

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

A Dangerous Priesthood

“Live Dangerously! Become a Catholic Priest!” Yes, I think so. There’s something about being a priest that is irreplaceable for the Church, but it’s a dangerous way of life to adopt, and few will do it for that reason.

Kindly Place Your Eggs In This Basket

“Not all of them surely? Is that wise?” No, not in the ordinary sense of the word; but if you don’t do it, you’ll be no priest (in the Church’s sense of the word). We welcome the unexpected gift of our married ex-Anglican brethren, and their ministry in the Church will often be wondrous; but really the Catholic priesthood is still about celibacy, about leaving it all to follow Christ, and - yes, about being sometimes alone with an intensity of aloneness that might dare to call itself sacrificial. It’s quite possible for a married man to speak to others about this quality of sacrifice; sacrifice is present in marriage, and above all in parenthood; but it’s a longer road to get there. The joyful vision of a happy, warm home with affection and healing always on offer, and the mystery of your child’s unfolding life before your eyes: this is not something that helps me to hear the wild call of Jesus to a ministry where he had nowhere to lay his head. After all, Jesus could have had a happy home and a burgeoning family full of lovely children - if he’d wanted to set that before us as the best model of the Way. Instead, he was celibate, in a society where celibacy was just as incomprehensible, unchoosable, and unsaleable as it is today.

The Horror Of Hypocrisy

All religion is at risk of hypocrisy. How can our mortal hearts and minds know or speak of God: how can we weave from the simple materials of our lives a vessel that is able to contain so august a mystery as God’s grace? Our Church mercifully orders us to put on vestments when we handle these mysteries, to make plain that it isn’t for any human quality of ours that we are selected to do the awesome work of the Sacraments. For priests, God decides to override our weaknesses and

even our sins, so that a mind and heart, a little understanding, a pair of hands and a voice can be employed in his service. We are, in the personnel-jargon of the world, “acting up”, like a simple copper standing in for the Chief Constable, but more so. We bear witness to the presence of Jesus, in the midst of those who gather in his name: we point helplessly towards the mystery of the Cross, and mutter and blurt out what bit of insight we may have been granted about what it means. But like Paul, we are set up for others to throw eggs at us; we’re with the captives and slaves, dragged along at the back of the parade. God uses most of all our inabilities, our incapacity - to show that, even if you spend years trying, and do nothing else and think of little else, it’s still impossible for a human being to speak of God or to be worthy of God.

But We’re Still Here

Nevertheless, standing up at the lectern, gathering round the altar day after day, we remain at our impossible work, quite sure that we have been told to do it, and not to find our meaning outside it, even in the holiest of the gifts of God. I think the second thirty years is perhaps proving a bit easier than the first was, because after a while the alternatives begin to recede and to look pale beside the truth of the vocation. You sometimes say to God, *Do you really want me to live like this?* and after a while he answers, *You? How else would you live?* If I had a loving family around me, I would never ask what I was here for, or have to live so long in the dark. My wife would tell me every day what I was there for, and so would my children. Instead, I have to feel that in human terms I don’t make all that much sense. And into that empty space where I have little human reason to be here, I hope that God will put meanings into place that don’t come from me at all, the meanings he wants to offer a humanity that will die to sin, and then rise to the glory and freedom of the children of God. And I have no control over that, where, when, or whether it happens or not: *I know not: God knows.* That, I think, is

what makes it such an awesomely dangerous
way of life.

Fr Philip