

Priest shortage, imported clergy and the ‘men of proven character’ solution.

While many bishops are urging their people to pray for ‘vocations’ to the priesthood to turn the tide on the world wide shortage and resultant sacramental and pastoral famine, the same bishops have taken out a long term insurance policy against what they hope and pray would turn out to be a short term crisis. They have been importing large numbers of foreign priests to fill the vacuum caused by the dramatic decline in the number of local priests. In order to make up for the shortfall, Australian bishops have adopted a policy of recruiting priests from dioceses and religious institutes mainly in West Africa (+80), India (+185), the Philippines (+93) and Vietnam (+88). Furthermore, it would be reasonable to assume that most of these priests have been brought to Australia on 3-5 year, possibly renewable, 457 ‘skilled worker’ visas.

Many of these men are lacking in a number of critically important skills needed for effective ministry in this country. Whilst appreciating the generosity and good will of these overseas-born priests, many have little or no experience of working collaboratively with laity, especially with women, in areas that require levels of competency they do not have. Cultural differences combined with sometimes inflated expectations of clerical privilege and entitlement can make it near impossible for some foreign born priests to understand and integrate Australian egalitarianism and shared leadership.

Information about the actual number and origin of foreign born priests is still a secret closely guarded by bishops and their Vicars General. However, based on what is known, it would be reasonable to expect the figure to be high, probably over fifty per cent of all serving priests in Australia. Secretiveness also masks the truth about the turnover rate or ‘churn’ factor for foreign priests. The Immigration Department has begun to cancel the visas of foreign priests who have failed language tests and of those who may have abused their immigration status for a variety of reasons. There are very likely a number of foreign born priests who have been dismissed on account of financial fraud, sexual boundary violations or for other serious reasons. Again, the culture of secrecy and non accountability prevails.

There is no secret, however, about the decline in the number of priests and how this has impacted on Catholics throughout Europe, North America and Australia. Catholics in these areas of the world are asking the tough questions to their bishops and demanding transparently honest answers. While few if any will deny that the foreign *Fidei Donum* (“Gift of Faith”) priests have done valuable work, there is a growing consensus that the overall project has been a failure of episcopal judgment, pastoral vision and sound ecclesiology. Problems associated with poor enculturation, language and social expectations have dogged these foreign priests and reduced them to little more than ‘sacrament dispensers’. These men are not to blame, but the entire enterprise has done little or no good for them as human beings, as priests, or for the people to whom they were sent to serve as “gifts of faith”.

Fr James Clarke, Chair the *National Council of Priests*, accurately reflects the views of many Australian Catholics in a recent editorial piece in *The Swag*. Clarke wrote:

“I hope and pray that the upcoming Plenary Council will address this issue of clergy morale and the declining numbers in priestly personnel. It is time to “grasp the nettle” and make the decision to ordain suitable married men to the priesthood. The venerable Pope Paul VI floated this idea and now his worthy successor Pope Francis is endeavouring to goad the various episcopal conferences throughout the world to take up this challenge, to face the reality of the situations in their countries and dioceses. The days of importing priests from other countries is over. **It was a doomed experiment which admittedly had some modest success, but overall has failed dismally.**” - Winter 2018 Issue. (Bold added).

“We have no shortage of vocations. What we have is a shortage of vision”¹

For years now bishops, particularly in the West, have grown accustomed to the theologically absurd idea of ‘priestless’ parishes but others have been busy searching for inventive ways to solve the problem that are both pastorally and theologically sound. Ironically, the most promising answers to priest shortages have emerged quite independently from two missionary bishops in Third World countries, Fritz Lobinger, emeritus bishop of Aliwal diocese in South Africa and Erwin Kräutler, now emeritus bishop of Xingu in Amazonian Brazil. Both bishops have suggested alternative models of priesthood that do not require alterations to doctrine but to ecclesiastical culture, discipline and governance.

Kräutler approached Pope Francis during an April, 2014 papal visit to Brazil with an enormously vexing pastoral problem but he came equipped with his own solution. Bishop Kräutler explained that his diocese covered a vast area of the Amazonia region, that the population was widely dispersed and that he had only a few priests to look after them. He proceeded to ask the Pope for permission to ordain to the priesthood married men of deep faith, proven virtue (*virii probati*), were natural leaders and who had the respect of their communities. Pope Francis advised Kräutler to table his proposal at the Brazilian bishops’ conference and that, if they reached consensus, it would indicate that they were exercising a ‘decisive role’ in taking responsibility for their own legitimate autonomy. Francis was clearly encouraging the Brazilian bishop to think and act synodally and he indicated that he would support their collective decision. Austrian journalist Christa Pongratz-Lippitt, reporting the meeting, wrote:

“The Pope explained that he could not take everything in hand personally from Rome. We local bishops, who are best acquainted with the needs of our faithful, should be corajudos, that is ‘courageous’ in Spanish, and make concrete suggestions,” he explained. A bishop should not act alone, the Pope told Kräutler. He indicated that “regional and national bishops’ conferences should seek and find consensus on reform and we should then bring up our suggestions for reform in Rome,” Kräutler said.”²

Years before the Kräutler solution was proposed, Fritz Lobinger, Bishop of a tribal land diocese in South Africa, came up with his own inspired thinking in a similar situation. Lobinger put forward a culturally coherent solution that made both good theological and sound pastoral sense and that could be realised without doctrinal obstacles. Lobinger proposed that small groups of proven, reliable married local village elders (*virī probati*) be ordained priests but that their ministry should be restricted to their local communities. These ordained ‘Elders’ would be supported and mentored by a team of professionally educated priests appointed by the bishop. Early in the twentieth century, Benedict XV reminded bishops especially in struggling ‘missionary’ environments of the advantages of local priests ministering to their own people in their own culture:

“There is one final, and very important, point for anyone who has charge of a mission. He must make it his special concern to secure and train local candidates for the sacred ministry. In this policy lies the greatest hope of the new churches. For the local priest, one with his people by birth, by nature, by his sympathies and his aspirations, is remarkably effective in appealing to their mentality and thus attracting them to the Faith. Far better than anyone else he knows the kind of argument they will listen to, and as a result, he often has easy access to places where a foreign priest would not be tolerated.” Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*, 1919. n. 14

Among those welcoming the prospect of *virī probati* priests was Irish priest and author, Fr Ned Crosby. He has called on his fellow Catholics to recognise and celebrate the surprising gift of a providential abundance of ‘vocations’ to the priesthood right before their eyes:

“Will we continue to dig for vocations to the priesthood with broken spades? Will we keep praying for vocations when perhaps God has already answered our prayers? Do we continue to refuse what God is offering and what the Spirit is saying to the Churches now? Are we like people weeping at a well running dry when there are rivers and fresh streams running all around us?”³

There will, however, be the inevitable and understandable theological, psychological and spiritual challenges that will have to be dealt with before the *virī probati* model of priestly ministry becomes a normal feature of Catholic life. One of these challenges is the accumulated distortions that have affected the theology of priesthood. These aberrations need to be identified and corrected through informed and sensitive faith education. Among the most damaging of these is the scholastic abstract theory that, at ordination, the inner being of a male Christian undergoes an ontological transformation whereby he is elevated to a superhuman state that is unimaginably superior to that of the rest of the baptized. The priesthood has been over sacralised and, as a result, dehumanised. Saint John Vianney (1786-1859), the Cure of Ars and patron saint of priests, best illustrates the point in his own words. In his “Little Catechism on the Priesthood,” he wrote:

“O how great is the priest! If he realized what he is, he would die... God obeys him: he utters a few words and the Lord descends from Heaven at his voice, to be contained within a small host. Without the Sacrament of Holy Orders, we would not have the Lord. Who put him there in the tabernacle? The priest. Who welcomed your soul at the beginning of life? The priest. Who feeds your soul and gives it strength for

the journey? The priest. Who will prepare it to appear before God, bathing it one last time in the blood of Jesus Christ? The priest—always the priest. And if the soul should happen to die (as a result of sin) who will raise it up, who will restore its calm and peace? Again, the priest. After God, the priest is everything. Only in heaven will he fully realize what he is. After God, the priest is everything.”⁴

Cardinal Robert Sarah, current Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Liturgy and the Sacraments, has pushed Vianney’s notions of priesthood to the outer limits when he drags in the discipline of celibacy and links it to another hyperbolic description of the ‘ontological’ superiority of the priest. Disregarding a thousand years of Sacramental tradition that at Baptism every Christian becomes an ‘alter Christus’ (*another or ‘representative’ Christ*), Sarah insists that the priest, through ordination, is not only transformed into an ‘alter Christus’ or representative Christ but he becomes ‘ipse Christus,’ – *Christ himself!* Sarah then proceeded to employ this distorted notion of priesthood in an attempt to undermine the ‘*viri probati*’ proposal. An ultra conservative Austrian Catholic news agency recently published Sarah’s views:

“”According to a report of the Austrian Catholic website Kath.net, Cardinal Sarah celebrated the Pontifical High Mass in Chartres, France, at the end of the Pilgrimage to Chartres, and he then delivered a homily. In this homily, he said:

Dear Brothers in the Priesthood, preserve always this certainty: to be united to Christ at the Cross, because priestly celibacy gives witness to this in the world! The project, as it has been again picked up by some people, to separate celibacy from the priesthood by administering the Sacrament of Priestly Ordination to married men (“*viri probati*”) – for “pastoral reasons or out of certain necessities,” as they say – leads to serious consequences and to a definitive breach with the Apostolic Tradition. Then we would establish a priesthood according to human criteria, but we would not continue the priesthood of Christ – obedient, poor, and chaste. Indeed, the priest is not only an “*alter Christus*” [another Christ], but he is truly “*ipse Christus*,” Christ Himself! Therefore, the priest who in the Church follows Christ will always be a sign of contradiction!

With these words, Cardinal Sarah has given a strong sign of resistance against the possible decision to ordain married men in the Amazonas region, as Catholic prelates, such as Cardinal Beniamino Stella, have recently predicted for the near future.”⁵

The proponents of the married priests solution to the decline in numbers of the seminary educated clergy are confronted with the task of persuading the Pope and bishops that the Church is experiencing challenges just as serious as it did at the Council of Trent when the bishops had to make tough decisions about educating the mass of mostly ignorant village priests whose inadequacies were highlighted and ridiculed by protestant reformers. The task of creating a ‘professional’ educated clergy was given to the Sulpicians and the Jesuits. Now is the right moment for a Jesuit Pope to accept the advice he gave to Kräutler, “be courageous.”

It is understandable that many bishops, priests and lay people are fearful of the impact on Catholic identity, structure, culture and worship that might result from dramatic changes.

Facing fears and anxieties and the ability to adapt quickly in the face of crisis are marks of the Christian discipleship. This is abundantly clear from the earliest history of the Jesus Movement and how it negotiated monumental shifts in theology, psychology and religious culture. A comparable time of challenge and opportunity has now come for the Catholic Church in Australia. The crisis is an internal one and it is literally a matter of survival.

At the May, 2016 Knox Lecture in Melbourne Archbishop Coleridge announced that the Catholic bishops had decided to have a National Plenary Council. He gave two major reasons for the decision: the catastrophic decline in the Faith practice participation rate and the revelations surfacing at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Coleridge insisted that the situation could not continue to be business as usual.⁶ But it is business as usual and a clear indication of this is that the bishops as a group still maintain a culture of silence, lack of transparency and absence of accountability. A striking example of this is the ongoing policy of importing ever increasing numbers of foreign priests.

A major test of Coleridge's bold assertion that the Catholic Church in Australia can no longer presume to function as it did in the past will be for the bishops to accept the offer of Pope Francis to negotiate the possibility of ordaining married Australian men to the priesthood. A full, frank and open conversation between the bishops and the Faithful should be happening now and not wait two years to begin.

Resistance to the *virī probati* proposal will inevitably come from the conservative sector of the Catholic community spectrum. An educated guess is that it will be strongest among bishops, priests and laity who are most deeply entrenched in the culture of clericalism. Resistance to change is natural to the state of inertia. In fact, Francis Sullivan, former CEO of the *Truth, Justice and Healing Council*, having become exasperated at the obstinacy of the bishops, described their inertia as "a management tool."⁷ The bishops must as a matter of priority abandon this kind of delaying tactic. There is a workable solution to the priest shortage problem and the Pope is open to it. It can be put in place within a reasonably short period of time if the bishops demonstrate the necessary courage and vision. Fears of letting go of disciplines, Canonical norms or of upsetting the clerical status quo need to be jettisoned. After all,*the salvation of souls, which must always be the supreme law in the Church, is to be kept before one's eyes.* (Can. 1752)

Pope Francis has opened the door to the calm consideration not only of this proposal but of many others too including female deacons. If the bishops refuse to take up Francis' invitation to make courageous local pastoral decisions then they would lay themselves open to the question put to the bishops by the Austrian association of reform priests (*Pfarrer-Initiative*), "... are they the new recalcitrants? Is there any other explanation and what does all this mean for parishes?" (*Sind die Bischöfe die neuen Ungehorsamen? Geht es auch anders? Und was heisst das für die Pfarrgemeinden?*)⁸

The bishops have perhaps one last chance to read the signs of the times correctly, regain their nerve, conjure up some courage and do something prophetic. That would also send a powerful,

affirmative message that, “*We have no shortage of vocations. What we have is a shortage of vision,*”

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- 2) “Pope says married men could be ordained – if world’s bishops agree” *The Tablet* 10 April 2014. (<http://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/659/pope-says-married-men-could-be-ordained-if-world-s-bishops-agree> Accessed 14/07/2018)
- 3) Noel Crosby *The Furrow*, cited in Brendan Hoban, *Who will break bread for us? Disappearing Priests*, Banley House, Mayo, 2013, 79-80. There is evidence of a growing number of foreign born priests who, having completed their contract in Western countries, have refused to return to their home dioceses or religious communities. There is at least anecdotal evidence that this is happening in Australia. For a French perspective, see, Marlo Tresca “The Phenomenon of ‘wandering’ priests *La Croix International*, 08/80/2018 ((https://international.la-croix.com/news/the-phenomenon-of-wandering-priests/8213?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=e-mail&utm_content=08-08-2018&utm_campaign=newsletter_crx_lci&PMID=47765922ca935ed104281ce03e24b04a Accessed 09/08/2018)
- 4) (<https://www.fisheaters.com/holyorders2.html> Accessed 16/07/2018) See also Fr Shenan J. Boquet, “The Priest is Irreplaceable in Preaching the Gospel of Life,” *Human Life International. Pro-Life Missionaries of Life to the World* July 5, 2018 (<https://www.hli.org/2018/07/priest-irreplaceable-in-culture-of-life/> Accessed 12/07/2018).
- 5) Maike Hickson, ‘Cardinal Sarah: Ordination of Viri Probati is a “Breach with Apostolic Tradition”’ *onepeterfive*, May 21, 2018 (<https://onepeterfive.com/cardinal-sarah-ordination-of-viri-probati-is-a-breach-with-apostolic-tradition/> Accessed 16/07/2018). Sarah’s views are reflected in the conservative mily are wonderful and “normal” and are the foundation of the reality of the Church.” Richard Cipolla, “A Letter to a Seminarian thinking of leaving the Seminary – from his Parish Priest” *Rorate Caeli* March 5, 2018. (<https://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2018/03/a-letter-to-seminarian-thinking-of.html> Accessed 06/03/2018). Innocent III 1160-1216, the first Pope to call himself the ‘Vicar of Christ’, also described himself as: “*representative of Christ, the successor of Peter, the anointed of the Lord, the God of Pharaoh set midway between God and man, below God but above man, less than God but more than man, judging all other men, but himself judged by none.*” From the website of the Archdiocese of Perth, Western Australia: “..The priesthood is a supernatural calling to serve as a mediator between God and his people. In priestly ordination the bishop calls down God’s power upon the man being ordained, imprinting upon his soul an indelible seal that can never be lost. .. The Church speaks of her priests as acting “in persona Christi”, which means “in the person of Christ.” As Saint John Paul II wrote, “The priest offers his humanity to Christ, so that Christ may use him as an instrument of salvation, making him as it were into another Christ.” Those who receive this gift can only strive to respond with grateful humility.” (*A Call from God* Archdiocese of Perth W.A. (http://www.perthpriest.perthcatholic.org.au/?page_id=32 Accessed 20/07/2018).
- 6) (2016 Knox Lecture: <http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au/media/141221/171025-Yarra-Theological-Union-panel-and-St-Benedicts-Melb-visit.pdf> Accessed 30/07/2018).
- 7) TJHC MEDIA RELEASE. Panel of church leaders discuss child sexual abuse crisis and way forward for Catholic Church. 25 October, 2017. <http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au/media/141221/171025-Yarra-Theological-Union-panel-and-St-Benedicts-Melb-visit.pdf> Accessed 29/07/2018).
- 8) At a May , 2017 press conference with the theme: “Francis in the dioceses!” *The Austrian priests association, Pfarrer-Initiative issued a statement that included these questions: ‘Viri probati’ (proven married men) as priests? Remarried, divorced (welcome to receive) communion? Female deacons possibly? Pope Francis has opened door after door to resolve pressing questions that are facing our Church. He has challenged the bishops to make bold decisions but they continue to stall. There are urgent priority questions that will not go away. Are the bishops themselves now the new dissenters? Is there any other explanation and what does all this mean for parishes ?* German text: Im Rahmen einer Pressekonferenz hat die Pfarrer-Initiative gestern Stellung bezogen zu den Themen: Amoris Laetitia, Gemeindeleitung (Viri Probati, Lobinger Modell), Maltesisches Bischofspapier, Orthodoxe Diakoninnen in Afrika und Bischofsernennungen hierzulande. (<http://www.pfarrer-initiative.at/site/de/home/article/231.html> Accessed 26/07/2017).

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(<https://www.scross.co.za/2017/11/viri-probati-a-married-priesthood/> Accessed 16/07/2018)

“Team of Elders: Bishop Fritz Lobinger,” *The Southern Cross*, Feb 12, 2018
<https://www.scross.co.za/2008/team-of-elders-bishop-fritz-lobinger> Accessed 17/07/2018)

Cardinal Kasper supports local episcopal conferences being proactive in taking the initiative in solving their unique pastoral needs:

“The [vocation] situation differs so widely in different parts of the world that a uniform worldwide solution is not possible,” Kasper told a German church website, katholisch.de. Each bishops’ conference should decide whether it was in favour of married priests and then submit proposals to the pope. “I have the feeling that if their application is well-founded, it will be met positively.” He added: “We simply cannot carry on with the situation as it is at the present ... One cannot just go on clustering more and more parishes together into ever larger entities.”

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