



Post-Reformation Priesthood in England: Taking the Past into the Future

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Abstract

This paper explores ways in which the identity of the secular priesthood in England and Wales has been shaped by its particular historical experience. Five themes are proposed: the creation of the concept of mission in the post-Reformation world; the combination of isolation and independence that became characteristic of recusant priests; the emergence of new ways of relating to church structures that priests were forced to find; the distinctive fraternal identity that was nurtured in a variety of ways throughout the penal times and the period of the Catholic Revival; the revolutions in relationships with the laity. These themes are pursued through the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries when the meaning and experience of them changed as the emphasis shifted to buildings and organisations. The twentieth century experience of priesthood in a parish context created possibilities for expansion, which masked issues and problems already rising to the surface. Both the challenges and the opportunities of the recusant way of life became stifled. A fixed model of the church made change difficult to contemplate. The loss of an historically shaped sense of priestly identity is explored as part of the explanation for the contemporary loss of confidence and direction within a shrinking presbyterate.

Keywords

Priesthood, identity, history, mission, parish

Every local church is shaped by its tradition, by its understanding of the history of the people and priests who constitute it. The secular or diocesan priest in particular draws his individual and communal identity from the tradition and history of a diocese and of the local church. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the document from the 1992 synod on the priesthood, asserts that priesthood finds its identity in “the specific historical and contextual conditions of a particular church”. This is put more directly in the 1994 *Directory on the Life and*

Ministry of Priests, which insists that every priest is a member of a specific presbyterate, and that there are “no theological foundations” for the idea of a universal priesthood.¹

My own unusual career path has enabled me to combine the academic study of English Catholic history and the formation of priests. Working in a seminary has given me a unique insight into the relationship between the history of Catholicism in this country and the formation and life of its priests, both past and present. It has brought me to reflect on ways in which contemporary priestly identity has been shaped by the unique historical context of the Catholic Church in England and Wales since the Reformation. This project is both an historical exploration, and an attempt to engage contemporary secular priests in reflection on ways in which they have been shaped by their history, and how that reflection might be harnessed to shape the future. There are intriguing questions, and possibly some answers, to be found in exploring priestly identity that has been shaped by the post-Reformation struggle to sustain and nurture faith and to recreate structures, institutions and buildings.

This discussion has its focus, inevitably, on the Church in England and Wales; the point is that the history of the Catholic Church in Scotland and Ireland are unique in themselves and have had a different and distinctive impact. My exploration is also specific to the secular or diocesan priesthood; its identity is uniquely linked to the life of a diocese and the structures of episcopal authority in ways that the priesthood of religious orders is not. Whilst members of religious orders have played a significant role in post-Reformation Catholic life in this country, their relationship with its communities and its structures is different. Their loyalties lie elsewhere and their spirituality, their priorities and their ways of life are shaped by the charism of their founder, rather than being rooted in the soil of the local church. Similar points can be made about the identity of former Anglican clergy who have entered the Catholic presbyterate and the growing number of overseas priests entering ministry in this country.

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A late medieval English parish priest, looking from his church porch across his town or village, somewhere around 1500, knew where and what he was. He stood in a long tradition of mainly parochial clergy, whose role at the centre of society had developed across Catholic Europe in the medieval period. His position within the community was secure, even though it could be, at times, fractious. The ties between the people of the parish and the resident priest were largely

¹ *Directory on the Life and Ministry of Priests*, The Holy See, 1994, p. 25.

feudal, and subject to social pressures, but within this tight social network, a distinctive and authoritative clerical caste had emerged. This was not a medieval idyll, but it gave clergy a high degree of status and certainty.

The parish priest, who occupied a secure place at the spiritual, social, economic and physical hub of pre-Reformation English life, was transformed within two generations into a homeless missionary, outlawed, isolated and denied a roof over his head and a position in society, if he chose not to conform to the new establishment. Nothing before or since compares with that cataclysm in the life of the priest. His purpose, his training, his relationships with fellow clergy and laity, the authority exercised by him and over him, his legal and political position and his public role in society were all radically and permanently wrenched apart. This was not a single, dramatic transformation, but a process that continued well beyond the sixteenth century, as the English Catholic priesthood constantly readjusted to changing religious, social and political conditions.

Secular Priests in England and Wales from the 1560s onwards had to evolve new ways of life, different forms of leadership, alternative ways of relating to the ecclesial structures of the Church and responses to a variety of dynamics within the Catholic community and wider society. They had to become missionaries, and develop a role never before imagined. The English priest after the Reformation was a very distant heir to his medieval forebears, and early tensions were manifest in the painful recognition of that reality. The contrast between the position of a missionary at home, but in a hostile land, and the pre-Reformation parochial clergy was dispiriting. Some never emerged from nostalgia for the old ways, and the hope of a Catholic monarch to return England to the shelter of the Church. The mission launched from the English College in Douai in 1568 was initially seen as an emergency measure until a Catholic monarch could be restored in England, but there were those who frowned on Douai and on the new-fangled missionary notion, even as a short-term expedient.

The vocabulary of mission entered the language of priestly identity. In the clash of cultures between the newly secure Elizabethan establishment and Catholic determination to survive, the task of the exiles was mission. Every priest ordained in one of the overseas colleges that grew from Douai, took what became known as the missionary oath, promising to serve the Catholic community in England, if necessary at the cost of his life.² The concept of mission came to underpin English priestly identity, but it also contained issues about organisation, leadership, authority, independence, relationships with

² For the text of the oath, see Michael E Williams, *The Venerable English College, Rome: a History*, Gracewing, Leominster, 2nd edition, 2008, p. 289.

laity and fellow priests, buildings, and the perennial question of the number and distribution of priests. What lies at its heart, which must speak to the present crisis in priesthood, is that the generation of English and Welsh Catholics at the end of the sixteenth century had no choice but to find ways of doing things differently.

The capacity of the men, called ‘seminary priests’ by the hostile Elizabethan government, to organize themselves into an effective missionary body was almost non-existent. Bitter and prolonged disputes broke out before the last of Mary I’s priests were cold in their graves in the last decades of the sixteenth century. The seminary priests, who came from the overseas colleges, found themselves forced to consider who and what they were in missionary England. They found it easier to be clear about what they were not, which was pseudo-Jesuits.

Nor were they merely traditionalists, harking back to the medieval past. Education and training in continental Europe brought them into contact with Tridentine reformers, enabling them especially to absorb something of Charles Borromeo’s model of the church. The Borromeo ideal offered an alternative version of mission from that of the Jesuits, one which was arguably more suited to the secular clergy. Yet it did not take root to the same extent as the Ignatian model, largely because of the dominant Jesuit influence in the refugee seminaries.

The identity of English priests was, for generations, shaped by the common experience and common memory of being outlaws and refugees in their own country. It was rare for a secular priest to have a settled home and church from which to minister to an identifiable group of people. Equally unknown was any sense of belonging to the structures and culture of a society, in which the Church of England gradually became embedded as the national Church. The political animus associated with both Catholicism and continental power meant that the priest was the most obvious representative of what the majority population regarded as alien and untrustworthy.

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The old ways were not an option. Everything familiar had been ripped out of the hands of priests and laity, and there were no guidelines for the new ways. The future was uncertain and the leadership taken up by the priests themselves was crucial in ensuring some form of continuity of faith and practice. Nobody knew what that would look like as the dream of a restoration of universal Catholicism faded. The building of a minority Catholic community led almost to a reinvention of the secular clergy for a new purpose. Five distinctive characteristics emerged, which were often in tension or even contradiction with each other. They shaped a new priestly identity and are still evident today.

First, the concept of mission took on a particular meaning in England and Wales. A rhetoric of missionary fervour built up courage, but there was a difference between the rhetoric and the reality of priestly life. William Allen, the *de facto* leader of the Catholic community, came to recognise that the objective of the English mission had to be more pastoral than evangelical, and drew a distinction between conversion from outright Protestantism and reconciliation of fearful or timid Catholics. What was vital and, even more importantly, achievable was the rescue of waverers. The challenge lay in stiffening the resolve of the remaining Catholics who were under religious, social and economic pressure.

Reaching those who might be susceptible, rather than confronting outright opponents, was likely to be more fruitful and less dangerous. The newly ordained were specifically directed to rally existing pockets of Catholicism and transform careless Catholics into conscientious and courageous witnesses. Allen was well aware that too rigid an approach would drive people away and he urged priests to be gentle and balanced in their approach, while maintaining Church discipline. Successful reclamation called for a “subtle and supple approach”.³ The mission was based on realism and pragmatism, which came to be deeply characteristic of the forms of English Catholicism that emerged in later generations, and which have much to offer today.

Second, most post-Reformation priests were isolated from each other and from the small number of bishops, and it is worth reflecting on the, largely unrecorded, experience of the individual priest. The isolation and loneliness in which most of them lived was considerable, and its human cost incalculable. It became, necessarily, accompanied by habits of independent, self-determined action, which became automatic. Priests also had to find the means to care for themselves, to supply their own food, drink, clothing, and personal health and well-being. This formative experience lasted through the generations, and became part of the way in which secular priests saw themselves. It became institutionalised to an unhealthy degree and was long regarded as the proper pattern of clerical life. It remains in the DNA of secular priests to this day.

Third, priests had to evolve new ways of life, different forms of leadership and alternative ways of relating to the structures of the Church. They had to respond to different dynamics within the Catholic community. The direction and momentum of that response has without fail been local, stimulated by immediate conditions, not in response to a master plan for a vicariate, diocese or

³ Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England*, Boydell, Bury St Edmunds, 1993, p. 63.

national Church. It embedded within the English priesthood a distinctive culture of localism, pragmatism and individual enterprise. This was reflected anew in the boom of church building and parish creation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where local territory was fiercely defended. A legacy of pain and grief has been left to those who find, in our own day, that their territory is being destroyed.

A fourth element in the emergence of a new priestly identity was a determination on the part of priests to create a distinct sense of themselves as a body or fraternity of missionary clergy. It weaves through the post-Reformation centuries, from the first generation of seminary priests, who sought to assert themselves in the face of government hostility, and in the uncomfortable context of a mission shared with religious orders and, increasingly, influential wealthy laity. It became important for secular priests to stick together. Newman picked up this theme, when, in 1873, he warned seminarians that in the approaching time of “darkness different in kind from any that has been before it”, the only protection was a strong body of priests who had a solid spiritual and theological formation in the seminary, and who were united in fraternity with their bishop and with each other.⁴ Tony Philpot, a century later, was convinced that fraternity between priests was a sacramental duty and a source of grace.⁵ He insisted, with his disarming simplicity, that

“Fraternity” isn’t a mysterious code word which conveys a message to the uninitiated. We are not freemasons. It means no more, no less, than being friends. How odd it is that in the Church we can be so many other things. Rulers, servants, teachers, pupils, apprentices, experts, preachers – and in all these ways we enter into relationship with one another. But the most precious of all relationships is friendship; inside it, you can speak the truth to one another with love. It is a quality that should infect all our dealings.⁶

Yet, the tension between independence and fraternity remains one of the most complex in the modern priesthood.

Finally, and perhaps most relevant to our own day, the enforced homelessness of priests and the fragmented nature of Catholic congregations meant that the laity became crucial in the emergence of independent local religious activity and commitment. The households of the gentry and aristocracy offered protection for the priest and for those in need of his ministry. They also preserved the faith of the social, political and economic leaders who had remained Catholic, and

⁴ John Henry Newman, “The Infidelity of the Future” in C Stephen Dessain (ed), *Catholic Sermons of Cardinal Newman*, Burns Oates, London, 1957, pp. 117-34.

⁵ Tony Philpot, *Brothers in Christ: a call to Fraternity in the Diocesan Priesthood*, Kevin Mayhew, Suffolk, 1991, p. 12.

⁶ Philpot, *Brothers in Christ*, p. 13.

who, therefore, had the potential to secure the future. Land, wealth and political power put them in a position, when the time was ripe, to achieve political freedom and toleration. If they were lost, then the thinly spread mission would be even riskier, serving only those with little capacity to influence their own future or that of the wider community.

The new creation that arose was a remarkable network of association and mutual reliance between the seminary priests and the laity, and not only the wealthy and powerful. It rebuilt Catholic life on the ancient foundations of interdependence and intimacy. As in medieval society, the laity held the purse strings, while recognising their need of the priests' sacramental ministry, but Recusant Catholicism built different patterns of behaviour between priests and laity. The new dimension was the absence of ecclesiastical structures and clerical leadership, combined with the dangerous legal position of priests. Leadership in a hostile environment had to depend on informal networks of interdependence.

This pragmatism formed part of the framework of a new kind of relationship between clergy and laity. The laity, at all levels of society, gradually developed a form of Catholic life that was often more self-reliant and domestic than communal, and the role of the priests adapted accordingly. Gatherings for Mass and the sacraments were rare and secret, with small numbers in attendance and little in the way of solemnity, so domestic piety became the norm. The missionary rhetoric of the seminary priests and the domestic scale of the mission produced a renewal of personal devotional and spiritual life, but in different forms. The path from medieval religious culture to denominational Catholicism created an intimacy and sense of a shared purpose, as well as endless disagreement, between the priests and the laity who supported and enabled them. The scale of Catholic life in its new missionary form meant that local knowledge, family networks, strong local presence and, above all, personal commitment were vital.

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For generations, priests and laity yearned for the rebuilding of ecclesial and physical structures; they wanted to restore public worship in cathedrals and churches, staffed by resident bishops and priests. Minority status became the pragmatic reality, but the missionary ideal was never lost. It struck deep roots in the English secular priesthood and, in the nineteenth-century, the lists of secular priests in the newly published Catholic Directories were headed "Missionary Priests". Cardinal Manning in *The Eternal Priesthood*, urged priests to remember that they were ordained "on the title of mission" and to renew their missionary oath on the anniversary on which they took

it.⁷ Ullathorne, first Bishop of Birmingham, told his diocesan synod in 1853 that unless a priest “make himself into a sacrifice, as an apostle would, for the souls of his brethren, he may be a priest, but he is unworthy to call himself a missionary”. This gave Cardinal Vincent Nichols his title for a volume of homilies published in 2007.⁸

After 1850, priests in England and Wales began to carve out a stronger sense of identity, arguably more clerical than priestly. Until 1918, the priests remained missionary rectors, not parish priests, but they began to recapture aspects of the settled parochial pattern of Catholic life. This meant that a different sort of priest began to emerge, with an alternative set of qualities and skills. Those “Missionary Priests” that were listed in the Catholic Directories became the key to the revival of institutional Catholic life, building churches, supporting convents, organising and overseeing schools and charities. The priest as builder, fundraiser and entrepreneur was born in the second-half of the nineteenth-century. Less dependent on the largesse of the wealthy, he called upon smaller contributions from a growing urban population, raising money wherever and however he could. A new Catholic culture was emerging in England, in which the priests played an increasingly dominant role.

Finally, for the first time since the Reformation, Catholic priests in England achieved their ambition of being regarded, by themselves and by the laity, as a distinctive body of men, set aside for a particular service, with the training and authority required to fulfil it. As parishes eventually became a reality, the priests moved to the centre of that expression of Catholic life. Priests were also visible in larger numbers, with the traditions and lifestyle of seminaries at home and abroad shaping their identity. The larger and more organized seminaries, on native soil and in closer contact with the local Church and the dioceses in which the priests would serve, inculcated a strong sense of clerical esprit de corps. This was enhanced by the gradual eradication of shared lay and clerical education and development of separate senior and junior seminaries. The seminary experience ensured the development of a very particular sense of identity and a network within the priesthood.

Despite this, none of the standard works that reflect the understanding of priesthood and seminary formation in England between the 1860s and the 1960s emphasised the value of fraternal support and shared activity among priests. The importance of any intentional fraternal support was largely ignored in Manning’s *Eternal Priesthood* (1883), in Bernard Ward’s *The Priestly Vocation* (1918), in William Godfrey’s *The Young Apostle* (1924) and in Ronald Knox’s

⁷ Henry Edward Manning, *The Eternal Priesthood*, London, 1883, p. 269.

⁸ Vincent Nichols, *Missioners: Priest and People Today*, Alive Publications, Stoke on Trent, 2007.

retreat conferences published in 1958 as *The Priestly Life*. It was, apparently, taken for granted that the fraternity of priests would be an automatic result of seminary formation. The problem was that the growing emphasis in seminary on ‘detachment’ began to separate priests from the lives of the people they served and, increasingly, from each other.

There was, however, an instinct to professionalize the priesthood and make provision for individual professional development. One result of this was the founding of *The Clergy Review* in 1931, which continues in its third incarnation as *The Pastoral Review*. The editorial board, chaired by Archbishop Downey of Liverpool, consisted of the rectors of all the English seminaries, and the editors, Edward Myers, and Thomas Flynn, were both former rectors. Setting out the purpose of the journal in their first editorial, they declared, “we are, in the first instance, seminary priests writing for seminary priests”. Its content was serious and scholarly, containing substantial essays and articles on topics of interest, as well as book reviews, Roman documents, surveys of recent research, questions and answers, and notes for preachers. The professional priest now had his *vade mecum*, which was in clear continuity with the rigidities and limitations of the seminary, but it was, at least, an attempt to link priests together, not only in common professional preoccupations, but also with a sense of shared identity.

The institutional and numerical crises of English Catholicism in the second-half of the twentieth century are well charted. Less fully explored is what happened to those “missionary priests” who had become entrepreneurs and professional specialists in pastoral leadership of a particular kind, when tight Catholic parish identities started to disperse and disintegrate. The assumptions that Manning, Ward and Godfrey had made about priesthood and seminaries were no longer watertight. The Church within and beyond England and Wales, was asking itself questions about the priesthood and about the effectiveness of vocational discernment and seminary formation long before the Second Vatican Council.

A report drawn up in England and Wales for a European conference on priestly vocations in 1958 is revealing. It described, historically, a change in the social status of secular priests from around 1860. The sons of the gentry, it suggested, were more inclined to attend schools run by the Jesuits and Benedictines, who were more likely, therefore, to benefit from any vocations. Secular clergy vocations came mainly from “good Catholic lower class families”, and a smaller number from the business and professional classes. The rise of grammar schools, the report suggested, meant that academically bright boys who might previously have gone to seminary now remained at school until sixteen or eighteen, “and it is a question, difficult to answer, whether a number of such boys do not lose their vocation in such

surroundings”. Nevertheless, it was admitted that the new Catholic grammar schools could also be a fruitful source of vocations, and that the majority of boys entering seminary from grammar school appeared to persevere to ordination.⁹

The report asserted that, in the late 1950s, the picture for the secular priesthood in England and Wales was “far from bright”. The large increase in the number of priests, as a result of Irish recruitment, had masked the fact that the number of ordinations in England and Wales had dropped from 153 in 1937 to 147 in 1956, and the future prospect was not good. In 1958, a total of 869 seminarians suggested an average number of ordinations per year of 145. In England there was one priest for every 809 Catholics, and this was probably based on an underestimate of population. The warning was stark: “more priests are needed”. Of the 3,590 secular priests at the time of the report, many were from Ireland, and the report questioned how long the supply would continue. England, the report compilers bluntly stated, should provide her own priests; more native priests were needed “and needed quickly”.¹⁰

Priests had been formed in a rigid seminary model that inculcated a sense of individual authority and separation from the laity, from wider society and often from each other, leaving behind older networks of interdependence. This was exacerbated by the results of the massive church-building programme, which enabled and encouraged the priest to be, literally, walled into his separate “clerical” space in the sacristy and presbytery. The newly built churches, and particularly the presbyteries, became different and privileged spaces, part of the mystique increasingly associated with priesthood. The overall effect was to isolate priests and to encourage an unhealthy mentality of a “clerical club”. This was not the fraternity their predecessors had sought. The homeless missionary had become the authoritarian leader, and exchanged one form of isolation for another. Priestly identity was difficult even to discuss.

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Yet, the sense of crisis in the present generation is coloured by a received view that the Church of the first half of the twentieth century was the perfect society, on which the optimism and promise of the 1960s was supposed to build. Somehow it all went wrong (blame who you like), and English Catholicism entered a long dark tunnel of decline. This is, quite simply, a false understanding. The

⁹ Archivum Venerabilis Collegii Anglorum de Urbe (AVCAU), Scr. 87/6, C Tindall, A Report drawn up for the 1958 conference on priestly vocations in Vienna, 13 November 1958.

¹⁰ AVCAU, Scr. 87/6.

first half of the twentieth century created a mind-set that enabled the Catholic Church in England and Wales to believe that it had got things right. It had established a perfect, unchanging pattern of clerical life and an unstoppable process of physical and numerical growth. A triumphalist view of history, based on the growing numbers of churches, schools, sacraments celebrated, and converts received etc., convinced English Catholics that continued expansion was possible and achievable without much strategic thought or effort. Numbers were the mark of the “success” of the mission. When this apparently unchanging pattern proved not to be so robust, many people preferred not to acknowledge it. Yet our generation still lives with the remnants of the idea that this perfect society existed, but that it fragmented with alarming rapidity in the late twentieth century, leaving a mood of uncertainty and loss of morale. What this has engendered is a nostalgia for something that never actually existed, based on a false understanding of history and a disinclination to grasp the issues of the day rather than those of yesterday.

The speed and complexity of social change, the immediacy of technology, and the fragmentation of traditional communities have, for many people, severed a sense of living connection with the past. This leads either to what Philip Sheldrake has described as “a weariness with history and the notion of being involved in a tradition or stream of continuities throughout time” or to a fearful and ill-informed retreat into an imagined past of a mythical “golden age”.¹¹ The living connection with the past remains important to the life of the Church. Its history embodies the faith we proclaim, but it becomes an embarrassment when we fail to integrate history into the present and the future.

To a considerable extent, Catholicism in England and Wales has been dislocated from its history by that embarrassment in the past couple of generations. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a measure of discomfort about the canonization of the Forty English Martyrs of the Reformation. For many Catholics, as Alana Harris has suggested, the sensitivities were born less out of ecumenical awareness than from a distaste for what seemed to be a whiff of nostalgia for an older, more defensive Church. This “did not wholly resonate with a 1970s English Catholicism that was ethnically mixed, ecumenically engaged, and focussed on social activism”.¹² That embarrassment embedded itself in the next generation of teachers and priests, for whom the past was monolithic and inhibiting. History struggled to find a place in seminary formation, and in Catholic schools the history

¹¹ Philip Sheldrake, *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology and Social Practice*, Paulist Press, New York, 2010, p. 24.

¹² Alana Harris, *Faith in the Family: a lived religious history of English Catholicism 1945-82*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 2013, p. 248.

of English Catholicism was rarely taught, creating a generation of Catholics who were largely convinced that there was nothing to be gained from reflection on the history of the local church.

This is discussed in Desmond Ryan's dismissal, in the 1990s, of history as a legacy to be overcome.¹³ Ryan glanced at the "legacy" of history, which he saw as wholly negative. His study, based on the Archdiocese of Birmingham, reflected on the damaging influence of perpetuated a view that there was an inherited institutional problem, which was an unchanging monolithic Church, reflecting an immature attachment to the past, incapable of adaptation. The danger of this was that it made history an enemy, ironically just at the moment when a new generation of mainly Catholic academic historians were exposing the history of Catholicism in England and Wales to the rigour of professional academic research and intellectual enquiry. Our generation were able to demonstrate that a rigorous grasp of the history of English Catholicism can be instrumental, not only changed the relationship between the Church and the academy, but could also be instrumental in strengthening what Ryan described as "a weakened sense of a distinctive community".¹⁴

The Church that had been created between roughly 1850 and 1950 was, it seems, either the perfect model now damaged beyond recognition, or the stifling trap from which an escape was necessary. The cultural, social and religious transformation under way in our own time is as profound and far reaching as that of the Reformation. Fresh consideration of the changing nature of Catholic communities is needed, and of parishes in the past and present, in order to build for the future. Our history, properly understood, tells us that managed decline is not the only option.

Priests are confronted with unthinkable change in the nature of the communities they lead, together with the possibilities of a new and radically different future. More worryingly, they are faced with the prospect of trying to carry on as they are. As much as at any point in the last four to five hundred years, courageous and imaginative leadership by a missionary secular priesthood is needed. A reappraisal of traditional ways must be open to the possibilities of real change in our own time. I am increasingly convinced that we stand in need of recovering an historically informed priestly identity, in order to take the Church in this country into a new future. Without a serious awareness of its historical rootedness, the Church of the present and future face the danger of becoming what Philip Sheldrake has called "a memory-less culture without a sense of historical identity".¹⁵

¹³ Desmond Ryan, *The Catholic Parish: Institutional Discipline, Tribal Identity and Religious Development in the English Church*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1996, p. 199.

¹⁴ Ryan, *ibid.*, p. 304.

¹⁵ Sheldrake, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

Facing and embracing change, trusting in God's providence, clearing pathways, and offering opportunities to look afresh at the world around and discern a new relationship with it can be a powerful means of renewal. Care and attentiveness is needed over what is retained, what can be salvaged, and what should be consigned to the past. The preservation of tradition is different from holding onto what is merely habitual and familiar. In defining the future, as part of the process of evolving a new vision and creating a new order, certainties are shaken. During the present times of transition for the priesthood, the past can illuminate the present; it can help to identify and prepare for the transitions of our own day. History can be harnessed to power renewal.

My experience of working closely alongside priests tells me that there is readiness within the presbyterate to face the future and to address the present situation thoughtfully and creatively. Above all, priests wish to renew the spirit and identity of the priesthood and often willing to do things differently. They are open to change but are not sure in which direction. Priests sorely need to be part of the evolution and expression of a fresh vision of renewed priestly identity and a renewed Church. Priests now need the inspiration to be reaffirmed in their courage, perseverance and commitment, and the opportunity to evaluate and analyse the present, and participate in real change.

At a conference for the priests of the Archdiocese of Birmingham a year ago, Cardinal Vincent Nichols gave the keynote talk, in which he quoted Pope Francis addressing volunteers at World Youth Day in Krakow:

Do you want to be the hope for the future or not? There are two conditions. The first condition is to remember. Trying to understand where you come from: the memory of your people, your family, your whole history. Memory of the path you have taken, memory of everything you have received from those who have gone before you. A young person who cannot remember is no hope for the future. Is that clear? So how do you go about remembering? First, talk to your grandparents. Because if you want to be hope for the future, you have to receive the torch from your grandfather and your grandmother, or if they are already in heaven, talk with the elderly. Ask them. They are the wisdom of a people. Second condition. If you are to be hope for the future and have memory of the past, then what about the present? What must you do in the present? Have courage, be strong, don't be afraid. Is all this clear? Good.

The cardinal went on to pose a similar challenge to the priests' gathering, in slightly different language. In my view, this points towards what we need to recover from our unique history and put to work for the future. Cardinal Nichols expressed it in these terms:

I believe that what is required of us today is a genuine development of the independence of action that has served the pattern of priesthood well, into a network of willing interdependencies such as we have not before fully achieved.

The immediate post-Reformation mission in England and Wales demonstrated the power of a local network of interdependence without which the local church in this country would not have survived or flourished, but today something more complex, more overt, more embracing, subject to scrutiny is required. The networks of interdependence, which may well be the key to our mission and to the witness we give, include all those we have been briefly exploring: a willing and full interdependence between priests, and with their bishops, especially in the leadership of parishes in processes of change; genuine interdependence between parishes in the use of resources and sources of inspiration; sustained and ready interdependence with the service offered by the diocese and in meeting the requirements that can only be fulfilled at that level.¹⁶

The choices made in the last four hundred years or so shaped a new set of traditions and a new identity for Catholicism in English society and particularly for the priesthood, which need to be understood and interpreted afresh. Our challenges are different and our solutions must be innovative, but neither challenges nor solutions can be separated from the history that shaped them.

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¹⁶ Available at rcdow.org.uk.