

## Fr Matthew Pittam – The pressure to be excellent

In his 1961 novel *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller famously turns a Shakespeare quote on its head: “Some men are born mediocre, some men achieve mediocrity and some have mediocrity thrust upon them.”

Being seen as mediocre is something that most of us fear. When I was first ordained, I thought I was going to change the world. In my mind, I would do everything well: I'd have the liveliest parish, be the best priest and never fall into the ruts that others around me seemed to be stuck in. I must have been unbearable.

I have come to see that there is a beauty and necessity in having an exceptionally unexceptional ministry. This is not an admission of failure. Rather, such an acceptance is surely part of the sacrificial vocation to priesthood. It certainly does not mean living life at the lowest common denominator but finding joy in living amid the ordinary.

We seem to exist within a tyranny of excellence. The pressure to be the best and most successful has never been greater. This can be seen in our schools with those elusive “outstanding” Ofsted ratings and in our workplaces with targets and performance management goals. Even in family life we cram our children's free time with so much “meaningful activity” at the expense of family time and rest together. So many parents are exhausted as they shuttle their children between gymnastics, music lessons, additional tuition and a whole panoply of other busyness. We are in danger of not giving our children the opportunity to appreciate the humdrum.

Social media is also constantly exposing us to the achievements and successes of others as they feel the pressure to post every time they step above the average. Even in the Church there is a creeping culture of excellence and expectation in our consumer age.

Before ordination I was a social worker in a busy mental health team. There were always staff members who were ambitious and driven. Often these people moved on quickly as they sought to develop in their careers. It was the steady, stable and reliable people who kept things going. They were not

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necessarily the most dynamic but they knew the work and were in it for the long haul. They certainly were not lazy. In a job where the level of burnout was high they were often the last ones standing.

In a similar way, I always believe that the hallmark of a good school is the existence of staff who have longevity. Many of the best schools that I know have a core of teachers who have been in post for 20-plus years. I am always in awe of those who commit their whole career to one school, often teaching the grandchildren of those they encountered earlier on in their working life. Their vocation, gently lived out, adds a much-needed stability as other staff come and go. In the

world's eyes such teachers could be seen as lacking ambition and settling for the mediocre, but in reality they are vital in helping to establish and maintain the Catholic ethos of our schools.

It is the same in our parishes. Those who quietly and faithfully support our communities, attend daily Mass, do all the unglamorous work and pray for our mission, are often the ones who in any other context would go unnoticed. Our communities still need to build up people with great gifts and imagination, but the Church would be a terrible place to be if it were full of ambitious and driven people. We don't need centres of excellence; we need centres of dynamic faithfulness.

A friend of mine used to be involved in the selection of men for training for the priesthood. Among all the other factors that he had to consider, he would often reflect on whether he would want the candidate to be present, as a priest, on his deathbed. For him, this was far more important than anything else. Most of a priest's ministry is unseen and does not result in outcomes which the world would regard as successful. It requires commitment, love, patience and generosity, but is largely unremarkable.

I am happy to admit to being ordinary. In fact, it is quite liberating. I work hard and try my best but I am no longer worried about being the best in worldly terms. Achievement is not a bad thing; it is just not necessary in every moment of our fleeting lives.

*Pastor Juventus is away*