



Teams of Our Lady

THE PRIEST-
SPIRITUAL COUNSELLOR

International Leading Team

May 2006

FOREWORD

The place and the role of the priest-spiritual counsellor in the team have been the subject of a number of rich and very interesting texts that may be found in the archives of the Teams of Our Lady.

Therefore, the team responsible for international matters (E.R.I.) decided to tackle this question with the College's members during the Rio meeting in July 2004. It has been decided that the College had to reaffirm its position in front of the increasing decline in priests-spiritual counsellors all over the world. At the same time, it is necessary to leave some leeway in order to adapt solutions according to particular situations in different countries and to experiment.

During the Rio College meeting, the E.R.I. led a deep discussion about what is specifically required of priests-spiritual counsellors in order to clarify the possible options for teams that cannot rely on the presence of a priest as a spiritual counsellor.

The Teams of Our Lady movement :

- Reaffirms, first of all, that the choice of the priest-spiritual counsellor's presence is a fundamental element that cannot be changed because it is an integral part of the charisma of the Movement. All the members of the E.R.I. College are unanimous on this point. This unanimity of the College does not stem from a mere fidelity to the terms of the 1947 Charter, but rather from a deep-seated conviction with regard to the importance of the priest's role in the team. This conviction, strengthened by collegial discernment, is based on what Teams have experienced since the very beginnings of the Movement.
- The document also highlights the need to explain the experience of Teams and to delve deeper into the meaning of the priest's presence in a Team; to this end, it offers suggestions that should open up new elements for reflection.

The E.R.I. made a comparative analysis of the Super Regions and in the Regions thoughts keeping as a point of reference the 1993 E.R.I. document¹ A synthesis has been presented to the College which made an ultimate reflection and defined the guiding lines about the lack of priests-spiritual counsellors :

*“The Teams of Our Lady members live in the present-day world. They fully belong to it and want to be “leaven in dough”. That is why they must constantly discern signs of times to detect new realities and the needs of couples nowadays. ”*²

The following recommendations are thus the result of this will of discernment in face of the signs of times that the Teams have always decided to take up assisted by the Holy Spirit. The E.R.I. wants these recommendations to be of use to the Teams of Our Lady worldwide. They define the official statement of the Movement on the subject.

¹The Priest-Spiritual Counsellor, E.R.I. , May 1993.

²The Our Lady Teams Guide, March 2001.

1. A FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENT FROM THE VERY BEGINNING OF TEAMS OF OUR LADY.

We have to avoid speaking of the chaplain merely as spiritual counsellor and refer to him instead as the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor.

1.1 The texts

The Charter (1947) says :

“Each Team has to secure the help of a priest. Actually, all the aspects of the work cannot replace the doctrinal and spiritual contribution of the priest. The priest does not only give principles, but he also helps couples to try to put them into practice in their lives. This collaboration is fruitful. Priests and couples learn how to understand, to respect, to support each other: the priest’s main apostolic intentions are adopted by couples; during his mass, the priest support these couples whose efforts, struggles and desires are known by him.”³ (chapter : Structure of Teams)

The text does not say: “Each Team has to secure the help of a wise, judicious person capable of providing spiritual assistance.” It expressly states “the help of a priest”.

The Charter addition added :

“The priest who “make[s] Christ present as Head of the community” (Synod of Bishops, 1971), is going to help it not to forget its real purpose”.⁴

The Teams of our Lady Guide noticed :

Almost sixty years after the Charter publication, the difficulty of teams to find Priests-Spiritual Counsellors:

“Each team has to secure the help of a priest [...]. If it is not possible for a Team to be helped by a Priest-Spiritual Counsellor, it is the Sector representatives’ decision, while remaining faithful to the guiding lines of the Movement, to ensure that it has a “temporary Spiritual Guide”.⁵

The document about “The Priest-Spiritual Counsellor” (1993) indicates :

“The Movement has always called on priests to be spirituals counsellors of the Teams. This is a well established tradition; it is also a very firm policy”.

The same document reminds us the meaning of the term “spiritual counsellor”:

This designation does not express what is fundamental about the priest’ s role in the Team: that is, his priestly presence. But it has been chosen in preference to that of chaplain, which implies designation by authority, to express the freedom of the Team to choose. This term (of spiritual counsellor) has been adopted in common use.

Nowadays, this designation has an other ambiguity, linked with the lack of priests, because this term could be used for other persons giving spiritual advice. Therefore, the international College and the international Team (E.R.I.) preferred to reserve this appellation

³ The Teams of Our Lady Charter, Structure of Teams, 8 of December 1947.

⁴Ibid. What is a Team of Our Lady? A Face, September 1976. (French version).

⁵The Teams of Our Lady Guide, VII, B-b, March 2001.

for the “Priest-Spiritual Counsellor”. They favoured the appellation “spiritual guide” for people who, without being priests, gives a spiritual advice in Teams.

1.2. The Canonical Statutes of the Movement

They have been approved in April 1992 by the Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis; they also define the role of the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor, in article 7:

*“Priests bring to the Teams the irreplaceable grace of their ministerial priesthood; they do not assume responsibility in the government of Teams; that is why they are called “spiritual counsellors”. **The priest-counsellor of a Team** is chosen by the members of the Team from among priests who legitimately exercise the ministerial priesthood and in accordance with Canon 324 §2”.*⁶

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The line followed by the Movement up to this point is therefore clear and coherent; it was intended from the very beginning that the spiritual counsellor be a priest, by virtue of his ministerial priesthood.

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⁶Canonical Statutes of the Our Lady Teams Movement, Article 7, Rome, 26 of July of 2002.

2. MEANING OF THE PRIEST'S PRESENCE IN THE TEAM

2.1. The need for a deeper understanding

To achieve this reflection, the E.R.I. and the College started from what was defined in the 1993 document about the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor. At the same time, the E.R.I. underlined the fact that principles mentioned in it are still topical and valid :

- The choice of **the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor** is a fundamental option, that cannot be changed because it belongs to the charisma of the Movement.⁷
- The **Priest-Spiritual Counsellor** is a full member of the Team, but in a “different” way in comparison with the other couples members.⁸
- Within the “small Church” that is a Team, there exists a spiritual wealth which comes from two types of vocations : the ministerial priesthood and the faithful's vocation.⁹

The meaning of the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor's presence in the Team

Among the College's members, there is a great consensus about the importance of the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor in the Team.

First of all, the function of the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor in the Team refers to its meaning within the faith community. Here are the most important aspects connected with his mission :

- Within the Team, the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor is the sign of Jesus-Christ, the Good Shepherd : we have to give a great importance to his “prophet shepherd” mission in the service of the Team's unity and communion and between the faithful and the shepherds.
- He acts as the spiritual reference, even when he is not present at the meeting.
- By his doctrinal competence, he is the authority that is consulted when theological questions appear.
- The great wealth of the presence in the Team of couples and priests lies in the possibility of the two different charismas, the couple's one and the bachelor's one, who progress supporting each other to live the baptism which unites them.

Let's add that the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor “as a fellow traveller” often experiments the couples' progression with joy and happiness. Welcome as if he was in his own family, the Team is for him a source of comfort.

The function of the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor

By “function”, we mean what the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor has to carry out according to his role and his meaning within the Team.

⁷ The Priest-Spiritual Counsellor, Op. Cit. p.1.

⁸ Ibid. , p.6.

⁹ Ibid. , p.5.

- Above all, he is a Spiritual Counsellor through the help he gives to couples in order to live fully their Baptism as couples united by the Matrimonial Sacrament.
- He reveals the gifts of the Holy Spirit through the advice he gives which allows fair decisions. The spiritual discernment makes life orientation easier according to the specific vocation of matrimony.
- He acts as the minister of the word of God: the community is created by faith and faith by the word of God's announcement and listening.
- The Priest-Spiritual Counsellor is the one who lights the way on the basis of the Gospel and gives advice to find better one's bearings in personal, couple and family life.
- He helps couples to understand the Charter and to be faithful to it, but he must be vigilant and put it into practice in his own life.
- He helps to understand better the studied theme and to adapt it better to everyday life.
- He helps couples to make their lives become a Eucharist by uniting them with Christ's sacrifice to his Father.
- As a Priest-Spiritual Counsellor, he is the minister of the Church communion. In this way, he keeps the team open to the needs and dynamism of the Church thanks to the grace and the strength of Christ.

2.2. Elements to reflect on

It would be impossible, within the framework of this document, to give a theology of the priesthood; besides, that is not our intention. It should be understood that we must call on our faith, since we are dealing with a mystery (of faith).

“No theology of the priest is satisfying in every respect. Each time, something of the integral richness of the priesthood is lost. The priest can be fully understood only in the light of faith. And faith is always more than a theological synthesis.” (Godfried Cardinal Danneels, Easter booklet, 1990)

However, drawing on writings and commentaries by various authors and on Synod resolutions, as well as, on our own experience and the experience of the Movement, we can reflect more in depth on the specific role of the priest in the Team.

2.2.1. The two forms of the priesthood

“There are thus two modes of participation in the one priesthood of Christ: that of the faithful, in virtue of their baptismal priesthood, and that of the priests, in virtue of their ministerial priesthood which they received at their ordination. These two modes do not coincide: they differ in nature, not in degree. They are not interchangeable, and cannot be reduced one to the other: but neither can they be separated. The only reason for the ministerial priesthood is to make possible that of the faithful: to give the faithful the capacity to present to God as a spiritual offering their entire being and all their action.” (Godfried Cardinal Danneels, Easter booklet, 1990)

Within the “little Church” of the Team lies the “spiritual richness that flows from the two forms of priesthood: the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of the faithful.” (Fr. B. Olivier)

In the Team, the priest is a “man for everyone”. He is the figure of one who gives himself in order to love. He supports the couples in their difficult moments; he is a tangible sign of God’s forgiveness, a reference point and an aid to their discernment of God’s calls. He helps the couples make a Eucharist of their lives by uniting them with the sacrifice of Christ to His Father.

A priest who accepts the invitation to enter a Team will gain a positive appreciation of marriage and family life and their unique spirituality. He will also be invited to accept another responsibility: that of learning about and reflecting on the charisma of the Movement, which is a gift from God that must be respected. His role is to help the couples remain actively faithful to that charisma.

2.2.2. The structure of the Church, the link between the Head and the Body

“Thus priests are with the believing members of Christ, but for the believers and facing them; priests represent the Christ-Head, they render Him present. They are chosen from among men, but they are established in their task for men, in order to work for them and in their midst. The head is not separated from the members, yet it does not coincide with them. The same is true of the priest: despite his deep solidarity with the faithful, he is still opposite them. Although he belongs to the people, at the same time he stands facing them.” (Godfried Cardinal Danneels, Easter booklet, 1990)

That is why the priest is a full-fledged member of the Team; however, his membership is different from that of the member-couples. He belongs to the Team, yet at the same time he stands facing the Team. In spite of his deep solidarity with the Team, he is still opposite them. He makes visible, in the “ecclesiola” of the Team, the bond that unites the Church to the person of Christ.

Certainly, even without the priest’s presence, we would be Church. His presence is not an absolute necessity for the forming or the continued existence of a Team. But we want fully live the sacramental dimension (sacraments are perceptible, visible signs of the mystery we are living) of this structure of the Church: as declared the Vatican 2 Council, the Church is “in Christ, as it were the sacrament, that is to say both the sign and the way to unite intimately with God and to unite all the human race”. (*Constitution about the Church, n.1*)

This implies that the members participate in a mature way in the journey of the Church, the People of God, and in the leadership of Teams, where all the responsibilities are held and carried out by couples.

2.2.3. A Church of communion

“The indispensable presence of the ministerial priesthood in the Church has yet another meaning. It makes visible the deepest being of the Church: she does not draw her being from herself, she receives it entirely from Christ. The Church does not exist by her own grace: her strength does not come from within her. All that she is and does, she receives from Christ and from His spirit.” (Godfried Cardinal Danneels, Easter booklet, 1990)

In a Church of communion, the priest also acts as :

- A minister of the Word of God: the community is created by faith, and faith is created by the proclaiming and hearing of the Word of God,

- A minister at the service of the communion of the Church: his role is to promote, animate and preserve unity, whether within the small group and the rest of the Christian community, so that the group does not close in on itself. He keeps the Team open to the needs and the dynamism of the Church, open to receive the grace and the strength of Christ.

The members of the Team, by their realism, openness and availability to the Spirit, also help the priest stay on guard against letting himself be drawn into bureaucracy or clericalism.

2.2.4. The priest and the Team

Teams of our Lady is a movement of couples with priests. Within the Movement, there is no such thing as a body of priests whose members could be called upon to render their services to Teams, who might have need of them.

Priests belong to the Movement through the Team whose life they share. When the Charter says: “Each Team has to secure the help of a priest”, that priest is one who shares the life of the Team and not just a priest “somewhere” who can be contacted.

If a priest cannot be found to share the life of a particular Team, then that Team enters into the exceptional cases and the Team has to dedicate its prayer to vocations in particular.

2.2.5. the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor in a Service Team, in a Sector, in a Region, in a Super Region and in the E.R.I. Team

He is a full member of these Teams where he is called in agreement with his hierarchy. The length of his mandate is the same of the service length he provides. However, admittedly for the sector, this service could be renewed once.

Briefly, we have opened up several “avenues” for reflecting on the meaning of the priest’ s presence in the Team: it is up to each of us to meditate on them, to pray over them, to pursue and complete the work of reflection that was begun in this document.

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3.FACING THE LACK OF PRIESTS, WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

As the number of Teams continues to increase and the number of priests continues to decrease, it is becoming more and more difficult to place a priest in each Team, especially in certain countries. The Movement is therefore prompted to look for ways to resolve this problem, if the formation of new Teams is to continue uninterrupted in those countries where the shortage of priests is a painful reality.

3.1. Situation in certain countries today

In the face of these difficulties, some countries have been obliged to adopt particular solutions:

- To avoid a generalization without coherence and to answer to a real and urgent need,
- To stop teams looking for risky solutions which forget the principles,
- To keep unity and the signs of the Movement's identity while settling this difficulty together.

The College proposes to set up the Teams spiritual accompaniment.

There have been a total consensus between the College members relating to the fact that the recourse to a non priest spiritual guide has to be lived as a transitional solution. The Spiritual Guide has to remain an exception not the rule. We have to give priority to a priest when possible especially in new Teams. In the same way, we have to favour partial participation of a Priest-Spiritual Counsellor in one or several Teams.

If none of these solutions are possible, we can try to find other solutions: monks, nuns, deacons, laymen, Teams of Our Lady members but under no circumstances is a couple to be designated as a Spiritual Guide.

The Spiritual Guide will only offer his services to the basic Team and the Spiritual Counsellor of the Sector or of the Region will always have to be a priest.

3.2. Working to sensitize and motivate priests

“Each Team has to secure the help of a priest”. This principle has to be followed to the greatest extent possible. The ideal situation is still that of a Team accompanied by a Priest-Spiritual Counsellor. Therefore, we have to persevere in our search for priests and not give up at the first obstacle.

How can we bring priests to an awareness that this kind of evangelization within a small community has extraordinary repercussions? How can we motivate them to take on this work?

On a personal level:

- By the coherent testimony of our lives, and by a deep personal exchange based on our life experience rather than on abstract theories,

- By the testimony of our commitment to serving others and the Church, which will show them that members of Teams of Our Lady are not just “spiritual consumers”,
- By hospitality and the offer of a generous friendship.

Within the Church hierarchy :

- By speaking with the bishop before introducing Teams in the diocese,
- By making every effort to make the bishops recognize Teams as a Movement that gives couples their own spirituality, and trains and encourages them to serve others as the presence of the Church in the world,
- By sending them all documents published by the Movement.

3.3. Reducing the priest’s participation in Team life

Given the difficulties in finding a priest for each Team, we must change our attitude and look for less exclusive ways for the priest to participate in the life of the Team.

A Team that has the joy of being accompanied by a priest should be attentive to the needs of the Sector and be ready, possibly, to make changes in its lifestyle in order to accommodate those needs.

The Sector Couple and the Sector Priest should encourage their Teams to think the matter over and to discuss it frankly at a Team meeting.

Several solutions might be envisaged:

- The Priest-Spiritual Counsellor might be present at every second or third meeting;
- The priest could be present at the first and last meetings of the year, contact maintained with him in the interval, and be called upon if the Team has serious problem;
- A more experienced Team, in agreement with its priest, could voluntarily free him from participating at every meeting, to enable him to help a Team that is just starting up.

Any of these solutions would help:

- Either relieve the priest of some of the constraints of participating in Team meetings and thus perhaps convince reluctant priests to join a Team,
- Or allow a priest to participate in several Teams.

In any case, adopting one of the above solutions could and should be an occasion to highlight the meaning of the priest’ s presence in the Team.

3.4. Teams without a priest

The agonizing problem of a real shortage of priests in many countries must not keep new Teams from being formed, nor must it hamper the spiritual growth of those that exist.

Two situations may be envisaged:

- Either the couples in the Team have received sufficient formation so that the Team may function on its own,
- Or the Team may need “temporary spiritual accompaniment”, especially at the beginning, until a priest can be found or until the Team can function on its own.

In both cases, the Priest-Spiritual Counsellor for the Sector (or, if no Sector exists yet, the Regional Priest-Spiritual Counsellor) would provide a priestly presence for the Team.

The Sector Couple, together with the Sector Priest (or equivalent authorities in areas where Teams are just beginning to take hold), and in agreement with the Team in question, will have to find the solution that is best suited to each particular case.

This implies that every Sector, Regional and Super-Regional Team has to be accompanied by a Priest-Spiritual Counsellor.

3.5. Spiritual accompaniment

In the preceding paragraph, we evoked a concept that is new to Teams, that of spiritual accompaniment. Let us try to clarify this notion and explain its different aspects. But let us remember that this solution is not to be considered until all the other possibilities mentioned above have been exhausted.

3.5.1. Why this spiritual accompaniment?

Teams everywhere are faced with the same situation: many young couples who would like to enter Teams have not received adequate religious instruction and thus are lacking a solid foundation on which to build their Christian married life.

The role of Teams of Our Lady is to help married couples grow in their love of God, their love for each other and their love of neighbour.

3.5.2. Who might provide this accompaniment?

This spiritual accompaniment could be provided by persons chosen for their wisdom, competence and good counsel, as well as, their ability to meet the following criteria:

- Prayer life and spiritual discernment,
- Knowledge and training in the areas of faith and theology,
- Life in communion with the Church and the local hierarchy: experience of pastoral commitment and openness to the church and the world,
- A positive conception of marriage: personal maturity and stability as a couple (ability to keep things in perspective and not to be unduly influenced by one’s experience of life and marriage),
- A faithful and dynamic understanding of the charisma and methods of the Teams of Our Lady and an experience of involvement in the Teams,

- Accompaniment viewed as a temporary service and not as a permanent membership or as an occasion to wield power.

It is up to the Sector Couple, acting jointly with the Sector Priest, to select the persons capable of fulfilling this mission.

3.5.3. How to define this accompaniment?

Spiritual accompaniment must not be confused with piloting or liaisoning. That is why it is not conceivable that this accompaniment could be exercised by a couple, well trained and competent the couple is.

Nor does it fulfil the mission of the priest in the Team. It is a service role that fulfils certain “functions of the spiritual counsellor”. Quoting from recent documents of the Magisterium, we could define these functions as follows:

- Mission of catechesis:

“By a systematic effort of catechesis, the lay faithful will make a precious contribution in favour of future generations, a contribution more necessary than ever.” (Christifideles Laici, 34)

- Mission of evangelization and sanctification:

“The lay faithful, precisely because they are members of the Church, have the vocation and mission of proclaiming the Gospel: they are prepared for this work by the sacraments of Christian initiation and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” (Christifideles Laici, 33)

- Communion Mission:

“And such a family becomes the evangelizer of many other families. The future of evangelization depends in great part on the church of the home. This apostolic mission of the family is rooted in Baptism and receives from the grace of the Sacrament of Matrimony new strength to transmit the faith, to sanctify and transform our present society according to God’s plan.” (Familiaris Consortio, 52)

- Mission of witness and discernment:

“This vital synthesis will be achieved when the lay faithful know how to put the Gospel and their daily duties of life into a most shining and convincing testimony, where, not even fear but the loving pursuit of Christ and adherence to Him will be factors determining how a person is to live and grow, and these will lead to new ways of living more in conformity with human dignity.” (Christifideles Laici, 34)

“The Christian family is called to enlighten by its example and its witness those who seek the truth.” (Familiaris Consortio, 54)

3.6. The implementation conditions of Spiritual Guides

Different strategies are suggested to guarantee the success of the Spiritual Guide implementation:

- The Spiritual Guide will always be called by the Movement and not by the Team,
- He receives a mandate from the Movement in a specific Team for a specific time, that cannot exceed three years and is renewable once,
- Even married, he practises his service personally and not in couple,
- He will be chosen according to very precise criteria, evoked above,
- It is necessary to create conditions so that the Sectors or Regions structure the organization of the Spiritual Guides service,
- We suggest the creation of a discernment and training Team (at the appropriate level(s) of each Super Region or Region structure) in order to examine or to create candidates and in order to propose the required training to Spiritual Guide candidates.

CONCLUSION

We cannot conclude this document without a reminder about the importance of prayer: we must pray for vocations. As Christian families, we must pray insistently for religious vocations and, while respecting our children's personal faith journey, we must help them answer the Lord's call.

The Church and the world need priests; so does our Movement. Religious vocations are born within the family, and in this respect the members of Teams of Our Lady have a responsibility towards the future of the Church.

“The family must educate the children for life in such a way that each one way fully perform his or her role according to the vocation received from God. Indeed, the family that is open to transcendent values, that serves its brothers and sisters with joy, that fulfils its duties with generous fidelity and is aware of its daily sharing in the mystery of the glorious cross of Christ, becomes the primary and most excellent seedbed of vocations to a life of consecration to the kingdom of God.” (Familiaris Consortio, 53)

In face of the lack of priests, it is advisable to set up a system of spiritual accompaniment controlled and lead by the Sector or the Region according to the needs thanks to the calls of monks, nuns, deacons, lay bachelors or widowed persons.

Priests-Spiritual Counsellor and Spiritual Guides are both “ordinary servants” in the service of a mission in the Team and in the Our Lady Teams and thanks to the couples who fulfil a mission in the family, in the Church and in the World.

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