

Clerical Culture Among Roman Catholic Diocesan Clergy



Introduction

Many Catholics are unaware of the extensive consequences of the clerical culture in which priests and the hierarchy spend most of their adult lives. From specified educational paths to socialization opportunities, from living conditions to financial remuneration, in working relationships restricted by oaths of obedience and isolation enforced by celibacy, priests typically live aside and apart from the people they should serve—they are culturally and often physically far removed from the realities of the communities that surround them.

Almost every profession has its own special culture, of course, and that culture supports and protects its members, provides them with useful information, and presents relevant educational opportunities. As examples, think of the cultures of police, doctors, and unions.

These cultures have positive benefits for the members within the culture. However, at the same time, to those outside the culture and those who depend on them for services, these specialized cultures can be opaque and sometimes threatening.

This paper considers the culture of Roman Catholic diocesan clergy in the United States and how that culture often leads to unhappy consequences within the Catholic Church. Clearly, one of the most disastrous consequences has been the clergy sexual abuse scandal and the cover-up by the hierarchy. But there are other consequences as well, including some that are damaging to the priests isolated within the culture.

What Is Culture?

The term “culture” applies to the interlocking forms of an organization’s life, whether that organization is a family, a corporation, a nation-state, or even a profession or trade. George Mendenhall, a noted scholar of biblical and Near Eastern cultures, describes culture as a “meaningful arrangement of *technology*, the means by which a people provide for material needs; *society*, or people’s relationships; and *ideology*, a people’s way of thinking.

This paper will describe some key elements of the clerical culture of diocesan clergy in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States—a culture where the provision of material needs, the relationships with people, and the way of thinking are controlled almost entirely via strict hierarchical structure. All diocesan priests live their lives within this culture.

Our focus in the paper is on the possible *unhappy consequences* of this clerical culture, but we are fully aware that not every priest will succumb to the most compromising elements of the clerical culture. We all know priests who are generous servant leaders in their parishes and communities. It should also be noted that diocesan clerical culture differs from the cultures of the various Religious Orders in the Church—each of which has its own culture depending on its history and mission.

What is the Clerical Culture?

In his book, *Clerical Culture: Contradiction and Transformation*, Father Michael Papesh describes the clerical culture as “precisely the constellation of relationships and the universe of ideas and material reality in which diocesan priests and bishops exercise their ministry and spend their lives.”

For a more negative description, consider that of David Gibson in *The Coming Catholic Church*. He describes clericalism as “the reflexive notion that clerics are a privileged fraternity whose sacred status guarantees them eternal protection from the reproaches of the world, even when they do wrong.” Gibson had the clergy sexual abuse scandal in mind.

With awareness of the clerical culture as background, in 2011 a Voice of the Faithful committee analyzed the then-newly completed John Jay Report: “The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010.” The committee agreed with many of the findings of the study, but noted that the terms “clericalism” and “clerical culture” did not appear at all. The committee criticized this omission:

VOTF faults the Report for describing, but not naming, much less citing as a principal cause, an overriding set of beliefs and behaviors in which the clergy view themselves as different, separate and exempt from the norms, rules and consequences that apply to everyone else in society—the very essence of a clerical culture or clericalism.

Despite the omission of this label, the John Jay study did identify factors that, in essence, describe clericalism. According to the report, four factors provided opportunities for priests to abuse children: “the authority of the priests; the public perception of them; the isolation of their positions; and the high level of discretion and lack of supervision in their positions” (p.92). Thus, although the term “clerical culture” is not used, the study could not have provided a clearer description of that culture.

This culture of the diocesan priesthood also has characteristics that distinguish it from the cultures of other professions:

- The hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the church
- Papal allegiance
- An ordination which is said to confer an ontological change
- Special education and training
- Celibacy requirements
- Clothing and dress—especially liturgical dress
- Special privileges concerning compensation and lifestyle

Hierarchical Structure and Patriarchy

Although most organizations, especially nation-states, have hierarchical structures, most also have a balance of power, thus separating the executive, the legislative, and the judicial powers. But in the Roman Catholic Church, all three powers are exercised by the pope and the Vatican Congregations that report directly to the pope. Despite the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the collegiality of the bishops, under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI a re-emphasis on Rome's authority took place.

In addition, the hierarchy of the Church is a patriarchy. Only men are allowed into the priesthood and, thus, all bishops and cardinals are male. This excludes female input into the decision-making of the Church and effectively cuts the leadership of the Church off from the gifts of the wisdom of women at every level of Church governance.

Papal Allegiance

Allegiance to the pope is secured by a series of oaths and promises taken by cardinals, bishops and priests. Chief among these is the oath sworn by cardinals upon their elevation: "I, [name and surname], Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, promise and swear to be faithful henceforth and forever, while I live, to Christ and his Gospel, being constantly obedient to the Holy Roman Apostolic Church, to blessed Peter in the person of the Supreme Pontiff [name of current pope], and of his canonically elected Successors, to maintain communion with the Catholic Church always, in word and deed; **not to reveal to anyone what is confided to me in secret, nor to divulge what may bring harm or dishonor to Holy Church** [emphasis added]; to carry out with great diligence and faithfulness those tasks to which I am called by my service to the Church, in accord with the norms of the law. So help me Almighty God."

Bishops take a similar oath at their ordinations. Diocesan priests, in turn, make a promise of celibacy and of obedience to their bishop. (Religious Order priests take solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience rather than celibacy/obedience to a diocesan bishop.) This chain of oaths and promises ensures allegiance to the pope and places possible restraints on the right of conscience on those swearing fidelity.

Ontological Change

The notion that ordination confers an ontological change on the one ordained did not appear in Roman Catholic theology until the 15th century, and it was not much emphasized until modern times. The concept came into use at the Council of Trent when it became important to identify the special power that enables the priest to transubstantiate bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

Ontological (pertaining to the being or nature of the individual) change implies that the ordained are *essentially* different—their human essence differs—from the non-ordained.

The notion that priests are “ontologically” different from the non-ordained is affirmed in the Second Vatican Council *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, section 10: “Though they differ *essentially* [italics added] and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood or hierarchical priesthood are none the less ordered to one another; each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ.”

Pope John Paul II emphasized this ontological change in his encyclical *Pastores dabo vobis*, which is directed to the training of seminarians. Many of the younger priests—those who call themselves “John Paul priests” —identify strongly with this concept.

Contemporary theologians, such as Edward Schillebeeckx and Paul Lakeland, however, have suggested that this concept of an “ontological change” should be challenged in favor of a more functional understanding.

Whatever the outcome of theological development, however, a person who perceives himself as ontologically different from others can feel—consciously or not—that he is superior to others.

Seminary Education and Training

Ever since the Council of Trent diocesan priests have been educated in seminaries that are closed off from the rest of the world. For several decades after the Second Vatican Council, some seminaries began housing would-be priests near universities and they attended classes with other students. But recently the Vatican has been insisting that diocesan priests should be educated primarily in seminaries. The aims, according to Vatican officials, are to ensure that seminarians receive doctrinally correct teaching and to protect them from temptations against their commitment to celibacy.

Although formation in the seminaries has greatly improved in the last two decades as a result of the sexual abuse scandal and the encyclical *Pastores dabo vobis*, separate housing effectively separates seminarians from the lives of those they are called to serve. It also separates them from association with women. Although today a small number of women are appointed to some seminary faculties, most faculty members are priests. The seminary remains a male bastion.

Clearly this enclosed environment may protect the candidates, but it also can close them off from experiences that are shared by their peers outside the seminary, and it can cut them off from an understanding of the problems and conflicts experienced by the people they are called to serve.

Thus, as with the characteristics of hierarchical structure and patriarchy, papal allegiance and belief in ontological change, seminary education and training in the clerical culture operate to separate a priest from the community rather than to help him understand the people he is expected to serve. The separation is then reinforced by other characteristics specific to diocesan clerics in the Roman Catholic Church: celibacy, independence, clothing, and special privileges.

Celibacy

Most Catholics know that celibacy, although required of priests in the Roman Rite, is not essential to the priesthood. Many of the Apostles were married, and celibacy was not made obligatory for Latin Rite priests until the Lateran Councils of 1123 and 1139. In the Eastern Rites that are in union with Rome, there have always been both married and celibate priests.

There is no doubt that celibacy, freely chosen, can be a sign of the Kingdom of Heaven and a commitment by the priest to total service to the faithful. The question here is whether *mandatory* celibacy has negative consequences for those who aspire to serve the faithful.

The John Jay study did not consider celibacy to be a cause of child sexual abuse and our committee agreed, because the vast majority of celibate priests did not abuse children. Also, we all know priests for whom celibacy has freed them from other responsibilities, allowing them to concentrate their energies on serving the gospel and the people with generosity, compassion, and leadership. Nevertheless, celibacy is a chief element in the clerical culture.

Celibacy contributes to the cementing of the priest's loyalty and obedience to the bishop, because his loyalties are not divided between his wife and family and the Church. A married priest has split loyalties, to his wife and family, and to his bishop.

In contrast, celibacy ties the priest, in a unique way, to his promise of obedience to the bishop. It becomes one more link in the chain that not only distinguishes the priest from the rest of the faithful, but also ties him more tightly into the clerical culture and shores up the institutional loyalty.

Relative Independence

Although priests owe obedience to their bishop, in most of their daily activities they are relatively independent. Once a man is ordained he receives very little supervision. He is not subject to performance appraisals, receives very little feedback from other priests—and certainly not from the faithful in any constructive manner—and is seldom monitored in his daily activities. This relative independence allowed some priests to gain unobserved access to children, and it was one of the contributing factors in the clergy sexual abuse scandal—a fact that was noted in the John Jay study.

Some astute lay leaders in the Church have suggested ways to improve oversight. The Leadership Roundtable for Church Management, composed mostly of successful business men and women, has recommended a series of performance standards to ensure that priests receive the necessary supervision and monitoring to guarantee that their pastoral service is above reproach. (The **standards** are applicable to both priests and lay ministers.)

Clothing and Dress

The clerical collar worn by priests establishes them as different from the non-ordained. This can have many positive consequences because people will recognize priests as ones who could assist them with problems they may face, and with spiritual counseling and advice. Many professions and trades, such as doctors, police, firefighters, judges, and so on, wear special uniforms that set them apart and allow others to recognize them for their special expertise.

But priests who wear the collar also may come to consider themselves as superior to others.

Similarly, while liturgical garments may be required for priests to perform their functions as presiders at liturgy, they also can become attractive means of separating the wearers from others. For some there is an attraction to moving up the ladder to acquire the red piping of the position of monsignor or the red vestments of a bishop.

Special Privileges

Although the normal compensation for diocesan priests is relatively small in comparison to many of their parishioners, priests have many special advantages and privileges that others do not. They receive health and dental insurance, a pension, an annual retreat, and a continuing education allowance. They are usually provided with room and board, a month's vacation, and one day off a week.

Because their lives are seen as lonely, and often are lonely, many priests receive gifts of clothing and cash as well as invitations to meals or entertainment from compassionate parishioners throughout the year.

Priests are seldom responsible for the cleaning and upkeep of their rectories and the property, including lawn care and snow shoveling. And they need not bother with property taxes and household insurance bills.

Above all, if they obey all the rules, priests are guaranteed a lifetime employment—regardless of how competent or incompetent they are.

These privileges effectively shield them from experiencing the financial problems faced by their parishioners.

Summary

All of these factors, and many others, can lead priests to view themselves as privileged persons. Many priests, of course, manage to escape this sense of superiority and to focus on their roles as servant leaders of the parish community. Indeed, many priests invest themselves fully in their ministries and wear themselves out in serving others.

But the temptations of clerical elitism are always there, and it is inevitable that many will fall subject to these temptations. The clerical culture can provide a comfortable life for many of the diocesan clergy, but also can make it too easy to deny or avoid dealing with the inadequacies and personal failings that are part of being human.

By placing our priests on a pedestal, we only contribute to their possible feelings of being specially privileged. We need to pray regularly for our priests that they not become absorbed in the clerical culture but invest themselves fully in serving the spiritual needs of the community.

We need to recognize that we are all called to holiness. We are the Church. As Cardinal Newman once said, “The Church would look awfully silly without us.” We have a right to call on our priests for leadership, but we can also offer our own God-given gifts to help shape a truly loving Eucharist-centered community.

Some form of clerical culture will always be with us as long as we make distinctions between priests and laity. But we can all work together to reduce the temptations to condescension and elitism among our clergy.

As Fr. Michael Papesh states: “The point persons for clerical culture change are priests. Changing the culture cannot be, foremost, the work of the laity. The transformation means a renewal of the spirituality and a reform of the way of life for the ordained. It needs to be led by priests, and strongly supported by the laity, who will hold priests accountable and keep priests focused.”

We can hope that, with the model of simplicity offered by Pope Francis I, this transformation is well begun.

References

Donald B. Cozzens, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, (Liturgical Press, 2000.)

Avery A. Dulles, S.J., *A Church to Believe in: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom*, (Crossroad, 1982.)

Thomas F. O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, (Paulist Press, 1999.)

Michael L. Papesh, *Clerical Culture: Contradiction and Transformation*, (Liturgical Press, 2004.)

Thomas J. Reese, S.J., *Archbishop: Inside the Power Structure of the American Catholic Church*, (Harper and Row, 1989.)

George B. Wilson, S.J., *Clericalism: the Death of Priesthood*, (Liturgical Press, 2008.)