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What it's really like to be a priest

Baptising a baby or comforting the dying is an enormous privilege – but one that is becoming the preserve of an ever decreasing few

By Rev Fergus Butler-Gallie

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I held her hand as she died; it was frail but the grip was still firm. There was still the slight dampness of oil on her palms where I had anointed her. I didn't know this woman well –

only by name really – as she had been sick a long time, and unable to actually come to church. But she wanted me with her as she passed into the eternal, not because of any familial link or personal connection but because I was a priest.

It felt strange to me, not just because being with someone as they die peacefully is a rare and holy thing but also because this was early on in my ministry: or to put it another way, she was very old and I was comparatively young. Still she had asked for me to be sent for – because I was a priest. It was there, by that bedside in a care home, aged 27 and just a year into my working life as a priest, that I first really understood what a deep and moving privilege priesthood was and is.

Like all too many privileges in this country, it is one that is becoming the preserve of an ever decreasing few. It has been announced to the General Synod, the Church of England's governing body, that the number of CofE priests in training dropped from 1,285 in 2021-22 to 1,101 in 2022-23.

I trained some years ago, when numbers were slightly healthier. It was an odd experience, a sort of cross between *The Mission* and *St Trinians*. There were ridiculous moments – I recall the chaos caused by a phantom obscene graffiti artist, and the infamous tantrum of one ordinand who stormed out of the dining hall as they were serving ‘f-ing quiche, again!’. Yet alongside these there were incidents of profound holiness – ordinands who would normally endlessly bicker united in silent prayer around the sacrament, the chance to study doctrine and philosophy with some of the finest minds in the country and, above all, placements out in parishes working alongside the good, holy, extraordinary people of God.

Varied though it is, I suspect it is not the process itself that is putting off would-be trainees for Holy Orders, not least because there is now a pathway for almost every type of potential cleric. The Church retains its academic hothouses in Oxford and Cambridge and its monastic model at Mirfield, but it now also has flexible and part-time training available too, for those for whom taking three years out of work is not viable.

Butler-Gallie describes his training as a priest as 'a sort of cross between The Mission and St Trinians'

No, the decline in people answering the call of God is, I imagine, much more to do with the current crisis in the Church's leadership. We have bishops who speak like management executives, structures that refuse to accord even basic employment rights to the clergy, an endless string of scandals about how predators, bullies and abuses have infiltrated even the highest levels of the institution and, perhaps above all, a sense that it is increasingly hard to see the pattern of Jesus in a Church that treats people in the way it often does.

There is a great yearning for something deeper in the spiritual life of the nation; a

profound opportunity for the Church to engage with. Yet, while it is unambiguously clear that providing specific places with specifically dedicated priests, ideally paid, is the best way to grow the Church and get more people engaging with the life of faith, the central CofE and its diocesan powers seem determined to move in a different direction.

True, such a model takes money – but the vast assets of the CofE are there to be used. How do we expect to grow without priests in place? And why should we bother expecting people to turn up to church if where we put our money suggests they're not worth it? We are the living body of Christ, not an asset-holding company and if the current statistics don't constitute 'a rainy day' then I'm not sure what does.

Despite all these challenges for someone considering ministry, I would still want to gently encourage them to explore it because it is the greatest privilege in the world.

As with the training, actual ministry has its ups and downs. There are the moments of profound beauty: baptising a baby, holding fragile new life in your arms and hallowing it in the name of the one who is creator of all, or sitting holding that fragile and wrinkled hand as a life ends.

There are ridiculous incidents too – such as when I was mistaken for a very ugly stripper – but even they serve to keep the priest humble in the midst of it all. It is worth remembering that there are two Churches of England – the one of Synod motions, institutional bullying and managed decline; and then there is the one that is the people of God, loving and serving in the places to which they have been called. Despite the former, I remain deeply in love with the latter and, as a priest and a man, it has been the making of me.

The Reverend Fergus Butler-Gallie is the author of [Touching Cloth](#), by (Bantam Press, £16.99). To order from Telegraph Books for £14.99, call 0844 871 1515 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk

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