

BEFORE THE SYNODICAL DECISION to ordain women to the priesthood was taken in the Church of England in 1992, many priests of the Catholic tradition belonged to priestly societies for support in living a life true to Catholic principles in prayer and spirituality. These societies did not accept the validity of the decision to priest women, and some members thus found themselves no longer able to be members. Father Michael Hart, Rector of St Mary Newington (Southwark) and local vicar of SSC came to this view, and left the society.

In 1994 he was inspired to gather together a local group of catholic priests to unite to form an inclusive group of male and female priests, and after meeting with like minded members of the Diocese in July 1994 the new society was agreed, with the then Bishop of Southwark, Roy Williamson, consenting to be visitor. A rule of life was written, a badge designed, and a constitution drawn up.

The Society was launched on 15 September 15 1994 when fourteen members were admitted by Bishop Roy, and the Society Prayer, written by Father Peter Edwards, first used.

In May 1995 a Pilgrimage, sponsored by SCP, was made to Canterbury, with an attendance of around a thousand. Mass in the Cathedral was followed by a procession to the Chapel of Our Lady Undercroft, and then anointing on the Cathedral green.

September of that year the first conference was held, with twenty members in attendance. At the first general meeting the text of the Constitution and standing orders were agreed, which envisaged a national federation of chapters, an annual conference of the whole society and a national meeting of chapter officers to elect national officers. Each chapter should have a visitor, preferably the diocesan bishop, and would be launched with a concelebrated Mass presided over by one of the National Officers, who would admit the new members.

News of the new society spread, and an article 'Not for our own sake,' published in the Affirming Catholicism magazine, led to a number of enquiries from priest of other dioceses. New chapters were formed in both the Church of England and the Church in Wales and by May 1996 membership reached 100. Enquirers today are directed to a local chapter, or if one does not exist are invited to gather with like minded priests to work together for the formation of a new chapter. By the time of the second annual conference in October 1996 membership had reached 134. At this conference Father Kenneth Leech spoke on Priesthood and Sexuality, and this topic has been a recurring area of discussion in subsequent years.

THE SOCIETY HAS CONTINUED TO GROW numerically until, in early 2006, there were around 500 members, with chapters in Wales, Scotland, Ireland and Europe, as well as England, interest also being expressed from individuals in other provinces of the Anglican Communion, and from priests in the Old Catholic churches of Europe. Ordinands are admitted to the Dearmer Society, founded in 2003, and upon being ordained to the diaconate may be made deacon members until they are priested. Lay members of religious communities are asked to enter into supportive prayer for the community.

SCP has many members who also belong to Affirming Catholicism, and the two societies are seen as complimentary. Affirming Catholicism has a broad membership, both lay and ordained, and sometimes engages in campaigning upon issues which are at the heart of Anglican controversy, for example the consecration of women and questions of human sexuality. While SCP members belong to a variety of organisations which undertake campaigning this is not currently felt to be the *raison d'être* of SCP, which focuses on priestly support and formation for its members. There is a reciprocal agreement between SCP and Affirming Catholicism, with an executive member of each being nominated by the other group. Thus two people are members of both executives.

The encouragement and nurture of priestly vocations is of central importance to the society, and one member of the executive is appointed as vocations officer. A series of vocation conferences continue to be successful, and a book *This is our Calling* edited by the then vocations officer, Father Charles Richardson (Southwark) was published by SPCK in 2004.

And so the Society grows and develops upon the foundations laid by the founding members of Southwark Diocese. Its spread is exciting and challenging. Practice and structure may change, but the initial purpose of priestly formation and nurture, the rule of life and catholic evangelism remain at the heart. In 2006 the constitution was reviewed and revised in order to support this growth, and to reflect a common life which has in some ways outgrown that supported by the original constitution. Enquiries continue to be made by priests of several churches of the Anglican Communion, and the revised constitution enables this growth.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: For greater detail there is a booklet by Mother Jane and John Bass, The First Ten Years: The Story of SCP. Jane is a former Rector General of the Society and without her research I would not have been able to produce this leaflet.

A Short History