

## Healing the Sin of Clericalism: Some Suggestions

*And at the same time, as part of its own pastoral solicitude, this Synod urges all concerned to work hard to prevent or correct any abuses, excesses, or defects which may have crept in here and there, and to restore all things to a more ample praise of Christ and of God.*

**-Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church-**

*This is the definition of sin: the misuse of powers give us by God for doing good.*

**-St. Basil the Great-**

When the bishops of the Catholic Church gathered in Rome in October of 1962, to begin the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, they had little thought of addressing the issue of clericalism in the Church. Indeed, with vocations to the priesthood and religious life at an all-time high, the Fathers of the Council were called to Rome not to meet a looming crisis within the Church, but rather to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit moving in the secular world and to read there the “*signs of the times*” for the Church. Europe, which had been decimated by the Second World War, was growing as an economic power to rival the triumphant and newly established American hegemony. Meanwhile, the Eastern Bloc, dominated by the Soviet Union and the rise of Communist China, seemed a constant threat to world peace and stability. In the developing world of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, popular revolutions seemed to offer hope for a new community of nations or a threat to the status quo—all depending on where one stood. Meanwhile, in the United States, as veterans of the Second World War came to power, the desire to avoid the isolationism that precipitated that conflict led to an interventionist foreign policy and a rising national security infrastructure. It was a time of tumult and possibility, when the world order, which had peaked in the 19th century and been damaged by World War I, was finally being replaced by a new order whose parameters were not yet understood. In this social environment, Pope John XXIII—the first Roman Pontiff to ever address an encyclical to “*all men of good will*”—called the Church not to respond to a particular crisis, but to reflect on its fundamental identity in a time no longer defined by the Protestant Reformation or Pius X’s attack on Modernism.

In a very real sense, the decrees and direction that emerge from Vatican II set the stage for the current crisis in the Catholic Church—though not in the way that many “*traditionalists*” would assert. Rather, when the Council calls for the Church to return to its sources—which it does in many documents, including the decrees on Scripture, on religious life, and, implicitly, even in the Constitution on the Church itself—it sets the stage for a conflict between the largely medieval models of governance that had attached themselves to the Church over centuries and more ancient models suggested both in Scripture and in the earliest writings of the Church. For while the former, as codified and concretized at Trent, describe a fundamentally feudal and inherently autocratic Church, one in which clericalism is not an aberration but the will of God, the latter—the more ancient traditions—suggest that the Church is a communion of sinners, equally loved by God and equally called to the care of the community, even though differentiations in mission may exist. By calling Catholics to look to the Scripture and the earliest traditions of the Church, Vatican II returns the whole People of God to the primacy suggested by Christ’s Incarnation,

revealing as an heretical aberration, an accretion of later centuries, the sense of the Church as primarily the clerical class, with the religious and laity following along behind. Although it is a somewhat unintended consequence, Vatican II's reforms—especially, notions such as “*the priesthood of all believers*,” “*collegiality*,” and, perhaps most explosively, “*full active and conscious participation*” in liturgy—threaten the foundational mythology of clerical elitism, and so are met with fierce opposition and retrenchment.

What the current crisis in the Church reveals, in a more powerful way even than was revealed in 2002, is that structural clericalism—though it may have become more subtle than it was in the days when the priest's back was to the people—continues to undermine and subvert the full participation of the People of God in the Church that Jesus Christ gave to them through his Incarnation. This crisis calls us to root out clericalism, not by destroying all order in the Church, but by recognizing how that order, “*given to us by God for doing good*” has been misused, and must be reoriented. To accomplish this, much is needed, but to begin, I offer these three suggestions: 1. we must liberate the Church from medieval distortions; 2. we must read the signs of the times as they exist today; and 3. we must change from forming “*priests*” to forming ministers of the priesthood of Christ.

**1. Beyond Medievalism:** Though many “*Church traditionalists*” bemoan the loss of the “*Tradition*” in the wake of Vatican II, the aspects of the Church to which they most often refer—the tall miters, the flowing capes, the gold, etc.—arose not in the primitive Church, where bishops were most often married elders, chosen by the community for their fidelity to the teachings of the apostles and the goodness of their life. During the medieval period, however, following Constantine, the institutional Church became both the mirror and the source of a feudal system in which bishops were, literally, princes and lords of the earth, invested with temporal power and often chosen from the wealthy and noble families of the land. In the development of this structure, a strict hierarchy was seen as emerging from God's plan, a plan which set each person in their proper caste. Though religious life or entry into a clerical state could move a talented person up in caste somewhat, the laity was to the Church what the serfs or freedmen were to the government: subjects to be ruled. The ministers of the Church were arbiters and mediators between fallen humanity and God's divinity—holding the power of Christ in their own hands. The Pope—who bore the name “*Pontifex Maximus*,” a title once held by the Roman Emperor, and meaning “*master bridge-builder*,”—was at the top of this hierarchy, wearing the triple-tiara (abandoned only in 1964) signifying his power over both spiritual and temporal matters. The Cardinals—created during this era—were, in theory, the priest-Senate of Rome, a remnant of the old Roman Senate, charged with electing the Papal ruler, just as the Emperor was elected—a fiction that explains why Cardinals are still given a parish in Rome when they are named. Though they could be pressured by princes whose armies were strong enough, the medieval bishops and Popes equated themselves with lords and monarchs, and retained that understanding even after the reforms of the Council of Trent, which sought to respond to the Protestant Reformation by cleaning up certain episcopal practices, but which never touched the underlying model of the Church.

If the current crisis in trust and governance in the Church shows nothing else, it reveals the inadequacy and inherent disorder of this medieval model of the Church, which places bishops and priests not as servants but as masters, not as companions of God's people but

as their rulers and betters. This model invites both abuse and the covering up of abuse, since it suggests that those who are ordained—who have been “*elevated*” to priesthood—are of higher value to the Church than are victims and families. Further, it creates a separation, in both symbol and substance, inconsistent with openness and with the humility of Christ.

To renew the Church at this time, to heal ourselves of this medieval hangover, we should look to separate the practices of the early Church from those which have misshapen it: e.g., getting rid of the trappings of royalty, such as coats of arms and rings of office, the regal purple and the princely red. Bishops should dress as common priests, “*uniformed*” perhaps in a black suit but without the expensive and exclusive dress of a medieval prince. Further, the monarchic model of governance might properly be tempered by the inclusion of required “*outsiders*”—i.e., members of the laity who have voice and authority in deliberations. The often quoted dictum, “*The Church is not a democracy*,” sometimes seems to confuse the truth that the monarch of the Church is neither the bishop nor the Pope, but Christ. Thus, the ministers of Christ—both ordained and lay—can work together under that one leader without turning the Church into a democracy or a tyranny.

**2. Read the “*Signs of the Times*”:** One of the great graces resurrected for the Church by the Second Vatican Council was the notion of spiritual discernment—i.e., reading the “*signs of the times*.” Though never absent from the history of the Church, the idea of discernment, because it depends on the charismatic power of the Spirit, can easily be met with fear and resistance by those for whom continuity and stability are sources of power. The resistance to the living Spirit of God can be seen in the life of Jesus, who confronts the Pharisees for their excessive allegiance to the Law and to “*human traditions*”; it can be seen in *Acts of the Apostles*, when Paul calls Peter to acknowledge his experience with Cornelius and stand against the Judaizers in the community; and it can be seen in the various movements in the history of the Church against Arianism and Gnosticism, Pelagianism and Donatism. Today, though entrenched privilege and fearful inertia seeks to circle the wagons of the Church, the People of God—lay and ordained—must discern together a new way, by which abuse of the innocent and abuse of power might be healed.

And what are the signs of the times telling us? Without prejudging the movement of the Spirit, I would say that the current crisis calls us, first of all, to discern anew our ordering of the Church, i.e. how and to whom power is apportioned. How are the criteria for Orders the product of outlived human traditions—notions of purity rooted in a particular culture and not the true Spirit of the gospel? Further, the old appeals of “*Tradition*” in our understanding of women’s role in Church leadership—both sacramental and structural—must be open for discussion. The unacknowledged but essential role of women, in every parish, in every diocese, in every work and mission of the Church demands that we re-examine, with fresh hearts, what God is saying to the Church. Just as, at one time, women were barred from apostolic ministry because our human traditions made us deaf to the Spirit, what deafness blocks us now? So many other issues could be listed, but isn’t that the world of a living Church?

**3. Form Ministers for the Priesthood:** In the days when I was charged by the Society of Jesus with approving men for ordination, I used to write them a letter in which I described

what I believed their call meant. I told them that they must consider themselves to be like the lenses in a pair of eyeglasses: it mattered how they had been ground, i.e., what their education and experience had done to shape them and made them unique. But they must always remember, as well, that they were being missioned so that their “*grinding*” might help others to see—not to see them—but to see and encounter God better. The best pair of glasses is the pair that the wearer eventually forgets are even on her face, because those glasses have helped that person see clearly the world in which she is called to live and the people she is called to love. The disorder of clericalism is that it proclaims that the lens is not simply an aid to help the eye more clearly, but that the lens is the source of the seeing at all. Clericalism makes the minister the barrier between God and the individual, because it takes the place of Christ, who became what we are that we might see God fully.

If we, as a Church, are to undo the sin of clericalism, we must form the ordained to recognize that they are not the source or the power of any Sacrament. It is not their magic words nor their special actions, but the fidelity of Christ by which the bread and wine are transformed, the healing imparted, the embrace and welcome made whole. Christ, alone, is the priest, who, in his flesh, mediates and unites the human and the divine. This is why the language of the modern Ordination Rite—which speaks of “*elevation*” to the priesthood and uses the analogies of the priesthood of Aaron—seems to me so antithetical to our call. For we are not priests, in the sense of those who offered sacrifice for the people of Israel, Christ has offered the sacrifice once and for all; rather, we minister—remember—the sacrifice of Christ, as symbols of the whole Church present in this particular community. All Christians share in Jesus’ priesthood—the lay and the ordained alike. Those who take up a permanent, life-time service of the community, who minister those Sacraments as living symbols of the whole Church, are like executors of an inheritance, distributing to the whole People of God what belongs to them. And receiving it, just as they do. There is honor and dignity in this work, but not power—and to make it about power, to make the clerical state one that forces other’s knees to bend, is to live a lie: a lie that has wounded the Church and is wounding us, even now.