

Why do we have priests?

Most people have some image of what a priest is, but this question goes a bit deeper than that. The images we have can sometimes be superficial or incomplete. Like many of the questions about priesthood the answer to this question begins with the person of Jesus himself, and His plan for our salvation.

Jesus made it clear, both at the Last Supper and again after the Resurrection, that he wanted His work on earth to continue after He returned to the Father. All of us as baptised Christians, led by the Spirit of Jesus, are called to be His witnesses, both in what we say and in how we live. In that way, we literally re-present Him. Baptism is not just something that happens to us; it is about what we become. We become members of the body of Christ. To use the words sometimes attributed to St. Teresa of Avila: Christ has no body now, but yours.

There is an essential link between the priesthood and the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the primary purpose for which priests are ordained. Priests re-present Christ in a particular way when they preside at the Eucharist. They also make him present when they preach the Gospel, and when they celebrate the other sacraments. In every aspect of his pastoral ministry, a priest is called to reflect in his own life the sacrifice of Jesus, who gave himself completely for his people. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders a priest, in spite of his own human limitations, and even his personal sinfulness, "becomes Christ" for the people. This is not just a matter of imitating Christ or taking his place. We believe that through the power of the Holy Spirit, it is Christ himself who teaches, feeds, heals, and forgives His people, in the ministry of the priest. To use the language of theology a priest is configured to Christ, and his entire ministry flows from his identity with Christ.

What are diocesan priests?

Diocesan priests look after the day to day spiritual needs of the people of a particular diocese. They work as part of a team led by the bishop who has overall responsibility for the diocese. This is a ministry which has been going on since the time of the Apostles.

A diocese is the Christian community of a particular area which is placed under the care of a bishop. There are twenty-six dioceses in Ireland, of which Dublin is the largest in terms of population. Most Irish dioceses were established around one of the old monastic settlements from the sixth century onwards. Some of the dioceses have double-barrelled names, which is usually an indication that there were originally two dioceses, but that these have been amalgamated in more recent times.

Each diocese is made up of a number of parishes. These are the local communities in which people live out their faith, supported by one another and by the priests who are sent by the bishop to minister among them. Most, but not all, diocesan priests are engaged in parish ministry.

At present the diocese of Dublin has 200 parishes, a mixture of urban, suburban, and rural communities. The bishop is Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, who succeeded Cardinal Desmond Connell in 2003. There are about 650 priests working in different ministries in the diocese. Some of these (just over a quarter) are Religious priests, who are on loan from their order or congregation.

What do priests do all day?

One of the characteristics of the diocesan priesthood is the variety of ministry. Most priests are in parish ministry. This includes the obvious things like saying Mass, celebrating funerals and marriages, and hearing confessions. There are many other elements in the ministry of a priest with which many people may be less familiar; things like visiting the sick at home and in hospital; helping young people to prepare for marriage; keeping in touch with the bereaved, and with those in prison. In many parishes the ministry of the priest includes school chaplaincy. Most parishes have a variety of groups with which the priest would have some involvement, sometimes leading, but more often just being an encouraging presence. Building community is an essential aspect of developing faith.

Do all priests work in parishes?

Apart from parish ministry, diocesan priests in Dublin are also involved in a wide variety of specialised ministries; school and college chaplaincy, as well as chaplaincy to hospitals, prisons, and to the defense forces, are just a few of the more obvious ones. Some Dublin priests are engaged in teaching at third level, or in the co-ordination of services to young people, to those preparing for marriage, or to those who are marginalised in our urban environment.

What other kinds of priests are there?

Apart from Diocesan priests there are others who belong to the religious orders or to the missionary societies. The religious orders (both men and women) mostly came into existence at a particular time in history, because of the vision of a particular person or group of people, who saw a particular need. They each have their own particular charism, or gift, to offer to the Church. These include contemplative monastic orders like the Cistercians and Benedictines; apostolic orders like the Franciscans and Dominicans, and orders like the Carmelites who live a mixture of active and contemplative life.

The missionary societies were set up to provide for the needs of countries where the Church is relatively new, or where the Gospel is still not widely known. Many religious orders and missionary societies have houses in Dublin diocese, and priests from these congregations have made an enormous contribution to the development of the diocese over the past twenty-five years. It is important to remember, however, that work in parishes is not the primary reason for the existence of religious congregations, and they may not always be available to work in the diocese.