

# CANDIDATES FOR MINISTRY

By JOHN LOWE

**H**AD THIS ARTICLE been written just a few years ago its title would have been 'Candidates for the priesthood' and, to be honest, that would have been a more accurate indication of the content of what follows. However, the Church has come to realize that it is essential to see the ordained ministry in the context of all forms of ministry and I will try to share in this broader vision towards the end of the article. This is a comparatively new way of looking at ministry (apart from the early centuries of the Church!) and the bulk of our experience of ministry has concerned the priesthood. Accordingly, the editors asked me to concentrate on candidates for the ordained ministry and this is certainly where my own experience lies.

## *What are the candidates like?*

It might seem an easy task to describe a candidate for the roman catholic priesthood. After all, they are all male, unmarried, reasonably intelligent and committed Catholics with a single vocation in mind. Or are they? In the good old days before the sixties, before the world began to swing and Pope John opened the Church's windows to the fresh air of Vatican II, it would indeed have been possible to give an emphatic and affirmative answer to the question, but things are no longer so simple.

In my experience the candidates have all been male, unmarried Catholics, but their degree of intelligence and even commitment has varied considerably and their views of the priestly vocation have been legion. Extreme examples prove nothing, but I have met a candidate who was convinced he would have to study geography in the seminary so that he would be able to find his way round the parish when visiting the people. At the other extreme, one candidate's parish priest included in his reference an indication that he would be lost if he were to be deprived of the assistance of his outstanding parishioner.

Some are hindered by dyslexia and some have gained first class degrees; some have been unemployed and others have managed companies; many are charismatics but Opus Dei has occasional representatives; most are cradle Catholics but some are very recent

converts; large numbers have barely heard of Vatican II but quite a few were involved in the National Pastoral Congress and the Pope's visit. There are teachers, nurses, social workers, policemen, chefs, solicitors and civil servants, to name but a few. Less than half of all human life is there, but it still contains a bewildering variety.

The most noticeable change since the mid-1970s has been the marked increase in the number of those who have had some experience of further education and/or work (or unemployment). This has enormously enriched the seminary community and made the task of teaching within it much more challenging and stimulating. Incidentally, the current appalling level of unemployment does not seem to have led to a general increase in the number of candidates, at least in my experience in the north of England (and the impact of unemployment is hardly likely to be more marked in the south), though a few individuals have undoubtedly been affected by their own experience of being unemployed.

So far this article has been largely impressionistic and based on my experience at Ushaw. It might be helpful to conclude this section with some recent national statistics concerning those starting their course of preparation for the diocesan priesthood.

| Year            | 1983 | 1984 | 1985 |
|-----------------|------|------|------|
| Total entrants  | 127  | 137  | 156  |
| Age at entry:   |      |      |      |
| 17-19           | 32   | 38   | 25   |
| 20-22           | 36   | 25   | 42   |
| 23-25           | 22   | 31   | 21   |
| 26-30           | 16   | 17   | 32   |
| 30 +            | 21   | 26   | 36   |
| Qualifications: |      |      |      |
| None            | 1    | 0    | 6    |
| CSE             | 3    | 1    | 2    |
| O Level         | 28   | 26   | 24   |
| A Level         | 52   | 52   | 54   |
| Graduate        | 24   | 39   | 44   |
| Post-graduate   | 3    | 3    | 9    |
| Professional    | 16   | 16   | 17   |

While it is dangerous to generalize on the basis of such small numbers, these figures confirm my own experience that there is an increasing proportion of candidates who have had significant

periods of further education and/or employment between school and seminary.

A final comment concerns the range of academic backgrounds. It is important to recognize that intelligence is a broader capacity than that measured by IQ tests and formal examinations. It is more a matter of being able to adapt constructively to one's circumstances and to the demands they make. A lack of formal qualifications is thus not an automatic barrier to acceptance by a diocese. Seminary courses tend to start at around GCE A Level standard and this can serve as a guide when assessing a candidate's potential, but many students without A Levels do well in the residential setting of the seminary where tutorial help is readily available and the students' vocational commitment increases their motivation.

*How are the candidates selected?*

This growing diversity in the range of candidates coming forward to prepare for ordination has been matched by greater attempts at careful selection. Candidates for the diocesan priesthood are selected by the bishops, usually acting upon the advice of a Vocations Board. They are increasingly assisted by reports which have been furnished as a result of a preliminary vetting procedure, a Selection Advisory Conference. During the late 1960s and early 1970s there was growing concern about the effectiveness of the existing methods of selection. The seminary rectors and staffs and the Commission for Priestly Formation were all keen to see an improvement. The first Selection Advisory Conferences were held at Womersley in the early 1970s and the pattern established there has served as a model for the ones which are now held at all the seminaries in England.

What the selection panels are looking for are indications that candidates are positively choosing the priesthood rather than avoiding something else, and that they have the capacity to develop their talents and personality in a healthy manner during their seminary training. They are looking for the potential to benefit from a relatively long period of formation rather than for ready-made suitability for ordination. This seems to be one significant difference between the catholic and the anglican approach to accepting candidates. The Anglicans have a shorter course and they look for candidates who are already considered nearly ready for ordination. Their courses are more densely packed and might be viewed in terms of training rather than formation. It is interesting that a much higher proportion of their candidates are ordained, though the absence of the requirement of celibacy is surely a factor in this. While considerable care is taken when

selecting candidates for the catholic priesthood to assess the maturity of their attitude towards celibacy, it is obviously impossible for them all, particularly the younger ones, to have reached a settled commitment and this inevitably introduces a reason for stopping short of ordination which does not apply in the Anglican Church.

Emotional maturity is a most difficult area to assess, but most of the difficulties experienced by seminarians or priests involve an inability to handle emotional situations constructively in keeping with proclaimed values. Some assessment of the candidate's emotional condition can be made by observing his behaviour during the Selection Advisory Conference, hearing about his relationships with his family and friends, discussing his attitude to celibacy, and learning about his interests and leisure activities. However, because of the delicacy and importance of this area, it is also essential that candidates should be assessed psychologically through clinical interviews and projective testing. This should be done separately from the Selection Advisory Conference and extensive use is already made of this form of assessment. However, it is not used as much in the north as in the south of England, despite the stated policy of both seminary rectors and the hierarchy that it should be a normal component of the selection procedure.

Psychological assessment should not be seen solely in terms of 'screening out unsuitables'; it has much to contribute to establishing the most fruitful ways of meeting the candidate's needs and developing his potential. Obtaining a picture of how a candidate's religious and personal ideals, actual attitudes and behaviours, underlying motivations and needs are all interrelated at the time of entry to the seminary will give those responsible for his formation a good indication of his strengths and weaknesses. It will thus highlight the areas in which he needs to grow, what kinds of pastoral experience would be useful for him, what kinds of relationships would be helpful or harmful to him, what areas of conflict exist on a conscious or unconscious level, how he tries to cope with tensions, and so on. All of this provides useful information so that the time and resources spent on his formation can be more specific and effective.

#### *The christian vocation to ministry*

So far the focus of this article has been on priests and the time has now come to broaden our viewpoint as we look towards a future Church in which priests will be numerically less significant and theologically less predominant. The numerical facts are well known and it is neither possible nor necessary within the scope of

this article to deal with the theology of the Church which lies behind my assertion. It seems safe to say that if the Church is even to maintain its present level of activity, let alone renew itself and spread the gospel more widely, it will depend on an increasing degree of involvement by lay ministers. Their vocation will be to offer some form of service which the local community of the Church recognizes and supports. A programme of formation should be one of the principal ways in which they are supported. This whole area of lay ministry is a major topic which I cannot possibly tackle here, but I offer two concluding reflections which have a direct bearing on the business of priestly formation.

My first reflection is quite simply that a very large proportion of those who are accepted as candidates for ordination do not complete the course. At Ushaw only around forty per cent of students who start the course are eventually ordained; I have no reason to suppose the figure is dramatically different elsewhere. Most of the sixty per cent who remain as lay Christians experience at least a couple of years of the seminary course. Here is a marvellous opportunity to provide a programme of formation which could contribute significantly to the development of committed lay ministers. My second reflection is much more far-reaching. Many lay people are already involved in the work of preparing men for ordination, particularly the candidates' own families and friends and those who assist the students in their pastoral placements. However, there is much more scope for such involvement within the seminaries, including membership of the governing bodies. Even more radically, lay ministers should share programmes of formation with those who are to become ordained ministers so that seminaries become centres for ministerial formation in the broadest sense of that term. This is already the pattern to some extent in anglican theological colleges where deaconesses and lay readers are admitted alongside the ordinands.

How this might work on a significant scale in the Catholic Church remains to be seen, but it seems to me to be the way forward which must be explored and then followed. The character of seminaries would obviously have to undergo drastic change. Much more of the programme would certainly have to take place outside them and they would probably be used to offer blocks of residential work and to act as resource centres for the whole programme. Much has changed in my sixteen years at Ushaw, but much more needs to change in the similar period which remains before the end of the century. Someone writing an article then on 'Candidates for Ministry' will have a very different story to tell, I hope.