had lots to ponder about my weekend experience. Basically, the sparse attendance and those who attended being older, I began to wonder how relevant the church was to the rest of the community.

The following morning, I drove to concelebrate the funeral Mass of my brother-in-law's sister at a parish in the south of the country, some one hundred and fifty miles away.

I met the pastor in the sacristy some time before the funeral. Following some introductory exchanges, we began to talk about the church, especially from his area and point of view. He began by indicating that his congregation, even though an urban parish, was an elderly one. On average, he had over fifty funerals a year there.

As a priest for thirty-three years, he began to share his perspective and vision of church and priesthood. Locally, parishioners saw him as a priest who wasn't afraid to speak his mind and that he was a "straight-shooter" and always "shot from the hip."

He began by indicating that, at present, his diocese had no seminarians studying for the priesthood. Nor were any young people interested in committing a lifetime of service to the church.

"The church must change and change radically and our church leaders don't see it or are willing to face it. We cannot go on as functionaries. Business as usual cannot continue. We have no visionaries in the church among its leadership that are willing to go out on a limb and forge a new path.

The answer isn't women priests or married clergy. That is not going to solve anything. Here is this area, take the Episcopal church, they have woman priests and they have married clergy and still they have vacancies they cannot fill. The nearest Episcopal priest to here is over fifty miles away and he has to cover a few counties. So, that's not the answer."

"No one wants to make a lifelong commitment to anything anymore. Look at our young people, they find it more convenient to cohabit rather than get married. If it doesn't work out, they can break up because there is no real commitment. Look at these young people cohabiting? Very few, if any want to bother with the church and get married in it. For them, it just adds another layer of complications.

The same is true of the work environment. How many young people stay in the same job all their lives, like their parents probably did. Not anymore! No one wants to be married to the same job for the rest of their lives."

"So, what do you think needs to happen?" I asked him. "What I think needs to happen," he continued, "is that priesthood should not be permanent. For example, a person could commit to being a priest for ten years and, then, after ten years, let them decide if they want to continue for another ten years or however many they feel like doing."

As he said this, I remembered attending a talk given by sociologist and author, Fr, Andrew Greeley in New York almost thirty years ago. Back then, from his sociological study of priesthood, he concluded that the option of term limits of commitment to priesthood should be advocated and pursued.

Our conversation was interrupted by the ringing of the church bells indicating that the funeral procession had arrived outside the church for the funeral Mass.

Following the burial, I sat beside my, over eighty, brother-in-law who lives in England. Over a cup of tea and some ready made ham sandwiches, I shared with him part of the conversation I had with the local pastor. Interestingly, he agreed with the suggestion of the pastor.

On my long journey home, my mind had much to ponder. What was the answer? Women priests? Married clergy? Ordain more deacons to continue the clerical caste system? Become a lay church instead of a clerical church? Or do we embrace term limits and replace the ever forever approach?

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