

An Approach to Anglican Formation

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I shall look at this topic in a perspective of education, with an eye to 'continuing ministerial formation'. I shall look first at what we mean by education, and the education of priests; then at some ideas of what a priest is; and finally draw out how we might grow in faith and understanding in this role. Two preliminary remarks: first, I aim to be reflective, in the sense of looking at my own practice and experience, for the theology I advocate starts with an engagement of faith in the world, and reflection upon that engagement. If there are any principles to be considered, they can only be drawn out from specific situations, puzzles and stories. I am concerned with what it is to be a Church of England priest, how we go on being faithful in a certain tradition and make that tradition live in the present. Second, we are confronted with the business of what it is to live in a world like this, a modern, secular world that in some lights yields little evidence for faith. Or, to put it better, where in this world do we find evidence for faith; how does the secular take on sacramental qualities? Putting the question like this serves to ask what our priestly vocation is; how do we understand it and develop it, learn to live it better and to serve others on this basis. We shall be treading certain well-worn paths, and rehearsing some known views.

I

I am going to start by comparing two models of education, which I shall label 'instrumental' and 'formational'. First, let us consider the instrumental model. At present, we think of education largely in terms of gaining knowledge and acquiring skills. The best education teaches the latest knowledge and offers the most up-to-date skills. We might notice two things. First, this is a view of education in which the educator tends to assume what a priest does and lists the things a person should learn in order to be able to perform the role. The approach is called instrumental because the focus concerns the tools for the job. Second, because the society is always changing, there are continually new aspects to the job, and the priest will require further training, new knowledge and new skills.

There are problems with this approach. Continuing ministerial education could then be conceived as 're-tooling'. There are now 'no jobs for life' (an ironic phrase for a Christian priest to hear), so we are faced with periodic re-training. Moreover, as people become older, they become less open to re-education, and so we are all faced in this perspective with the prospect of diminishing usefulness and redundancy. We must ask, are the two terms 're-training' and 'redundancy' an adequate horizon against which to understand what is the nature of being a priest? This is not a new problem: Trollope gives a fictionalized account of the emergence of this instrumental view and the generational clash it represented in the Barchester novels.

There is much to be said for being given the tools for the job. One needs relevant knowledge and practical skills, and these both change for any given task in society. But there are two related problems with making such an approach central to training priests. The first is the list of appropriate learning and abilities is open-ended, for the agenda is set, and is continually being re-set, by outside circumstances. We are therefore caught in a situation where formal agreement is impossible. One can argue over what the syllabus should contain, and in practice it is impossible even to agree over what might constitute a core. What should be

left out? How can one set of demands be given priority over another? This leads to a further aspect to this problem: given future, as yet unknown, calls upon the priest, what should have been included in anticipation? For one of the features of the way of thinking I am sketching is what has been called 'negative responsibility': there are no clear boundaries to your responsibility, and you are held responsible for things you do not know and the skills you do not possess, being implicated in the things you have failed to anticipate and the things you have not prevented. In terms of training, this means not only continual re-education, but also a state of permanent anxiety and a mental framework of anticipating failure.

These issues point to the second problem: there is no clear idea or conception of what priesthood is underwriting this approach. Yet without some preceding idea, there is no basis upon which to select and prioritize and limit responsibility in a reasonable fashion, and we cannot easily agree upon such an idea: there are too many inputs. The approach outlined simply assumes that being a priest consists in performing a number of tasks, and from that all else follows. In practice, the tasks deemed appropriate come largely from an un-thought-out inherited idea, one which was supposed to have been replaced by the newer, task-oriented concept. So it is a big step to assume that being a priest consists in performing tasks, and it may need more thought. For concentrating upon tasks does not give a clue as to what being a priest is, any more than it tells you what a mother or father is, or a husband or wife, or, for that matter, a scholar or a leader. These are better described as vocations, and a person is not equipped for a vocation so much as formed, so that he or she grows in certain capacities, virtues and dispositions.

This distinction is crucial in contemporary education: we focus upon equipping for tasks and not upon formation, the creation of certain types of person. Formation takes place, in schools and universities and elsewhere, but we do not concentrate on the processes involved as such, nor do we try to think about them and describe them, so that they are at best haphazard, and take place in the margins of instruction – rather than the other way about, when the teaching of knowledge and skills is conceived as contributing to the task of formation. Instead, we tend towards a position where the anxieties created by ever-changing external demands, and the potentially infinite responsibility of having to anticipate those changes, obstruct the formation of a godly character, as we are steadily reduced to fragmented and, in the end, defeated selves.

II

That is enough about the Hind Report. What do we know about the formation of persons and, in particular, of priests? How are people created who are sufficiently well-formed that they are able to respond within a demanding, changing and potentially unlimited world? In a word, how do people become focussed, not on themselves but on God, so that '...among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found' (4th Sunday after Easter)?

Here I am proposing a second model, on the basis of the following hypothesis: that Christians are made, created through hard work, and are not found in the world, as if they were a natural kind. We are more like fishermen than we are like lobsters; we learn the business we are engaged in, we do not know it by instinct. Christians undergo an apprenticeship; they are formed through joining in small-scale collective practices, through undergoing disciplines that form habits and dispositions. As we are formed, we develop character, and become better capable of sustaining and sharing these formative ways of life. This presents a different view of education from that of training for a task: it has a sense of time passed and growth built in, rather than being held hostage by the future; the focus is on the group rather than the individual, though the individual does not disappear; and the central concept is that of change and development of character rather than acquisition of skills. In brief, this account of education is not instrumental but participatory.

Participating in such practices involves how you spend your time, and in whose company, and will result in the participant being changed; altered in what you know, and want, and remember. Such changes are a good part of the point of the exercise, in contrast to the instrumental view, in this sort of education the relationships formed and things undertaken together share in the end aimed at. This is important: it means that in participating, you are changed; you become someone different to who you would have become had you not taken this path. And this creates one of the standard perceived problems of modern Christian life: why should one want to join in such a process, given that one will not at that point desire to become someone who one is not?

That is to put the problem in thoroughly individualistic terms, but such an autonomous, self-making self is part of the modern way of viewing things. The autonomous self is the actor who requires skills and knowledge in order to fulfil a task; this does not involve transformation. But it is not an adequate picture by itself. Something has to come from outside the self. Part of the solution is the fact that no human is wholly independent of others, and one is drawn into new relationships and possibilities through the discernments and desires of others. By and large, one becomes a Christian because people one takes seriously themselves take Christianity seriously; one is drawn in through these other lives. And once drawn in, a priestly vocation is discerned by others, and grown into by the person identified.

So the small scale practices I spoke of in terms of formation are made up of other people, and work in terms of attraction, of interest evoked, energies put to work, habits learned and sustained, dispositions created, always in common. People are made through small institutions made up of others, little 'machines' composed of human beings, of which the smallest is probably the married couple and the family. And from this angle, a church may be conceived in a similar way, but at a larger scale.

III

In distinguishing formational from instrumental education, I have suggested that the formative processes are not simply means to an end but are part of the task. The vocation of a priest is in fact two-fold: it involves the on-going formation of the person, and that is my focus in this paper. But the task of the priest is not self-focussed; it is to sustain a community and a set of collective practices which themselves contribute to the formation of persons, habits and dispositions which will make a difference to the population and place within which that church is found. Some of these practices are liturgical, and others are pastoral. The former focus directly upon the formation of Christian persons in a concentrated fashion, and the latter in a more dispersed fashion. For there are many human collective practices which may go better or worse, and part of the priest's task is to pay attention to these wider practices, to encourage and support living well and to confront and to solace the effects of ill-living. These wider practices are legion, involving the forms of life of every age group, whether at home, at work or at leisure. And the claim is, both for the priest and for the laity, that the narrow liturgical practices are intimately connected with the flourishing of the wider, everyday practices because the liturgies 'model' a way of being human, both in the sense of representing and shaping. In short, the priest is formed through doing the job, through performing the tasks of a priest within a community – both a church community and a parish – and through that continuing formation, he or she will be fulfilling his or her task.

The *Book of Common Prayer* shares this perspective, and the Ordinal, 'The Ordering of Priests' in particular offers an account filling out this understanding. The Bishop's Exhortation focuses on the matter of formation more or less to the exclusion of consideration of tasks, and identifies three interconnected habits which mark the priestly life: prayer, the study of Scripture, and innocency of life. Prayer is introduced in this context primarily to indicate – as we have already seen – that these activities cannot be self-motivated: '...ye

cannot have a mind and will thereto [the tasks of the Office] of yourselves; for that will and ability is given of God alone: therefore ye ought and have need, to pray earnestly for his holy Spirit'. The purpose of the study of Scripture is practical, to undertake work pertaining to the salvation of man, through teaching and exhortation on the one hand and, on the other, through living 'a life agreeable to the same': reading and learning the Scriptures is the means of compassing so weighty a work, and there is no other. And by innocency of life, the priest, and indeed his family, is to set an example, so that he demonstrates what he teaches, embodying the truths and the resources of faith in Christ that are learnt through prayer and reading Scripture. The exhortation sums up the priestly calling in this fashion: 'We have good hope...that you will continually pray to God the Father, by the mediation of our only Saviour Jesus Christ, for the heavenly assistance of the Holy Ghost; that, by daily reading and weighing of the Scriptures, ye may wax riper and stronger in your Ministry; and that ye may so endeavour yourselves, from time to time, to sanctify the lives of you and yours, and to fashion them after the Rule and Doctrine of Christ, that ye may be wholesome and godly examples and patterns for the people to follow'.

IV

These are the indications given concerning the habits needed to construct the dispositions that, sufficiently shared, will allow us to meet 'all the changes and chances of this mortal life' (Collect from the Communion Service). These are serious demands; how do we begin to fulfil them?

Having approached these matters in the perspective of formation, I am brought inescapably to reflect on my own experience. For if you are changed by doing the job and, as I have argued, part of doing the job is bound up with that change, some part of ministry will include reflecting in public on what has happened to you in the course of time. Part of the task of a priest is to be able to give a description of the processes of formation that he or she is caught up in and expresses; that indeed is in part how doctrine is sounded out, how others are encouraged, and how a certain form of exemplification is lived. This approach may be summed up as regarding the Christian life, and the life of a priest as an expression of that life, in terms of an experiment in Providence: the life of faith provides its own evidence over time. Reflecting upon growing in understanding is an aspect of this process of formation. In the course of my own 'experiment', I have been led to think about some basic matters, ones I had taken for granted.

Let us start with the importance of the Daily Offices. The *Book of Common Prayer* talks of prayer and the daily reading of Scripture; in fact, they are to be combined, the Scriptures being read in the context of worship so that the worshipper is confronted by the mind of God in Scripture, and is read by the text quite as much as reading it. Saying the Offices is a collective practice, conducted on a small scale, sometimes as small as a single person, but not for that conceived as a solitary occupation. The point of this repeated exercise is to allow the Bible to be a force in our lives, a resource that will act on us and change us. To some extent we have lost sight of the Bible as such an active resource, and then some of us wonder why we say the Office (or even give up saying it). The Office is conceived as a means of forming Christian character, and Scripture is the engine at the heart of this process. You do not have to take this on trust, in a superstitious, credulous or idolatrous fashion; the important thing is to make the experiment; try it and see what results.

Reading Scripture in the Daily Office raises a set of further questions, however, of coverage, familiarity and understanding. These remarks in particular are necessarily compressed in expression. A preliminary step is to read the Bible systematically, and to this end, I have altered the lectionary at Morning Prayer. This is a part of recovering an acquaintance with Scripture, upon which more sophisticated lectionaries can then play. But such an acquaintance remains superficial without further study and guidance. The *Prayer Book*

Ordinal slips in a phrase about 'diligence in such studies as help the knowledge of the Scriptures', and such diligence should emerge in preaching and teaching. Acquaintance with the Scriptures should be encouraged amongst the laity, but exposition and teaching are clearly more a priest's task. There is a purpose then in developing ways of understanding the various books of the Bible. The method of approach varies according to the book; the idea is to find ways of elucidating the mind of the author (or authors), and the methods of the editors, in order to show the structuring insights that each text is organized around, insights that may be termed the 'logic' of Scripture. These insights or ideas vary enormously in focus and means from book to book. The logic includes how parts of the Bible use other parts, how the writers in question engage with and apply Scripture, for this offers models for our engagement.

So, to speak of my own ministry, it has taken me a long time to perceive the interest of the Daily Offices, and longer still to recast the lectionary for Morning Prayer. I have preached short exploratory series on books of the Bible, of varying length and focus, detail and depth; (and, more recently, we have taken to reproducing the series in pamphlet form, for members of the congregation to take). This work has a triple purpose; first, it represents my own attempt to engage more deeply with Scripture in the context of worship; then, an attempt to teach what I have learnt from that engagement; and last, it offers an exemplification to members of the congregation of the small-scale activities that are possible in this direction. This is not a matter of expertise, nor is it an ungodly worship of the Bible; it is a matter of exploring one way that faith may seek understanding.

V

However, these developments by themselves are insufficient. I had imagined that a critical engagement with Scripture would lead to increasing application, essentially by analogy: from scriptural examples of how Scripture was put to work in new contexts we may learn to do likewise. This is not wrong, but it neglects an additional factor. When preaching, one does not only expound Scripture; one also addresses contemporary topics, responding to circumstances. In responding, the preacher weaves together materials and resources from a variety of sources, including Scripture. There is a lens through which we read Scripture, to put it to work in our world and gain access to its force of discernment.

The notion of a lens through which to read Scripture reintroduces the problem of whether the agenda is being set from without; are we being taken over by contemporary concerns, put to work by Canaan's gods, rather than by the one true God of Israel? No doubt, a good deal of Christian thinking is shaped in this manner, being organized not by thought that emerges from a tradition of worship, but by thought that bears the mark of another, secular intelligence.

This opposition is however too simple. We need rather to ask, what sort of tradition are we formed in, that constitutes our lens for reading and applying Scripture? If we read and used imaginatively writings of people who themselves had been formed by prayer and the study of Scripture, and who had put to work what they had learnt in interpreting their world anew, we might get round this stark opposition of Scripture and the Modern World, and see how to create a common Christian mind in the present time – a mind that might sustain you as a priest, rather than one which will lead to you dispersing your energies. We want to learn how to create an Anglican mind.

I am drawn therefore to propose a course of reading as one model of continuing priestly formation. Once again, this contains a biographical element. It is important to say that Anglican formation is not confined to reading. It may be found in the study of architecture and the appreciation of music, in responding painting or embroidery, or to poetry or folklore, and in other expressions of the human mind. For we are all engaged

with aspects of ordinary life and how they yield the sacramental, how they point to and engage with God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and through the human spirit. But I read books.

When I reflect on the writers whom I have used to think with and the books that have allowed me to engage with aspects of my ministry that have confronted me at different points, a fairly traditional set of names and works emerges. To begin with, there is the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662). This should not be treated as a fetish, but it serves as a remarkably complete manual for a practising priest. It offers a basic check-list of the issues to be considered, the kind of responses that might be offered, and an appropriate frame of mind for engagement in them. This book helps shape both my practice and my preaching, offering resources and analogies for most situations one meets with.

Aside from the *BCP*, these are some names which have assisted my reflections: Hooker, Joseph Butler, Jane Austen, Coleridge, Ruskin, George Eliot, F.H. Bradley, T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, R.G. Collingwood. This is not a closed list, a canon, but is meant rather to be exemplary, in the sense of asking you to reflect on your own influences. There are a cloud of names that can be drawn in, and it is an interesting exercise to reflect, draw up lists, and share them with your colleagues. These writers are a pretty cerebral lot, and eclectic. Not all of them prayed and read the Bible for their whole lives, though most of them did, and those who did so less were influenced by those who did so more. Why are these names important? They are not primarily theological writers, but they are marked by a particular kind of Christian engagement with the life of the society that surrounded them, an engagement that is both critical and positive. Each of them sees Christian engagement with the world as a source of common life and flourishing, as does the *Prayer Book* (which they would all have taken for granted). They are each in their way concerned with the creation of a public space of action that is simultaneously a sphere for godly perception and for participation. It is worth adding that every writer named sees their world as in some sort of crisis; there is no complacency, and aspects of that world are criticized as corrupt and corrupting. Yet their writings are repeated attempts to make sense of the new, to adapt and to grow, without being overwhelmed, dispersed or defeated. So in no case is there an attempt to exclude God from the everyday, to make him the exclusive concern of the faithful, and to give up on everyday life; instead, there is a continuing project to create, elaborate and share a simultaneously faithful and moral vision.

VI

Let me try to sum up. There is nothing radical proposed here, for I am doing no more than suggest we should start with the resources in our tradition. A common enough illusion is that tradition means nothing because it is particular, and truth comes in general form, so we are continually being asked to jettison the past and begin again anew on the basis of principles, principles which are often ill-articulated. I am not however interested in advocating a reactionary clinging to the past, but an exploration of tradition as an experimental approach to the present. So I suggest we take seriously saying the Daily Offices, as a collective process if possible; that we focus upon reading the Scriptures; and that we develop aids to reflection, through reading and, if possible, through discussion. This is how we might consider carrying on the vision of priestly formation contained in the *Book of Common Prayer*. We undertake practices that form our dispositions and at the same time grow in an Anglican tradition of wisdom; an interpretation of the world that neither rejects nor is ruled by it, but which allows an increasing engagement. In short, we need self-

¹ Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity* 1593-7, Butler's *Analogy of Religion* 1736, Austen's *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*, Coleridge's *Confessions of an Inquiring Mind*, *Aids to Reflection*, *On Church and State*, Ruskin's *Unto this Last*, Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Bradley's *Ethical Studies*,...Collingwood's *Autobiography* and *The Principles of Art*.

² I draw attention to the recent book by David Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, Cambridge University Press 2007.

consciously to develop (or re-learn) an Anglican tradition of interpretation, a tradition that does not separate Bible reading and prayer from the world but which, on the contrary, joins them together as a way of being in the world.

The overall purpose of such work is to create a public space of judgement, a distinctive way of engaging in and contributing to shaping our common life in all its aspects: wealth, employment, education, health, leisure, power, law, environment, family, policing and so forth. I have not talked at all about this practical work, and yet this is the purpose of the continuing formation of priests. I have solely be concerned with construing the concept of formation, which the *Prayer Book* focuses through prayer, the reading of Scripture – including ‘diligence in such studies as help the knowledge of the Scriptures’ – and the sanctification of lives. It is no small thing in which we are engaged; the challenge is to know how to set about it in a manageable and sustainable way.

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³ After Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgement*, Eerdmans 2005.