

Generations of Priests

The book, *Generations of Priests*, by Fr Thomas McGovern, will shortly be published by Four Courts Press, Dublin. It is a timely volume for this Year of the Priest. Fr. McGovern, a priest of the Opus Dei Prelature, has published other books on the priesthood: *Priestly Celibacy Today* (1998), and *Priestly Identity: A Study in the Theology of Priesthood* (2002). These were very well received to the extent that they are now out of print. However, *Priestly Identity* is being reprinted by an American publisher. *Priestly Celibacy Today* has been translated into Spanish, and is now in the process of being translated into Russian.

Generations of Priests is a study of ten priests, from different periods of the history of the Church, from St John Chrysostom to Pope John Paul II. The others are St John Fisher, St Oliver Plunkett, the Curé of Ars, Cardinal Newman, Archbishop Lamy of Santa Fe, St Pius X, Blessed Clement von Galen, and St Josemaría Escrivá.

These men were very different in personality and background, but they had all the traits which characterize holiness of life. Most of the priests reviewed are beatified or canonized saints. While the Church has proposed the Curé of Ars as the patron of priests, it doesn't necessarily mean that his spirituality should be imitated in every detail. Certainly priests will be inspired by his prayer-life, his love for the Eucharist, and his devotion to our Lady. They will also feel challenged by his daily catechetical schedule, and his exceptional dedication to the confessional. But they will also be able to identify with points from the spirituality of the other priests reviewed.

Each of these priests reflected Christ in his own way – they were truly icons of the Saviour. The priest is the visible representative of Christ in history – people need this human presence of the Good Shepherd to respond to their Christian calling. Those who are really searching for God expect the priest to reflect the holiness of Christ, to somehow be better than themselves, so that he can bear the burden of their weaknesses.

These were men of great apostolic zeal. They not only attended their flocks diligently, but they also had a real concern to bring others into the unity of the Catholic faith. Thus we find John Chrysostom recovering Christians who had been tainted by Arianism, Newman guiding his former Oxford undergraduates into 'the One, True Fold', and Lamy of Santa Fe converting the Navajo Indians of the Southern Rockies.

This book makes eminently suitable reading in this Year of the Priest. It is an inspiring description of the lives of ten priests who were totally converted to Christ and who identified their lives fully with the mission they had received.

As Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, says in his *Foreword*:

Fr McGovern is already the distinguished author of several books on priesthood and on priestly celibacy. *Generations of Priests* is a rather different book—dramatic and existential rather than spiritual and theological. Newman, he tell us, is profoundly affected by the Church Fathers 'because they are saints who come alive in their writings and he is thus able to establish a very personal relationship with them.' This accurately describes *Generations of Priests* too: its vivid writing invites its readers into a very personal relationship with the ten priests whose lives he explores.

There are what Saul Bellow called 'axial lines'¹ going through these priests—all of them are challenged and inspired by the newness of the Gospel, applying it with what Pope Benedict calls 'the knowledge of love' to their hard times. All of them deeply experience their weakness, and focus on the Cross, which opens them out to God's mercy. As priests, they live intrinsically relational ministries, where their unique vertical and sacramental relationship with God, is expressed in their horizontal relationship with the hierarchy, with their fellow priests, and with those they serve.

¹ The phrase is used in Saul Bellow's novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*.

While many of Fr McGovern's ten are bishops, and two are popes, all are characterized by a truly Christian democracy of service. The one among them who was neither pope, nor bishop, nor cardinal—the simple Cure d'Ars—most clearly defines the essence of the priesthood as 'the love of the heart of Jesus.'

As Pope Benedict has noted, "only in this way can we cooperate effectively in the mysterious 'plan of the Father' which consists in 'making Christ the heart of the world'! This plan is accomplished in history as Jesus gradually becomes the Heart of human hearts,² beginning with those called to be closest to him: namely his priests."

These ten priests, spanning 1500 years, can be seen as unfolding an array of virtues that we priests need today.

This book could be read as a handbook for living the priesthood in a difficult time. Through the often heroic lives of these priests, we are introduced to rich insights from Church and secular history and imaginative pastoral practices—many as relevant now as when practiced by their 10 protagonists. There is an excellent interweaving too, with various papal or ecclesial writings on priesthood, indications of Fr McGovern's experience as a spiritual director. Because the ten priests are saints, or at least on the way to sainthood, their stories will also be invaluable to catechists and an inspiration to all Christians living in our age, which is no less exciting or exacting than the times experienced by these outstanding men.

This book can be obtained from martin.healy@fourcourtspress.ie

² Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on 150th anniversary of the death of St John Mary Vianney, Homily of his Holiness Benedict XVI, St Peter's Basilica, Friday, 19 June 2009.