



ANCIENT CATHOLIC CHURCH

Office of the Archbishop Primus of Great Britain

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"Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."
(Colossians 3:12)

Tuesday 20th May, 2025

Feast of St Bernadine of Siena

Re: Rethinking Vocational Training As Practical Apprenticeships: A Path To Renewal

Dear Brother and Sisters in Christ,

As a bishop entrusted with the formation of future priests at our seminary, I have seen firsthand the challenges that face our Church in the realm of ministry and leadership. With dwindling numbers of clergy, a vital question emerges: how can we adapt our methods to meet the evolving needs of both the Church and society? The traditional four-year academic model, while venerable, may no longer be viable if we are to attract and adequately prepare the next generation of priests.

The Numbers Problem

Over the past few decades, the Catholic Church has encountered significant declines in the number of priests and deacons. Jesuit Father Thomas Reese highlights that in the United States, the number of priests has decreased by almost 30% since 1970. This trend is mirrored in many parts of the world, raising urgent questions about our approach to priestly formation.

The current model typically emphasises rigorous academic coursework, often at the expense of practical, real-world experience. While theological study is fundamental—forming a solid basis for a priest's spiritual and pastoral life—this conventional method may not sufficiently equip candidates for the demands of parish leadership.

If vocational training in the priesthood is to still be relevant, we must consider an innovative approach akin to the internship and apprenticeship models seen in trade professions.

Learning From The Trades

Consider how we train professionals in skilled trades such as plumbing or electrical work. To be effective, apprentices spend vast amounts of time learning on the job, fully engaging with the realities and challenges they will face. The classroom component, while necessary, often serves as just one side of their comprehensive training. This hands-on experience is indispensable in helping them develop both technical skills and essential interpersonal qualities.

In the same vein, why should we not adopt a similar structure in priestly formation? As priests, the ministry involves not only liturgical knowledge but also the ability to connect with the faithful, to provide counsel, and to engage with community needs proactively. This kind of development cannot happen solely within the confines of an academic classroom.

Practical Apprenticeships: A New Model For Priesthood Training

Responding to this challenge, it is time for the Church to embrace hybrid training models that combine practical experiences and academic learning. Here are several aspects to consider in shaping a more resilient and adaptable formation program:

1. Extended Parish Placements

Rather than confining seminarians to years of classroom learning, we can integrate extended placements in parishes where candidates can immerse themselves in community life. This experiential learning opportunity would allow them to witness the realities of parish ministry, engage with parishioners, and take part in the diverse activities that form the heart of church life.

These placements should be structured to include responsibilities that range from leading prayer services to taking part in community outreach, effectively training them in pastoral care, crisis management, and everyday church operations.

2. Use of Online Learning Platforms

In our increasingly digital society, the Church must embrace technology to enhance the educational experience of seminarians without sacrificing theological rigour. Online courses could cover important topics such as Church history, moral theology, and ministry skills, allowing students to learn at their own pace while still committing ample time to hands-on training.

This dual approach addresses the logistical issues faced by many candidates—specifically those who may be balancing jobs or family responsibilities—while liberating them from the constraints of a traditional classroom setting.

3. Mentorship by Practicing Clergy

Seminarians can benefit from mentorship relationships with experienced clergy members. By pairing candidates with seasoned priests, we can ensure that learning happens in a supportive environment rooted in real-world ministry. They can receive guidance tailored to their unique circumstances, encouraging personal growth and reflection on experiences within their community.

The Benefits Of A New Approach

Transitioning to a more balanced approach to priestly formation will yield myriad benefits, both for candidates and for the Church as a whole:

- 1. Relevance and Connection:** When priests emerge from formation programs steeped in both theory and practical experience, they are better positioned to resonate with their congregation's needs and challenges.
- 2. Diverse Skill Set:** Practical training in various parish roles equips candidates with tools that promote adaptability and resilience—qualities that will serve them well in an evolving religious landscape.
- 3. Sustainable Ministry:** If we are to maintain healthy, vibrant parishes, we must cultivate clergy who can address contemporary concerns with empathy, integrity, and hope. This model of training fosters a collaborative church environment that fosters growth.
- 4. Increased Engagement:** As the Church adapts its approach to training, we may see a renewed interest among young people to pursue a vocation in the priesthood, knowing that their education will be relevant, practical, and life-changing.

Addressing Potential Pitfalls

Despite the clear benefits, apprenticeship schemes within the Church must navigate several potential pitfalls. One major concern is the risk of inadequate oversight or support for apprentices. Without proper mentorship and clear objectives, the program might not deliver the intended benefits, leading to disillusionment among participants.

Therefore, establishing a framework of accountability and assessment can mitigate this risk.

Another challenge lies in ensuring that apprenticeships stay inclusive. The Catholic Church embodies a diverse congregation, and any apprenticeship program must ensure equal access and representation.

Failure to do so could reinforce existing disparities within the church community.

Lastly, there is the danger of over-commercialising religious vocations. If apprenticeships are perceived solely as a means to achieve career advancement, the spiritual element of the calling may be compromised. Care must be taken to maintain the primary focus on faith formation throughout the apprenticeship experience.

A Call To Action

As we see the pressing need for change, I urge my fellow bishops and seminary leadership to explore this new path of vocational training for priests. We must advocate for innovative models that merge academic rigour with substantial, meaningful pastoral experiences.

The Vatican Council II emphasised the importance of formation that comprehensively prepares clergy for both public and private aspects of their ministry. We can honour that vision by moving forward with a new approach.

The Church stands at a crossroads. We must recognise that the needs of the modern world require an adaptive, flexible response in our approach to priestly formation. As we embrace the notion of practical apprenticeships in tandem with online education, we can develop a generation of priests better prepared for the challenges ahead.

If we continue to cling to outdated methods, we risk not just shrinking numbers of clergy, but the vitality of our Church as a whole. Innovation, engagement, and responsiveness are imperative—let us collectively commit to adapting our formation practices to meet the needs of tomorrow's faithful.

The call to serve in the priesthood has never been more vital, and with a new approach to training, we can ensure the Church thrives for generations to come.

Yours in His name,



A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Felix Gibbins". To the left of the signature are two small crosses, a traditional symbol for the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary (OSB).

The Most Reverend Dr Felix Gibbins OSB Cam
BA (Hons) PGCE (Cantab) MA MTh STL DDiv SSCC
Rector of St Thomas Aquinas Seminary
Archbishop Primus of Great Britain

Prayer For Seminarians

Loving Father, send forth the power of your Holy Spirit upon the seminarians of our diocese who are discerning a vocation to the priesthood. Grant them all the graces they need particularly the graces of clarity, simplicity of heart and a deep personal relationship with Jesus, with a strong trust that will enable them to continue to respond generously to your call. Grant them the gift of your wisdom, that they may know your will, and grant them the courage to follow it with all their hearts.

We ask this through the intercession of Mary our Mother, St Joseph, patron of the Universal Church, St John Vianney, patron of priests and in the Holy Name of Jesus.

Amen.

