

The Clerical Culture Within the Catholic Church

How could our priests who were often so caring to the neglected and marginalized, so outspoken on issues of human rights and justice, put the interests of the clergy above those of innocent children and above those of the People of God?

Voice of the Faithful considers that the normal support system of the ordained is often corrupted into a clerical culture of elitism. Many professions have support “cultures” which usually have checks and balances to ensure competence. In contrast, many priests have often employed the protective side of the clerical culture to provide a safe hiding place for their incompetence and even their crimes.

According to David Gibson in *The Coming Catholic Church*, “Clericalism is 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.” This culture has allowed the abuse of children and the cover-ups by the bishops. In addition, it seems to represent a mentality common to recent generations of clergy. Unlike other professional groups, in the clerical culture of the Catholic Church there are no checks and balances. The Pope and the bishops hold absolute executive, legislative and judicial power.

The late Dean Hoge, director of Catholic University’s Life Cycle Institute, asked priests, “Does ordination confer on the priest a new status which makes him essentially different from the laity?” As of 2001, 70-95% of the serving priests under 55 years of age—the so-called John Paul II priests—agreed strongly or somewhat strongly with this statement; they identified with this “cultic model of priesthood.”

Priests older than 55 years, however, tended to hold a “servant leader model” of their vocation. This latter is the model set by Jesus when he washed the feet of the Apostles and told them to do likewise.

And, again, Jesus says to the Apostles in the Gospel of Luke: “Let the greater among you be as the junior, the leader as the servant.” (Luke: 22:26)

Whose Church is this to which we belong? The New Testament tells the People of God, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people God means to have for himself.” (1 Peter 2:9) The Gospel of John and the letter of Paul speak to a leadership of service and a fellowship of equals. The Second Vatican Council addresses the right and responsibility of the People of God for active participation in the mission of Christ. (*Lumen Gentium* 2:10/11; *Lumen Gentium* 4:37; “Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People”)

All legitimate leadership bestows upon the office holder both authority and responsibility. The authority may be shared; responsibility, however, is borne by the leader alone. In addition, the ordained leaders are responsible to the faithful, of which they are themselves

members by their baptism. In the distorted clerical culture, however, priests may claim themselves only responsible to the bishop. And too many bishops seem to reject any responsibility, try to assert absolute authority over their diocese, and often claim they are responsible only to the Pope.

In modern human society, formal respect to the office is expected, but personal respect must be earned by an individual. Clerical elitism, in contrast, is actually dehumanizing, because it protects the individual with no regard for him as a person, but only for his exalted station. The People of God must move away from enabling the ordained to continue in this form of social elitism, by demanding that our brothers in Christ reassess their role as People of God.

Clericalism takes many forms, but the following “touchstones” are offered to assist the laity in identifying some common elitist behaviors.

- ❑ The priest projects the image that he is always right and may feel above criticism, causing the laity to become reluctant to provide feedback, whether positive or negative.
- ❑ The priest insists that by ordination he was ontologically changed, which gives him a status above the laity.
- ❑ The priest insists on and enjoys titles. While a mark of respect, the use of these titles tends to reduce the laity to the status of children.
- ❑ The priest insulates himself from parish life by focusing on liturgical details and outmoded clerical dress.
- ❑ The priest enjoys the security of a guaranteed home and regular meals, which often leads him to become out of touch with the actual lives of his people.
- ❑ The priest spends an inordinate amount of time with children, pre-puberty youth and even teen-agers.
- ❑ The priest spends more time with a select group of the parish, often with the wealthy and connected.
- ❑ The priest is often unaccountable to anyone outside the clerical culture, which can lead to a feeling of superiority.

As lay followers of Christ, do we abet this behavior by:

- ❑ Excusing poor social behavior out of sympathy for the priest’s “lonely life”?
- ❑ Refusing to acknowledge that he has stepped over the line with alcohol, drugs, etc.?
- ❑ Overlooking his regular lack of preparation for homilies and tardiness to meetings?
- ❑ Not confronting him when he misuses authority, is incorrect in his statements on dogma and morality, or gives scandal to the community?
- ❑ Feeling uncomfortable about giving performance feedback to a priest?
- ❑ Bowing to the priest’s spiritual expertise rather than recognizing our own call to holiness?
- ❑ Not standing up for those priests who daily live the “servant-leader model” of ordained ministry?

Voice of the Faithful is calling for healing and reconciliation within the Catholic Church. For the health of our Church, it is important that we all—clergy and laity—recognize the potential negative aspects of the clerical culture. It is especially incumbent on us, the non-ordained, to learn how to communicate with our priests on a level of equality, while maintaining respect and even love towards them.