

11th Sunday (A)

18th June 2023

'Ask the Lord to send labourers to His Harvest'

Ex 19: *I will count you a kingdom of priests ...*

Ps 99: *We are His people, the sheep of His flock*

Rom 5: *Christ died for us while we were still sinners*

Mt 9:36–10:8: *Harvest is rich ... Labourers are few ...*

One thing we quite often hear of in the Church, these days, is the *shortage of priests*, and many dioceses including those in England are having to adapt quite quickly to a time of fewer priests, by the clustering of churches and parishes etc., and the bringing in of missionaries from abroad. In some quarters, understandably, then, there come appeals for *married priests*, or for *women priests*, to serve the Church in ministry at this time, and to make up the shortage.

Well, we'll come to that in a minute. In the Gospel of the Mass today, Our Lord's own sacred words on ministry show us three things: (i) that there will *never* be enough labourers in the Harvest; (ii) that there must always be *prayer for vocations*, for there to be more labourers in the Harvest; and (iii) that for a specific role in that Harvest Jesus chose *12 apostles, who were men*: Peter & Andrew, etc. ... all their names are listed for us in that passage from Mt 9, and in other Gospel texts.

Now, the Church is always in need of more Shepherds, and we must always be promoting vocations to the priesthood, as well as to religious life, in our prayers and in our pastoral actions. The current lack of vocations is not in itself a crisis of the priesthood, I would suggest, but is a crisis of all sorts of commitment: there are fewer marriages, and far fewer children, as well as fewer priests ... these three, sadly, go together. Where there are happy married families, living a rich and full Christian life, then *there will be vocations*, and the young will have the courage to respond in joy to the call of God to serve Him and His people. It is where marriage is sidelined, the birth of children is avoided, and the faith and morality is not accepted in full, that the climate is not conducive to the response of young people to the call of God.

We must also with all seriousness address the issues which some people raise periodically with regard to priestly ministry. Both are mistaken, but we need to understand why the Church says that this is the mind of Christ. One is the question of *married priests*, and the other is of *women priests*. These are very different questions.

For a start, we do have a few *married priests* in this country anyway: generally they are converts from the Church of England who were already married before their conversion, and who were subsequently accepted for ordination as Catholic priests — each one is treated as an individual exception. And in the Eastern-rite Catholic Churches (and Eastern Orthodox Churches, too, whose sacraments are valid), some of their priests are married too, although their bishops are only ever chosen from the unmarried clergy. However, it is the discipline of the Latin-rite of the Catholic Church (98.5% of all Catholics) that the norm is for *a celibate clergy*, who live up to the ideal of Jesus Christ Himself, and do not marry but give themselves entirely to their service and their people. From the beginning of the Church it was expected that if a man was already married when ordained that he at least refrain from sexual union with his wife after that time; later it became the law for the clergy of the Western Church to not be married at all or to be widowers.

The question of *women priests* is a totally different sort of question. It is not a question of discipline, but of

theology: in those specific actions which the priest can do, and no other — the Mass, Confession, and anointing of the Sick; and for bishops, Confirmation and Ordination — in these actions, the priest precisely stands in the place of Christ. The incarnation of God has happened such that the Son of God was born a male, from the female Mary. In order for a human being to represent in suitable fashion the Son of God in His sacramental actions, that priest himself must be a male. This in no way undermines all the countless, invaluable things that in each and every community the women do, in co-operation with the priests and other men. No parish in this country could run without the tireless work every day, in important roles, of the women Catholics. The restriction of the priesthood to men is not a question of honour or of dignity, but of God's own plan: that He be born into this world as a man, born of a nurturing woman, Our Lady. Note in the Gospel that when He chooses His apostles, despite the many women amongst His wider group of disciples, and despite the evident holiness and worthiness even of His mother, He chooses 12 *men* to have a specific priestly role. He did not *have* to do

this, for He broke many other traditional practices, but He did do this, since it is more fitting that a male represent at the altar and at other key moments the action of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son.

In regard to both these questions I want to bring in some teaching of the Church that came out of the 2019 Vatican Synod on the Amazon. One of the key concerns in such a vast rural landscape as the Amazon is the provision of priestly ministry to the Catholics scattered across a region which includes part of some 9 countries. Naturally, a point of great discussion before, and at, that Synod, was how to provide more priests for these deprived communities: would the Synod call for the ordination of mature married men of proven reputation, *viri probati*, for example? Well, interestingly, did not; nor, less surprisingly, did it give any backing to the more controversial topic of women's ordination. But what it did do, and this is brought out in the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia* ("The Beloved Amazon Region"), is provide some really solid instruction on these important topics. It was as I was

reflecting on them, and what best to say on today's Gospel about labourers for the harvest, that I thought to refer to *Querida Amazonia*. I had never read any of it — its publication in February 2020 all got a bit lost in the flurry of anxiety over the pandemic that was about to sweep the world. But I'm glad that I have now read some of it, and would like to quote you some relevant passages, which may help us to get the idea of priesthood in perspective: it's so important for the Church to have priests, but it's also crucial that the priesthood does not become self-important!

Pope Francis writes this (ch. IV):

87. ... There are those who think that what distinguishes the priest is power, the fact that he is the highest authority in the community. Yet Saint John Paul II explained that, although the priesthood is considered "hierarchical," this function is not meant to be superior to the others, but rather is "totally ordered to the holiness of Christ's members." When the priest is said to be a sign of "Christ the head," this refers principally to the fact that Christ is the source of all grace ...

88. The priest is a sign of that head and wellspring of grace above all when he celebrates the Eucharist, the source and summit of the entire Christian life. That is his great power, a power that can only be received in the sacrament of Holy Orders. ...

89. ... a way must be found to ensure this priestly ministry. The laity can proclaim God's word, teach, organize communities, celebrate certain sacraments, seek different ways to express popular devotion and develop the multitude of gifts that the Spirit pours out in their

midst. But they need the celebration of the Eucharist because it “makes the Church”. We can even say that “no Christian community is built up which does not grow from and hinge on the celebration of the most holy Eucharist”. If we are truly convinced that this is the case, then every effort should be made to ensure that ... peoples do not lack this food of new life and the sacrament of forgiveness.

92. ... Priests are necessary, but this does not mean that permanent deacons, ... religious women and lay persons cannot regularly assume important responsibilities for the growth of communities, and perform those functions ever more effectively with the aid of a suitable accompaniment.

93. Consequently, it is not simply a question of facilitating a greater presence of ordained ministers who can celebrate the Eucharist. That would be a very narrow aim, were we not also to strive to awaken new life in communities. We need to promote an encounter with God’s word and growth in holiness through various kinds of lay service that call for a process of education — biblical, doctrinal, spiritual and practical — and a variety of programmes of ongoing formation.

99. ... For centuries, women have kept the Church alive ... through their remarkable devotion and deep faith. ...

100. This summons us to broaden our vision, lest we restrict our understanding of the Church to her functional structures. Such a reductionism would lead us to believe that women would be granted a greater status and participation in the Church only if they were admitted to Holy Orders. But that approach would in fact narrow our vision; it would lead us to clericalize women, diminish the great value of what they have already accomplished, and subtly make their indispensable contribution less effective.

101. Jesus Christ appears as the Spouse of the community that celebrates the Eucharist through the figure of a man who presides as a sign of the one Priest. This dialogue between the Spouse and his Bride, which arises in adoration and sanctifies the community, should not trap us in partial conceptions of power in the Church.

The Lord chose to reveal his power and his love through two human faces: the face of his divine Son made man and the face of a creature, a woman, Mary. Women make their contribution to the Church in a way that is properly theirs, by making present the tender strength of Mary, the Mother. As a result, we do not limit ourselves to a functional approach, but enter instead into the inmost structure of the Church. In this way, we will fundamentally realize why, without women, the Church breaks down, and how many communities ... would have collapsed, had women not been there to sustain them, keep them together and care for them. This shows the kind of power that is typically theirs.

It is not the restriction of the priesthood to *unmarried men* that lies at the bottom of the lack of priests: the problem lies instead with our failure to live up to the Gospel, which urges on us this message: “*pray the Lord of the Harvest to send labourers into His harvest*” ... for it is so rich, and there is so much good to be done! Whether it is vocations to the priesthood and religious life, or the greater, prior, and crucial vocation to holiness in all states of life, we need to pray for labourers, and we need to pray that *we ourselves* be labourers. We must work hard for Jesus, work hard for the Church, work hard at promoting all vocations, both priestly and lay, and allow the Lord to reap the Harvest of souls for heavenly bliss that He so desires of this world He has created.