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## Review :Thirty-Three Good Men : Celibacy, Obedience and Identity by John Weafer

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# Review: Thirty-Three Good Men: Celibacy, Obedience and Identity by John A Weafer

These conversations with priests fall short of their stated aim to get to the core of the lived experience of priesthood

Eamon Maher

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This new study of Irish diocesan priests in the five decades from 1960 to 2010 provides some astute insights about their varying perceptions of priesthood. John A Weafer's methodology is based on what in sociology is referred to as conversations with a purpose personal interviews with diocesan priests who were ordained before Vatican II, around the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) or more recently. The interviews concentrate on the key issues of celibacy, obedience and identity, with those ordained before and during the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s showing more liberal views on these matters than their younger counterparts, who appear to have been heavily influenced by the doctrinally conservative papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

One might ask how representative the views of these 33 men are in terms of encapsulating the vastly changed perception of Catholicism and the priesthood in the time span under discussion. Clearly the number of people attending Mass and receiving the sacraments on a regular basis has significantly diminished since the 1960s. In fact, the noticeable decline in vocations, and the increasingly secular society in which priests were forced to operate, may well have prompted the visit of John Paul II to Ireland in 1979. Although the visit was a success in terms of the crowds that turned up at the various events, the acrimonious debates on divorce, contraception and abortion during the 1980s showed an ever-widening gap between what the Catholic Church taught and what a significant proportion of the population was willing to accept. The moral authority of the church was severely dented in the early 1990s when news broke about Bishop Eamon Casey's affair with Annie Murphy, and then the first revelations of the clerical-abuse scandals, the ramifications of which are still evident.

A backlash against diocesan priests, working as they do on the front line, in the wake of such seismic events might well have been expected. But Weafer says that "priests are still highly regarded by some sections of Irish society and that their image has not been as severely tarnished as the institutional Church".

People are sufficiently discerning to distinguish between the institutional church and those priests with whom they interact on the ground. In John McGahern's *That They May Face the Rising Sun* the local handyman Patrick Ryan, not one to pull any punches in his assessment of people, says of the local parish priest, "Fr Conroy is plain. The priests had this country a-bulling with religion once. It's a good job it's easing off."

The time when priests dictated to parishioners how to live their lives is long gone, and that is a positive development. What Weafer's study tries to analyse, however, is not so much how diocesan priests are perceived from the outside as how they experience priesthood themselves, at their core.

Celibacy is clearly a divisive issue, especially because it is mandatory for all aspiring priests. There are varying interpretations of clerical celibacy, with some viewing it as the total exclusion of sexual activity from a person's life and others maintaining that a close male-female relationship is possible as long as the parties are prudent. Being celibate does not imply that one ceases being sexual. When it is a freely chosen option, many priests believe that celibacy makes them more available for service to others. Among his sample interviewees Weafer includes heterosexual men who left the priesthood because of difficulties with celibacy; priests involved in relationships with women; gay priests; and former priests who are gay. The views were divided between those who viewed celibacy as a gift or as a cross and those who were ambivalent about it. Younger, post-Vatican II priests are the most likely to embrace celibacy, seeing it as central to the identity of priesthood. Older priests vary in their assessment but tend to believe in general that it should not be mandatory.

One major problem I have with the survey findings is that the sample is so small: 33 interviewees are unlikely to give an accurate picture of how diocesan priests feel on any issue. One man who was ordained in the 1980s felt that "well over half of his class in the seminary were gay", for example. It is impossible to assess the accuracy of this observation.

Diocesan priests are a disparate lot, and their views are formed by their family backgrounds, seminary education and parish ministries. So to claim, as Weafer does, that "post-Vatican II priests are ideologically obedient and theologically conservative, and they embrace the solemn promise of obedience" seems more like an expression of the author's own view rather than a scientific

deduction based on incontrovertible data.

Weafer admits that “a priest’s private life is something of an enigma”, but unravelling this enigma is precisely what would be of interest to readers. His comment that he did not sense that any of the priests he interviewed were in crisis also flies in the face of what people like Fr Brendan Hoban have been arguing, convincingly, for at least two decades.

Overall, then, *Thirty-Three Good Men*, while it contains many fascinating testimonies and anecdotes, fails to meet the challenge of its subtitle, namely to produce “a sociological study of the lived experience of Irish diocesan priests”. That is a pity, but then again maybe such an aspiration was far too ambitious in the first instance.

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