

Article on Priesthood and Ministry Resource. Fr. Billy Swan.

The Irish Catholic Newspaper.

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT PRIESTHOOD.

As pilgrims of hope in a synodal Church, we need to talk urgently about ministerial priesthood. We need to courageously face up to the crisis of very few priests that will be in the Irish Church of the future and the consequences of this reality. In doing so, there are two extremes to avoid. The first is what might be termed a theology of replacement whereby the flourishing of lay ministry currently taking place is seen as a replacement model for a clerical Church of the past. This does a disservice to both lay ministry and ministerial priesthood for while both are orientated to the other, both are distinct vocations within the Church. The other extreme is to interpret a conversation on the value of priestly witness and ministry as a harking back to the past and a return to how things were. What is needed is a Spirit led conversation that rejoices in so many of the baptised accepting the call to greater responsibility for mission and leadership in their parishes and dioceses. But also, one that values the unique and indispensable contribution of priests to the life of the Church – as preachers of God’s Word, teachers of the Catholic faith, bearers of the Catholic tradition and imagination, ministers of the sacraments, leaders and administrators of parishes and groups of parishes, interpreters and evangelisers of culture, men of prayer and good shepherds with the loving heart of Christ – all within and not apart from a synodal Church. So too must we strike the balance between spiritualising the vocations crisis (I pray for vocations but wouldn’t want my son to become one and wouldn’t dare to ask someone had they ever thought of a vocation) and a secular type recruitment drive that weakens the vocational foundation of a priestly calling.

Within these parameters, we need to face the reality as the crisis it is, trusting in the Lord being with us but yet facing the issues with eyes wide open. For example, we shouldn’t be surprised at a shortage of priestly vocations when our sacramental systems don’t seem capable of producing and retaining committed disciples who live their commitment within the Church that prepared them. The same is true for all vocations that have fallen in recent decades including that of marriage. This alerts us to a problem further ‘up stream’. Another issue is a lack of clarity about priestly identity. Who are we? What do we

stand for, live for and die for if necessary? Has the rightful condemnation of clericalism been confused with a healthy and necessary clarity around priestly identity?

These are the questions and conversations we need to have as families, parishes and dioceses, and soon. It is a discernment process that can't wait any longer because it simply can't be business as usual.