

**VOCATION, IDENTITY WORK AND REFLEXIVITY:
CAREER TRANSITIONS OF FORMER PRIESTS AND SEMINARIANS**

Abstract

The influence of vocation on the lives and careers of professional workers has emerged as an important research issue. The stages of acquiring and fostering a calling, and its flowering into a commitment to the work of service, have been the subject of many studies. There is less focus, however, on the unravelling of commitment and the decision to withdraw from one profession and re-site a calling in another. In this paper we explore these issues in relation to a group of former Catholic priests or seminarians who trained together in the 1960s. The great majority chose to leave the Church, many of them after serving as a priest for a considerable time. Based on in-depth retrospective personal accounts, the paper examines the research participants' background in the Church; their decision to leave it; their transition to a new career; and the experiences and achievements they enjoyed there. It is suggested that their choices of alternative career, many of which involved work akin to that of the priesthood, show that their ideals remain intact. We reflect on the implications for individuals and for organizations.

MAD Statement

The paper provides an in-depth analysis of the dilemmas faced by a group of people who trained together at a Catholic seminary in the 1960s. Their retrospective accounts of their working lives show how their sense of vocation—though not their religious faith—was tested by their experience of working in the Church. The great majority made the decision to leave, but they were able to retain their sense of vocation by taking up in new careers in which their willingness to serve could be applied in a different way. In looking at the case in which a sense of vocation is likely to be at its strongest, the paper has implications for how similar dilemmas might be faced in other situations. It also has important implications from a management point of view, underlining the need to understand the strength of the various components of employee motivation and career orientation.

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Introduction

The concept of vocation has been examined in the context of many occupations and professions (Dik and Duffy, 2009; McSweeney, 1974; Novak, 1996; Weiss et al., 2004). Among the questions addressed are how an individual discovers a vocation and how the experience of that vocation unfolds (Dobrow, 2004). Vocation is often associated with career commitment, which may undergo go different events and stages over a lifetime (Hall, 1976; Hall and Chandler, 2005). During these stages, commitment to the vocation may be questioned, reviewed and even revoked (Duffy and Sedlacek, 2007).

It is this process that this paper will explore. We examine the accounts of thirty-two former trainee priests, or seminarians, who trained together and whose careers have transitioned and changed over a forty-year period. Caza et al. (2018: 902) point to an individual's unique set of identities at work, yet what remains to be explored is exactly how specific work-based role, collective, and personal identities are integrated in an overall work-based self-concept and what contextual characteristics impact on this process. In trying to help remedy these deficiencies, we examine how our research subjects or participants came to their decision to transition; how they came to choose their different career context; and how they reflect on the identity work involved.

Vocation, Identity Work and Reflexivity

Vocation and calling

Elangovan et al. (2010) offer a comprehensive account of the many definitions of vocation, identifying three key aspects which emerge from the literature. First, there is an orientation: the calling includes an action task and service to be done in, for example, nursing. (Raatikainen, 1997). Thus, while beliefs, attitudes and values are essential and ever-present, the concept of callings, per se, ‘focuses on the actions they motivate’ (Elangovan et al., 2010: 429). Second, there is a sense of clarity of purpose and personal mission. Here the suggestion is that you are what you do (Elangovan et al., 2010: 429). Third, there is the element of pro-social intentions: the desire, for example, to make the world a better place (Dik and Duffy, 2009; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). As we shall see, our research subjects’ narratives identified how they established their vocation; how events influenced their decision to leave; how they re-established their vocation in a different context; and how they reflect on their long-term experience.

Identity work

Not all professional identities are sustainable over a lifetime’s career. Searches for a new identity are sometimes described as a dialogic process (Beech, 2008), one which is seen as co-constructed and fabricated through discourse—a process that can be fragmented, fragile and fluctuating. The search may need to ‘explore and expose ambiguity and persistent contradictions’ (Ybema et al., 2009: 314), and it ‘refracts the continuous articulation of agency and structure’ (Ybema et al., 2009: 318) lying at the heart of a permanent dialect supporting identity theory.

There are two questions underlying identity: who am I? And who ought I to be? (Corley and Gioia, 2004). Striking a balance between the questions requires identity work, which is ‘told internally through interaction with others’ (Caza et al., 2018: 895). Caza et al. (2018: 899) suggest ‘humans are driven to see themselves as remaining the same, at least in part, as time passes. Narratives can create this desired sense of stability even amidst change.’ This also relates to identity as ‘who am I?’. The second question--who ought I to be?--presents the challenge of exploring options around personally held ideals and aspirations. Caza et al. (2018: 899) speak of coherence, which can also ‘motivate individuals to create a sense of compatibility between various discourses.’ Similarly, Weick et al. (2005) state that ‘coherence does not imply “truth” but rather the ability to create a story that integrates one’s observation and holds it up to scrutiny.’

Looked at in this way, early aspirations to serve in a profession can be supported by dreams of fulfilling the role (Fraher and Gabriel, 2014), and this itself can be supported by inspirational role models or through formal education (Ibarra, 1999). It ‘facilitates socialization and enable[s] rules and routines to become part of the individual’s habitus’ (Ybema et al., 2009: 302). This search for the self is part of identity work, linking the personal (the biography) with what’s going on in the world (the history) and with who we take ourselves to be. It can also be a function of the person we see reflected in the eyes of others (Goffman, 1959). Identity work is thus a process of self-understanding made possible through interaction with others. It is experienced through the influence of discourses and the response to those discourses, which enables the individual to craft a self. It is a ‘coming together of internal/inward self-reflection and external/outward engagement’ (Watson, 2008: 126). We will explore this identity work in the narratives of our research subjects.

Breaks and ruptures

There are many examples of those who have left one career to join another that they have always had a desire to follow. Caza et al. (2018: 892) refer to this as an aspirational identity work mode. Ibarra (2003) offers examples of what she calls ‘unconventional strategies for reinventing your career,’ and, in a similar vein, Linde (1993: 3) speaks of research subjects ‘creating coherence in their life stories.’ The role of external events in this process has been examined in a number of research studies. Service personnel leaving the Marines following injury or trauma, for example, sought to re-site their career in alternative military service (Haynie and Shepherd, 2011). Furloughed pilots could be divided between those who moved to other occupations and those described as ‘stuck’ or waiting to get back onto the flight deck (Fraher and Gabriel, 2014). Vough et al. (2015) explored the responses of subjects who had been prematurely retired. She contrasted those who felt ‘discarded’ with others who felt, looking back, that they had had an ‘epiphany’ and who welcomed an opportunity to move on elsewhere in their lives.

What are less often explored are cases in which there is an erosion of professional beliefs that requires the change of career needed to reaccommodate vocational aspirations (Oliver, 1992). Obodaru (2017) refers to such moments as a ‘fork-in-the-road’, the point at which a choice is required between occupational options. She suggests there is sometimes a ‘forgone identity’ which can often resurface in the choice of a future career and even in the choice of continuing free-time activities. Changes can be triggered by ‘arresting moments’ (Greig et al., 2012) or ‘turning points’ (Abbot, 1999) which surface surprise and, in turn, require sensemaking (Weick, 1995) or appraisal and decision (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). It has been suggested that this narrative work is an ongoing process of ‘writing one’s autobiography,’ in which the

story ‘must align with the teller and listener’s understanding of how the world works’ (Caza et al., 2018: 899).

Identity work and reflexivity

Identity work, then, is a process of self-understanding made possible through interaction with others. It is experienced through the influence of, and the response to, discourses which enable the individual to craft a self. Radical change can cause those experiencing it to reflect on their values and the meaning of the new project that they have chosen. According to Schwartz and Vakola (2021: 43), this is the ‘need to introspect and examine how we think about change itself,’ and this individual reassessment of vocational commitment often involves reflexivity. Bartunek (2020) describes this as ‘the process of critical self-questioning which facilitates the production of the self,’ a process which Archer (2003) develops in her research into what she calls her subjects’ ‘internal conversation’. She identifies some individuals as meta-reflexives—those who link their vocational ideals to their work project and seek to ground it in the work practices that those projects require.

These meta-reflexives have three characteristics (Archer, 2003: 288): their contextual critique is life-long, for no context ever fully exemplifies their ideals; there is a life-long reconfiguration of practical projects; and there is a similar life-long preoccupation with acquiring greater self-knowledge. Archer (2003: 293) notes that ‘when personal situations are deemed too disparate from their ideals, they quit’. In the present paper we show how our research subjects reflect on the values that supported their original vocation and how these have been modified during their experience of career transition. It is this search for coherence between ideals, project, and practices that is our central concern.

Methodology

Research setting and data collection

We chose a grounded theory approach which involved an iterative process of data collection, analysis and theorizing (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Data was collected from thirty-two subjects who had trained together for the Catholic priesthood in the late 1960s. At some stage thereafter they transitioned into a different vocational career. This cohort had come together again in 2012 to celebrate the forty-year anniversary of their time at St John's Seminary, Womersley in the UK. The first author of this paper was part of this reunion. He was ordained as a priest but left the Church after eight years' service. Table 1 provides details of those taking part in the research, showing the years each spent in training (including years spent in junior and senior seminary respectively); the years spent in active service as a priest; an indication of where, respectively, presbytery life, intimate relationships and theological concerns had an influence on their decision to leave the Church; and the new career into which they entered.

Table 1 about here

The seminarians' reunion provided an opportunity to examine the careers of those who had left the priesthood and transitioned into different occupations. The research focuses on participants' experience and meaning-making, not merely on descriptions of observable actions and behaviour. Our primary means of data collection was one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. We followed a timeline-led sequence of pre-transition, transition and post-transition, asking probing, follow-up questions about their recollections of, and reflections on, the experience that they had undergone. We

used Louis's (1980a, 1980b) approach of probing what surprised and what did not surprise our subjects about events they experienced.

The time that our respondents shared as seminarians was an important period in the history of the Catholic Church. Ecumenical Councils (meaning all the bishops are invited) have been held throughout its history to resolve challenges to dogma or practice, and sometimes condemning heresy. The first such Council was held in Jerusalem in 49 CE to resolve the issue of whether Greek converts would be required to adhere to Jewish religious practices. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), or Vatican II, addressed radical change to align the Church with the modern world, and it has been shown to have led to a significant number of priests and religious to leave the Church's official ministry (Ventimiglia, 1977; Bartunek, 1984, Ebaugh, 1977; 1988). Nunez (2010) conducted research in the Barcelona Diocese, and he found that the impact of the Council's decrees (Abbott, 1966) had led to 18% of clergy leaving during the period of his research. Certainties and intuitive feelings changed, as did their priestly roles and practice (Nunez, 2010: 276). This sometimes led to a sense of betrayal, which Nunez suggested focused on perceived consequences of the Council affecting the role and identity of the priest. Hedin (1995), himself a student for the priesthood, conducted research with his fellow former-seminarians in the USA, and noted how those who experienced the Second Vatican Council during their training had different hopes and expectations which sustained them during the difficult times of change. Bartunek (1984) and Ebaugh (1977; 1988) offer similar empirical evidence of the impact of Vatican II on the orders of nuns to which they both belonged.

Data analysis

Once the data was transcribed, the first stage of data analysis involved the authors working individually on the transcripts. Thematic analysis (Reissman, 2008) was used, aimed at identifying ‘arresting moments’ (Greig et al., 2012); ‘turning points’ (Abbott, 1999); ‘epiphany moments’ (Vough et al., 2015) or ‘fork-in-the-road’ events (Obodaru, 2017). In the second stage we each drew up a list of significant themes which we then exchanged before, in the third stage, considering the theoretical categories arising from the narratives. In the fourth stage both authors reread the complete set of original transcripts to confirm that our categories represented the emergent themes of our subjects’ narratives. In presenting our findings we follow the sequence of the narratives: first, from vocational experience prior to the transition to both the establishment of the vocation and the influences leading to its erosion; then the transition itself, including choices made and the contrast with the priesthood; and finally, the life in the new occupation and the reflection on its meaning and values.

Findings

Establishing a vocation: Initial call to the priesthood

A common experience amongst our interviewees was that of being an altar server in the Church as a young boy—on average, from around seven years of age. This experience involved being close to the priest in the sanctuary; being part of the actions of the priest; and also engagement with the Latin language, which allowed the altar server to respond to the priestly dialogue throughout the Mass. All of this was viewed as a special privilege which frequently led to an invitation to consider becoming a priest. What followed was acceptance for seminary training. For some, this could be at as early an age as twelve; for others, the age of entry was eighteen. It was a disciplined life which carried most of our subjects along with

growing reflection on its content. Interviewees' reflections on their early experiences of the Church and the seminary are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

There seems to have been little conception at this stage of making the world a better place. The interviewees' reflections focus on priests as role models whom they aim to emulate, and seminary training is the logical first step in this. Once in the training, the seminary takes on a momentum of its own, which they openly acknowledge.

Identity work: breaks and ruptures

During their time at the seminary, our subjects experienced the impact of the Second Vatican Council. Life became much less restrictive in the Seminary. Formal clerical dress was made voluntary; the liturgy was now in English; and students were encouraged by some staff to become involved in discussion about the future of the Church in the modern world.

However, the Church our interviewees eventually entered contained many more senior colleagues whose views were governed by more traditional ways of thinking and belief. This led many to a questioning of their priestly life. The situation faced by our interviewees is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3 about here

This division in the Church (Chinnici, 2004) continued to influence the experience of active priesthood with older priests who became their superiors, often uncommitted or even resistant to the new ways of doing things introduced by Vatican II.

Arresting moments: The beginnings of a fork-in-the-road

For many of our interviewees, there were moments in which the ambiguity of vocational occupation suggested that a fork-in-the-road was inevitable. Some of these involved personal relations with parishioners, for which our interviewees felt unprepared. The data presented in Table 4 illustrates this. When ambiguous events occur, previously constructed understandings of the identity that supports them are called into question, as we noted. Close family and Church officials did not always deal well with this discussion about leaving the priesthood, but friends were largely supportive. If the situation is unresolvable by staying, then the challenge now presents itself: what are the future options for re-siting their vocation in an alternative occupation?

Table 4 about here

Experience of life ‘in the world’ soon disabused most research subjects of the notion that their celibate state was something they could easily take for granted. Experience in parish life was to test these early expectancies and lead to an erosion of their previously held beliefs.

Coping with transition: identity work and reflection

For most of those who left the Church, the thoughts of career change had developed over months and years, and therefore the search for a job had usually been given some thought too. Pastoral-type roles predominated in the jobs which were eventually chosen. Among these new fields were social work, probation, caring for ex-prisoners, teaching and counselling. The similarity between social work and priestly pastoral practice was apparent to our subjects and relates to what Archer (2003) refers to as the link between practices, in

this case counselling and support, and the ideals embodied in the priestly vocational role of service to others. Elangovan et al.'s (2010) evocation of making the world a better place is directly addressed in the moral choices made about prospective jobs. Service to others, especially the deprived or disadvantaged, are clearly preferred to money or status-driven occupations, as Table 5 illustrates.

Table 5 about here

The erosion of belief which Oliver (1992) refers to is apparent in these accounts. Ambiguity and ambivalence lead to questioning vocational ideals, and sensemaking included the option of moving on (Weick, 1995). Once again, ambivalence was resolved through an intentional decision (Piderit, 2000). Unsympathetic encounters with Church authorities contributed to disidentification from the institutional church (Pratt, 2006), and it required moral courage to face the possibility of family disappointment and rejection.

Post-transition: Reflection and epiphanies

As we can see, new role challenges were welcomed by those leaving the Church. Indeed, re-establishing a professional identity outside the Church's ministry was experienced as refreshingly real and authentic—as feeling like any other person, rather than one marked out as different and perhaps less approachable. As for settling into a married relationship, the benefits were perceived unanimously by those who had left. The arresting moment had led to a fork-in-the road (Obodaru, 2017) and a forgone identity which was the base for a new work project fulfilling the previously held vocational ideals (Archer, 2003). The experience of these new roles was often referred to as 'authentic,' as the data in Table 6 demonstrates.

Table 6 about here

These responses reinforce Archer's (2003) assertion that meta-reflexives are likely to leave and resite in a work project that restores the link between their ideals and their working practices.

Our final concerns related to the ongoing evaluation of our research subjects' personal values as they look back on their forty-year career span. The narratives include their spiritual quest, which is still the focus of their identity work. The nature of these reflections is shown in the data presented in Table 7.

Table 7 about here

These comments bear similarities to those of Hedin's (2010) research subjects, reinforcing the ideals which lie at the heart of vocational commitment. Nunez's (2010) suggestion that his subjects ceased to be clerics but retained the priestly ideals are also reflected in these accounts.

Discussion

As our research participants relayed their narratives about how they reached the transition in their vocational careers, they described events and experiences that shaped how and why it had occurred. Professional identity requires both aspiration and construction (Pratt, 2000), and both are apparent before and after the career transition. Their identity work is triggered by ambiguous experiences, leading to ambivalence about the disparities between beliefs and

practices. This process is not confined to priests and others in religious occupations. It applies to a 'boot camp' for medical students (Pratt et al., 2006) and to medical staff (Hyppola et al., 1998). It triggers identity work in which the classic questions 'who am I?' and 'who ought I to be?' (Corley and Gioia, 2004) are critical for individuals to explore as their vocational career unfolds.

When ambiguous and unexpected events occur, 'previously constructed understandings and the identities that support them are called into question' (Caza et al., 2018: 898), and when sense has been broken, it requires reconstruction (Pratt et al., 2006). There is an interaction here between ambiguity and ambivalence, itself reinforced by diverse and sometimes uncongenial experiences in practice, which can lead to conflict between the cognitional and emotional levels. This leads, in turn, to the intentional level of making a decision, in this case between staying in and leaving the priesthood (Piderit, 2000; Randall and Procter, 2008).

The second identity question—who ought I to be?—indicates a moral dimension which is derived from the ideals and values which Elangovan et al. (2010) suggest underwrite a vocation: making the world a better place, for example. Working experience brings with it additional tests of the vocational ideal's endurance—such as the anti-social behaviour of colleagues and the difficulty of keeping personal life separate from professional life. This can occur for all professionals who live on the job, as Catholic clergy do (Kreiner et al., 2006). For our interviewees there is the added challenge of the celibate life for which, by their own admission, they felt inadequately prepared. Opportunities for developing personal relationships, however, had soon become apparent.

These experiences lead to ‘arresting moments’ (Grieg et al., 2012) or ‘sense-breaking practices’ (Pratt, 2000), which can cause the individual to disidentify with the organization (Pratt, 2000). The ideals of the vocation are eroded, a process which Oliver (1992) refers to as expectancies undermined and ideals questioned. Arresting moments lead to Obodaru’s (2017) ‘fork-in-the-road’, as individuals disidentify from the Church and feel the need to explore other career options: continuation, it is felt, will only lead to further ambiguity.

Pratt et al. (2006) suggest that transitioning into an alternative career offers three areas to explore in the reconstruction of professional identity: career and role transition, socialization and identity work. As far as the choice of occupation is concerned, the authors were surprised at how closely the occupations chosen mirrored what our subjects would have been familiar with in their work as clergy. Pastoral work roles predominated. This may be a rational outcome for those making a career transition later in life, as jobs might require related experience. However, the moral choices our interviewees made suggest that for several of them there was a clear option to move into a traditional professional career in such areas as the law or finance. These were turned down in favour of serving disadvantaged people through social-type work. This suggested that the ideals of a vocation making the world a better place is the morally favoured option in transitioning to an alternative occupation. It also supports Archer’s (2003) subjects’ accounts that indicate that meta-reflexives will move occupation once ideals, the (priestly) project and its work practices no longer support each other.

As far as socialization is concerned, there is much less detail of the challenge of returning to secular life after a clerical life in the Church. This contrasts with the experience of those who abandoned their lives as nuns (Bartunek, 1984). For many of them, the search for a secular

identity loomed large in the research findings (Ebaugh, 1977, 1988) as the now former nuns searched for a secular occupation and a reorientation of their personal lives in the modern world. In contrast, our subjects expressed palpable and welcomed relief at working in the secular world and an authentic self, free of clerical institutional constraints.

In terms of identity work, the priesthood is a forgone identity as an institutional role (Obodaru, 2017). However, the values and ideals which supported the priestly vocation are re-established in the roles exercised in the newly chosen occupation. Nunez draws the conclusion that his ex-priest subjects ‘ceased being clerics, but they remained priests.’ This reinforces Obodaru’s finding (2017) that forgone identities are often expressed in new work or voluntary activities.

While on the question of ideals and values, we can also link up with the religious and spiritual aspects of the priestly vocation. If we accept the distinction between religion as the outside practices and spirituality as the internal search for meaning (Hernandez et al., 2011) then, of the present group of former priests or seminarians, all but two still attended Mass and all accepted the mission to make the world a better place (Elangovan et al., 2010). However, as we saw, none of our participants said they would return to ministerial priesthood if the opportunity arose. This provides support for Archer’s (2003) view that meta-reflexives will resist resuming a failing project which can be placed successfully elsewhere, thereby re-establishing the link between ideals, project, and practices. One final question might be to ask whether Oliver’s erosion, which she sees as leading to deinstitutionalization of the Church, is supported by our findings. Certainly, amongst the cohort upon whose experiences we draw here, there could be said to be what an employer might regard as a serious loss of

key staff. Whether this indicates deinstitutionalization as defined by Oliver (1992) and Nunez (2010), however, remains to be established.

Conclusions

What can be concluded from the present research? In answer to those who might see here an exclusively ecclesiastical case study, we would suggest that many professions are assailed by members leaving to pursue different careers. The question for managers in all professional sectors is: why are members looking to leave and what impact will that have on our ability to continue to run the service? Where there is an erosion of the values that supported the calling, we need to examine why professionals feel that this has taken place and what can be done to reinforce the ideals that sustained the original calling.

Moreover, the exploration of long-cycle professional transitions adds weight to the value of our findings and their contribution to the basis of identity work, forgone identities and meta-reflexivity. Study of the links between ideals, projects and practices remains a fruitful exploration for identity work and its impact on professional services over a longer work cycle. As Louis (1980a, 1980b) has suggested, in order to understand what individuals are changing to, we need to understand what they are changing *from*.

A forty-year appraisal of identity and career change may be viewed as anecdotal or nostalgic. However, it is also primary evidence of the experience of unlooked-for change and the ingenuity and commitment of those who have re-established their professional identity in spite of the organization, not because of it. The evidence of our subjects' experience of re-establishing a professional identity in an alternative vocational occupation supports Ebaugh's view that 'the new identity incorporates vestiges and residuals of the previous role'

(1988: 4), a point which Obodaru (2017) also makes about forgone identities. Vocation does not have to mean a life sentence in one role. A calling can be re-established wherever the world needs to become a better place. This approach privileges ideals over projects and confirms actors and their agency of established practices as the foundation for continuing vocational ideals.

Finally, we hope we have gone some way to addressing Pratt et al.'s (2006: 259) assertion that 'despite increasing interest in identity, and importance of professionals in organizations, there is little research on how professionals construct professional identities.' This research has sought to extend that research and contribute to our understanding of this subject and can serve as a foundation for further research on identity construction during vocational occupation transition.

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Table 1 Summary of research subjects' experience profile

	JS	SS	N	AS	PL	R	Th	NJ
S1	5	4	9		x	x		Probation
S2	4	4	8				x	Social work
S3	6	4	10				x	Childcare
S4		4	4			x		Teaching
S5		4	4				x	University administrator
S6	2	4	6			x		Self employed
S7	2	4	6				x	University lecturer
S8	4	3	7			x		IT manager
S9	6	4	10			x		Self employed
S10	4	5	9			x		Publishing
S11	4	2	6			x		Social work
S12		5	5				x	Solicitor
S13		11					x	Consultant
S14	5	5	10				x	Counsellor
S15	5	3	8				x	MD oil company
S16		4	4				x	Senior police officer
S17		5	5			x		Self employed
S18		5	5			x		Self employed
P1			7	37		x		Retired
P2	5	6	11	40		x		Social work
P3	2	6	10	4		x		Probation
P4	4	6	10	6		x		Minister at crematorium
P5	7	6	13	27		x		Counsellor
P6	4	6	10	11		x		Voluntary
P7		7	7	30			x	Academic
P8	2	6	8	17		x		Carer
P9		7	7	8		x		University lecturer
P10		4	6	10	x	x		Probation
P11	5	6	11	6	x			Teacher
P12	3	6	9	11			x	University lecturer
P13	6	6	12	6			x	Anglican priest
P14		6	6	11	x			University lecturer

Key

S1 etc: Seminarian 1 etc; **P1** etc: Priest 1 etc; **JS**: years in Junior Seminary; **SS**: years in Senior Seminary; **N**: total number of years training; **AS**: active service years; **PL**: presbytery life; **R**: relationships; **Th**: theological concerns; **NJ**: new job

Table 2 Data supporting establishing a vocation to the priesthood

Sub-category	Representative quotations
Early attraction	I loved serving Mass. Obviously at the time it was Latin Mass, but there was a certain amount of pride involved here.
Seminary life	Once I was in the system, the system carried me along. I did not ever make a free independent decision about priesthood and religious life. I was already in it from the age of eleven!
A structured life	Obedience was the key word. Any deviation from the rules was interpreted as a sign that you did not have a vocation.
A different life	I was surprised that when I started at the seminary it seemed like going into a time warp – all these 18-year-olds walking around in cassocks all the time.

Table 3 Data supporting breaks and ruptures

Sub-category	Representative quotations
Impact of radical change	Ash Wednesday [day of change in 1967] came along and suddenly it was a free day, just a totally different regime. No structure, no guidance. The more mature people further up the house took to it like a duck to water.
Uncertainty and difference	There were those who wanted a far more liberal approach and those who were far more traditional and conservative. And what I noticed, that with this dissention went a considerable bitterness.
Uncongenial colleagues	I was living there Monday to Friday with this old priest. I thought he was a very bitter man, and it was just the whole thing of being cooped up with this guy, for meals and social events.
Dealing with sickness	Initially for the first six years I served two curacies. One was on the Kent coast with a very sick and authoritarian parish priest; the second was an inner-city parish with an alcoholic parish priest.

Table 4 Data supporting a final break

Sub-category	Representative quotations
Unpreparedness	<p>My notion of being human is that there is a sexual side to you and being a sexual being was a sacrifice to have to make.</p> <p>I arrived at ordination believing this to be the right thing for me but not having been really challenged or looked seriously at other alternatives.</p>
First encounters	<p>I got ordained the following March and then I think I lasted three years and I met [name] ... we used to do these youth vigils and youth groups and she was in the parish, she joined the team and I think I began a relationship with her, and I thought ‘I can’t carry this on and I can’t give it up’, so I just resigned.</p>
Friends’ advice	<p>I was a bit surprised about some of the advice I did get from people which was ... ‘continue in the priesthood and get the relationship out of your system’ that sort of approach to things. But I said to them ‘she is worth more than that’.</p> <p>I was not surprised to receive this avalanche of letters [from lay people], ‘we hear you have gone, good luck, here is some advice, here is some money, if you ever need a bed for the night’.</p>
Church authorities	<p>He [the bishop] said, ‘Well, there was a man who decided to leave and his parents both tried to commit suicide together’ and I remember thinking, ‘this is not a good way of dealing with someone who is telling you they are changing their life’.</p>
Dealing with the family	<p>When the time came to actually leave, my mother was very hurt, but I knew I could not be a priest just to please her. It was the hardest decision of my life.</p>

Table 5 Data supporting transition

Sub-category	Representative quotations
Similar occupations	<p>Probation, of course, is probably the nearest parallel, if you regard the priest as a sense of the person who stands between the infinite perfect God and the messy human beings we all are, he tries to mediate these two impossibles.</p>
Moral choices and ideals	<p>I left and decided there were two options: one of going into business and I remember having conversations with certain people about did I want to become a merchant and was told I would basically make a fortune. But I concluded that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life making rich people richer... so I went into social work. Then from '69 up till now I've done social work - primarily childcare work.</p> <p>I became enrolled as a solicitor and after a brief period in a run-down solicitor's office in Hammersmith, I was taken on, for a small salary, by a not-for-profit housing rights group as their in-house solicitor working on harassment and housing disrepair cases in a very poor immigrant neighbourhood.</p>
Constructing professional identity	<p>So, I found that [social work] very professionally satisfying, which I know I wouldn't have done [by staying in the Church] ... also because it is a much more flexible society, it is not hidebound by the rigidity of mediaeval scholasticism.</p> <p>I think what has happened is I had the capacity, what the [probation] service did by ensuring I had further training and development and opportunities, expanded it and developed it.</p>

Table 6 Data supporting reflection and epiphanies

Sub-category	Representative quotations
Encounter with the 'real' world	<p>Compared with life in the ranks of the clergy, my new occupation had one supreme value: it was authentic. I went out to work each morning like the rest of humanity. As I joined the commuters each day in crowded underground trains, I thought to myself 'This is wonderful; I have re-entered the human race.'</p>
Supporting relationships	<p>The fact that I am now married has contributed considerably to my general well-being. There are now the privileged opportunities to reflect and share with the person closest to me the "hopes and joys of life." I am certain that ministry would have been so different if I had been married.</p>
Post-Church reflections	<p>My understanding of faith is it gives me the duty to question everything including the faith itself.' In my parole board work I am always questioning.</p> <p>Religion I now find to be stunted, whereas spirituality is always alive and flowing. The old model of Church cannot today address the life of the modern world. I would abolish the clergy!</p>

Table 7 Data supporting identity work and reflexivity

Sub-category	Representative quotations
Questioning religious practice	While I still go to Sunday Mass on regular basis, there is a growing feeling that the celebrations I attend leave me wanting something more.
Search for something more	I don't feel the loss of the Church. I think of it as a useful launch pad in my life which gave me the supreme privilege of serving others and learning about spirituality in life and its connection with the world at large. So, I would say I am still a believer as a Christian and I will find a home in any place where those spiritual values are supported and developed.
Spiritual quest	I do feel there is quite a growing number of people disaffected by the church or churches, or simply have no connection to Christianity. But somehow, they do have a spiritual dimension and they want, actually to ... they are not humanist as such, but they want to explore or express that in some way.
Final words	<p>When you look at what's happening around the world, I think the doctrine of original sin is not such a bad theory. I'm still convinced that there's hardly a better set of guidelines around than the gospels.</p> <p>If you are going to be an unchanging person in a changing world, inevitably it impacts you and I suggest that you ask yourself is that [the priesthood the right life for you?</p>