

Professions

Michael E Williams

The news that in France not only have prostitutes occupied churches as part of their campaign for a better treatment under the law, but that priests have taken their part against the police, could be interpreted as one of the more bizarre aspects of life in the common market. Yet this incident can provide food for thought about the style of life of the clergy themselves. When society is stable, vocations to the priesthood can be fostered by drawing attention to the status of the priest in society and the points of likeness between him and the schoolmaster, doctor, and other professional classes. It is only in these days of uncertainty and change that we can begin to entertain the thought that there might be a parallel with the oldest profession of all.¹

Religion like sex cuts right across society and class. It stands for basic forces in mankind that neither cold logic nor social pressures can adequately control or express. No wonder then that anyone whose way of life calls attention to the inadequacies of society in these matters will be regarded with suspicion and hostility. One has to proceed with prudence and caution. Quite apart from whether it infringes the citizen's right to be unmolested, door to door evangelism can be counter productive. Soliciting is a crime. The customer has to make the first move. Part of the skill of the game is to elicit that initial request and to do this all manner of artistry is needed. The wares one is hawking have to be desirable, one has to create curiosity and interest, to dress up, to know human nature so as to play on natural instincts, to practise a few mincing liturgical steps, to give an ecumenical glad-eye. The tactics of the fisher of men are not all that different from those of the hooker. This need to appeal to man applies to the church as an institution as well as to the individual pastor. In the past the Church certainly did achieve a certain glorious meretriciousness. Just think of those vast baroque sacristies of Southern Europe. The gilded mirrors, the candelabra, the drapes and brocades, the marble-top dressing tables, the cloth of gold vestments, the bejewelled reliquaries. How like the world of Violetta Valéry in *La Traviata*! How like the courtesan's boudoir with its mirrors and cushions. The figures of the saints with real hair and real dresses are so like her poppets and dolls. The air heavy with

¹Such a comparison is not entirely new. In the fourteenth century *Libro de Buen Amor* the lament on the death of the gobetween Trotaconventos is in fact a parody of a letter of St Jerome mourning the death of a priest. In fact, how far can one interpret the whole of this work with its account of the amorous adventures of the Archpriest of Hita as an allegory of the multifarious relationships of priest and penitent. In our own day in Pasolini's film *Teorema*, the stranger who seduces in turn each member of the family has been seen by some to be a Christ figure.

the perfume of incense after the mid morning toilette of the Solemn High Mass. All that dressing up in liturgical vestments so that little urchins are transformed into attendant cupids. Here is something to appeal to the transvestite in all of us. The liturgical kisses chastely bestowed on sacred objects, rings, birettas, spoons for incense, with just the briefest contact between mouth and human fingers. These were the toils that caught such as Beardsley, Wilde and Firbank. For Newman and Chesterton other bait was needed, but it was bait for all that.

*Sua quemque trahit voluptas.*² But arousing the desire is only the first stage. There are certain rules to be followed in the satisfaction of that desire. There can be no question of an exclusive relationship. The pastor has to be available to many. He has to be understanding of the almost infinite variety of human needs and foibles. Basically what he provides is the same for all, but his success is often measured by the manner in which he works. After a time he is able to build up a regular clientele, people in whom he inspires trust. His personality comes into play, and in secret assignations, confidences are exchanged, counsels are given and he encounters man with his spiritual trousers down. He is able to provide a relief and consolation that cannot be found in any other relationship, even that between friends and members of the same family. He is called to be a surrogate wife, a surrogate husband. He has to play the role of Tiresias. Few men care to admit that they have constant recourse to priests.³ The life has its dangers. He has to be kind, considerate, sympathetic, but he must never become deeply involved with a client or the unique relationship will be destroyed and he will cease to be effective and have to leave the profession. There is a strict moral code and etiquette in this calling.

Because he is forbidden to engage in deep relationship with his clients, he has to find companionship with others who are in the same line of business. It is with these he can relax and exchange anecdotes. Sometimes it is difficult for him to find an object on which to lavish his affections and he has to be content with a pet dog, or budgerigar or goldfish. Although he takes his recreation with others in the same métier it is sometimes advisable to dress in mufti. He has to take into account the susceptibilities of his clients and the sudden sight of countless clerical collars can have a devastating effect. Perhaps only equalled by a café full of whores.

The difficulty of the life increases with advancing years. There are health hazards, walking the streets, climbing the stairs, hurried meals, a sudden call to some one needing your services when you do not feel up to it. What at one time was fun and excitement is now a duty and a chore. In providing consolation for others one does not necessarily

²This citation from St Augustine is still to be seen today carved on the lintel of a renaissance brothel in down-town Rome.

³Andrew Sarris in his introduction to the English translation of the script of Bunuel's film *Belle de Jour* (Lorrimer, 1971) remarks 'Most writers, even the most radical, treat prostitution as a symptom of a social malaise and not as a concrete manifestation of a universal impulse. Bunuel reminds us once again in *Belle de Jour* that he is one of the few men of the left not afflicted by puritanism and bourgeois notions of chastity and fidelity'.

find consolation for oneself. It is a living martyrdom and there is the strong temptation to give up the life and settle down to what society regards as normal and acceptable. The most one can look forward to is the time when one runs a house of one's own and has a number of younger colleagues to supervise and instruct in the life. One's active days are over, but there is always administration to be done, advice to be given and the occasional visit from some client of bygone days who still finds your services indispensable.⁴

Of all the temptations the greatest and most constant is avarice. The economic situation is a unique one. One has to live on other people's earnings. The services that one renders are such that there can be no strict monetary equivalent. Consolation, advice, reproof, are spiritual things and to set a price-tariff on them would be simony. Money has to change hands if one is to stay alive and continue to serve others but one cannot make payment a condition of one's work.

But the similarities between the two ways of life are not entirely superficial. Too often, in the past, the Church and its ministry has behaved like a kept woman in the unacceptable sense. It has been paid by the State and expected to underwrite everything the government stands for. It has been regarded as one of the pillars of society. It is hardly to be wondered at that the portrayal of the priest as a respectable figure of the establishment fails to raise much enthusiasm today. In an age when we are questioning the value of some of our long cherished convictions and conventions, it is perhaps more useful to emphasise the way in which the very life style of the pastor runs contrary to accepted behaviour. His claim to provide something that the structures of society cannot provide will gain him few friends in the establishment, but it will at least assure him of a role.

⁴In the *Tragi-Comedy of Calisto and Melibea*, the bordello presided over by Celestina is not unlike the clergy house presided over by the parish priest. At the end of Act 15 one of the inmates, Elicia, makes a speech which might easily pass for the argument of a priest who has decided not to quit. 'I'm well known there, sister, and its my parish. That house will always be called by poor Celestina's name, and all the girls who have followers and suitors, the friends and relations of those she looked after, always go there. They use the house for their assignations, and I shall make a little profit. Also the few friends I've still got wouldn't know where else to look for me. As you know it's difficult to break a habit, and to change your ways is a sort of death. So I'd rather stay there if only because the rent is paid for this year; and I don't want to waste the money'. (Rojas, *The Spanish Bawd*, p. 210, Pelican, 1964.)