

Clericalism

The Death of Priesthood

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*For Anne,
sister and best friend*

You, however, are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people he claims for his own to proclaim the glorious works” of the One who called you from darkness into his marvelous light.

1 Peter 2:9

Since culture is a human creation and is therefore marked by sin, it too needs to be “healed, ennobled and perfected.”

John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*

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Preface

After reading a first draft of this work, a friendly Jesuit advisor made the wise suggestion that it would help you, my readers, if I were to begin by telling you some of my personal story. It could provide some illuminating context for the ideas and recommendations I am offering here.

As for the bare-bones essentials, this is the way I wrote my brief biography a few years ago: *“A priest for more than forty years. A Jesuit for more than fifty. Somewhat over seventy trying to live up to my baptism, and a few weeks longer than that sharing in the continuing gift of creation along with the rest of this mysterious universe. That’s in ascending order of significance, in case you hadn’t noticed.”* In other words, my identity as priest and membership in the Jesuits are subordinate to the gift of baptism and the sheer dignity of being God’s creation.

Today I would agree with this assessment and only need to ratchet up the numbers a bit. But skeletons call out for flesh and sinews if they are to become dialogue partners. So, for the purpose of our time together, I need to tell you a bit more of what I have been up to during these wonder-filled years of my ministry as one of the ordained.

First, during two years of studies at the Gregorian University in Rome that ended with a doctoral degree, my concentration was on the way the church’s teaching on papal infallibility had been understood by the great Dominican theologians of the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries. Then I spent eleven years teaching Jesuit seminarians at Woodstock College, focusing on our understanding of

the church and its sacraments, with a special eye on the day-to-day living out of those understandings by the faithful in the pews. That remains the lodestar around which my spirit and reflection have continued to orbit to this day.

If my intellectual life had followed its presumed trajectory, I would have spent a lifetime in academia as a seminary professor. But that was not to be. At the close of Vatican II the conciliar *periti* John Courtney Murray and Gustav Weigel returned to join us on the Woodstock faculty. They urged the seminary to open its doors to seminars that would help to disseminate what had happened at the council, to American priests, religious men and women, and laity. Their recommendations were accepted. The first summer institutes were mounted in 1966, and I was assigned to organize the sessions and serve as their ecclesiastical cruise director.

It is only in hindsight that I realize how profoundly those events changed the way I saw things I'd been looking at all my life. Here was the church, and its sacramental life, *occurring*, in Technicolor. Not a static reality to be merely intellectually unpacked, but a living organism in which you and I—some of us ordained and most not—were participating. We were shaping it as baptized peers. For all its roots in a divine impulse, the church was nonetheless an organism, fully human and subject to the same dynamics that come to expression in any human institution, including its warts and sins. If we do not learn to love the church in its sinfulness, we will not love the church loved by the Lord but, rather, some figment of our romantic imagination. (Thank you, Henri DeLubac.)

I spent three summers guiding the program. Then in the succeeding two years my engagement with the embodied reality of the unfolding church continued, as Woodstock's coordinator for two historic seminars. One was for 135 women religious, superiors, or spiritual directors engaged in the formation of their members. The second was a similar event, perhaps even more significant in light of the tectonic plates being shifted. It involved the same number of contemplative women from across the great traditions

of the church: Carmelites, Poor Clares, Passionists, Redemptoristines, Trappistines, and Benedictines. Some of them had not crossed the threshold of their cloister in forty years. The meeting, which had started with an open agenda, ended in the creation of a national organization, the Association of Contemplative Sisters. That body continues today, supporting the contemplative life of its members, now both canonical and laywomen.

My role in those seminars led in turn to thirty-four years as a staff member at Management Design Institute. There our dominant clientele consisted of religious congregations, dioceses, and Protestant judicatories. Serving as process facilitators and planning mentors, we helped hundreds of groups to tap into the power of their founding vision as they translated that vision into more effective ways of living the Gospel in a changed world. Our focus was always on the way human systems—including religious ones—actually “work.” Each has its own absolutely unique myth and culture, but, as they try to bring their vision to life, common principles of human organization come into play. Looking back on the experience I realize that it was a great grace to walk intimately with such a rich diversity of manifestations of the reality we so glibly label “the church.” I found myself in the company of Francis of Assisi and Benedict and Dominic; of Mother Guerin and Catherine McCauley and Marguerite Bourgeois; of Isaac Hecker and Edmund Rice—with occasional brushes with Martin Luther and John Wesley. It was sacred ground.

Yet my story would not be complete without a complementary reality, my sharing in liturgical worship with two special communities. I spent every Christmas with the Medical Mission Sisters in Philadelphia; every Holy Week with the community of the Grail outside Cincinnati. Both communities have a profound sense of biblical prayer and embodied ritual. And for over twenty-five years I have had, and continue to have, the rich experience of presiding regularly at liturgy within two African-American parishes in Cincinnati. Praying with them, sharing the Word with them, and feasting with them has nourished my soul with the wine of the Spirit in ways I am sure are beyond my fathoming.

It is that body of experiences that grounds the reflections in this work. My exploration of the sad reality of clericalism calls for naming uncomfortable, perhaps even hard, realities. I name them, not as an indictment of any individual cleric or layperson. In my work I have interacted with great numbers of the faithful, both ordained and not, who have remained priestly and uninfected by clericalism. They are a blessing in our church community. What I have tried to name is rather a seduction that carries its own allure for every last one of us, ordained or lay. Our love for this warty old church demands of us that we recognize clericalism where it exists, and work against it in favor of the priesthood to which we are called by virtue of our baptism.

In the chapters that follow, after some preliminary reflections on our confused terminology and the nature of culture, I invite the reader to ponder in succession (1) the culture of clergyhood; (2) the nature of priesting; (3) the clericalization of priests; (4) the role played by the clerical culture in the collective tragedy of the sexual abuse situation; and (5) the transformation that will be required if we are to be true to our common vocation as a priestly people.

And so to our topic.

“Priest” and “Cleric”: Clarifying the Terminology

A common mantra concerning the scandal of sexual abuse by Roman Catholic priests pinpoints “the clerical culture” as the root cause of what went terribly wrong.

Of course each individual abusing priest had his own personal story of sexual underdevelopment and psychological disorder, his own uniquely manifested need for power. And the same is true of the bishops. The leadership failure of each individual bishop who moved abusing priests from one assignment to another was grounded in his own personal story. That story manifested its own particular combination of ignorance, naiveté, and less-than-admirable motivations such as fear and self-interest. But when the same kind of behaviors show up in so many individuals in so many different settings within the same organization, we naturally look for common causative factors. We look for factors that go toward explaining the behaviors of the system as a whole. According to the prevailing assessment, the reality that links this tragic story together is a shared bundle of elements which add up to a “clerical culture.” From the perspective of a culture, what took place was not a series of isolated, unrelated tragedies. They were all part of a single, coherent drama.

It is a plausible interpretation. Commonalities in behavior do beg for the naming of shared factors to account for them. But naming the common root cause will contribute little to our understanding, and much less to healing and transformation, if we simply apply a label and let it go at that.

Moralizing about the evil clerical culture may be psychologically satisfying, but merely indulging ourselves in moralizing will lead only to further frustration. An unhealthy system—and the clerical culture is unhealthy—will always prove itself impervious to outrage unless it is accompanied by further critical analysis. Rage is by its nature transitory. For genuine change new modes of relating are required, and if we are to create them we need insight into the mindsets and attitudes that gave rise to the present unhealthy system in the first place. If we are to enlarge our insight and thereby discover the best steps for forestalling repetition of the tragedy, we need to dig deeper. We need to mine the implications of each of the two terms in vogue. Just what is involved when you deal with a “culture”? And what goes into making something “clerical”?

A Linguistic and Conceptual Muddle

Before we reflect on the nature of cultures, however, we need to listen to the way we use terms in our everyday speech. A common headline offers a starting point. The headline in a representative diocesan newspaper seems innocuous enough: “*Clergy of the Diocese Meet at Renewal Center; Priests to Discuss Confirmation Norms.*” Similar articles, with more or less the same headlines, have appeared many times over the years.

Why should a line like that raise eyebrows? What could possibly be amiss in such a straightforward headline? A lot, as it turns out. And the consequences contain a whole bundle of mischief for our church and our understanding of what our God is about.

The fact that such texts do not give us pause is itself an indicator of a serious issue. No red flags are raised. The dog didn’t bark. We have become so accustomed to this kind of language that we do not even remark on the confusion that it perpetuates. It serves as our ecclesiastical wallpaper.

Read the headline again. What is the issue lurking behind this boilerplate way of speaking? To mix a metaphor: what elephant is staring us in the face? The answer is: the implied *identification* of “clergy” with “priest.”

You're not alone if you don't see the problem with this identification. You might be thinking: "But aren't they the same thing? Aren't the two terms just synonyms for each other? Aren't all priests clergy, and all clergy priests? Wait a minute! Deacons are considered clergy and they aren't ordained priests. Is that the problem?"

Well, no, although it's a start. The issue shows up when priests gather for a "clergy meeting" and the deacons (who are ordained and recognized by society as clergy) are not included. Some noses can get slightly bent out of shape at what is experienced as an unwarranted form of exclusion. Are deacons in the circle or not?

The water becomes even murkier when people raise the question of whether religious sisters or brothers are clergy or not. From a canonical perspective, such non-ordained religious are not clergy. But those canonical niceties matter little to laypeople. They generally tend to put all these people in the same mental bin: "Official religious folk." And that everyday mentality is far more powerful, more telling, than canonical definitions.

But these issues of turf and inclusion aren't the real fly in the chiasm. They actually get in the way of uncovering the more significant confusion at work. They serve to mask the issue that is latent in the headline.

No, the real issue is not who gets lumped in the clergy bin or who gets to attend clergy gatherings. The much more significant issue lies in the fact that the identification of priests with clergy involves mixing—confusing—two radically different orders of *reality*. "Priest" is a religious term, pointing us to the transcendent or numinous or sacred dimension of life, to the holy. "Clergy" is a sociological term that names the fact that society recognizes a certain segment of its members as having recognizable social features and norms that distinguish them from the rest of society. When we confuse these two orders of reality by interchanging the two terms we implicitly ratify the notion that priestly activity is the prerogative only of these individuals socially recognized by their ordination. Priestly—sacred—activity is the preserve of the ordained; laity need not apply. By continuing to make our clergy

the only manifestations of priestliness, we reduce our lay faithful to passive recipients of the holy actions of the ordained, diminishing the dignity that should rightly be theirs by virtue of their baptism and confirmation.

Once we begin to appreciate that these are two very different orders of reality, the religious and the sociological, it becomes possible to entertain some potentially rich alternatives and questions. The answers to them might call all of us to some costly conversions:

- 1) Is it possible to be ordained “clergy” without being “priest”?
Yes.
- 2) Is it possible to be “priest” without being “clergy”? *Yes.*
- 3) If the two realities can exist independently of one another, can they coexist in the same human person? *Yes. “Priest” and “cleric” don’t necessarily exclude one another. In fact, we hope that all our clergy are priests—even those we label deacons, bishops, sisters, and brothers. But, as we will see in chapter 2, they aren’t the only priests in the congregation.*

I realize that these three points may be confusing or even disconcerting to my readers at this stage. A full grasp of their intent depends on further explanation in coming chapters. At the moment I am compelled to use a bit of linguistic jujitsu, using customary words in unc customary ways, in order to open the possibility of new insight and better responses to our situation.

New Terminology

In this book I will be using some turns of language that can with some accuracy (or even disdain) be called neologisms. Readers may be put off when I speak of “priesting” or “clergifying.” However, I speak this way not out of a desire to be catchy or cute, but because of a profound conviction. Unless we wrestle with new forms of expression in order to tap into the energies of new insights, the language of the past will continue to trap us within its walls. As long as we remain within the confines of our habitual

forms of expression, our understanding (and therefore our behavior) will not change. After all, the words we use reinforce the way we see the world. Our terms make us comfortable that the way things are is the way they're meant to be. And it is precisely that comfort which blocks the impulse to take a hard look at the present disorder and enter into the work of changing it.

My claim is that our ways of speaking perpetuate an unacknowledged muddle that results from identifying "priest" as "clergy." That inappropriate identification has allowed unhealthy behaviors to cloud the image and diminish the power of the Christian faith in our world. If we continue to *talk* in a certain way, we will also continue to *act* in the ways that those expressions have made comfortable. And as a result we will perpetuate some bad stuff.

By this point it will be obvious to the reader that I have laid on myself a heavy burden. I am challenging our traditional forms of speech and charging them with being manifestations of muddled thinking, leading to questionable attitudes and behaviors. That makes it incumbent on me to spell out clearly just what is involved in the religious world of priesting as contrasted with the sociological world of clerifying.

Incidentally, I should say that I am under no illusion that I will be able to change our habitual modes of expression. People will continue to use "priest" and "clergy" interchangeably even if my writing succeeds beyond my wildest imagining. King Canute will succeed in talking down the waves before such a transformation of usage takes place.

No, my goal in putting these thoughts together is at once more modest and perhaps more difficult. My hope is that after mulling over what I am trying to say, when you or I do use the word "priest" when we mean "clergy" or vice versa, it will be with a slight hitch. A momentary stop, where these thoughts can serve as a brake and make us ask, "Is this what I really want to say? Or does my new framing of the question compel me to struggle for new words, new forms of expression? Are there things I want to change in our understanding of the holy? Behaviors I want to reject?"

My purpose in writing, however, also is not because I'm a stickler for using proper language when naming things. Developing clearer concepts and language to express them is only the necessary first step. The goal is to articulate a vision and think through the steps required to create a whole new set of attitudes and mutual relationships between the ordained and the Catholic laity.¹

The foundational insight which clamors for explanation is, as I have indicated, that we are dealing with two distinct realities when we use the terms "clergy" (a sociological perspective) and "priest" (a religious one). Let me tip my hand and indicate where we are heading: there are other clergies than that of the ordained ministers (chapter 1) and other priests than the ordained (chapter 2). We will eventually focus on the ordained and the way they and the rest of the faithful relate to each other (chapters 3–6), but the effort can't succeed if we begin there. The destructive phenomenon of clericalism in the church is only one manifestation of a human disorder that infects many areas of society. It cannot be properly understood if we see it as something which occurs *only* in the church.

We have to begin, not with the ordained ministers we traditionally have called "priests" and church folk called "the laity" but with clergy groups in general, and the relationship of each to its corresponding laity. Only after that foundation is laid will we be in a position to appreciate the unique features of the relationship between church ministers and the faithful. Even prior to that, we need to put into place some foundational notions about cultures in general. After we have taken those two steps we will be in a position to explore effectively what is amiss in the relationship between the ordained and the lay faithful with an eye to proposing specific strategies for changing the present disordered relationship.

So we turn to cultures.

1. Protestant readers will easily recognize that the issues addressed here apply in their religious world as well.