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Training for the Ministry

BY DONALD COGGAN

ONE thing is abundantly clear to anyone who has to write on this subject. Unless a man who has been twenty-five years in the Ministry (or, for that matter, fifty years) is still training for the Ministry, he were better out of it. For to anyone not blind to spiritual issues, the size of the task of the Ministry increases with his exercise of it. What a miracle, that to *me*—"less than the least of all saints—is this grace given"; that to *me* is committed the word of reconciliation; that to *me* a voice has said, "Go, tell this people . . ."! New every morning is the miracle. As he ponders, prays, reads, preaches, administers the sacraments, visits, the clergyman constantly sees how vast are the issues with which he deals; how rich the treasure with which he is committed; how feeble a beginner he is at his craft. So, like any athlete, he keeps in training. So, as the middle years come and go, he watches against that "fatty degeneration" which makes him slack, and which closes his eyes to the miracle that *he*, of all people, has been counted faithful, being put into the ministry.

That all needs saying. But it is clear that the Editor, when he asked for an article on *Training for the Ministry*, had in mind the early years of training. So, I shall divide what I have to say into two parts—pre-ordination training, and post-ordination training.

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What kind of man is needed in the Ministry of the Church? For it is of no use to talk about training until we have talked about the man to be trained.

Clearly, he must be a man with a *first-hand knowledge of God in Christ*. Unless his heart beats a bit faster than usual when he reads the New Testament phrase "my Gospel", let him think again before he knocks at any theological college door. More need not be said; but any ordinand reading this need not bother to read further unless he knows the meaning of the sentences I have just written.

Again, he must have an *alert mind*. The adjective was carefully chosen. I did not say a brilliant mind, though the Church is in need of plenty of those. But not *many* William Temples are called, else most of us would be otherwise employed! What God does demand is an *alert* mind. Too many—to cull a phrase from T. R. Glover—"cultivate mental fog and call it reverence". The result can be seen in the attitude of the congregations to which such men minister. Comes the time for the sermon, and the congregation sits back, composed, "at ease in Zion"—all too obviously unexpectant. The God of their Vicar (or curate) is *too small to be interesting*, and the last thing that the proclamation of His message could be called is *exciting*. But—here is a man in the pulpit; maybe he was never a Fellow of a University college; maybe he has never written a book, and could not

do so to save his life. But his mind is alert. He has caught a vision of "the many-splendoured thing"; he is constantly reading, and learning from books and from men; his prayer life is alive. *His* congregation sits up expectant—there is probably a word of the Lord for them today, hot, relevant.

I leave on one side the question of his *physical fitness*—except to say that he will need to be reasonably tough if he is to do a job in which trades union hours are unknown and in which demands are constant. But of a closely allied question I would say a word. I refer to what I may call *nervous fitness*. He must be a man who knows where to take, and *where to leave*, his burdens. Too many clergy break down for the simple reason that they have never learnt that secret. They preach frequently on the wonder of leaving sin at the foot of the Cross; they know their New Testament on this, and their Bunyan. But they themselves do not know what it is to leave their worries there and to go on their way rejoicing, and at rest.

" At Thy feet I lay them,
And I leave them there."

"Them", in the first of those two lines, need not only refer to sins, but to burdens and to worries and to the sense of inferiority experienced by some ministers of the Gospel. There is no need to go on carrying these loads.

* * * *

Given that, then—a first-hand knowledge of God, an alert mind, a reasonably fit body, and an experimental knowledge of what to do with his burdens—what should be said of a man's pre-ordination training? This is no place to try to lay down the law about the curriculum of a theological course, nor am I the person to teach *C.A.C.T.M.* or the members of theological faculties. But two things I would say:

(i) The first task of a theological college is to provide (as it is the first task of an ordinand to seek) a balanced diet of devotional and theological training. The early years of diaconate and priesthood can be, and often are, lonely times after the fellowship and exuberance of College life. Does the young clergyman know what to do when he kneels down? Does he know how best to use the daily offices and the periods of prayer and meditation with which he will preface every day's work? To begin to learn *that* is perhaps the most important thing he can do while he is at College. Nor is this a thing which, in its entirety, can be *given* by the College which trains the ordinand. For the ordinand himself will bring much to the learning of this. If he himself is non-receptive, not wholly living in love and charity with his neighbours (staff and students), and regarding the period of training as so much time to be got through before "the real job" begins, he will be in no frame of mind and spirit to learn to pray and meditate, and his later ministry will inevitably suffer. The very closeness of the community in which he lives, and the intensity of the disciplines which he is supposed to learn, will provide him with testings as severe as any he has hitherto known. He will do well to ponder on the ditty:

“ To dwell above with saints in love—
 Oh my, that will be glory.
 To dwell below with saints we know—
 Now, that’s a different story ! ”

Again and again throughout his ministry he will find that the point at which “ our Father below ” will seek to wreck his work is the point of personal relationships. Does he know how to get on with his Parochial Church Council, his organist, the leaders of his organizations ? Or is his approach such as to annoy them and to strain relationships ? The theological college is the place to begin to face this problem, against the background of a growing discipline of a life of prayer, sacrament, Bible study, and meditation. His college is far more than a place in which certain subjects are mastered, and certain examiners are defeated. It is the place where, through corporate worship and private prayer, through the discipline of the mind and of the spirit, and through the give and take of a life lived in very close proximity to his fellows, the metal of his character is purified at least of some of its dross and a vessel is produced at least a little more meet for the Master’s use.

(ii) The second point I would make about pre-ordination training is this : It is a mistake to try to cover too much ground. The deacon should not be expected to be “ the compleat parson ”, any more than the young man who first goes on to the wards of a hospital from his medical school is expected to be a self-sufficient doctor ready for any emergency. When a young man is made a deacon, he has completed part one of his training, and part one only. That training is to be carried on, under careful supervision, through the diaconate and through the early years of the priesthood ; even then, the training has but begun. If this is true, then it would seem to be better to attack, during the College period, certain fundamental theological and pastoral disciplines only, and to leave other things undone, arrangements having been carefully made with the diocesan directors of ordinands that such matters shall in fact be dealt with in the post-ordination years.

* * * *

What are these “ fundamental theological and pastoral disciplines ” ? That is a very difficult question to answer, and I do not suggest that the following list is complete. Quite clearly, the candidate for ordination must come to grips during his theological college course with Biblical theology, so that he knows his way about his Bible and begins at least to glimpse the great doctrines of the Christian faith, with the teaching of which he will be put in trust at his ordination. With the detailed study of his Bible he will have to come to grips in the ensuing decades of his study ; but he must not go out from College until he has begun to get at least a bird’s-eye view of “ what it is all about ”.

The other book which he will be using every day is the Book of Common Prayer. He must know how to handle this against the historical, theological, and liturgical background which gave birth to it, and in the light of the modern liturgical ferment in the midst of which he will exercise his ministry.

Almost every Sunday for the rest of his life he will be preaching. It is, therefore, of fundamental and crucial importance that he should concentrate on *this*, right from the start and during the entire length of his theological training. He must study not only *what* he should preach, but *how* he should preach. Let him face the fact that there is a technique, and the technique must be learnt (if he does not like the word *technique*, let him read his Charles Simeon and he will not be so ashamed of it). Nor is there any quick route to the mastery of that technique. We cannot afford to allow homiletics to be the Cinderella of the course. It must be resolutely tackled; time given to it; reading set on it; sermons examined, and so on, during the pre-ordination days. *Then* a foundation will be laid for that criticism of his sermons which his Vicar (if he is worth his salt) will give him during his curacy, and for those schools of preaching to which he will (we trust) go from time to time during his ministry, as any specialist in other spheres would go to refresher courses in his own particular skill.

There is another matter to which attention must be given in his pre-ordination training. Can he "minister to a mind diseased"? To a soul heavy-laden? To a person, face to face? Evidence would tend to show that only too often the theological colleges fail their men *just at that point*. And yet this is the very essence of the clergyman's work. If, after a period in a parish, people are not consulting him about their personal problems, he must ask himself whether he is not frittering away his energies on the husk and never getting near the kernel of his task. The heavy-laden came to Jesus and went away light of step. "Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven. . . ." Is the candidate learning to do the *real job*? Or is he learning to do everything but exercise a ministry of release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind? I am not suggesting that this can be taught *in vacuo*, or by the learning of a little elementary psychology. But I am suggesting that the foundations can be laid of a ministry which will have personal dealing at its centre, personal dealing which is based on a knowledge of God and on an understanding of what men and their real problems are. The pioneer work in this country of Dr. Frank Lake with ordinands, and especially with clergy, has shown how tragically lacking at this point is the ministry of multitudes of clergy and (let it be frankly admitted) how lacking was their training in the elements of this craft.

I repeat that I have not attempted to outline all that must be taught in a theological college. I have singled out four subjects to which high priority must be given—biblical theology, the Book of Common Prayer, homiletics, and personal dealing. I have pleaded that it is better to go deep on certain essentials, leaving other important matters to be filled in later, than it is to cover a wide area of ground and achieve nothing at all!

* * * *

What of post-ordination training? Here many of the subjects which to an ordinand are little more than theory will "come alive" as urgent issues with which he has to deal in the rough and tumble of his work. The relevance of the Bible will be seen in the parish in a

light very different from that in which it was seen in the lecture-room. Let the young clergyman, then, continue, on a deeper level, the Biblical study begun in college. The work he has done in a preliminary fashion in personal dealing will spring to life as he faces Mr. X or Mrs. Y, at grips with this complex or that, this sin or that temptation; and he will find himself seizing eagerly on the insights given him by the study of psychology or psychiatry. Ethics will no longer be a dull subject to be swotted up for G.O.E. It will be a series of problems which he is facing in pulpit, in Bible Class, in Sunday School, in personal interviews.

Again, when he has been in the ministry a few years he will, all unwittingly, have fallen into habits, bad habits, of which he is entirely unaware. Many are the dear old ladies who have told him that no one has ever preached like that before (*could that remark be taken in more ways than one? He had never thought of that!*). Few are the faithful friends who have told him that sometimes his pulpit work was shoddy, his style poor, and his diction well-nigh unintelligible. It is time he pulled out for a short while; made a tape-recording of a sermon; played it over to a candid and skilled critic; and accepted his judgment, however critical and humiliating that judgment might be. (When, oh when, will the day come that the Church of England will insist that after ten years in the Ministry a man must have, say, two months in which to go into dock for re-fitting? It is a thing much to be desired; and the effect of such a course of action on the ministry of the Church would be beyond all telling.)

By the time he has been in the ministry a few years, the young priest should have some department of theology which he would like to make especially his own, to which he is prepared to give whatever spare time he can set aside, for which he will collect all the material he can lay hands on. His study may or may not issue in an article or a book—that is quite secondary in importance. What does matter is that he has got something which will keep him constantly interested (and, incidentally, interesting!), a source of refreshment and mental and spiritual invigoration. It may, if his make-up and training fit him for this, be a purely academic subject; it may, on the other hand, be a subject very closely related to the work on which he is engaged in his parochial activities. Let him feel after a subject; let him seek good advice; let him adopt a theological or pastoral "child" on which he can, over a period of years, lavish his care.

I wish to close this article with a plea. All too often the post-ordination training of a young clergyman is very badly related, if related at all, to his pre-ordination training. All too frequently his later studies are repetitive of what he has done before, and of little use to the life he is living and the work he is doing as a clergyman of the Church of England. The result is two-fold: he is bored—that is bad enough. But worse, he forms, almost unconsciously, a determination to drop study as soon as the supervision of his early years in the priesthood ceases. Of course, he never *says* this; he scarcely even *thinks* it. He simply says that he has not time to read! But stop reading he does, and his shelves and his preaching bear witness to his mental nakedness.

What can be done to avert this tragic state of affairs? My plea is for much closer *liaison* than now exists between the theological colleges and the directors of post-ordination training. If this could be achieved, by means of conferences and so on, I think the load of teaching at the theological colleges might be lightened, and the post-ordination training considerably brightened, to the lasting benefit of both!

This article is, necessarily, a very small thing on a very large subject. On many important aspects it has not even touched. But I believe that, if its main tenets were worked out and followed up, less men than now would have to say, in the later decades of their ministry, in wholly minor tones, "*non talis sum quam eram*". More would be able to say, even as physical strength declined: "I keep pressing on toward the mark for the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus".

The Work of a Parish

BY JOHN GOSS

"**T**HERE are three things which have not changed with time; the hunger of the human soul for God; the satisfaction of that hunger in the Gospel; and the Church's trusteeship as the steward of God's Word and Sacraments." So wrote R. C. Joynt in 1934, and his words are as true today. To his three changeless factors might well be added a fourth—the character required in those to whom is committed the leadership in ministering the Gospel of Redemption. "Christian Stewardship" is the phrase of the hour—too often hinged to money-getting—and the adjective should be underlined, for without that quality in its fullest reality no man can be found faithful, and no effort, however spectacular can prove truly fruitful. The work of a parish is a particular stewardship—that of precious souls committed to the care of one chosen and called to this great task, and the character demanded of him, if he is to be found faithful, is that of a Man of God. Rightly does the Ordinal declare the Christian Ministry to be "an office both of so great excellency and so great difficulty". The qualities are the same in every age, and the excellency will be maintained and the difficulties surmounted only as it can be said of the minister as it was of Elisha of old, "I perceive that this is an holy Man of God". Where that can be said we may be sure the excellency will always transform the difficulty, and helps will not be lacking to minister the Bread of Life to fainting souls, even where the cure of fifteen or twenty thousand of them has been committed to one ordained minister.

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Remembering that the basic needs and problems are the same, though patterns vary and proportions change, let us consider first