

The need for a Eucharistic Presider

(Mr) Vianney Shiel AM, St. Kevin's Parish, Lower Templestowe, Vic.

The devolvement of duties in various professions has certainly been evident over the past 100 years. For example, back in the early 20th century the only person who could give drugs was a doctor. An ambulance driver or a nurse were not allowed to do so. But then society recognised the fact that patients were dying unnecessarily on their way to hospital in an ambulance or in a private hospital while waiting for a doctor to come. These situations were even more prevalent in remote areas. So, society decided that this exclusive doctor's responsibility should be devolved to others who had suitable academic and skills background and who had undertaken suitable additional training.

So now we have Paramedics and nurses who are allowed to administer drugs and, in doing so, help to save more lives.

Over the years there has been a continual shortage of nurses – it is not an easy job and needs a special mind set and dedication. In order to reduce the shortage, society decided that some of the lower level tasks requiring less training and skill could be devolved even further. So other levels were established in the nursing area – a fully trained nurse with authority to give drugs became known as a Division 1 Nurse and the level of Division 2 Nurse was established having slightly less medical training and without the authority to give drugs. Further the position of PCA (Personal Care Attendant) was established, having even less medical training. So, these days, in a hospital or nursing home, there may be a Div 1 nurse in charge of two Div 2 nurses and three PCAs, all working together on a particular hospital floor or in a small nursing home.

The above is an example of only one profession where the devolvement of duties and responsibilities has occurred. We have a chronic shortage of priests in the Australian Catholic Church so, to ease this shortage and better serve the needs of the People of God, why can't more of the duties and responsibilities of priests be devolved?

There is a large amount of commentary around about the declining attendance at Sunday Mass and the possible reasons for it, two of which seem to be "it's boring" and "I am not involved". Well, what better way to get people involved than by getting them to do things. But, you might say it is already hard enough to get people to help. Yes, but the more different tasks that need doing the more likely it is that one will get more people with different backgrounds and skills involved.

And just an aside on the "involvement thing". If it is considered that the Liturgy of the Eucharist is the "pinnacle" prayer of thanksgiving, then why is it that the congregation are still just "spectators" at this time. Surly, in this day and age, the congregation should be involved as much as possible. We are not still back in the days when most of the congregation could not read and, in particular, could not read Latin. These days, all of the congregation could read the Eucharistic Prayer in their own language, perhaps with the exception of the words of consecration. Why don't we? Why can't we be more involved?

There are many areas of society these days where people take on volunteering along with their full time job. In the Church, the position of Lector could be considered as one such situation. As well as that, some people take on a part time job with their full time job. The councillors on all municipal councils are an example of this situation. One person may be a school teacher and a councillor, another a doctor and a councillor. Why are these people on the council? Well, firstly of course, because they wish to be and secondly because the people of the municipality think that these people have the interest, education and skills to be good representatives in municipal matters.

The duties of a person in the position of Homilist are fairly obvious – to prepare and deliver the Homily at Mass. They would be responsible to the Parish Priest who would always be available for

mentoring. Perhaps as part of their initial training the Parish Priest would need to approve their homily for a given period of time.

The duties of a person in the position of Eucharistic Presider would be to read the Eucharistic Prayer (preferably, in my opinion which I have noted earlier, with the congregation) and to perform the Consecration – and that is all. The Eucharistic Presider would NOT take on any other duties or responsibilities of the Parish Priest.

I think this is a time when we need to be calling on the small talents and capabilities of the People of God rather than the multi-talents and many capabilities which just don't seem to be there – hence the current lack of priests. Many small pieces come together to make a large piece. For myself personally I would be very happy and honoured to become a Eucharistic Presider to help my community. I think I have the background and skill to be able to do it. But I would never consider becoming a priest – there is just no way I could hear confession or comfort a person in their dying hours, just to mention a couple of things that a priest does. These parts are just not me.

Where does this leave Parish Priests? Particularly for those priests, especially in rural Australia with its great distances, who have multiple parishes to serve, I would hope with far less exhaustion on Monday (even through to Tuesday) and better mental health. It would stop the need for them to rush from parish to parish every Friday/Saturday. They could go from parish to parish each week and the Eucharistic Presider could give the community the full participation in the Liturgy of the Mass rather than just the cut down version of a Communion Service on the other weeks. In more remote communities this could mean having Mass every Sunday instead of maybe once every four or six weeks.

The Parish Priest would act as a mentor, guide and coordinator of all the Lay Ministers in his parishes including the proposed Homilist and Eucharistic Presider.

It is interesting to note that in the Rite of Baptism we are all baptised “priest, prophet and king”. However, it would appear that the “priest” referred in the Baptism Rite is not the same “priest” that we have in current society. If this difference is indeed the case, then the Baptism Rite needs to be changed. If there is no difference, then what is the problem with all Catholics doing more “priestly” duties?

So, I would ask that the Plenary Council petition Rome to add the positions of Homilist and Eucharistic Presider to the Lay Ministry.

Obviously suitable selection criteria and training courses would need to be developed. So, I would further ask that the Plenary Council recommend to the Australian Bishop Conference that as soon as Rome adds the positions of Homilist and Eucharistic Presider to the Lay Ministry, the Australian Catholic Church begin the drafting of suitable selection criteria and training courses for these positions.

And, as a final comment, I would hope that the position of Eucharistic Presider would be available to suitable male and female lay people as well as, of course, religious brothers and nuns.