

**“Recognising Motivation for Ministry”
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Bishop Donal McKeown

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1. Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here with you this morning. Having been a seminary dean for 8 years and now being in the position of having some national responsibility for this work, it is great to be with those who have been doing the work on the ground. So I don't come with some great font of wisdom but rather with a desire to share where I am and to learn from your experience and wisdom.

2. Motivation

Motivation is not easy to assess – for anything (from marriage to crime, from having babies to aborting babies) We are often unaware or not sufficiently conscious of our motivation (cf scripture re the heart as devious). Indeed the NT is quite clear that clarity of motivation was not always evident in the apostles. The mother of James and John has her own priorities, Peter was initially able only to understand a successful Jesus – and we know from the letters of Paul just how fragmented his early communities could be. Writing to the Philippians, he warned about those who preached only “out of rivalry and competition, while the rest preach Christ with the right intention, out of nothing but love”. (Phil 1:15-6). Similarly, Paul reprimanded Peter and Barnabas for succumbing to the pressure of the Judaizers at Antioch. (Gal 2:11-13). And we know from Paul's Corinthians correspondence that there were factions born of pride or a hunger for power. Mixed motives are not a peculiarly post Vatican II phenomenon!

There were extraordinary levels of religious vocations in 1950s and 1960s Ireland.

If we believe in the incarnational dimension of God's revelation – social factors are clearly present and this is not a bad thing per se. Thus **Tom Inglis**, in an interesting article, stated that “allegiance to the Church is never a purely religious matter but is tied in with social, political and economic life”¹ The revisionists will mock that period as a time when there was no freedom and choice. Inglis argued that allegiance to church was not just a question of belief in heaven and hell or in the efficacy of sacramental practice but inevitably involves a basic struggle for power. Thus adherence to church could be used to enhance a sense of social acceptance, social prestige and thus of surrender to the community. This may seem an unnecessarily negative view of human nature and of the unredeemed instincts that drive many of our decisions. However, it does provide some element of the context within which individuals discerned their vocation. After all, Jesus must have taken the background, culture and expectations of his listeners into consideration when he called the disciples. However, it does not necessarily explain why each individual followed such a vocation or why others chose not to follow through with their preparation for religious or clerical life. Adherence to church and religious vocation is more than just an expression of the lust for respectability and power. But that does not mean that these elements are not also to be found within many people's commitment to faith and to a vocation within the people of God.

¹ Inglis, T., *Power and the Catholic Church in Irish Social, Political and Economic Life*, in *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society* (1987) Dublin, Gill and Macmillan p.63

Of course, we have to acknowledge that there were probably many people in the priesthood and religious life for whom external influences played a large role in their initial entry into seminary or novitiate. Some who entered for what we might call ‘wrong reasons’ will have lived their whole lives with a sense that they were really in the wrong place. That has expressed itself in addictions, inappropriate behaviour, bitterness, or lack of enthusiasm. Dead at 40 and buried at 90, as the saying goes. Others will have left formal positions in the church. Some of them will have been content with that decision, while others will have been equally unhappy out rather than in, or unhappy with the fact that they chose to leave.

This emphasis on the environmental dimensions to the individual’s choice is no less relevant today than it was then, for it explains why people react in certain ways to church and religion. The creation of a culture where the Christian vocabulary was dominant was not necessarily a bad thing for it provided for stability, low levels of suicide and abortion, strong social cohesion etc. The current prevalent culture cannot claim to have provided a healthy and caring atmosphere either. And JPII is very clear about the need to imbue a culture with a Christian perspective from within. God is mediated not just through intense moments of personal insight but also through the community, the body of Christ. So we are faced with two distinct challenges – to help people discern their call, and to create an environment where that call can be heard and responded to with integrity.

However, we are invited to distinguish between a Christian culture and a cultural Christianity. People can be sacramentalised but not evangelised. And we are trying to find out here just how we can create a context for a healthy sense of call, and appropriate tools for distinguishing that call in the much less coherent social context of our day. Or put it another way, we have to create at least sub-cultures where the language of sacrifice, commitment and faithfulness are meaningful.

Much useful work has been done in the fields such as social anthropology to help clarify the circumstances that influence decisions. **Mary Douglas**, a Catholic professor of SA at London University, was concerned about much of the implementation of Vatican II changes². From her studies of various societies, she concluded that how we perceive our social body influences how we perceive our individual body. Thus in social contexts where there was a strong sense of internal cohesion (grid) and of borders (group), self-control, repetitive prayer, symbolic gestures had deep meaning. In loosely structured societies, the emphasis moved more to the individual, the personal, the self-expressive. However, her concern was that the latter type of society did not have an agreed language with which to communicate its values to others and to the next generation. She argued that the church, if it wanted to hand on its rich vocabulary of symbolic language (salvation, grave, sin, sacrifice) and gesture (fasting, kneeling, holy water etc), would have to create communities where these things would be accepted as a currency.

Similarly the distinguished Dundalk-born History of Christianity at Cambridge, **Eamon Duffy**, has argued very cogently that ‘the richness of the Church’s past is a liberation, not a straitjacket’³ He calls for a re-examination of much of our rejected past – lurid medieval portrayals of Hell, garish hagiography, sweet post-Reformation pieties. Thus he suggests that, while much of the old portrayal of hell did seem to portray a harsh God, the new glib emphasis on an all-loving and forgiving God can have negative consequences. Hell can be important not so much a ‘language about what God is capable of, but about what we human beings are capable of’.⁴ Theological wallpaper is important for handing on the faith and its values. Much of our religious heritage is caught, not taught.

² Douglas, M (1966), *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul and (1973), *Natural Symbols. Explorations in Cosmology*, London, Barrie and Jenkins

³ Duffy, Eamon (2004), *Faith of our fathers. Reflections on Catholic Tradition*, London, Continuum

⁴ Ibid, p135.

The context in which we live is part of who we are as human beings. That applies now just as it did for Jesus and for Jeremiah, for Abraham, Amos and the apostles. There is no world where motives are pure. Social influences and environment are key parts of all our motivations. We are incarnate human beings. Unlike the anthropologies of Eastern religions which see the body as a trap for the spirit, our worldview speaks of a God who took our flesh and of the resurrection of the body. The wheat and the tares grow together. God can write straight on crooked lines. Thus, when Jesus died and the apostles – Jesus’ avowed public followers - had fled, it was Nicodemus (who came only by night) and Joseph of Arimathea (who was a secret believer – Jn 19:28) who went to Pilate and asked for the body back so that it could be buried. We can only work to try and purify, clarify and redeem motivation.

Indeed, PDV is quite clear that

“the life and ministry of the priest must ‘adapt to every era and circumstance of life... For our part we must therefore seek to be as open as possible to light from on high from the Holy Spirit, in order to discover the tendencies of contemporary society, recognise the deepest spiritual needs, determine the most important concrete tasks and the pastoral methods to adopt, and thus respond to human expectations’” (PDV 5)

Despite the eternal nature of Christ’s priesthood, that ministry is always in dialogue with its time and its culture. The motivation has to be not just to serve Christ, but to serve Christ in a particular cultural milieu. PDV is very clear about the need to be very aware of the “positive and negative elements in socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts which affect boys, adolescent and young men who throughout their lives are called to bring to maturity a project of priestly life.” (ibid) Like Jesus, ministry and God’s grace are incarnated.

3. Assessment

Now while some people will have entered seminary for the wrong reason (parental pressure, immaturity, escapism etc) and stayed for the wrong reason, there are those who will have entered for the wrong reason and stayed for the right reasons. Personally, I am not sure why I entered seminary at 18. I am not aware of any base reason or any coercion. But I do know that I had to make deliberate decisions to stay and to make a very deliberate decision to go forward for ordination. Those whose job it was to assess my suitability had really little to go on other than just the externals of how I behaved in the seminary context. Numerous others with me were ordained and are no longer in ministry. At that time, I certainly did not have doubts about the worthiness of any of these candidates. Who got it wrong? Could they have got it right? As a seminary dean, I have seen plenty of fine young men come forward for priesthood. Some we thought were great, some we were dubious about. But some of the great ones left (before and after ordination) and some of the doubtful cases are there and doing great work.

So assessing motives and staying power is not, and never will be, a precise science. If the apostles and the early church were full of mixed motives, then we cannot expect to be completely free from these problems. Original Sin is alive and well in this age as in every age. In fact, all of us is in need of salvation – and ministry is about ministers who can recognise where they need to be healed and where they have been healed. Only in this way can they be wounded humble healers rather than dispensers of professional holy services. We are all in need of salvation, and the recognition of that is a very healthy sign.

And there is no template for the ideal priest. None of us is as smart as all of us. We are not looking to clone clergy. Part of the NT vision is quite clearly to celebrate diversity. (1 Cor 12-3) But Paul is clear that diversity without love behind all the gifts is useless and not a place where God’s grace is at work. So our job is not to make the ideal priest, but to allow us to recognise who the people are that the Lord is sending to us, and to enable people to sense more clearly their specific call in the context of the realities of our current culture and its various sub-cultures.

Of course, there are many aspects of the current cultural environment that militate against the idea of a self-giving and a following of Christ's call. One of the problems that we face is the fact that so much of our current culture is focussed on self-actualisation. We must fulfil our dreams, we are the ultimate arbiter of what is good and right and valuable. Obviously self-actualisation is a vital aspect of personal growth and of mental health, as Jung would have pointed out. But Christian faith comes with the perspective that we are all invited to move beyond that to **self-transcendence** through the grace of God. That is the whole message of the sub-liminal anthropology and cosmology in much of our prayer, pieties, hagiography and art. The idea of 'God up there' may seem to be reflect a simplistic view of the universe, but it is a constant invitation to move beyond ourselves – in love, as social beings and towards God. The idea of the Resurrection of the body is a clear assertion that transcendence can break into immanence, and that the two have to be held in balance. The Incarnation, the Gospel healing stories and our tradition of miracles and saintly thaumaturgs are narratives that say 'God can break into our world' And the Christian tradition insists that it is precisely this possibility that allows for the Kingdom to be built here. The transcendent is immanent in the world (the Kingdom of God is close at hand, already here but not yet fully. The seed has been sown and will bear fruit etc). The glory of God is the human being fully alive. But many see the idea of God as a barrier to human self-actualisation.

And in a context of cultural confusion, where there is no agreed language about morality and human dignity, and where we are reduced to being able to haggle only about prices and not about values, you will know only too well that we encounter a number of reactions to that situation. On the one hand we get those who are certain about everything. These theological George Bushes want everything in black and white. They seek certainty. But that certainty often does not leave much room for the searching, doubting pilgrim people and implies an evangelical fundamentalism that leaves little room for growth. That sort of frightened certainty can lead to inflexibility and self-righteousness, exuding a sense of their being less of an earthenware vessel than a theological Ming vase. On the other hand, we also encounter the confused searcher after spirituality who cannot work within one specific theological framework. This level of vague piety can reflect a fear of being committed to anything. But if you stand for nothing, you fall for anything.

Broad criteria:

1. *Freedom*

As we all know PDV set the foundations for our understanding of formation, with the four dimensions of any good programme – the human, the spiritual, the intellectual and the pastoral. But a prior disposition is vital. PDV is clear that, since vocation is essentially a call from God to which the person must respond, freedom is vital. The invitation can only be responded to by a free oblation of oneself. It is therefore a response in both freedom and amazement because "those who have been called know that they are rooted not in their own strength but in the unconditional faithfulness of God who calls them" PDV36. That is not always easy to judge and measure. But it seems to be a useful criterion for measuring both the potential for an authentic vocation and the development of that during the life-long process of formation and transformation,.

2. *Formation*

Seminary is not so much about training as about formation. Because the churches and ecclesial communities of the Reformed tradition tend to focus on the key experience of personal conversion, their preparation for ministry consists mainly of a degree in theology plus a bit of pastoral practice. However, our tradition allows much more for growth in the spiritual life throughout life – and is clear that seminary life is much more than information for it is a preparation of those who will help people to embark upon and live in a process of spiritual life-long learning. So we need people who are capable of being formed and open to that uncertain process.

Again PDV is clear about the purpose of preparation for ministry.

It is essential for the formation of candidates for the priesthood and the pastoral ministry – which by its very nature is ecclesial – that the Seminary should be experienced not as something external and superficial, or simply a place in which to live and study, but in an interior and profound way, a community that re-lives the experience of the group of Twelve who were united to Jesus. The seminary and its entire life in all its different expressions, is committed to formation, the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation of future priests. (PDV #60, 61)

Do candidates want to learn, grow, develop, mature? If not, they will not only be unable to benefit from the formation process but also be unable to act as ministers of growth and maturation.

3. *Ecclesial dimension*

The acceptance of formation is important. This is true not just because formation is useful and valuable in itself. It is also true because vocation is always an invitation to serve the community. It is an ecclesial call, not an individualist one. It is not a call to serve God in “an individualistic and self-centred way...(for) priestly ministry acquires its genuine meaning and attains to its fullest truth in serving and fostering the growth of the Christian community and the common priesthood of the faithful” PDV 37

Are the candidates aware of, committed to and capable of the ecclesial dimension of priestly ministry – whatever task within the Church they may end up carrying out? If not, that may be another key element in assessing their suitability and their motivation.

4. *Human*

Perhaps surprisingly, PDV is clear that “human formation is the basis of all priestly formation” PDV 43. Ours is a faith and a tradition that emphasises the Incarnation. PDV quotes *Optatam Totius, Prebterorum Ordinis* and the *Ratio Fundamentalis* when it insists that

“Future priests should cultivate qualities (that) are needed to be balanced people, strong and free, capable of bearing the weight of pastoral responsibilities. They need to be educated to love the truth, to be loyal, to respect every person, to have a sense of justice, to be true to their word, to be genuinely compassionate, to be men of integrity and, especially, to be balanced in judgement and behaviour.” PDV 43

Some of these are qualities that are not particularly highlighted in our current culture. And candidates do not have to have them all. However, they need to be capable of learning, of developing warm hearts and having the strength of character that will enable them to have the ability to cope with loneliness, crises etc.

The authorities in Maynooth have made major steps in responding to these emphases. The College is clear that it aims

“to prepare priests, who can work with other priests in the diocesan presbyterate, in serving the Catholic Church in Ireland in 21st century. These priests must be balanced people, who are spiritually advanced and theologically well-formed and who can also value their role as servants and leaders ‘in persona Christi’ in the faith community, where they can also be nurtured by the people. These priests must be attuned to the pastoral needs both of the faithful and of those estranged from the faith, in the setting of an increased cultural and religious dialogue and diversity”.

5. *Spiritual*: Grace builds on nature and the spiritual has to have a solid human foundation. I spoke recently to one of our younger priests who has simply left the ministry after a few years. He did not leave to get married and had led an exemplary life in his work – he preached well, prepared well, was conscientious and energetic. But when I asked him what we needed to do in formation to ensure that men could be better prepared for their ministry. Make sure that they want to be priests, and not just social workers, he said. There is a need for deep spirituality and this implies a deep hunger for God. It means that a candidate needs

to be both aware of his weakness and confident that God can fill that space in his life. All Paul wanted to sustain him was knowledge of Christ and of the power of his resurrection. (Phil 3:11)

PDV is clear that spiritual formation is central for all Christian believers. However, the spiritual formation for priests is not just to be about a general growth in faith and prayer, but a spiritual formation that “unifies and gives life to his *being* a priest, and his *acting* as a priest.” (PDV 45). That means being able to live intimately united to Jesus Christ, and, at the same time, be searching for Jesus. That is more than just a warm feeling about God. Obviously, we need men who have some awareness of, and openness to the Scriptures. Are they able to open their lives to the Word of God and allow themselves to be pruned by it? Are they able to spend time in prayer and have that self-discipline that counteracts the temptation to activism? Have they a sense of the Eucharistic dimension of our Catholic tradition? Have they the ability to develop a spirituality that does not assume that celibacy is only a minor side-show? Furthermore, PDV is clear that “spiritual formation also involves seeking Christ in people.” (PDV 49) This is echoed in the NMI emphasis on faith communities being consciously formed as “schools of prayer”(NMI 33) where a spirituality of communion is actively fostered and developed. An excessively individualist piety is neither healthy nor really Catholic.

6. *Intellectual*: This aspect of the PDV paradigm for seminary life comes third in the list. It is important but not the most important part. However the ability to understand the faith so as proclaim it and concretise it is a key part of preparation and ministry. It is clear that the intellectual dimension is part of formation (and not just of information). While we do need to constantly foster a strong intellectual dimension to the life of the Irish Church – so that we can dialogue with our culture at all levels – that does not mean that everyone has to be capable to doctoral studies! But candidates have to be capable of an appreciable level of theological studies, even if we always leave flexibility for the Cure of Ars syndrome to come to the surface! People will always be touched and moved by genuine piety and pastoral zeal. But an educated society also needs an ability to expound the faith to the people of our day. However, the old description of theology remains a key in assessing candidates – have their a *fides* that is searching for *intellectum*? If not, there will be problems down the line.

7. *Pastoral*: This comes fourth in the list. That is not because it is not important. But it is clear that while all must be capable of personal, spiritual and intellectual formation, not all will be involved in pastoral ministry. Nevertheless pastoral formation is not just about developing various skills. It is also about developing a Gospel-based heart. Love is the greatest of God’s gifts and must permeate all pastoral activity. (1 Cor 13). As secular management says, the heart of leadership lies in the heart of leaders. That applies to the theology professor as well as to the enthusiastic parish clergy. The longest 12 inches in the world is from the head to the heart. Jesus had gone down that route and wanted his disciples to follow him along that route, that they might all have within them the mind and heart of Jesus Christ (Phil 2:5). Have the candidates for secular priesthood a compassion for people, an ability to listen, and a human warmth? If they have that, all skills can be learned. If they don’t have these attributes, skills are only formal appendages, bolt-ons. That potential to be increasingly Christ-like must be a key criterion for suitability.

8. *Catholic*

And of course, we are seeking to form Catholic priests and not just general ministers of the Gospel. They will have to work within a clear ecclesiastical framework – and be part of a living Catholic tradition. Tom Groome⁵ has given a simple breakdown of some of the key points of the Catholic worldview and they may offer us some guidance when it comes to assessing motivation and suitability. He has tried to specify the

⁵ Groome, T.H., (1996) *What makes a School Catholic?* in McLaughlin, T., O’Keefe, J., and O’Keefe, B. (eds), *The Contemporary Catholic School*, London, Falmer, page 108. He also offers a number of expanded versions of this tool elsewhere. Cf. *Educating for Life. A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent.*(2001) New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company.

characteristics of the Catholic worldview, and for much of these insights, he bases his writing on the work of the Protestant theologian Langdon Gilkey. He proposes that there are five key aspects to the Catholic *Weltanschauung*.

- "a positive anthropology of the person;
 - the sacramentality of life;
 - its communal emphasis regarding human and Christian existence;
 - its commitment to tradition as source of its Story and Vision; and
 - an appreciation of rationality and learning."
- a. A positive anthropology. Unlike the Reformers with their Genesis 3 emphasis on sin and *massa damnata*, the Catholic tradition remained closer to the Genesis 1-2 vision of human beings as made in God's image and likeness. Human beings are thus capable of becoming children of God, and not just protected from God's righteous anger by the merits of Jesus. An excessively negative view of human nature or of the grace of God in people's lives, an excessive emphasis on purity and separation from the world that God so loved that he sent his only Son not to condemn it but to save it – these may not be a healthy basis for a Catholic priestly vocation.
- b. **Sacramentality.** Catholicism is often attacked for its excessive emphasis on the sacramental life and for allowing that to get in the road of Jesus. But in our tradition the seven sacraments are only the tip of a whole view of the world and his revelation of himself. The positive anthropology and sociology that we espouse allow God to be revealed in beauty, love, celebrations to the heart and not just to the head. Sacramental consciousness engages the imagination.⁶ It also encourages contemplation. (Smell of the Tantum Ergo). Anyone who might have congenital blindness in this area will have problems as a Catholic priest.
- c. **Community.** Fortunately, despite many indications that might suggest the contrary, the idea of belonging still appears to remain a deep-rooted distinguishing feature of Catholic Christianity worldwide. Groome has been, for example, very insistent on this particular aspect of what makes a Catholic education Catholic. He is convinced that, while the Protestant Reformers rejected much of the communal dimensions of faith in the interests of underlining the crucial need for personal conversion, "Catholicism clung to its emphasis that we encounter God as a community of faith, that the primary mode (not the only one) of God coming to us and of our going to God is as 'Church' – now the sacrament of Christ to the world".⁷ We need people who are able to work within that context, prepared for koinonia (the welcoming community), kerygma (a Word of God community), Leitourgia (a worshipping community), diakonia (a community of welfare) and marturia (a witnessing community)⁸ Anyone who has a block with one of these may not have motivation that will last.
- d. **Rationality.** Groome underlines the Catholic commitment to learning. Just because we are searching for the truth does not mean that we believe that we have it fully in our grasp and formulae already. Formation means an openness to learning and reading, to believing that we all have much to learn. It involves walking the path between the current temptations to both the blind faith of fideism and the trust in the sufficiency of reason that rationalism espouses. It also means being prepared to work within the Church's theological tradition, able to work with the magisterium without descending into a theological literalism. We occasionally come across students who cannot do that.

⁶ Greeley, A., *The Catholic Imagination*, xxxxxx

⁷ *ibid*, pp.114-5

⁸ Groome (2001) p.190S

- e. **Tradition.** And finally, we work within the context of a theological tradition, drawing out of the treasury things both new and old. We have a long history of varied spiritualities and pieties. Being a Catholic priest involves a sensitivity to that history and an awareness that people have different spiritual paths to God. That past is a launch pad for growth and discovery, not a straitjacket for the heretic. The mad man is not the man that has lost his reason. The real mad man, said Chesterton, is the man who has lost everything except his reason.

Conclusion:

1. Deciding motivation is never an exact science. All that even a psychological assessment can give is the presence or absence of major counter-indications. That takes a learned person.
2. We are not looking just to weed out the entirely unsuited. We are also looking for those whose roots are on rocky ground, or on shallow soil or amid thorns. That requires a holy person.
3. We are trying to prepare priests who will be working into the circumstances that will prevail in the second half of this century. You have to be really mad to think that you could do that!

Pope John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* proposed that we should be developing a spirituality of communion (NMI 43), creating schools of prayer and focusing on ecumenism. In *Ecclesia in Europa*, he invited us specifically to proclaim the Gospel of Hope, celebrate the Gospel of Hope and serve the Gospel of Love. If we can encourage priests who are contented complainers and men moved by a confident restlessness, then we will have priests who can face the 21st century whatever it may bring.

DMcK