

Constitution of the Canons of St Ambrose & St Charles

Preamble

"It is important for priests not to live off on their own somewhere, but to accompany one another in small communities, to support one another, and so to experience, and constantly realise afresh, their communion in service to Christ and in renunciation for the sake of the kingdom of heaven"
(*Light of the World*, pg 149, Benedict XVI in conversation with Peter Seewald)

Throughout the ages diocesan priests have lived out their vocation to serve Christ and His Church in many different circumstances and models. These models have varied to enable priests to adapt to the ministry in which they are called to serve. In the Second Vatican Council the Church called us to re-examine the lives and ministry of priests to further the proclamation of the Gospel in our world. The Council particularly recommended the common life as suitable to priestly ministry in the modern age, "in order to enable priests to find mutual help in cultivating the intellectual and spiritual life, to promote better co-operation amongst them in ministry, to safeguard them from the dangers of loneliness, it is necessary to foster some form of community life".¹ The common life of priests is recommended also by the Code of Canon Law, "some manner of common life is highly recommended" (280). So often priests now have to live alone and far from their brothers. Society itself has become more isolated. Society is perhaps even hostile to the Gospel and priestly ministry. These all serve as reasons why a communal form of priestly life recommends itself in our age.

The common life of priests has taken diverse forms through the ages. Firstly, the canonical life of the secular clergy lived in the early middle ages provided for common celebration of the office and excellence in the celebration of the liturgy. There was an early form of common life for the diocesan clergy established by St Ambrose in Milan. In England (in the medieval period) there is a historical precedent of priests living in common in "minsters", which were larger central churches, travelling to outlying parishes to serve from the centre (allowing excellence in catechesis, liturgy etc in one central church). Moving into the counter-reformation period, St Charles Borromeo took up the project of St Ambrose in Milan and breathed new life into these common houses of priests; known as the Ambrosians they survived until at least the 20th century. This manner of life of diocesan priests, belonging to a sort of society within the diocese and moving between houses of common life, was taken up by Cardinal Wiseman and introduced into Westminster Diocese; they were known as the Oblates of St Charles. St Philip Neri established a society of secular priests in the Roman Oratory (they were fixed to one particular house and spent their whole lives there). Cardinal Charles de Berulle established a similar model of common life for priests in the French Oratory, except they were able to move between different houses.

¹ Presbyterorum Ordinis, Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, no.8

Elements of all the models of the past provide us with inspiration and guidance for living as priests today. The common prayer of canons, the flexibility of the French Oratory, charity as the bond of the community from the Roman Oratory, the pastoral provision enabled by the medieval minsters, all these are necessary for the modern community of priests. Most particularly however the inspiration of SS Ambrose and Charles, as they tried to lead the priests of their own diocese to a deeper appreciation of the Priesthood and to a growth in holiness, serve as the model for our community.

Structure

This community of priests takes the canonical structure of a Chapter of Canons (Canon 503). The basis of their life together is the liturgical worship of Almighty God in the daily celebration of the Divine Office in the church of Our Lady and St. Joseph's in Carlisle adjoining their common residence. This church is established as the collegiate church of the chapter. This structure provides for common prayer as the basis of a priestly community and a common way of life. This constitution serves as the statutes of the chapter (Canon 505).

Purpose

The aim of this college of canons is the praise of Almighty God by the excellence of the priestly ministry exercised by its members. The primary purpose of the establishment of this way of life is the sanctification of priests, assisting them in pursuing the vocation to holiness. The college has as its secondary purpose the support of priests of the Diocese of Lancaster in the exercise of their ministry. This is to be achieved by three principle means:

- Common Prayer
- Community Life
- Intellectual Formation

Primarily this will be a support to those who constitute the college, but it is also intended that this college would serve as the "House for Clerics" envisioned by the Directory on the Life and Ministry of Priests.² This "House for Clerics" would provide a place of fraternal support, spiritual retreat and intellectual study for wider community of priests in the Diocese of Lancaster.

Composition

The college of canons would consist of priests of the Diocese of Lancaster, both active and retired, freely appointed by the Bishop of Lancaster to this ministry and way of life (Canon 509 no.1). Priests on loan from other Diocese' can be appointed to the college at the Bishop's discretion (ordinarily they would remain incardinated in their own Diocese). Canons would be appointed to serve in a pastoral mission by the Bishop within the locality (for example Parish Priest, Assistant Priest, Hospital or School Chaplain). Canons would need to agree with this manner of priestly life and the constitutions of the house before appointment. Canons can be freely removed by the Bishop to serve other needs of the Diocese.

² Directory on the Life and Ministry of Priests, no.84

Deacons and seminarians may be appointed by the Bishop to form part of the community, sharing in its life, prayer and work as he sees fit. They do not hold the office of canon (Canon 509). They are to hold the office of “Vicars Choral”.

One member of the college would be elected by the Canons, in a secret ballot, to serve as Provost for a period of two years (Canons 507 no.1 and 509 no.1). Election requires a majority of two thirds. This election would need to be approved by the Bishop for validity. The Provost would have responsibility for the internal ordering of the community, governing in a spirit of fatherly love. The Provost would have no authority in respect to the canonical pastoral missions given to individual Canons (Canon 510).

Spiritual Life

The spiritual life of its members takes pride of place in the life of the college. The liturgy, and most especially the Eucharist, is the “source and summit” of the Christian life. The canons are to pursue excellence in their liturgical life following the admonition of St Thomas Aquinas “quantum potes tantum audes”.³ As the most important part of our lives the worship of God is to be given particular care. Preaching ought to be of a high standard, leading the faithful deeper into the celebration of the Mysteries. Especial care should be taken to ensure the rubrics of the Roman liturgy, and the commands of liturgical law, are followed. Sacred art, whether music, vesture or other things used in the celebration of Divine Worship should be noble and in continuity with the traditions of the Roman Rite. The following will provide the basis for the spiritual life of the canons:

- Daily common celebration of lauds (9am) and vespers (5.30pm weekdays, 3.45pm on Sundays) in the collegiate church.
- Daily half-hour meditation (7.30am weekdays) (8.30am Saturday & Sunday)
- On Sundays Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament is to be given following vespers.
- Daily celebration of Mass by all priest canons.
- Bi-Monthly afternoon of recollection to be held in the residence for all canons. Other priests of the Diocese are welcome to join.
- All canons to avail themselves of the Sacrament of Penance on at least a monthly basis.
- Annual retreat of 5 days. This is to be taken individually by all canons thereby preventing disruption to the pastoral provision in the area.
- On the patronal feasts of the Chapter (SS Ambrose and Charles) all canons are to gather to solemnly celebrate the Eucharist and Vespers in common in the collegiate church.

Community Life

“They remained faithful to the teaching of the Apostles, the brotherhood, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers”.⁴ This was spoken of the early Christian community and should be especially true of the brotherhood of priests in a diocese. This is to be enabled “by priests living together, by sharing a common table or at least meeting at frequent intervals”.⁵ Therefore all members of the college are to live together in the presbytery attached to the collegiate church. The

³ Sequence of Corpus Christi, Lauda Sion, St Thomas Aquinas

⁴ Acts 3:42

⁵ Presbyterorum Ordinis, no.8.

community life envisaged for the college also includes the priests of the wider Diocese. The following will be observed in the college:

- At least one meal each day is to be eaten in common, as specified by the Provost after taking into account pastoral duties.
- There is to be a weekly chapter meeting to discuss community/parish business.
- Canons are entitled to receive the basic diocesan salary and Mass offerings. To encourage a spirit of poverty stole fees and Christmas and Easter Offerings are to be shared equally between all canons regardless of their pastoral mission.
- To encourage poverty in dress, clerical dress (either the cassock or other black clerical dress) is to be worn.
- Meals in the residence are to be simple, avoiding waste and extravagance.
- All canons will attend deanery conferences.
- All canons will attend the annual Chrism Mass in Lancaster Cathedral.
- Whenever possible canons are to attend funerals of the clergy of the Diocese of Lancaster.
- Canons are entitled to four weeks annual holiday and one day off (including one overnight stay) each week.

The residence of the college would also serve as a place of hospitality for other priests of the Diocese allowing them to share in the priestly fraternity we all enjoy under the guidance of the Bishop.

Intellectual Life

The continued intellectual development of priests is essential to both their own growth and to their pastoral ministry. Therefore this is an important concern of the college. Such intellectual formation should be based on the faith of the Church. It should be oriented to both prayer and to the catechetical formation of the faithful. The following norms are laid down:

- Some time should be spent each day in theological or spiritual reading.
- Every month there is to be a conference given by one of the canons on a subject from the sacred sciences or arts. The topic is to be decided by the Provost in consultation with the college. This is to be followed by a community meal.
- Canons are encouraged to take part in the ongoing formation programme of the diocese.

The monthly conferences are to be open to other priests of the diocese.

Pastoral Ministry

There is a great need in the Church today for effective witnesses to the Gospel. Our Diocese does not have the same number of priests as it once did, yet the demands of mission have not fallen proportionately. Many of our people have lapsed from the faith; many others have never known Jesus Christ. The end of the college is for the canons to be equipped in their priestly ministry to go out into the world as Jesus commanded and proclaim the Kingdom of God. As such the college is oriented to the New Evangelisation. It draws on the riches of the Church's tradition to present the Gospel afresh in our world.

Members of the college are to be assigned a variety of pastoral responsibilities, all of which are fed from the common source of prayer, community and study. The college of canons will be based in the Church of Our Lady and St Joseph's in Carlisle. At this centre excellent catechesis, beautiful liturgy and devout prayer can be built up to support the surrounding district. Priests from the college can then go out from this centre to serve local communities in outlying parishes and schools.

Conclusion

"Today it is impossible not to recommend them [institutes of common life for priests], especially those who live together and are pastorally involved in the same place. Besides the advantage which comes to the apostolate and its activities, this common life of priests offers to all, to fellow priests and laity alike, a shining example of charity and unity"⁶

⁶ Synod of Bishops, 8th Ordinary General Assembly, *Intrumentum Laboris*, no.60