

The pandemic has shown that people still need and value their priests

The vocations crisis is rooted in a social, cultural and ecclesial landscape that has changed radically in the last 20 years, writes **Fr Tomás Surlis**



The return to seminary this year was particularly challenging, given the current pandemic. However, we approached the challenge with vigour, since the experience of a common life is central to the experience of priestly formation in Ireland and across the world today.

Living with and for each other helps our seminarians to develop the necessary skills they will need in priestly ministry going forward. In the seminary, the way we live is designed to prepare future priests for the reality of ministry in a changed and changing society and culture.

Skills such as being a generous person for others, being a builder of communion and community, being a team leader and a person who collaborates with lay women and men at parish and diocesan level, as together the people of God exercises its co-responsibility for the life of the Church in our times, such as those called for by the Congregation for the Clergy in its recent instruction on *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church* (2020).

Such attitudes of heart and mind are especially important in an ecclesial landscape that cries out for priests filled with zeal for both ministry and mission.

Configuration

In 2019, the national seminary welcomed 13 new seminarians; eight of these came into the first year of the discipleship stage of philosophical studies and five entered what is known as the configuration stage of theological studies.

This brought the number of full-time resident seminarians in St Patrick's College, Maynooth to 33, up from 22 in 2018-19. Of the 33, 27 were in formation for Irish dioceses, with a further two being sponsored by an Irish diocese with a view to ministering in that diocese for some time after ordination, before returning to their home diocese. The remaining three were in formation for a diocese outside of Ireland.

In 2020, in keeping with Health Service Executive and bishops' conference guidelines on social distancing and sanitisation, we made ready to welcome 32 resident seminarians. This number includes eight new seminarians.

Five of the new seminarians entered the discipleship stage of philosophical studies, with two of these undertaking a degree in arts (including philosophy) in Maynooth University. The other three entered

the diploma programme in philosophy and arts in the Pontifical University.

Three seminarians joined us in the configuration stage of theological studies, having completed their studies in philosophy outside of Ireland.

Of the 32 resident seminarians in Maynooth at the start of this year, 27 were in formation for Irish dioceses.

There is no doubt that people are sometimes shocked when they hear that there are just around 30 men in formation for the priesthood in the national seminary. People speak of a 'vocations crisis.' They are correct; there is a crisis of vocation in the Church in Ireland and across many parts of the western world, particularly in western Europe.

This is rooted in a social, cultural and ecclesial landscape that has changed radically in the last 20 years.

“The landscape in which future Irish priests will minister has changed significantly, even since 2006”

The current pandemic has exposed some of the real potential that exists for developing forms of collaborative ministry and co-responsibility in the life of the Church.

In the national seminary, we are continuing to energetically implement the insights of the 2016 document on priestly formation called *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*. Together with St John Paul II's seminal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* – I will give you shepherds (1992), this new document has guided the Irish seminaries in formulating a national admissions policy, which was approved as a working document by the bishops at their June 2020 meeting.

The 2016 document has also helped a committee, of which I was a part, to put together a draft of a national directory for priestly formation in Irish seminaries which the bishops are currently considering before it is sent to the Holy See for the *recognitio*. This new directory represents an update of the existing programme for the formation of priests in Irish seminaries (2006).

This is indeed timely, as the landscape in which future Irish priests will minister has changed significantly, even since then.

When I entered the seminary in 1998, I came from a family back-



ground and experience of parish where the vast majority of people attended Sunday Mass. The support I received in my decision to leave a fulfilling job as a teacher in Coláiste Iognáid in Galway to enter formation for priesthood in the diocese of Achonry was strong and heartfelt, from family, from friends and from my students and colleagues in Galway.

Support

To be honest, I almost took such support for granted. If I were entering seminary today, I'm not sure if the same level of support would be there from outside my family circle.

Many of the men entering the seminary today are coming either from third-level institutions or the world of work. Some still come from second-level education but they, and all the others who come into first year, have the experience of one year of seminary formation behind

them, in what is called the propaedeutic stage, before they come to Maynooth.

This is a good thing and a most welcome development. It means that the settling in process takes far less time and that they are already familiar with many of the aspects of seminary life which, in my first year, took quite some getting used to.

“I pay tribute to the invaluable support...that is given to seminarians by the St Joseph's Young Priests Society”

The promise of the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest still holds true. The wonder is not that there are so few responding to the call; the wonder is that there are so many who are able to hear that call amidst the cacophony

of voices that clamour for their attention in our busy and noisy world.

I thank the bishops of Ireland for their continued expression of confidence in St Patrick's College, Maynooth by entrusting the formation of their seminarians to us. I would also like to pay tribute to the diocesan vocations directors who are doing sterling work in vocations promotion, together with the vocations council of the bishops' conference and the national vocations office which is based on the St Patrick's College campus.

Experience

I also pay tribute to the invaluable support (both prayerful and financial) that is given to seminarians by the St Joseph's Young Priests Society and those women and men who pray for vocations to the priesthood and religious life all across the country. In Maynooth, we focus on providing the best experience and highest standard of priestly formation possible. Not to do so would be to do a disservice to the men who are here, as well as to the people of God, from whom they come and to whom they will return as servants of the Gospel.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown that people still need and value their priests.

We are doing our very best to provide them with the priests they need: men for others, theactairí Chríost (messengers of Christ), holy men for a holy people.

1 Fr Tomás Surlis is a priest of the Diocese of Achonry and Rector of the National Seminary, St Patrick's College, Maynooth.

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