

# Lay ministry in Catholic rural parishes: practice and traditions



My former rural parish was fairly typical: three churches with a combined congregation of 150, drawn from the 25 villages and hamlets in an area of over 120 square miles. In such a context what lay ministry takes place?

The list includes many things:

.....bringing the housebound to church for Mass (celebration of the Eucharist/Holy Communion)... taking the Eucharist to the sick... running age-appropriate children's liturgy during Mass... the roles of altar-servers, readers, musicians and choir members... preparing children for the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist and Confirmation... preparing couples for baptism of their children... running classes for those interested in the Catholic faith... managing parish finance and gift aid... making grant applications... taking responsibility for safeguarding issues... church cleaning... flower arranging... sacristan duties (preparation for liturgies)... fund-raising to keep the bills paid maintaining grounds and buildings... serving on ecumenical groups... raising money and participating in campaigns for CAFOD (Catholic Aid For Overseas Development) and missionary groups... participating in prayer groups and Bible study...

Understanding Catholic rural ministry: some background

## **Eucharist**

All Christians cherish the scriptures, which tell us, 'unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life within you.' (John 6:53). Catholic Tradition has the celebration of the Mass (Eucharist) at its heart. Eucharist is the life of the Church and all ministry draws its purpose from the presence and power of Christ in the Eucharist. This shapes the Church's priorities: with large distances between rural churches the ministries of lift-giving to Mass and taking Eucharist to the housebound are a given.

## **Schools**

Following Catholic practice being outlawed in post-Reformation England, Catholic Bishops were permitted to re-establish in 1851. They gave very high priority to the building of Catholic schools, which increased from under 100 to over 1400 in the next 25 years, and there are now 2245 in England & Wales. Many Catholic teachers are prominent Church lay leaders. Rural congregations have less access to Catholic schools, so lay parish catechists (who teach prayer, scriptures, sacramental and Christian life understanding) have a higher profile.

## **Second Vatican Council Reforms**

Catholic bishops of the world gathered for a council 1962-1965 which initiated many reforms. The decree on ecumenism encouraged Catholics to work wherever possible with Christians of other denominations. The decree on the Word of God encouraged all to undertake regular personal prayer and study of scriptures. The decree on the Church affirmed the vocation arising through baptism of every Christian to ministry in the body of the Church. One perception of change I have, based on personal experiences, is that currently Rural Catholics are more prominent in shared ecumenical mission and praying scriptures with other denominations than urban Catholics.

### **Specific Ministry Concerning Rural Life**

Fr Robert Miller (Catholic National Rural Officer) has a pastoral role with Catholics in rural life. The website [ruralcatholics.org.uk](http://ruralcatholics.org.uk) and annual conferences are to be recommended. National Catholic rural ministry is lower profile than C of E, Methodist and URC due to our lower proportion of rural parishes.

International Catholic rural ministry is networked through the International Catholic Rural Association (ICRA, [icra-agrimissio.org](http://icra-agrimissio.org)). Their global focus, however, is more on the 1 billion subsistence farmers worldwide and on agricultural multinationals than on UK-type farming systems, conditioned as we are by our particular agricultural history.

Fr Rob Taylerson

Archbishop's Adviser on Rural affairs and parish priest St Teresa's, Trent Vale

R.C. Archdiocese of Birmingham)

[robtaylerson@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:robtaylerson@hotmail.co.uk)

*This article first appeared in Country Way 74: Developing Lay Leaders, January 2017.*