

“It’s Not About Me”

Priests’ Perception of Occupational Meaning

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Abstract

Twelve Episcopal priests address questions of role function and meaning through semi-structured interview. Participants are rectors, associate rectors, and priests-in-charge at various church communities in Chicago’s western and southern suburbs. Priests acknowledge the presence of conflicting tasks and expectations within the role, yet do not accord these a central shaping influence. Instead, five key attributes of effective, optimal role performance are identified through the interviews: *listening, praying, laughing, teaching, delegating*. Each attribute is examined in terms of its contribution to the day-to-day functions and overall meaning of priests’ work. A central, integrating theme (“It’s Not About Me”) emerges from the data on role attributes, and implications for continued research on questions of occupational meaning for a wider, more diverse sample of clergy are discussed.

Introduction

Any church is a business. I wish it weren’t, but the lights need to get electricity, you need to have heat, you need to have a building that’s not falling apart, it needs to be accessible to people . . . [I]n the priesthood, we talk about getting a “Call.” Now, when I get the call in the middle of the night because someone’s in the E.R. with a heart attack, when I get those calls it’s when you really know you’re where you need to be. When you’re doing administrative stuff around here, it’s kind of hard to be in contact with the Gospel all day, but boy, when you get a phone call and it’s time to go – you know, you go, you’re ready (P1; the priests of the study are designated by “P” followed by a number).

[1] What do priests identify as the core meaning of their work? In the light of its measurable professional qualities (Marty; Smith), and one’s personal vision of role meaning, how do pastors perceive and act upon their role requirements? These questions animate this study, and derive from a wider set of questions and preliminary data on intrarole conflict and meaning among “helping” professionals. The twelve priests of this study are a sub-sample of employed professionals in people-oriented roles and whose jobs require them to continuously integrate administrative and personalized role tasks. Questions about role conflict and occupational meaning are inextricable from analyses of role structure and performance in the helping professions since all such roles combine instrumental and affective elements. The work demands systematic efficiency as well as emotional involvement. For priests, this is a particularly salient connection due to the centrality of the “calling” to their occupation (Gross; Fichter; Smith). Responding fully to the “calling” means that ministers learn to perform, and then to appropriately balance, the pragmatic tasks of the role with its elements of personalized “emotional labor” (Hochschild). A less-than-full response to one’s “calling,” where the role balance-point and its concomitant linkage to organizational structure remain unrealized, leads frequently to role disengagement or “burn out” (Dewey; Cameron).

[2] Studies of the clergy abound in the sociology of occupations and professions, from the classic works of Blizzard (1954; 1956; 1959), Gross, and Fichter, to contemporary occupational analyses in the manner of Marty, Christopherson, or Cameron. Across the varied base of this literature, the

common theme is the complex structure of the priest's social role, and the inherent difficulty of balance in the performance of its multifarious responsibilities. This role complexity is a product of its structural and cultural location "within and between two sometimes complementary and sometimes competing norms" (Marty: 74), and it forms the ground of this qualitative investigation into the priesthood. The overarching inquiry spans a series of so-called "helping" professions (all marked by a similar role complexity) and focuses on the possible expression of intrarole conflict at the nexus of interest in norms of professional efficiency and those of service to others.

[3] The myriad and dynamic aspects of the minister's role have long-attracted scholars. It combines the mystery of divinity and the efficiency of the manager, the revolving wheel of duty to church and congregant, and the interpersonal focus of the spiritual healer. Samuel Blizzard's seminal work on this kaleidoscopic role brings a disciplined, scholarly curiosity to this panoply of shifting role elements. Where Blizzard's work (1959) posits, among other things, a hierarchy of role tasks and elements cascading from the "master role," my stance holds the role as a fluctuating and "integrating" (1958b) combination of traits. What he terms the "master role," and tends to see as stationary and hieratic is, in this work, the entirety of one's shifting and developing role demands. It is this quality Martin Marty depicts as being caught-up in the stormy confluence of social norms and cultural expectations, continuously shifting between complement and conflict.

Centralizing Role Meaning

[4] Traditionally, a vocation to ministry presumes the centrality of service (see Ignatius Loyola on this point). In the lives of priests, this assumption holds, but in a special and limited way. These data show that the norms of service trump all other role tasks and responsibilities except those in two discrete domains: (1) the pastoral emergency; and (2) the worship ritual. All priestly role domains and daily situations contain an ever-shifting, and often-competing combination of administrative and pastoral activities. Each priest runs a church, overseeing the development and maintenance of a multi-layered organization. Simultaneously, each offers a diverse array of pastoral services to congregants and members of the wider community. Priests feel the incredible press of these competing tasks, and work continuously to reconcile them. Although a steady increase in the scope and array of role tasks is common to all professions (Fichter; Hage), for priests called to negotiate the "minister's dilemma" (Blizzard 1956) the press of the ensuing intrarole conflict is often particularly severe. The rector of a mid-sized, middle-class, suburban parish, in her job more than a decade, speaks cogently of this dilemma:

It's when a dozen things are happening at once that it's hardest to prioritize, and also the most tiring. The hardest part of my job is the emotional work that I do, and that tires me out. That's the hardest part, trying to balance that, and other people's neediness, with what I need to get done . . . I think, especially for women in my generation, life has always been about multi-tasking (as they call it now). We didn't call it that then, but raising the children, cooking the supper, getting the house clean, all were conglomerated, and running relationships above or interwoven with that was just all taken for granted (P8).

[5] The general purpose of the study is to enhance our understanding of priests' responsive perception to the demands of a complex and difficult role. This study is the first part of a larger inquiry in which I examine the potential shaping effect of role meaning on the ways priests perform their role. What do priests identify as the central meaning of their work, and (how) does this perception affect priests' enactment of the role? Knowledge about the structural and symbolic properties of the modern professions has been accruing rapidly since the mid-twentieth century

(Blizzard 1956; Fichter; Sorensen; Marty; Rakoff; Christopherson; O'Connor and Macdonald). The scholarly dialogue about questions of meaning and paid work, and particularly for the clergy and other service-oriented (“helping”) professions, centers on the relative contributions of social and individual factors to the generation of occupational knowledge (Abbott; Blackmore). Unsurprisingly, this is a domain of great intellectual contest, including the question of whether the clergy constitute a professional group at all (Bryman).

[6] These priests seem sharply aware of the changing symbolic nature of their job, and of the general impact of overarching social patterns as well. The twelve Episcopal ministers forming the basis of this study represent church communities in suburbs to the south or west of the City of Chicago. A suburban sample reflects shifting American demographics, and is a conscious departure from traditional conceptualizations of church and community interplay as being urban or rural (e.g., Blizzard 1954, 1959). One associate rector of a large church community west of the city derisively notes the quaintness of the “Jan Karon model [of the minister].” (This is not the predominant view in the sample, however, since one-quarter claim the designation “Cure of Souls” as the best descriptor of themselves as priests.)

[7] George Herbert Mead, one of the first American sociologists to connect social structure and roles to the generation of micro-phenomena such as meaning and identity, gave a dual lens to the scientific study of work – one continuing to serve occupational analysts well as they investigate the properties of complex and often ambiguous roles (Kleinman; Smith; Woods; Kimball; Christopherson; Golden). Mead identified social interaction as the integrative nexus between the structural and symbolic properties of roles; setting the stage for the development of research epistemology incorporating the two scales. In this study, I examine what priests actually do in their everyday work lives, and how this interaction is conditioned by the structural and symbolic elements of the role. Beyond the anticipated contribution to the theoretical literature in occupational sociology, the study’s conclusions may be useful as a basis for graduate and professional education in ministry.

Method

[8] Qualitative data are gathered from twelve Episcopal priests using intensive, semi-structured interviews conducted at each participant’s church office. Interview data are transcribed and coded immediately after each session, and contextualized using observational field data. The coding schema identifies key variables, hypotheses, and data patterns; yet the data shape the analysis with a force equivalent to the initial questions and assumptions. This “grounded theory” approach allows the hypotheses to guide the research without overly restricting its findings, while the data themselves act as the generative ground of knowing (Strauss). Potential participants are randomly selected from publicly-available diocesan lists of priests and rectors in suburban Chicago. The interviews occur at each church, usually in priests’ offices but occasionally in the chapel itself. Each interview is complemented by observation of the physical environment, and in most cases, of the social activities occurring there.

[9] The sample consists of twelve Episcopal priests: seven rectors, three associate rectors, and two “priests-in charge” (an internal designation for rectors of mission parishes). All participants work in parishes within a 50-mile radius of the Chicago city limits. To control variation in this relatively small sample, I focus exclusively on Episcopal priests. This allows me to interview priests of different ages, and of both sexes, and yet remain within a relatively centrist theological domain. All participants are white. As this inquiry is designed for an expanding participant base, future data will be gathered across diverse clerical experiences and traits to ascertain whether the study’s findings are

germane to clergy beyond the sample group. The random selection of participants into this sample of twelve results in an array of “kinds” of churches; a sketchy spectrum of socioeconomic and political orientations are impossible to use as variables in the enunciation of patterns in the data. The sample is all-suburban, yet contains mission, mid-sized struggling, mid-sized growing, and large, affluent congregations.

[10] By chance, the interview period overlapped the combustion of energy and conviction around the ordination of an openly-gay Episcopal bishop. Thus, the political character of each church community and the stance of the rector towards inclusion becomes abundantly clear to me (even though I never ask about it). Every participant raises the issue during our conversation, appearing to relish the task of reflecting on the implications for the church community and for one’s own motive and behavior. In that sample of 12 exists a full spectrum of opinion on the inclusion issue, yet the instrument is not designed to compare those “accidental” data with information on general political and economic characteristics of the church communities.

Essential Attributes of the Priest’s Role

[11] During the interview, I ask priests to identify a number of key attributes of an “effective priest or minister.” The range of these attributes is fairly wide, with those identified by three or more participants considered as “essential.” Essential attributes are the baseline ideas about the role. They form part of the shared understanding of the structure and meaning of priest’s role. Attributes exist on the supra-personal scale, and these priests tend to use them as internal measures of their own individual integrity and effectiveness. This subjective measure of one’s role performance combines with the attributes’ structural function to create a common base of role meaning. Function and meaning are central qualities of all social action, but their usual presentation as dichotomous variables is problematic for role theory in general and for the analysis of occupations in particular (Weber; Blackmore). These data are a combination of functional (“What do you do?”) and symbolic (“Why do you do that?”) role elements. In this study, a “mixed methods” approach (Creswell) allows one to gather both levels of data. An integrative epistemological position facilitates the combination of structural and symbolic data, and helps form the first steps in a general theory of people-centered, “helping” professions. In many critical respects, the minister represents an apothecic form of the helping professional; the role brings together a host of diverse responsibilities under the umbrella of a sacred healer/mediator. My selection of priests as the initial sample base for this inquiry is deliberate, and I expect it to function as the comparative ideal.

[12] The interview is “semi-structured,” which means that dialogue and focused conversation are its foundation. These interactions allow me to elicit a rich nest of conceptual signifiers, and to compare the frequency and variety of their usage across the sample. The participants repeatedly use certain terms in their identification of the key attributes; words blending function and meaning. Using their experience and their objective understanding of the role, these practitioners believe a good priest or effective minister *listens, prays, laughs, teaches, and delegates*. Each essential attribute denotes a measurable action with a central purpose or function in the role. At the same time, each one represents an idea or meaning infusing its performance.

[13] The five essential attributes are rooted in a priest’s seminary training and, in a less attenuated way, in one’s day-by-day work experience. Priests use the attributes as touchstones; continuously crafting and assessing their role performance. The essential attributes help them gauge, and even develop, professional competence; acquiring crucial skills to bridge the troublesome gap between the seminarian’s anticipatory perspective and the experiential knowledge gained as a consequence of performing the priest’s role. Essential (“touchstone”) attributes of the priesthood emerge in full

form as the priest gains this necessary workaday experience. During the interview priests identify attributes they believe they actually possess (albeit in relative measure). They depict attributes as progressively evolving values towards which they continuously strive. I argue that the act of articulating essential attributes shows role competence even as it reveals important sites of role challenge. Supported by ample experiential narrative and as the focus of intensive interview/dialogue, these five attributes are the idealized outcome of priests' sustained and critical reflection on their role. Even as priests recognize their relativity, the indispensability of the attributes remains unquestioned, and each must be expressed for a priest to perform the role well. They ensure balanced action in a role comprising a host of potentially-competing demands, and they stave off the encroachment of unproductive conflict or "burnout" (Dewey; Cameron). The associate rector of an affluent and growing parish in a suburban enclave takes pains to elucidate this particular function of the priestly attributes:

So, I don't do anything when I'm home even if I need to. I just won't do it. I've got a wife and four kids, so when I'm home – I'm home. So, that's it, managing time is a huge one. And then, the third one – which should probably be first – I think you have to be a person who prays. I worked for a rector at the last church I was at who was completely fried. I mean burned out! He was not able to receive anything from anybody, even good stuff. "Gee, that was a great sermon." "Yeah, it was all right." (Shrugs to mimic the "burned out" rector.) Or, "You're a very effective evangelist!" "Just doing my job" (P7).

[14] These words reflect the perspective of a priest out of contact with the essential qualities of the role. As Joseph Fichter, in his classic explication of faith-based work, notes:

One does not ordinarily think of religion as a branch of "economic activity"; nevertheless, the full-time religious functionary is in a sense an "employee" of the Church (8).

The specter of role disengagement ("burnout") stalks these priests in the form of the seemingly-endless queue of tasks, and the responsive shape-shifting necessary to perform them well. I initially assumed that priests' chief source of intrarole conflict lay in the management of this task diversity. Yet, the robust patterns in the narrative data show that pursuing at least one of the five essential attributes helps a priest to manage, even routinize, intrarole conflict. Effective clergy can articulate the meaning of the role in terms of key attributes, and use them to monitor and adjust their role performance. Minimizing the pressure of competing tasks allows a priest to focus on the meaning of the role, and one's own vision of it. An established rector of an urban parish in a problem-plagued downtown area talks gently, during the interview, about the lengthy process of listening to his parishioners' views on changes he proposed to the century-old church interior. His use of the "listening" attribute facilitated a strengthened bond between the parishioners and himself, and allowed him to reach a point where attention could be entirely focused on the work to be done to the church and not siphoned off into long-term resentment and in-fighting. Similarly, a rector of a smaller parish on the other side of the same town used the power of "delegating" to collaborate with the vestry members in revising her job description. The new description allowed her to delimit, and develop, the primary areas of her responsibility, delegating other aspects of the role to others. In the conversation we have about it, she still feels strongly about the necessity of this move, and points to it as the chief reason for her effectiveness in the pastoral role. Indeed, all of these priests continuously emphasize the essential "touchstone" attributes of the role, and every participant identifies at least one of the five as critical to his or her professional success.

Listening

[15] These priests practice active listening, using pastoral interaction as a base of dialogue for ministering. Listening to others (and through reflection, to the self) is arguably the basic foundation of all human interaction. Says one young, female priest-in-charge of a small and struggling congregation on the outskirts of the city:

I think listening is key. You have to be able to not talk so much, and be able to listen. There are people I know in this calling (as well as others) who just really like to hear themselves talk. And I think they should talk less. We have our 10-15 minutes of time at the pulpit and we can talk all we want, but there are other times I think it's just better to keep our mouths shut, or ask some questions (P12).

The sample majority (7 of 12) identifies listening as central to effective role performance. Some participants, once listening emerges as an attribute, want to analyze its components or even its unwelcome concomitants (such as projection):

I mean, as a priest you get a ton of things in projection. People will project anger at their dad, or their mom, or God or anyone else, at the person wearing the clerical collar . . . so, I'd say be able to listen, but at the same time be able to take that and say, "Alright – this part needs to stick; the rest is going right out of my mind, And, I'm not going to even listen to it" (P7).

I think the ability to communicate clearly is very, very helpful. Being able to write well and speak well. Because then you get your point across and hopefully teach it in a way, or present God in a way, that people can understand and accept. Whereas, I've been in churches where the clergy person is just a horrible speaker and people come away frustrated! They want to hear something useful, and if they don't – I'm sure this person thinks they're communicating very clearly, but after going around in a circle three times in half-an-hour, you know . . . (P2).

Participants link listening to good leadership, and tend strongly to view it as an indispensable behavior in the "good priest." All twelve priests share a deeply reflective manner – an almost tangible inner hearkening. They did not begin thinking about the meaning of their role just because I showed up to interview them. In my role as researcher, I realize I have been listening, too, to the fruits of the priests' internal dialogue, and one that pre-dates my appearance in their lives by many years.

Praying

I've read somewhere that the church will actually reward you for doing anything else but praying . . . You need to be doing stuff . . . But, if you're not going to get fired as a rector, it has to be there. It's spiritual work, and it's the hard part. And, it's usually what gets squeezed out first (P7).

[16] Seeking active communion with God through prayer, meditation, or reflection arises as another of the essential attributes. The data on prayer are quirky; rich with meaning, but terribly uneven at the same time. Participants, when asked about the essential qualities of a good, effective priest, either noted prayer immediately, or left it till the end, almost as an afterthought. Not every priest identifies prayer as an attribute; none of the women do. The data are not geared to explain this phenomenon, but it certainly points to an important area for continued investigation.

[17] Ironically, many priests not only find it challenging to find a regular time and place to pray, but must face and resolve its implicit devaluation by other community members. The priest's role as a

worship leader, “mediator of the sacred” (Eliade), is never questioned. I think that has to do with worship being an active, public performance of the role. Time to pray or to reflect in private seems not to be accepted so readily in the church community – even by many of the priests themselves. They value it, but do not pray nearly as often as they would like to. Says one of the older, more experienced pastors, while indicating the doorway to the chapel in his nineteenth century wood and stone church building:

(Each day) I spend probably half-an-hour to an hour in there on my knees. And mostly struggling to allow God to love me, you know to feel loved. So, that’s one of my big sources of power and strength (P5).

Another elder rector, presiding over a small south-suburban congregation, identifies private prayer as the most essential element of the role:

I’ve been reading morning and evening prayer pretty much everyday for 40 years. I think I would not have lasted without that. Now, the exact time when it might be scheduled will vary; I do it as I can work it in – but I will do it, and I will work it in . . . even if it’s perfunctory (and sometimes it will be), it still has to be there . . . if you don’t feel like it, it’s probably even more important (P11).

[18] More research is necessary before we can draw any conclusion about the role of private and public prayer among clergy; it is clearly essential, yet there is much about its place that is deeply ambiguous. It appears to be highly valued, but not always practiced. In this group of twelve clergy, there emerges a very clear sense of private prayer as a kind of luxury or, conversely, as the object of some militancy. I am uncertain how to explain the fact that none of the five women in the sample mentioned it at all. Do female clergy feel a stronger pressure to lead an “active” ministry? And, if so, why? Among the male clergy, it is the older, more established priests who are most ready to profess the value of private, regular prayer time. The younger men understand and perhaps yearn for this time, but several actually tell me they would feel embarrassed to be “caught” praying or reading scripture in the office *as if they were not working*.

It’s very frustrating, it’s a grave source of frustration . . . I think that’s our dilemma: we need to be both scholars and pastors, and once upon a time you could do that, I guess you were expected to. We’re now in a model where you want to be out with people, you want to be at the food bank, you want to be building the food bank . . . you want to be doing everything (P9).

[19] This observation would be comparable to discovering that college professors tend to give up on private reading time or feel a need to practice it on the sly. During the interviews, I heard the same joke about prayer time repeatedly: *A priest’s secretary walks into his office without knocking and sees him kneeling in prayer: “Oh good, you’re not busy!” she says*. Clearly, the press of tasks involved in parish life, coupled with this newly ambiguous role of private prayer, makes taking the time for private communion with God very difficult for many priests. As one elder rector of an affluent and growing congregation attests: “Prayer can be a wonderful companion.” Will younger priests, and female priests, be able to stop “doing” long enough to discover this?

Laughing

I think a sense of humor is very helpful. If you start taking it all too seriously and you get bogged down . . . I mean, people are funny. And, they’re annoying. So, you have to be able to make fun of it to a point, to laugh about it, to laugh at yourself . . . (P2).

[20] The indispensable role of humor for the professional life of a pastor emerges in nearly all of the interviews, and laughing represents a kind of survival-value to them. Whether each laughs ruefully or uproariously, 11 of the 12 vote for humor as an essential characteristic of the well-functioning rector. A sense of humor may be a sacred thing, but that possibility is not at the root of its essential value to the parish priest. Laughter helps ease the daily grind; it softens the sharp contours of conflict and refreshes the spirit. Being a priest is an emotionally taxing occupation, and one must find an antidote to the constant pressure of others' needs.

I'll tell you the truth: a lot of times, probably every other day or so, I say to my husband: 'Maybe I'll just quit and go to work in a deli!' . . . I think one of the biggest assets is a sense of humor. You have to be able to laugh at yourself and at situations . . . (P8).

[21] Laughter brings a priest closer to other people and situations, but it also creates a safe distance between them. Many of the priests relate funny incidents, times when they felt closer to people because of a shared sense of humor. Many of the interviews, to my great surprise and interest, are spiced with laughter and joke-telling. Ironic plays on central pastoral metaphors ("Other people feel exactly the same way – that they'd like to strangle the sheep!") abound in the interviews, and laughter follows. The priests are not zany, and many times we speak without any hint of humor; nevertheless, laughter seems always at-the ready.

[22] Valuing humor may be traceable to the Episcopal Church's position as a body of believers in the middle between the Roman Catholic Church and the various Protestant denominations. The internal structure strives for mediated democracy, and the careful eschewing of any strict position (the current imbroglio over the anointing of an openly-gay bishop may represent a growing counterweight to this tradition) allows one rector to declare:

My leadership model has always been a collegial model, consensus-building. It's pretty rare, I try not to, well – I'm like everybody: I like to get my way! (laughter) But I realize that you've got to build consensus, for me anyway, to feel comfortable. And I think that falls in line with the church and their understanding of leadership. In the Episcopal Church, we've got a bi-cameral legislative house--the House of Deputies is half-clergy and half-laity – we've made almost an institution of holding together two different viewpoints. The Catholics have always said, 'You're a bunch of Protestants,' and the Protestants have said, 'You're a bunch of Catholics.' And, we've stood in the middle and said, Yes! Isn't it wonderful! (P1).

Teaching

[23] The twelve priests identify, by acclamation, teaching (and its twin, preaching) as an essential attribute of the "effective" and "good" priest. The priest's work all flows towards, or away from, this component, and it may actually be what draws most people to the role. Fully three-quarters of this sample identifies "teacher" as their alternate profession. Seminary-training for the priesthood combines careful instruction and practice in scripture-based teaching (although much less time is apparently spent on preaching). These priests see teaching as an all-encompassing activity, with boundaries that are indistinct and continuous. Preaching, on the other hand, is a special and ceremonial form of teaching. Priests labor to create their weekly sermons at discrete, and usually pre-set, times during the work week, using the scriptural selection of the coming service as the marrow within which a lesson or inspired understanding can arise. Teaching, in contrast, may occur in a formal classroom setting (particularly with new church members), but it is much more likely to

take on an organic, developing character that complements a priest's and congregation's temporal experience.

If I get in the pulpit and just give them what I think is a problem, that's not being faithful to who I am as a priest in the church, because it's not just about bringing my own ideological or political prejudices into the pulpit, it's trying to be faithful to the tradition . . . (P3).

[24] During the worship ritual, teaching becomes "preaching." In the constant run of smaller, more informal settings for religious instruction, the priest's work emerges as "teaching." Preparation for teaching and preaching consumes much of every priest's time. For them, the omnipresent sense of an incomplete sermon or lesson comes with the priestly territory and never really dissipates.

Preaching is an awesome thing to do. There are some weeks when I'm only preaching because you pay me to stand up here on Sunday morning, and I've been struggling all week long and I have absolutely nothing to say . . . and it never fails, that when I'm struggling and I'm in this position only because I have to be that someone will come up to me and say, "Thank you, that's just what I needed to hear." And, it's so clear in those times, when you say, "Ah, it's not about me!" (P1).

[25] Priests need quiet, reflective time to prepare for teaching. Yet, this is precisely what many in today's super-active ministry find hard to achieve. The data are quite clear on this point: if a priest becomes overburdened by the sheer crush of tasks necessary for a strong pastoral and administrative church base, he or she will have precious little time for teaching. If teaching weakens, the base is threatened. For priests in relatively small congregations, this can be a hard issue to adequately address. One priest-in-charge regularly does office tasks such as photocopying and answering the telephone in her tiny church basement cubicle because the main office volunteer is a public school teacher who cannot do much for her during the academic year. This person evinces an overwhelming commitment to strong teaching and to a weekly worship service steeped in tradition and thematic integrity. Finding time for everything without sacrificing the worship ritual and teaching becomes her chief priority. She seems courageous to me; clearly very much alone in her struggle. Contrast her situation with that of many of the sample's well established rectors in thriving, growing congregations:

When I'm teaching, I'm trying to help people explore themselves as unique beings whom God has created and I'm trying to help them understand how God wants to relate them – first in the person of Jesus Christ and then in the power of the Holy Spirit – all under the umbrella of the God the Father creating . . . I think churches miss something if they're not aware that this is a place where people want to grow. In this congregation, I think this is reflected in a high commitment to teaching . . . If you get the right staff, and you're doing the right teaching, you're going to be attracting the right new people and the money issues will take care of themselves (P6).

[26] The focus on teaching and preaching in this rector's words is sincere, yet he is able to afford the luxury of unilateral focus because his church has a large staff to which he delegates much of the administrative detail. I think of "P1," back in her small community church photocopying the week's bulletin, and "P6" with a staff of five and also an associate rector. The size of the congregation and of the paid and regular volunteer staff are two central variables that seem to position a priest to function well and to focus almost exclusively on teaching. Yet, priests heading small and struggling congregations are no less likely to identify teaching as a core activity. The question is whether they

can focus on it without the attendant press of other role demands – demands that a priest with a paid staff can delegate. However, even with a paid staff and a stable of volunteers, a priest can go wrong. The last essential attribute the sample identifies is “delegating” – the parceling out of tasks and administration of responsibilities. Even though all acknowledge its centrality, this is in no way a common trait among those who seek the priesthood (nor among those in the sample). As one associate rector remarks, “A lot of priests are so weak administratively, it’s real crime.”

Delegating

[27] The instrumental necessity of valuing administration and task delegation forces priests to note it as an essential attribute. Priests’ views of the “administrative piece” are remarkably similar. On the one hand, each recognizes the imperative function of the business-side to parish life; on the other, most see it as a drain, a chore, a vaguely threatening time-eater. Priests agree that seminary preparation for this critical aspect of the role is useless, but they all tend to hold the seminary-tinged view that strong administration is a necessary evil:

What drains me? Probably the administrative piece . . . I’m perfectly capable of doing administrative work, but I guess the more time I spend in the office . . . (*pantomimes death by thirst*) (P4).

Knowing how to effectively delegate aspects of one’s authority is a mark, among clergy in this sample, of the well-functioning priest. This is a highly valued skill across occupations, as well (note the contempt with which the business “micromanager” is held by all and sundry). In this regard, the rector of a thriving parish notes:

If you aren’t good at organizing, if you aren’t good at delegating, if you aren’t good at it – at making sure things get done and that you don’t have to do it all, if you’re not good at that, then you’re going to have a little church. But it takes those other gifts, a set of gift-skills, to have a church this size (P6).

As I note above, many clergy lack the critical resource of a staff (or even a stable group of volunteers). This makes the skill of delegating superfluous (at least to some degree). For those in smaller parishes, successful administration seems to be a combination of “whatever works” and lots of hands-on management.

[28] Administering the business of a church is a central area of a priest’s responsibility. Not much attention is granted to it during seminary training – a fact that continues to dismay more than a few of these participants. (When I ask what each would most like to change about the current occupational milieu, “seminary preparation” is one of the most common answers.) Why must a priest master time management and task delegation? The simple answer is: to survive. Priests live with an awareness of the gross disparity between the archetypal image of the country curate and the modern reality of life at the helm of an organization every bit as complex and problematic as a profit-generating firm. Days are filled with meetings, months defined by strategy and initiative. The priest who “adapts by delegating” (in essence, delimiting one’s zone of primary responsibility) is the priest who feels effective, energized, and ripe for the challenge of this kaleidoscopic profession. The priest without enough supportive assistance, or one given over to the lure of “micromanaging,” faces almost certain trouble. The overwhelming majority of the sample’s priests take pains to describe themselves as “big picture” persons – not overly concerned with “details” (which are safely left to the care of others).

The thing I really love about the job is not the meetings, the administrative piece in general just doesn’t . . . it’s not where my energy goes. I much prefer reading for, or

preparing, a sermon or a class, or I enjoy doing things like pastoral care or premarital counseling . . . sometimes I feel like I just go from appointment to appointment! It's not that I dread the meetings, the meetings are good . . . I guess for me what helps is to frame it in such a way as it's part of a whole . . . if I can understand this meeting as in some sense being a small part of the church and that has its role in the coming life of the church . . ." (P3).

[29] Details are details, people seem to be saying, and second-tier administrative activities are best left to competent staff ("P3" has a very tiny, part-time staff, and must attend the meetings himself). Priests conserve their energy (or would prefer to) for theological reflection, on the one hand, and pastoral or community service, on the other. They are not pursuing efficiency for its own sake, but for the opportunity of expanding their study time or their service activities. Running a church often gets in the way of these two things, and it is an effective minister who knows how to sidestep the unrelenting press of bureaucratic detail in favor of service.

Someone with a pastoral need takes precedence over any administrative need . . . you know, other people have the skills and can pick up on the administrative piece. And, I can say, "I wasn't able to get this done," a whole lot easier than I can say, "I didn't have time to talk with Mary when she came in" (P4).

Conclusion

[30] The five essential attributes arising from the interviews are not, in themselves, capable of sustaining the priests' occupational vision and function. They are the indispensable and valued steps one takes to reach the priestly ideal, key pieces in the core meaning of this occupational role. Some priests in the sample are proficient across the attributes; most see themselves as still developing these layers of competence. Either way, everyone holds – at least in an attenuated way – the same occupational ideal. What do the five attributes (*listening, praying, laughing, teaching, delegating*) have in common? Is there one theme running through them, a unifying value? I think it is this: Time and again during the interviews, participants conclude an anecdote with the words, "It's not about me." The realization continually recurs, and each time brings (to the priest) a welcome sense of pleasure and surprise:

You know, it's not about you at all. In fact, it shouldn't be about you at all. That's true for any job you get into, but especially this job. It's really easy to get a big ego and you have to keep checking yourself, "Hey, this isn't about me!" So, if somebody says, "You gave a really good sermon," I'll say, "Well, I prayed a lot about that and the Holy Spirit came through . . . I tell people when I sit down to write a sermon and it doesn't come, I'll start fussing at God, saying "You know, you'd better get busy here, 'cause I'm not going to have a lot of time to write this." I mean, I'm excited that I do – I think I do – a good job, and that people respond to that, but you know you just have to be able to separate out that it's not about you, it's about people (P2).

[31] This other-centered value point seems to provide a cross-cutting sense of the meaning of this job, yet insight garnered from twelve participants provides only the initial enhancement to our knowledge of this kind of work. This is one "helping" profession among many, and whether the others' key attributes and sense of occupational meaning are a match to priests' is an open, and inviting, question. The other-centeredness that appears in these data is roughly analogous to the "integrating" ministerial role, as classically developed by Blizzard (1958b). He calls this aspect of the occupation ". . . the minister's goal orientation or frame of reference to his work . . ." (374). The "It's Not About Me" orientation functions as the umbrella of meaning unifying all the essential

attributes and, perhaps (this needs further research and explication), shaping and creating them as well.

[32] There are other questions within the data calling for additional inquiry. In particular, the role and meaning of prayer (both public and private) invites a new round of focused research attention. The place and meaning of prayer in the life of a priest (or any occupation's emblematic activity) presents us with a unique professional circumstance, and we must ask if other similar roles hold functions analogous to it. Further research may proceed on a comparative basis, or span the full range of ministry and the relation of each branch to prayer. Returning to my initial assumptions regarding intrarole conflict, it seems that a priest's work is not at all driven by a need to "resolve" this. Conflict exists, certainly; it pulls, it affects – but it is not the shaping influence on the role. For that, we must look to role meaning, to the articulation of "essential attributes," and to the ever-present self-assessment of these women and men as they seek a way to respond fully to their unique "calling."

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