

PASTOR OR MANAGER? YOUNG PRIESTS PLACED INTO A ROLE THEY DID NOT SIGN UP FOR

Gottfried Catania, & Andre Mifsud

Department of Psychology, University of Malta (Malta)

Abstract

The number of young persons attracted to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic church in Europe has been steadily declining over the past few decades. Persons attracted to this role usually view it as a vocation, with the main occupational aspects of the role they are interested in being addressing the pastoral needs of their congregation, both from a spiritual and a personal/social perspective, and their involvement in the rites that are important to them and their faith. The number of persons interested in becoming priests or pastors has been steadily decreasing in most religions. As a result, in Malta, persons studying for the priesthood are thrust into the role of vice parish priest as soon as they are ordained and can expect to be “promoted” to parish priest soon after. The role of a parish priest is however much more managerial rather than pastoral, with incumbents expected to perform a number of managerial roles such as paying the bills and managing accounts, coordinating and leading various types and levels of meetings, and ensuring the smooth running of the parish as a whole. In most other organizations managers are surrounded by a dedicated team of people who have usually been specifically selected according to certain criteria, are a good fit with the organizational culture, and are all committed to the same goals. Parish workers, however, usually mostly include volunteers with limited availability of time and expertise, and at times having agendas which are at odds with the main agenda of the parish. Priests are not given any managerial training in their formative years, with training mainly focused on theology. Young priests have expressed concern at having to take up such an important role which they do not feel prepared for, and which is somewhat at odds with what they originally expected to be doing as priests. This qualitative study will interview young priests from an organizational psychology perspective, focusing on their perception of how what they are actually doing matches what they expected to be doing, with its possible consequent effects on motivation, job satisfaction, and attrition. Six to eight young priests will be interviewed, and data will be analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Keywords: *Parish priests, managers, job satisfaction, motivation, conflicting roles.*

1. Introduction

“I wish I had more time to work with youths, and if I could, I would delegate the administration and spend more time with people.”

In a public statement given to *The People of Malta* in April 2022, 34-year-old Tarxien archpriest Fr. Chris Ellul sheds light on a side of priesthood often disregarded. Harris (2014) lists qualities posed by Pope Francis, such as hospitality, sobriety, patience, kindness, and goodness of heart as constituents of a “good” priest, in line with the five qualities posed by the Vocation Office of the Diocese of St Augustine (2021) - love for Eucharist, strong prayer life, need for scripture, generosity and kindness, and being a good listener. All these qualities depict the priest as a relationship-oriented spiritual advisor, both a physical representative of God and an available counsellor for his parishioners. While these are undeniable aspects of priesthood, the 34-year-old archpriest’s statement highlights a third element: the priest as manager of the parish, involved in fulfilling managerial and administrative time-consuming tasks. This study will explore their lived experience of young Roman Catholic priests who are assigned to managerial positions early in their career.

1.1. The role of the priest

From a spiritual perspective, Roman Catholic priesthood is defined by a secure attachment to God and other religious figures (Rajagopalreddy & Varghese, 2020). From a practical perspective, priesthood is comprised of conducting Sunday Mass, hearing confessions, drafting the parish budget,

supervising parish staff, and conducting special services for funerals, baptisms, and marriages (Zickar et al., 2008). Although traditionally regarded as a spiritual teacher and advisor, the role of the priest today has expanded to incorporate the administration and management of the parish, resulting in a multitude of different roles and tasks.

Way back in 1969, Stewart had already acknowledged this “crisis of role ambiguity and strain”, dividing the tasks carried out by the priest into five different offices: the *priest* who is focused on sacramental duties; the *pastor* who provides counselling to his parishioners; the *preacher-teacher* who educates and forms attitudes; the *prophet* who advocates and acts as spokesperson for the oppressed; and the *administrator* who is responsible for organizational and administrative tasks. Similarly, in analyzing the local position of the parish priest in Malta, Koster (2015) delineates multiple roles of the “kappillan”. He acts as a counsellor, a spokesperson and a public registrar, as well as a delegator who must “supervise the local clergy and assign various duties to them” (p. 189), at the risk of initiating envy and disputes especially in such small communities. This administrative side to priesthood contrasts with the traditional depiction of the instructional priests, perceived mostly as teachers (Horan & Raposo, 2015).

The role of the priest is also a “sacramental representation” through his unique relation to Christ (“The Pope Speaks”, 2002). Here, the six elements posed as central to the priesthood include priestly identity, unity of life, journey towards holiness, fidelity to Ecclesiastical Discipline, Ecclesial Communion, and a sense of the Universal. There is no reference in this document to managerial or administrative duties. Even when discussing priest shortages, the document states that delegation “cannot in any way substitute the task of [...] the parish priest” (p. 152), perceiving duties as solely sacramental, without acknowledging the managerial and administrative tasks that could, in fact, be easily passed on to others. Lount and Hargie (1997), on the other hand, regard the priest as a counsellor and list the range of incidents reported to priests, ranging from marital disharmony to bereavement, alcoholism, substance abuse, physical and verbal abuse, and mental health issues, amongst others. In line with this, they also posit important interpersonal skills for the counsellor-priest to possess, such as effective listening, confrontation, showing empathy and sensitivity, and respecting confidentiality.

Reilly (1975) also investigates how Catholic priests perceived themselves at the time. While she found consensus on perceptions of the priest as pastor, teacher, and head of rituals, young priests were found to give more importance to prophetic activities and less to administrative duties, for which priests did not feel they were adequately trained. Unfortunately this situation persists in the training of priests in the Seminary in Malat, where training focuses on theology and the pastoral role of the priest. This implies that the seminary’s lack of instruction potentially contributes to the young clergy’s disillusionment, eventually discovering the administrative workload through experience. Additionally, in analyzing priests’ self-perceptions vis-à-vis how they are perceived by parishioners, Stewart (1969) finds that while the clergy like to see themselves as pastors and counsellors, “parishioners want the priest to function and perform better and oftener in his administrative role” (p. 84). Administrative roles are found to be the most demanded by the church yet are rated as least attractive by priests. Time is mostly invested in the roles of prophet and pastor. Stewart’s findings suggest role strain, potentially resulting from overwork due to role multiplicity and lack of training, orientation, and specialization in relevant competencies required, mostly when it comes to management.

1.2. The role of the manager

Several theorists have tried to define management. Most famously, Mintzberg (1973) demarcates ten managerial roles grouping them into three categories. Later, DuBrin (2012) increased the number of managerial roles to seventeen and the number of categories to four (see table 1 below).

Table 1. DuBrin’s (2012) managerial categories and roles.

Categories	Roles
Planning	Strategic planner
	Operational planner
Organizing and staffing	Organizer
	Liaison
	Staffing coordinator
	Resource allocator
Leading	Task delegator
	Figurehead
	Spokesperson
	Negotiator
	Motivator and coach

	Team builder
	Team player
	Technical problem-solver
	Entrepreneur
Controlling	Monitor
	Disturbance handler

The table above clearly hints at the complexity of the managerial role, implying that training is essential for managers to be able to perform their role effectively. Most of the above competencies are skills which can be taught, falling under the categories of personal, interpersonal and group skills (Whetten & Cameron, 1983)

1.3. The priest as manager

While recognising the pastor’s role as manager White (2018) does not believe conventional managerial theory can be applied to the priesthood. His list of managerial tasks applicable to priests includes planning, marketing, financial management, and human resources management among others. Rainer (2013) draws attention to basic level managerial tasks for priests, such as paying the bills, calling meetings, and setting parish policy. In another paper Rainer (2009) poses five anecdotal observations of the different functions of the management role of the pastor, namely being a *liaison*, or spokesperson for the church; a *mediator*, intervening in times of crisis; a *juggler*: a leader of many teams, alternating between different meetings; an *observer*, or monitor of the church. And a *disseminator*, relaying information and connecting the church as a body.

Walters (1996) sees the pastor as a personnel manager, noting that “Seminary training at the Master of Divinity level in personnel management is seldom sufficient to prepare a pastor to know how to develop functional role descriptions, to conduct interviews [...], provide supervision and evaluations [...], deal with problem employees, and to discharge an employee if it becomes necessary”. He contrasts effective organizational practises with the recruitment of the apostles as outlined in the bible, conducted without a prior job analysis, advertising openings, preparing a comprehensive job description, conducting interviews, checking references, and actually scrutinising applicants. What Walters attempts to demonstrate by this is a distinction between the spiritual and the managerial, and this becomes exceptionally important in a context where priesthood preparation is focused on the former and excludes the latter. For instance, in analysing the Seminary of Malta’s formation of Maltese priests, Bonnici (2000) proposes a programme of formation based on evangelisation, without ever referring to administrative and managerial tasks. He also underlines an attraction theory, founded on the belief that “the bishop should respect this attraction and ordain priests who were attracted to the priesthood” (p. 38), prioritising attraction over specialization and assessed competencies. This contrasts with Walters (1996) position, which focuses more on church personnel policies and essential issues they need to address, such as probationary periods, normal working hours, rest and meal periods, overtime, paydays, performance appraisals, sick leave, vacation, and other benefits. All this planning falls on the shoulders of the parish priest, more often than not with little or no managerial training. Walters gives several experiences as examples: “When I felt a call to the ministry and began to respond to it I did not give much thought that one day I might be the defendant in a costly wrongful discharge suit or that I would have to spend much of my time dealing with employing and supervising lay staff [...] yet as much time or more may have to be given by the more typical pastor who is the only ordained person in the church but who supervises many lay staff—secretaries, custodians, music personnel, school staff, wedding personnel, professional program staff, treasurers, etc.” (p. 4).

The studies cited above show a considerable overlap between the role of priest and that of manager. It seems, however, that for some theorists these roles are more distinct than they are alike. In analysing the facets of leadership, Hatch et al. (2006) distinguish priesthood and management as two separate categories, and list different descriptions and core competencies for each (see table 2 below)

Table 2. Differences between the managerial and pastoral roles of priests (Hatch et al., 2006).

	Manager	Priest
Common description	Disciplined, rational	Empathic, ethical
Core competencies	Organizing, controlling	Inspiring, comforting
Helps others develop their...	Technique	Faith
Psychic domain	Intellect	Soul
Type of vision	Strategic	Transcendent
Source of power and influence	Expertise	Purity
Heroic ideal	Decision-maker	Saviour

Holland (1966) groups vocational interests in six RIASEC types and organizes them in a hexagonal model, with correlation being greater between alternate than opposite types and the greatest between adjacent ones (Hutchinson, 2014). In correlating RIASEC dimensions to psychometric evidence from psychology students, those inclined towards clinical psychology (similar to the therapeutic function of the priest) correlate to the social dimension of Holland's model, while those inclined towards organizational psychology (similar to the organizational function of the manager) correlate to the enterprising dimension (Ferreira et al., 2015). This result indicates that younger priests who, because of the lack of persons entering the priesthood, are given the role of vice parish priests as soon as they are ordained, may find themselves increasingly disillusioned with their role, ending up having to occupy a managerial role which they are not trained for and which does not align with their original pastoral vocation. This might lead to decreased motivation and job satisfaction, possibly resulting in some priests leaving their role and compounding the problem of lack of priests.

2. Proposed methodology and conclusion

In order to understand the lived experience of young priests who are more often than not thrust into managerial roles which they would prefer not to be doing, semi-structured interviews will be carried out with six to eight participants. Interviews will be analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). It is envisaged that results will shed light on the struggles young priests face when trying to juggle the pastoral and managerial roles, and point to needs which need to be addressed in the training of priests. It is hoped that the above would result in priests who are more likely to remain motivated and continue deriving satisfaction from their job.

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