

Shortage of Priests

(May 1961)

“Three teams in a town in France, because of the scarcity of clergy in their locality, have only a single priest to look after them, and this priest can only attend one meeting in three for each team. In another town in France, as well as in a town in Brazil, there are couples who, for some months, are ready to start a team, but are unable to do so because of the lack of a priest.”

A question is raised; impossible to escape it; can the monthly meeting of a Team of Our Lady take place without the presence of a priest?

The Charter, in 1947, did not contemplate such a situation arising. No one suspected then that there would be such a huge increase in the number of teams. No one thought that some day, in certain towns, the priests would be too few in number for each team to have one at each of their monthly meetings: nor that teams would increase so much in numbers, in regions which happened to be rich in priests, that they had to give up the idea of having a chaplain at every meeting.

We can no longer live in a world of make-believe. The choice to be made has to be faced now and will have to be faced more and more frequently in the future: it is between having no teams and having teams without the support of a priest at every meeting – and perhaps as regards teams in some far off town, or some region beyond the iron curtain, without ever having a priest at their meeting.

Is this lack of priests going to put a brake on the expansion of the Movement? Or is it going to make us feel more strongly that our teams, the nursery of priestly vocations, are producing the answer to an urgent need? So then, what is to be done while we are waiting for the sons of teams' members to become team chaplains?

That is the problem: it has to be resolved, in each particular case, in union with the leadership of the Movement. Following our usual custom, we are going to look closely at the experiences of the first teams before recommending a solution. In one place, a long established team will probably give up having its chaplain at every meeting in favour of a new team starting off; in other places, the priest will only attend every second or third meeting.

My wish is that for every team this should be the occasion for them to ask themselves if they value at its true worth the presence of their chaplain, if they know how to get the maximum benefit from his support as a priest, and if they are avoiding putting too great a burden on him.

To the teams who have to accept these restrictions I would say: Don't simply be resigned to them, learn how to discern God's intentions. Pascal wrote: “If God were to give us masters, we would have to obey them wholeheartedly! But such, unflinching, are necessity and events.” Seek therefore to understand what Providence has in mind in permitting this shortage of priests with which you are afflicted.

So many Christians remain “childish” all their lives – they make me think of those boys and girls who do their homework badly and whose parents do not supervise their written work or make them recite what they have to learn by heart. Perhaps God wants to bring them mature spirituality of greater breadth by depriving them from time to time of the help of a priest. Why, in spite of his absence, could they not read and meditate on the Gospel with profit, and help each other to put it into action in their lives. In these teams, it is true, the responsible couple will feel they have a heavier responsibility to bear, the team members will be obliged to be more generous in their care for each other, and to have a more perfect brotherly love: but will there not be an advantage in this? Very probably also the couples will be more conscious of their ignorance and will be inclined to make their questions more precise so as to have them ready for the priest at his next visit: in that case also, there is an advantage. So what at first sight seemed purely and simply to be a deficiency to be overcome, shows itself to be a source of spiritual profit: but so that the ordeal may be useful, it will be necessary that the couples do not allow their opinion of the value the presence of a priest to



be diminished nor develop a presumptuous self-sufficiency, but they must meet the demands with a spirit of faith, ingenuity, humility and generosity.

May the prayer of all the Teams help those who are called upon to try this experiment and may it also intercede for the millions throughout the world who lack the grace of having a priest to break the bread of the Gospel for them, and to reveal to them the love of the Father.

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