

MINISTRY— FORMATION—TRAINING

By ANNE HINE

I HAVE IN my mind's eye a picture I saw in the popular catholic press of Pope John Paul II at Heaton Park in 1982, the year he came to England. In the forefront of the picture there are several pairs of heels belonging to candidates for ordination to the priesthood, who are lying prostrate on the ground: centre stage is John Paul II in focus with shadowy indeterminate figures in the background. Though not the moment of ordination this is a dramatic picture and encapsulates a hierarchical model of the Church, with which many feel comfortable, and ensures that whatever the woeful state of vocations, the Church at the end of this ceremony will be richer by the number of heels divided by two as new priests.

This picture raises questions about the Church and about ministry. If we feel comfortable and secure about it they will not be asked. First of all where are the people who together with these new priests make up the community—the Church? They were present in corralls at a safe distance: pictures cannot show everything, but do the circumstances, on reflection, tell us something about how the Church is understood by those who presume to know what is best for us?

The picture contains many other suppositions; that this is the end of that time of training in which these men have spent up to six or more years. It supposes that training is sufficient for ministry—or at least for priesthood, the only one blessed by sacrament and thus the only authorized ministry that the Church recognizes, apart from permanent diaconate (a clerical second-best). Does priesthood conferred on an individual make him any different from the rest of the human race—should it? If the word priesthood is used, are the laity kept safely in their corralls or in the benches in front of the priest? Is the expectation that the priest is now responsible on his own for the multitudinal duties and details of parish life? If the word ministry is used are the confining structures around the laity loosened or removed? Is there a response from the laity, a movement to take on responsibility within the community, which should be theirs? Does this blur the edges of the role of the priest or take away his authority? Are the gifts of the community only

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to find expression in one person? As a woman looking at that picture I wonder at the all-male caste—is there any room for the other half of the human race in this patriarchy?¹

Questions to what purpose? Well, two or three pairs of those heels in the picture belonged to students whom I had got to know in their final six months in the seminary and who were about to begin their priestly ministry in different parishes in the north of England. They had completed their time in the seminary—what does the seminary do? The quick answer is to say that it trains young men who feel called to serve God as secular priests in the Church by providing courses in dogma, scripture, philosophy, church history *et al*, so that they will have the necessary knowledge to be able to minister to the people whom they will be ordained to serve. A good description for a quick answer, nice and clinical, but which omits the blood, sweat and tears dimension of testing and growing in vocation. What follows arises from reflection on what happens in one particular seminary and may not be common to all, though one would hope that principles for formation could be adapted to other situations.

Training presupposes that those entering for it have the necessary qualifications: be it for teaching, medicine, law or the priesthood. It aims to provide knowledge in the various disciplines, test that this knowledge is mastered and understood, that various skills have been practised along the way and at the end of a specified number of years the candidates are assessed by examiners and pass or fail in their subject. Training can give you knowledge about something, but does not guarantee a first-class practitioner at the end of the time of training. A newly-qualified teacher receives more formation in her first year of teaching than the previous three years of training in the actual art of teaching. Most professions have some form of supervision in the first years of practice; those who are priests seem to be lacking in this. Most professions see in-service training as necessary and integral but once again those who are priests seem strangely resistant to this.

Training is a factor and an important one in the lives of those young men in discerning their vocations within the Church. Another word used is formation, a word that those following vocations within a religious order have taken to heart and used effectively to define themselves and their charism. Within the religious vocation an individual's formation has its own parameters: the spirituality of the founder and the order; the expression of their charism within the Church. Candidates and novices are introduced to these and grow in their vocation and self-understanding in the light of them. Within the context of the seminary,

formation is talked about but less clearly understood. Some of the reasons for a want of clarity lie in the way the word is used, particularly in formal documents where it is often synonymous with training. In *Optatam totius* the word formation occurs only in the introduction where it is seen as the outcome of training, 'because of the unity of the catholic priesthood, this priestly formation is required for all priests, secular, religious, and of every rite'.²

In the Cherwell report there is a reaching-out to see formation as beginning with the individual, particularly in the section headed 'specific aspects of formation',³ but the understanding of training is so ingrained that it is open to this interpretation rather than formation.

Another reason for the lack of clarity is that the spirituality of secular priesthood has a wide variety of expressions because there are as many models of priesthood as there are men ordained to it. In the long run this can be a great richness or it can be a source of division. For the candidate entering the seminary this can come as a surprise, shock or disappointment according to how it fits in with his personal ideals. Training provides the models; formation should enable integration at the personal level.

Formation in the general sense of conformity to what is asked of the candidate by the institution is perhaps formation at its lowest level; one which can be seen and assessed by the presence or absence from prescribed duties. The more important area of formation is at a more personal level; how the individual makes sense of the demands of the gospel together with the integration of what he is being taught, not just at a head or understanding level but at a heart level within the context of his life experience, be that broad or narrow. Within the system at the moment this is the work of the spiritual director and as such is personal, private and not open to public scrutiny. My question is: should this matter be the preserve of only one person or should it be the responsibility of those who teach to help that integration take place? This can be a delicate area in that it can touch conscience which is safeguarded by Canon Law;⁴ though the distinction is fine in some cases, it would not be true of all. Given a different attitude and skills training, formation and training could happen in conjunction with each other rather than despite each other.

How far training is formation is a question with as many possible answers as there are people receiving it. If the model of teaching used is the passing-on of information because the matter in this course has to be known and mastered, then it will be responded to at a head level; memorizing and sorting material to meet

whatever questions are raised to test it. It is more difficult for integration to take place here because there is little room for the life experience of the individual to have a place. If the model of teaching is taken from the individual's experience as a base and broadening and widening this vision and understanding, then there is more room for the necessary integration to take place. It is not being imposed from outside and has a framework or context to be seen within. It might also help to bridge the jargon gap, a seeming affliction of specialized subjects, and one that prevents them being understood by non-initiates. Seminars and tutorials are other means of coming to terms with an ever increasing mass of information that is deemed necessary as part of the tools of the trade. Team teaching can be another way of breaking down the barriers between subjects which seem to cause a certain blindness as to the connection between different approaches. At the practical level, the tension between training and formation may be seen to increase or decrease depending on the way information is presented and the possibility of integrating this at a personal level.

Another area of training or rather of formation is the pastoral field work that the students do in part of their course in college and during placements for a month during the summer. Out of any first year entering the college sixty per cent will leave before ordination to the priesthood and it is in this area that our understanding of ministry in a broad sense is encouraged. In pastoral placements students have the opportunity to come in contact with people in such a way that the skills that they learn will be of use to them if they leave and still wish to be concerned in the life of the Church in an active way. All pastoral work within the college would be concerned with introducing students to areas that they will be involved with in the future as priests, but from a wider perspective than just what will be their priestly concerns; to get them over thresholds of areas of work that they will be involved in. Time is allotted on the timetable for this and work in the field is followed up by reflection periods when difficulties and strengths can be explored within the group. Arising from this, further input would be offered so that background and theory are seen from within the context of the student's experience but not confined to that context. Emphasis and concern would focus on the student's ability to feel comfortable enough within himself to be able to operate in that situation and, working from there, to develop skills appropriate to it. As progress is made through the college more is expected of the individuals and usually sufficient trust has been built up so that they feel free enough to ask for help or advice. In the first three years students would be encouraged in their summer

pastoral work to get into areas that they have not been in before, so that they have some idea of the lot of humankind whom they will be serving in the future. It is interesting to see how those who take up the challenge to do something more difficult have a better idea in the long run of what to expect of and from people than those who choose in these earlier years to help in the parish where they feel safe and where their horizons are not broadened to the same extent. In the last three years parish placements are made by the diocese from which they come and pastoral work within the college would be in parishes around the Hexham and Newcastle diocese. There is a difference of opinion as to whether the parish experience is left too late but for the most part this is a more satisfactory arrangement than putting in parish experience and confirming unhelpful clerical attitudes. It meets the need both of those students who will persevere to ordination while providing those who leave with some skills in ministry in its broadest sense.

There are other factors which influence formation; what might be seen as the mute factors. 1) The place where this formation takes place; in this case in a very large building in the middle of nowhere with a bus service that runs every two hours. 2) The seclusion from the everyday life of people and the provision for all needs on the spot; meals, amenities and liturgy are maybe good for training but are less acceptable in terms of formation. 3) The all-male nature of the student body with the same objectives in view builds its own inevitable pressure to ask to go through to the next ministry with your year—not to do so is seen in terms of failure rather than allowing growth and readiness to be the basis for going forward. 4) The high proportion of priest professors to lay professors and the presence of only three women on the teaching staff inevitably influence those who came to explore their vocation. The background from which the students come has to be taken into consideration: where once it could be presumed that they would be from good, stable, catholic families, this is no longer the norm and brings with it attendant personal difficulties that sometimes require more help than the seminary can offer. The possibility that such help is available outside the seminary sometimes seems to be the last option rather than a matter of course. In this way the modelling of interprofessional backup that a student would be encouraged to build up in pastoral situations is found wanting in the place of formation—the laity are still in their corralls.

The drop in the number of candidates coming forward to priesthood adds another pressure on bishops who are aware that they will not have enough priests to maintain the *status quo* in parishes. It may perhaps account for the advice offered by selection

conferences not being taken. This results in much time having to be spent on helping unsuitable students to leave which could be more valuably spent on helping suitable students to a better understanding of themselves and the integration of their lives. The recommendations by the Church that psychological screening should be part of the assessment procedure of candidates to the priesthood, if implemented, would give a base to the formation process.

Another mute factor but one which speaks loudly to the hierarchical model of the Church is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the composition of the governing body of the seminary which comprises sixteen bishops. Whilst respecting that it is the bishop who has the responsibility for accepting and ordaining men to priesthood one is left wondering at the narrowness of outlook that this would seem to portray—have the laity nothing to say about the training process of those who are to be ordained?

When all this is said, there are two signs of hope and a final question to ask.

The first sign of hope is the way that some students take the whole formation programme seriously. They will find a support system in their future ministry and continue to grow as men and as priests throughout their lives.

The second sign of hope is the way in which the laity are beginning to be able to take responsibility both for themselves and for their communities through programmes like RCIA and other renewal schemes. This model of discovering role and function together with others may eventually influence training and formation in the seminary. The way that authority and service are being untangled in the local Church may help those associated with seminary formation to do the same.

The question is really a call for imaginative ways to enable teaching staffs to find a balance between training and formation in the very limited context of a seminary. There is so much working against them, yet at present they have the initial responsibility in forming compassionate and courageous priestly ministers for the twenty-first century.

NOTES

¹ For further reflection on the place of women in ministry cf E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In memory of her*. (London 1983).

² Vatican II, *Optatum totius*, Introduction.

³ *The Cherwell report*, pp 11-24.

⁴ Cns 240 and 244.