

# A CLOSER LOOK AT AUSTRALIAN PRIESTS

A Reflection on the Report "*The Profile of the Priests of Australia*" which was prepared  
by The Center for Human Development

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## INTRODUCTION

The Synod of Bishops scheduled for October 1990 in Rome is to discuss the issue of the Formation of Priests. The intervening months provide the opportunity to bring the matter before the minds of priests and the Australian Church at large for reflection and possible action.

Fortunately, a body of factual data is now available in Australia that will enable an informed assessment of some of the effects of priestly formation to date. Evaluation of this data will also facilitate intelligent and informed planning for the future.

### *Collecting the data...*

*Over the four years 1985-88, more than 1300 priests, mainly diocesan priests, from sixteen of the dioceses and archdioceses of the country answered a series of questionnaires designed to measure to some degree their personal attitudes and capabilities. The questionnaires were part of the Ministry to Priests Program mounted by the Center for Human Development.*

*Since 1989 the Australian operation of the Center for Human Development (CHD) has become independent of its American parent and adopted by the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference. Its name has been changed to the Catholic Institute for Ministry.*

The Catholic Institute for Ministry believes that human persons, and so priests too, are able to grow through life, though this does not happen inevitably. Personal maturity involves personal freedom that is felt to be life-giving for the priest himself and for those among whom he works. Real growth is not based on a drive to perfectionism but reflects rather a capacity to perceive and respond appropriately to the richness, complexity and paradoxes of life. It leads to peaceful acceptance rather than to stressful achievement.

The call to diocesan priesthood is a call to work within the presbyterate of the diocese. It requires that

priests be ready and able to work together with each other and with the laity within the diocesan vision. Such fruitful collaboration requires a degree of personal maturity.

The vocation to priesthood is a mystery. It is not a lifestyle that a man chooses for himself but one for which he is chosen by Christ, who knows him in his strengths and weaknesses.

Redemption has not removed the messiness either of the priest's own life or of society. The Spirit breathes where it wills, and the strength of Christ is at its best in weakness [2 Cor. 12:9] .

Nevertheless, the operation of grace tends to work through and build on nature; and its effectiveness in the priest's life depends to some extent on whether he lets it work and gives Christ room in his weakness.

This profile of Australian priests is based on data collected as part of the Ministry to Priests Program, and was conducted by the Center for Human Development. This program motivates and assists priests to take ownership of their own personal growth and need for mutual support, and thus to respond in some way to the observation that Paul VI made in his first encyclical letter:

*Psychological awareness and moral conscience are both called by Christ to a simultaneous maturity, as a condition for receiving the Divine Gifts of truth and of grace.*

*Ecclesiam Suam*, paragraph 21

A reading of the Australian profile may help priests to see more clearly where they can give Christ permission to be present in their lives.

## The Test of Ego Development

### THE OVERVIEW

#### Three Levels of Growth

The Test of Ego Development (TED) measures respondents according to three levels of personal growth: the conformist, the conscientious and the autonomous levels. While the methodology utilises precise categorisation, the underlying human attitudes cannot be defined so precisely. People defy strict categorisation, and the boundaries of each category should not be viewed too sharply.

Individuals, even within the same category, bring with them their own history and will remain unique.

### ***ABOUT THE TEST***

*The Test of Ego Development was completed by half of the priests in the survey group, randomly selected. The instrument is a sentence completion test with a high degree of reliability. The answers, which are evaluated personally by a trained experimental psychologist, provide insights into an individual's level of ego development. Here ego refers to the framework within which individuals organise into a meaningful pattern their experience of themselves, others and the world.*

*The test is based on the understanding that growth of the ego takes place in stages. While there are happy and well adjusted people at each level, each successive stage represents opportunities for growth in depth and maturity.*

### **The Conformist Level of Growth [4%]**

Only four percent of priests remain undisturbed at this level, where individuals find security in uniformity and loyalty. Those priests at this level have a very unnuanced way of seeing and feeling themselves and others.

### **The Conformist-Transitional Level of Growth [31%]**

The transitional stage between the Conformist and the Conscientious Level marks an increased consciousness of self and of the complexities of life. At this level a person can think in, and be attracted to, a more personalised and thoughtful way of operating, but still not be convinced or able to act accordingly in fact.

The interaction of this attraction and the accompanying fear of it can be quite stressful.

About one third (31%) of priests are in this 'in between' stage and have not moved (and may never move) to the more developed and adequate Conscientious stage. These individuals find it easier to think in generalisations and tend to label and box others, rather than seeing them as individuals. Loyalty to the Church would be important to priests at this level.

*The fact that nearly a third of priests prefer to live and act in this way means that it is **harder for all to live and work together maturely**, to share a common vision forged out of a plurality of theologies, and to win the commitment of everyone.*

### **The Conscientious Level of Growth [36%]**

Following the tension of the transition stage, people at this level achieve a broader world vision and a more personalised view of life. This level involves a less instinctive, more thoughtful attitude to life and behavioural principles that have been thought out (though the values which they protect are not yet genuinely appreciated). Compassion bows to orthodoxy. People at this stage pay little attention to personal needs, which are generally repressed or suppressed.

Just over a third of the priests (36%) in the sample are at this level. They can motivate themselves to work hard at what they see to be the Church's goals.

Achievement and professional competence are important to people at this level and this can often militate against developing human relationships. Individuals at this level of ego development may have more energy for tasks, objects and administration than for the human warmth necessary for compassionate ministry to others.

### **The Conscientious-Transitional Level of Growth [20%]**

A further one fifth (20%) of priests are in a second transitional stage where individuals become more conscious of their affective, interpersonal life. Feelings of intimacy and affection begin to stir, frighteningly at first, and so may still be suppressed. Tension can result from the conflict between deepening relationships and the former sense of responsibility and achievement.

At this level people become more sensitive to themselves as individuals who matter and who have needs, and become more aware, too, of others as individuals; but they still have difficulty in acting accordingly. They have trouble moving beyond the familiar security and sense of control that their rationality provides.

#### ***Transition and Stress***

*The two transition states embrace half (51%) of the priests in the sample. These in-between experiences are often ones of stress and inner conflict. Stress is not a bad thing, of course, and can stimulate the development of a more adequate approach to life and personal needs.*

*Whether in fact this is happening is not indicated by the test. One would presume that some might dig their heels in and either remain where they are or return to a less stressful, though reactionary response.*

## **The Autonomous/Integrated Level of Growth [7% & 2%]**

Sadly, according to the criteria used in the test, only about one in ten [9%] of the priests in the sample have comfortably and consistently reached a high level of human maturity where they each think for themselves and take note of their feelings. They approach moral behaviour on the basis of their personal appreciation of the values involved. They can cope with individuality and can hold in creative tension the needs of both the individual and the common good.

They no longer suppress their feelings and are able to recognise and own them and draw on their energy creatively. They relate to people with compassion from an appreciation of their dignity and specialness. They recognise the importance of authority but their obedience is responsible and thoughtful.

### ***Ego Development and Authority***

*While the Conformist person is concerned with obedience to rules and regulations, the Autonomous/Integrated person can move with maturity and responsibility beyond the law, when appropriate, to the Church's traditional teaching that all laws are based on love.*

*Priests in transition from the Conformist level may make much of obedience to authority. However, their obedience can at times be selective and limited to random issues. They may support the Church's opposition to abortion or contraception, for example, but completely disregard its teaching on social justice. In a case of conflict with one authority some may appeal to another, more from a need to preserve the familiar than to further the truth.*

## **The Personal Orientation Inventory**

### **ADDING DETAIL**

#### **Self-Actualisation**

The findings of the Test of Ego Development (TED) are generally confirmed by the results of the Personal Orientation Inventory (POI). An advantage of the POI is that it gives detail to flesh out the clear, bold lines of the TED.

#### ***Maslow's Self-Actualised Person***

*The focus of the inventory is the 'self-actualised person', a concept developed by the psychologist Abraham Maslow to describe the whole personality. Self-actualisation is not*

*identical to the Christian calling. Christian wholeness is a matter of openness to love and to life rather than success or achievement. However, many of the factors that Maslow sees as contributing to the experience of self-actualisation coincide with Gospel values and are important for a life of peaceful and effective ministry.*

*In two major scales and a series of minor scales the inventory measures what it considers to be the attitudes and skills of self-actualising persons. It is therefore a valuable tool in indicating the areas for growth into wholeness and effective ministry.*

***The Self-Actualised Person is...***

*active*

*creative*

*warm*

*responsible*

*balanced*

*spontaneous*

*adaptable*

*accepting*

*modest*

*competent*

The results of this testing show that over a quarter (28%) of priests in the sample are adequately realising their human potential. A further one-third (32%) are what it classifies as average. This means that either they can and often do act out of their potential, though it occasions in them some effort and stress, or they choose to act below their potential to avoid the effort. The rest (40%) either identify themselves as below average or are out of touch with where they really are. People in this category may not be aware of any stress, but their experience of life is likely to be fairly grey and somewhat fatiguing.

Most priests are in constant contact with people and in leadership positions. The figures would seem to indicate that 40% of priests who are largely out of touch with how they are coping might encounter special difficulty in situations and times of change, questioning and pluralism. Their lack of flexible leadership in such situations says little about their effectiveness in other areas. Roles within the diocesan presbyterate that require more flexible and sensitive leadership skills would be better reserved for those priests who have them. Unnecessary stress can be felt by priests who are placed in positions to which they are not really suited.

In the norm group (ordinary lay Americans), 34% of people were 'self-actualising', compared with 28% of priests in the sample. Why is this so? Research in America some years ago (refer Knapp, *Handbook for the Personal Orientation Inventory*) suggested that the Church was apparently not a benign environment for self-actualisers. The same may be true in Australia.

The reasons may be either that the priesthood does not attract many self-actualisers in the first place, or that they tend to encounter such conflict that some leave, or that their development is either not encouraged or perhaps positively discouraged. This may say something about seminary formation and the attitudes and expectations that it cultivates. Can an institution the size of a seminary be easily otherwise? The Test gives no breakdown according to age, and so a comparison of the more recent seminary systems with the older ones is not possible.

The whole blame cannot be laid on the seminaries, however, as the process of personal growth is more likely to peak during the post-seminary years. The problem extends to the broader institutional Church. Whatever the effect of the institution, the fact remains, however, that, as indicated above, over one in four priests (28%) have still managed to allow their potential to blossom. The institution must not be allowed to become a scapegoat.

Among those priests whose potential has not freely developed a smaller number have an unrealistic assessment of where they stand than does the corresponding category in the norm group. Their formative influences seem to have helped at least to keep their feet on the ground.

## **The Major Scales of the Inventory**

The Personal Orientation Inventory measures two major factors contributing to openness to life and to love. In both major areas the Australian priests do not fare as well as the cross-section of people who comprised the original American norm group.

### **1. Attentiveness to the 'Present' (Time Competence)**

The Time Competence scale measures people's ability to be attentive or present to whatever they are doing, whether it be listening to others, praying, working or relaxing. Well over half of the priests (56%) functioned poorly in this area, while only one in ten priests (11%) performed well and freely. The rest (33%) can apply themselves, but it requires extra effort. Their capacity to give full attention is distracted by 'static' in their life.

A second inventory completed by the priests, the **Spiritual Orientation Inventory**, shows for example, that one-third of the priests (38%) never or rarely experience the transcendent. They are apparently too distracted or perhaps do not know how to identify it!

The figures are rather alarming, particularly in the light of the two main reasons for them. Either many priests are still carrying round a lot of unfinished business from their past, such as unhealed hurts and angers that have not yet been owned and forgiven, or they are burdened by anxieties about the future that they are unable to face with equanimity and trust.

Since this result falls well below that of the norm group, it would seem that the hurts are more than the normal hurts that are present in any person's life, and possibly come from what is specific to priests as a group: their formation in the seminaries and their experience since then of life within the Church, as well as their celibate lifestyle. Their abnormal anxieties, too, would seem to be tied to the specifically priestly role, and may be due, among other things, to a vague and unnoticed sense of inadequacy in a changing world.

The **Spiritual Orientation Inventory** would seem to confirm this sense of inadequacy since one in five priests (18%) admit that their lack of self-esteem causes them considerable concern, and is a source of at least mild concern for as many as half them (46%).

A further reason for concern about the difficulty of many priests to be attentive and sensitive is that they may miss the gentle movements and promptings of God's Spirit, both as individuals and as communities. In their ministry for the sake of the Kingdom they need to do God's Will and not their own, for only there will life and genuine creativity be found. The spiritual tradition insists that God's Will is often discerned precisely through these gentle promptings of his Spirit. In these times of change God calls each person to respond to new situations, and people can no longer rely on what they have always done.

### ***Challenge***

*For the sake of God's Kingdom, therefore, priests need to bring peace to their past areas of hurt, to live their celibacy maturely, and to develop such trust in God as will allay undue anxieties.*

## 2. Reaching Decisions (Inner Directedness)

The other major area that the POI examines is how individuals cope with making decisions: whether they are free to work from their own insights and convictions, or whether they either still uncritically accept familiar customs, rules and regulations or feel under pressure from the expectations of others. One third of the priests (30%) show up noticeably influenced by the system. Another third (36%) can, when necessary, stand on their own convictions, but it requires extra effort and is not their preferred way of acting. (The Spiritual Orientation Inventory confirms the fact that two-thirds of the priests (65%) find confrontation a major source of concern). One fifth only (21%) are free to act consistently out of their own inner convictions.

These figures [30%, 36%, 21%] correspond fairly closely to those of the Test of Ego Development where 35% were categorised as conformist, 36% conscientious, 20% leaning towards autonomy, and 9% having arrived there.

Those priests who seem unquestioningly and uncritically to accept the institution they serve are twice as many (30%) as in the population at large (16%). Their obedience is not a mature obedience that is helpful to the refinement of authority. In a culture that questions everything, these individuals would seem unable to enter easily into constructive dialogue. Another one in three (36%) can do so, but at a price and under stress. This must reflect again on formation in the seminary and experiences of the Church as an institution since then.

### ***Moral Decisions***

*One area of decision-making that is particularly relevant to priests is that of morality. This issue was specifically covered by a particular test, the Test of Moral Judgment. The purpose of the test, which was completed by half the priests randomly selected, was not to inquire into the orthodoxy or otherwise of their moral principles but to measure their ability and readiness to apply principles in the complexities of everyday life.*

*Most priests, just over half (53%), are at home acting on the letter of the law that they understand and have thoughtfully accepted. In many life situations, however, moral rules can sometimes seem to conflict, and a morality based on law finds it hard to proceed comfortably in these circumstances. A good number (38%) have been able to develop their consciences further and to find and make their own the moral values behind the rules; and can consequently handle complexity with greater flexibility and ease.*

*It is pleasing to note that virtually none (3%) of the priests make their decisions from a totally*

*unquestioned and uncritical stance. And at the other end of the spectrum there is an even smaller minority (2%) who, having felt the inadequacy of a strictly legalist approach to morality, are in some kind of moral 'no-man's-land', not having found the values underlying the principles.*

*These findings as a whole must reflect again on formation in the seminary and subsequently. As a group, priests have a better knowledge than most people of moral principles. However, many are either ignorant of or ill at ease with what the Church teaches about the further development of conscience, their own and others', and the possibility and conditions of inculpable dissent.*

## **The Minor Scales**

As well as a lived openness to life and an inner strength and sense of freedom, the Personal Orientation Inventory also measures some other factors that undergird these attitudes.

### **1. Open to Experience (Valuing)**

This sub-scale measures whether a person accepts or rejects the values held by self-actualising people.

**The values of** self-actualising people include...

- openness to experience
- trust in one's experiences
- spontaneity
- assertiveness
- self-determination
- affirmation of others
- trust in others

The Inventory shows that two out of three priests in fact appreciate these values, most priests quite clearly so (38%), with some (27%) admitting to some difficulty in consistently doing so.

Apparently about one in six priests (17%) is not convinced that such an approach to life is justified, and would prefer caution, predictability, orthodoxy and tradition.

A marriage of the two attitudes may be difficult. A further sub-scale shows that a considerable number of priests, two in three, find it either impossible (33%) or at least difficult (31%) to harmonise

apparent opposites. As well as learning to trust, priests probably also need skills in negotiation and conflict resolution.

## **2. Sensitive to Needs and Feelings (Feeling)**

As one would expect from the figures already quoted in the Test of Ego Development regarding conformity, the POI also shows that many priests (30% compared with 16% in the norm group) are hardly aware of their own needs and feelings. Anger and its expression are particularly troublesome. This is not the total picture, however, and over half of the priests are generally able to recognise and own their feelings positively and to take care of their needs, some more easily than others.

The problem here is that each individual has personal needs and feelings. Even if people fail to notice and accept their feelings, they do not evaporate. Either they remain in the unconscious and accumulate, only to explode inappropriately later on, or they change into something else such as loneliness or even psychosomatic symptoms like headache or backache. In the meantime the energy required to suppress or repress them is not available for normal use, with the result that an individual can feel constantly tired or bored. Priests in this situation may not have the warmth they would like to have in pastoral encounters.

### ***Out of Touch***

*People not in touch with their feelings would be likely to be acting with a fair amount of passive aggression or occasional uncontrolled outbursts due to repressed emotions surfacing inappropriately.*

*People not in touch with their needs (e.g. for relaxation or recreation) would be likely to overwork. Insensitivity to their own emotional needs and the energy lost in repressing emotions could lead to burn-out.*

When priests fail to notice and respond to their needs, they fail to nourish themselves and to grow healthily. In these days of fewer priests, of new and unfamiliar situations, of theological pluralism and the like, when greater demands are made on the spiritual and nervous energies of priests, serious disregard for personal needs could lead to destructive stress and break-down.

### ***Responding to God***

*People's awareness of feeling also affects how they relate to God. In the Spiritual Orientation Inventory, priests nominated their preferred way of seeing God. An overwhelming majority of*

*priests (84%) chose 'source of love and freedom'. This choice does not seem to be consistent with the data of the Test of Ego Development where most priests were shown to have conformist or conscientious mind-sets. Some answers in the Spiritual Orientation Inventory may express more the theological knowledge that people have in their heads, and indicate that individuals are not really in touch with their deep personal feelings regarding God.*

*This observation is further borne out where respondents indicated the breadth of their feeling reactions towards God. Only a few (5%) often felt angry with God, and only one out of five (18%) admitted to fearing God much. On the other hand, four out of five priests (80%) proclaimed their constant love for God and sorrow for their sins, and only a few less (72%) joy in their faith. Since any genuinely intimate and honest relationship with anyone, including God, would presumably involve the whole gamut of feelings, it would seem that most individuals are not really in touch, especially with their 'negative' feelings towards God, and that their responses echo more the accepted and expected teaching than a real self-knowledge. As was mentioned earlier, this makes quite problematical an individual's discernment of the Spirit's movements within.*

### **3. Self-Esteem (Self-Perception)**

In the area of self-esteem (acceptance and integration of strengths and talents), priests show up better than the average population. Indeed this is the area where they score their best results. Two out of five priests (41%) clearly accept their strengths, a further 24% cope adequately, and only one out of five (21%) have a low self-esteem.

People need a healthy self-esteem (and a proportionate degree of self-discipline) if they are to work for their goals and achieve them. It gives a person the freedom to be creative, to take risks and to bounce back after setbacks. The better-than-average showing by priests on this issue could well explain the strong sense of dedication of so many over the years.

As with other issues the difference between priests and the general population may be due to their formation and the institutional system within which they live. Priests and laity generally have a high estimation of the priesthood. It could be possible that the figures reflect this appreciation of the priestly calling more than of the priest's own personal uniqueness. The fact that more priests have difficulty in accepting themselves in their weakness than in their strengths might suggest this conclusion.

These findings are complemented by the results of the **Tennessee Self-Concept Scale**, an objective

multiple choice test completed by one thousand priests. The test, which focuses directly on self-esteem and breaks it down into a number of components, indicates that two thirds of the priests in the sample are very happy with the way they see themselves (66%) and their worth (67%). However this figure drops in relation to behaviour in general (49%) and moral behaviour specifically (48%).

The varying degrees of difficulty experienced by two-thirds of the priests (66%) in accepting themselves in their weakness may be some indication that they may not have arrived yet at the point of conversion when people come to accept that God loves them unconditionally in spite of their fallen nature. *God's strength, indeed, is at its best in weakness.* Integrity lies in accepting the limitations of humanness and allowing God the freedom to love the sinner. Weakness and sin are points of entry of God's grace. They are the basis of all growth in humility, which is the foundation of true spirituality.

Do those priests who find it hard to accept their own weaknesses find a similar difficulty coping with the weaknesses of others? No doubt, most would probably try to react compassionately. There may be some concern about the one in five priests whose own self acceptance is so below average that their attitude to weakness in general is probably quite rigid. Given that priests are ministers of forgiveness and reconciliation, some may need help to discover the wonderful mercy of God and to image it to their parishioners.

## The Spiritual Orientation Inventory

### **ROUNDING OFF**

The Spiritual Orientation Inventory provides a wealth of information on priests' attitudes, behaviours, satisfactions and concerns. The following analysis will focus on two categories: Satisfactions and Concerns.

#### **1. Sources of Satisfaction**

About 30 sources of satisfaction, both ministerial and personal, were listed and respondents were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction for each as either 'none', 'slight', 'moderate' or 'great'.

#### **Ministerial Dissatisfaction**

Only a small number of priests found no real satisfaction at all (average 4%) or only slight satisfaction (average 18%) in the seventeen ministry activities listed in the inventory.

The major exceptions were:

- Administrative Work ['none' 16%, 'slight' 34%];
- Involvement in social problems ['none' 11%, 'slight' 35%];
- Youth Activities ['none' 8%, 'slight' 30%]

The small degree of satisfaction found in youth activities probably highlights the ageing of priests as a group and their increasing difficulty in bridging the generation gap.

### **Ministerial Satisfaction**

The most popular sources of satisfaction in ministry were the following:

- Celebrating Liturgies ['great' 59%, 'moderate' 34%];
- Preaching ['great' 47%, 'moderate' 41%];
- Ministering to the Sick ['great' 54%, 'moderate' 33%];
- Counselling ['great' 33%, 'moderate' 47%].

It would seem that, as a group, priests find real fulfilment in their ministry. This is quite heartening. At the same time, they may feel less urge to improve in those areas where they feel good about themselves. This may not always be good news for parishioners.

#### ***Listening***

*Given the difficulties which many individuals experience with listening attentively, as well as being more at home with the law than with values and individuality, counselling may sometimes consist more of advice than of compassionate listening. No doubt a good number of parishioners are happy with that kind of service and expect nothing else.*

### **Personal Satisfaction**

In this area, nearly everyone said that **relaxing with friends** gave them either great (69%) or at least moderate satisfaction (24%). This represents 93% of the priests in the sample. There is a certain poignancy about these results. So many priests want to be affirmed and supported, yet the figures for the Personal Orientation Inventory revealed that about one fifth of the priests surveyed are not capable of real personal closeness (22%) and a further third (33%) do not find it easy. Perhaps they do not realise the further support they could find if only they could risk greater trust and sharing.

## **2. Sources of Concern**

The inventory presented 44 concerns, religious- and work-related, as well as interpersonal and personal. Respondents were asked to rate their level of anxiety about each concern as either 'none', 'slight' or 'much'. The main sources of concern for priests were:

- Fear of Confrontation [much 65%; slight 25%]
- Loneliness [much 32%; slight 44%]
- Use of Time [much 31%; slight 51%]
- Expectations of Others [much 29%; slight 50%]
- Sexuality [much 28%; slight 47%]
- Lack of Appreciation from Authority [much 24%; slight 50%]

Loneliness is not a problem only of the celibate. It needs to be distinguished from aloneness, and is not necessarily related to it. Loneliness reflects a difficulty in coping with aloneness and lack of friendship and warmth. In this context, the difficulties experienced by priests in being at peace with their constantly changing needs as sexual persons become relevant. It is not surprising that concerns about both loneliness and sexuality rate almost equally. Being in touch and at peace with their inner needs and feelings comes with maturity.

Overall, not many experience their own faith or change in the Church as sources of concern. And boredom and lack of faith in the priestly ministry cause no concern at all for half of the priests. The figures confirm, however, as was mentioned earlier, that boredom is a hazard for those largely out of touch with their inner selves. The greatest stresses, however, come from the areas of personal and social interaction.

In the light of what has already been indicated, all of these conclusions are fairly predictable and tend to confirm the general validity of the questionnaires.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Where to Go?**

The 1990 Synod presents a challenge to look to the future and specifically to the nature of the seminary and post-ordination formation that is to be encouraged. In the light of the data, the Australian Church must face seriously whether it wants priests to stand on their own two feet, to be in touch with themselves and act out of their own personalised convictions.

1. Is that what the **bishops** want? It is easy to scapegoat the bishops in order to escape the price of one's own decisions. It is possible that the bishops themselves are spread across the range of personal development. Some would presumably be open to it; some possibly would be more fearful of it. A mature obedience can be difficult for both bishop and priest, and for the bishops themselves their situation is similar to that of the centurion, *'I am under authority myself, and have soldiers under me'* (Matthew 8:9). What is a fact is that sixteen dioceses have already adopted the Ministry to Priests Program with its stated aim of the human and spiritual development of priests. (And this says nothing of other initiatives taken in other dioceses.)

A bigger question than the personal and conscientious attitudes of the bishops is the difficulty inherent in the institutionalised operation of the Church. The accepted ways in which authority is exercised in a diocese may need to be monitored more closely. There is no one ideal way to exercise authority, and different situations call for different styles.

One could also ask whether institutions as large as the present seminaries are the best or only way to educate prospective priests. The data cited in this presentation raise some (not necessarily conclusive) doubts about their ability (at least on past record) not only to allow but, even more, to encourage personal development.

2. Do **priests** themselves want to grow? The data indicates that some do, and that some do not. External factors may make growth more difficult, but nothing really can stop it if a person really wants it. However, it has its price. To obey responsibly is harder than to conform, though it is also more fruitful. People may wish at times that their opinions be heard, but balk at the price of doing the homework and accepting the responsibility for the quality of the result.

If priests choose to have a bigger say in decision making, both bishops and priests will need to grow beyond where they seem to have arrived so far. All need to share honestly what they think and feel and accurately listen to each other. That may seem impossible for some at the moment, and for others it will take energy.

3. Do the **faithful** at large want their priests to mature? That is difficult to ascertain. Research done elsewhere (Philip Hughes 1989, *The Australian Clergy*, The Christian Research Association) indicates that the majority of Christians belong to a Church because they see it as a source of peace and a refuge from the stresses of the secular world. Many prefer a priest who does not challenge them and is

content to leave them secure in the familiar and the unchanging. If the price of that is a priest who may be compassionate but fails short of intimacy, many of them seem to be content to pay the price.

At least it seems that Jesus wants us to grow, to blossom and to bear fruit. He would love us to live 'life to the full' (John 10:10).

### **How to Get There - Given the diagnosis, what is the remedy?**

The Church needs a climate and structures that encourage and support human and spiritual growth. To find them, it will be necessary to examine the patterns of authority and institutional ways of interacting. Experimentation will be needed, as will evaluation and, perhaps, learning that mistakes are possible, even important, provided one learns from them.

As individuals, priests may need to be helped to think differently. Individuals need to be helped to work through their ecclesiology and to tease out its consequences. Priests may need to be helped to cope with a degree of plurality. In the area of moral theology, priests need to be assured again of the place of conscience, of the factors that subjectively affect moral judgement, and of the possibility of legitimate dissent.

People can inform their consciences through books but they can form them only through personal interaction and reflection on their lives. Until they have learnt to set free their own God-given capacity to appreciate values and to base their lives on them, their behaviour is less the expression of their true selves than a work of imitation. Individuals will probably also need the practical skill of getting in touch with their own conscience and learning to distinguish its voice from the other voices that echo within.

Priests need wise spiritual directors who can help them come to terms with the sin in their own hearts. They need to be helped to believe that Jesus really did mean that the taxman went home at peace with God more than did the earnest Pharisee (Cf. Luke 18:14).

The clergy is fortunate to have had in Australia for these past seven or eight years an excellent resource for this learning in St Peter's Centre in Canberra. It is a pity that greater use has not been made of it. It is also a pity that most have not learnt the value of spiritual direction. Diocesan priests still perhaps tend to see it as a requirement only for a 'post-graduate' spirituality. Yet, it is these priests who are in close contact with people that have the greatest need.

In the light of the facts and figures referred to in this presentation, priests obviously need to be helped

to get in touch with their inner world, their personal needs, and to discover and own their feelings. Feelings are important in themselves, and also because of the harm they can do to individuals when they are repressed or suppressed. In coming to know and to accept oneself a good friend is so important. Most of those who have taken part in the Ministry to Priests Program mounted by the Center for Human Development can vouch for the value of a regular opportunity to talk through what is on their mind or heart with a brother priest who sees it his duty to make contact. The groups that many have joined have had a similar effect in providing the special support and challenge that is so often needed.

Human growth is possible. It belongs to the dynamic of God's grace. But no one can make an individual grow, not even God. Because all growth is an adventure in freedom, it is inseparably tied into an individual's own decisions.

***Ephesians 3:14-21***

*That is why I kneel before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name; and I pray that he will bestow on you gifts in keeping with the riches of his glory. May he strengthen you inwardly through the working of his Spirit. May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, and may charity be the root and foundation of your life. Thus you will be able to grasp fully, with all the holy ones, the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love, and experience this love which surpasses all knowledge, so that you may attain to the fullness of God himself.*

*To him whose power now at work in us can do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine - to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus...*