

# How to humanise the priesthood



An Ordination at St. Paul's Cathedral

## Making ministry human means more than de-bureaucratising it, says **Rowan Williams**

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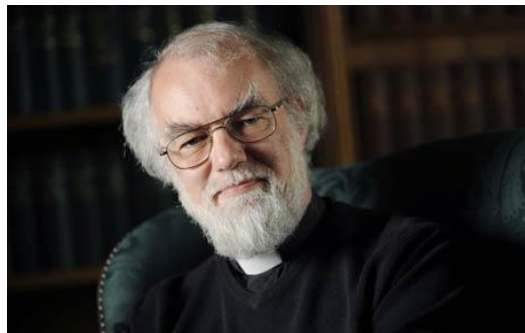
MANY are concerned about the creeping bureaucratisation of priesthood: we ask ourselves: "What does bureaucratisation mean?" The way I understand it is a distancing of priestly ministry from all those things that have to do with the intuitive, the relational, the unfinished. Bureaucracy exists partly so that you can say: "I've done that." And I think ordained ministry at any level is profoundly about knowing you've never done that. Perhaps what we are saying in resisting the bureaucratisation of the priesthood is something about the necessary incompleteness of ordained ministry. There is always something more to discover. There is always someone else with a question that you have not thought of. Bureaucratisation can mean perhaps taking the priesthood away from justification by faith, and anchoring it in a kind of justification by box-ticking. Something that I have often found myself saying to ordinands is the great difficulty in ordained ministry of telling the difference between proper professionalism and malign professionalism. Malign professionalism is creating the structure that allows you to say: "I've done it. It's all right." Proper professionalism is rather obviously transparency, accountability, taking responsibility for what you do and its consequences. Making sure that you have some opportunity of growing in — yes, let's say it — in excellence, in virtue, in transparency and honesty in what you are doing. That is professionalism in what I believe to be the absolutely right and theologically defensible sense. Sometimes it is difficult to know where that is clouded over by the malign professionalism that treats this just as something you can finish with. On the humanity of priesthood and episcopacy, it does seem to me that, if we have an ordained ministry in the Church, and if part of the function of any ordained ministry is to help the Church be the Church, and if the Church truly is the Church when it is the human community that is Christ's body among us (and you can add lots more ifs), then the ordained person — deacon, priest, or bishop — is not exempt from modelling the new humanity.

The ordained person does not just talk to other people about how they become better human beings or more effective parts of the Body of Christ. The ordained person is a part of the Body of Christ, and therefore involved in modelling the new humanity.

So if we ask whether this or that form of ordained ministry models a humanity that looks full or joyful or renewed, maybe that is the crucial question. And frequently the answer is no, for men and for women. When looking at challenges such as employment practice, work patterns, couples in ministry, and a whole range of issues, we might ask whether this human ministry looks as though it stands for an attractive, a transforming and transformed, new humanity. Because if it doesn't, we are actually not doing what we are supposed to do, and we are treating ordained ministry as if it were something other than the life of the Body of Christ. So it is all right for a congregation to flourish and a priest to be crushed? I don't think it is all right.

We all know how the pain and the cost of ordained ministry can feed the life of a community. And I think that is what St Paul is talking about in a great deal of 2 Corinthians. But we can't leave it there, because that both dehumanises and super-humanises the ordained ministry. It dehumanises because it says it doesn't really matter what happens to these particular persons that God loves in Jesus Christ. That is dehumanising. These particular persons in Jesus Christ, who have collars round their necks and various coloured shirts, are the ones who do the work for the Body of Christ, including the sacrificial suffering. And everybody else sort of freewheels on it. You won't be surprised if I quote Dostoevsky at this point, but one of the terrifying things in the great parable of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* is, of course, that the Inquisitor is not a bad or a selfish man. On the contrary, he is a fanatically selfless man. He believes that his own renunciation of peace, absolution, a sense of being right, is necessary. He doesn't really know what he believes, except that he knows that he has got to make other people safe. And therefore this aged, dried, wrung-out, exhausted, sacrificial character cannot see Christ. This is a rather grim image, but I think that we have to ask ourselves about what kind of humanity the priesthood models, and what kind of humanity the Church at large wants in its priests, if it wants any at all. Sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't. We can celebrate a commitment to humanising the priesthood. If that sometimes sounds like feminising the priesthood, well, people need to be challenged to define their terms. Sometimes when people talk about feminising this or that context, unfortunately what they do mean is humanising it, or de-bureaucratising it, or something like that. And that tells a rather grim story.

But what I feel celebratory about is how we can think about what it is for a priesthood and an episcopate to be human. In its humanity — such as the drawing-in of the maximum range of human experience into priesthood — we can say something crucial about the saving humanity of Jesus Christ, and where we belong in and with that humanity. Above all, we can try to hang on to that sense that, in arguing for and working for the full inclusion of women in the ordained ministry of the Church, what we are after is not simply justice — though that's not exactly insignificant — but we are after the humanising of the ordained ministry and all that that might mean in terms of mission and the health of Christ's body.



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