



## ***Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism***

**Produced by the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests in collaboration with Voice of the Faithful and lay people and clergy across the nation; endorsed by FutureChurch.**

# ***Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism***

Presented at the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests National Assembly, June 2019

## **Dedicated to:**

- All baptized persons who suffer because of the evil of clericalism
- All ordained priests who humbly serve God's people
- All the faithful who help baptized and ordained priests to be human, Christian, and priestly

## **Document Editors: Fr. Kevin Clinton and Donna B. Doucette**

This paper was prepared by a Working Group under the auspices of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests (AUSCP):

Fr. Gerry Bechard, AUSCP, pastor, Sts. Simon & Jude Parish, Archdiocese of Detroit  
Alvera Bell, parishioner, St. Paul the Apostle parish (Youngstown OH Diocese); retired from 39 years teaching in Catholic school and six years as PCRE; Parish Council member and active in many other parish ministries

David Bell, parishioner, St. Paul the Apostle parish (Youngstown OH Diocese); retired; spent 16 years teaching in Catholic high school; member of Parish Council and active in many other parish ministries

Fr. Bernard R. Bonnot, AUSCP Executive Director, pastor emeritus, Diocese of Youngstown OH

Fr. Kevin Clinton, AUSCP President; pastor, Church of St. Wenceslaus, Archdiocese of St. Paul/Minneapolis

Donna B. Doucette, Executive Director, Voice of the Faithful

Fr. Tom Ogg, AUSCP, pastor emeritus, Diocese of Cheyenne, Worldwide Marriage Encounter—U.S. Ecclesial Priest

## **Special Thanks**

We are indebted to the people who shared with us their first-hand stories about experiencing clericalism and allowed us to use them. The stories were edited for grammar and length. We selected the stories (there are many others) that best illustrated a particular behavior. We do not identify the individuals in the stories because our aim is not to “call out” anyone for their actions but to demonstrate the ubiquity of clericalism in Church structure. Almost every story selected had at least one similar to it, if not identical, in its specifics but from a different parish, another diocese, a different region in the country. Clericalism in our Church today is global.

## Table of Contents

Preface	3
Introduction	4
Experiencing Clericalism	5
Cultural Separation and the Ecclesial Structure	10
An Imperial Hierarchy in a Modern World	12
Clericalism Hampers Growth and Grace	16
Growing as a Human	16
Clericalism Stalls Human Growth	18
Priesthood from the Beginning: What Did Jesus Intend?	22
Priesthood Evolves and “Laity” Emerge	24
Strategies to Address Clericalism	25
Conclusion	28
Resources Consulted	29

## Preface

When we were asked to prepare a document about clericalism within the Church, we quickly realized that our challenges would be two-fold. One was the sheer volume of books, articles, editorials, and pronouncements on the topic. What could we say that would help advance the literature already available? What new perspectives or visions could we offer to move forward on efforts to confront and root out clericalism?

Our other challenge was to produce a document that would “ring true” with both clergy and laity. Could we help us all to see the problem clearly and begin to recognize its manifestations? Could we frame the discussion so as to encourage clergy and laity together to confront actions and attitudes that contribute to clericalism?

To answer the challenges, our writing team of priests and lay people chose an experiential approach, one that speaks from our own experiences within the Catholic Church. Some of us come from the Association of United States Catholic Priests (AUSCP), another from the Voice of the Faithful (VOTF), others from years of engagement with the life and the ministries of a Catholic faith community. We have all lived within and interacted with many others in the ecclesial environment of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. We also reached out beyond ourselves and asked other clergy and lay people for their stories about encounters that illustrate clericalism and its effects. We do not identify the individuals in these stories because our aim is not to single out anyone for their actions but to demonstrate the ubiquity of clericalism in Church structure.

As we note in our document, “We typically encounter clericalism as an *experience*.” Using only scholarly definitions and explanations when discussing clericalism cannot communicate this lived experience of clericalism in the Church. To fully understand clericalism, we also must hear the voices of those who experience abuse of power by someone whose role is to accompany others on their spiritual journeys, and we must hear the voices of the ordained for whom lay expectations may be unrealistic and exceed their human capacity. It is this element, personal experiences “at the roots,” that we hope to add to the academic, historical, and theological writings on the topic.

We convey these experiences through stories selected to illustrate points we are making. The value of this approach was demonstrated when we sent the draft paper out to selected clergy and lay people for review. For some, the stories resonated with their own experiences and they could add examples of their own. This correlated with our own discovery that for each point we chose to illustrate, there were multiple reports from which to select.

Other reviewers called a few stories “odd” or “extreme,” or said it must have occurred long ago because no one would do this today. This reaction, too, could be expected—we all generalize from our particular experiences and some of us are fortunate to live within a faith community where clericalism has been muted. However, sad to say, the testimony we use does come from today’s Church, not yesterday’s, and for each selected testimony there are others like it.

We hope that our words help us all rise to the challenge of today in confronting and ultimately removing as many vestiges as possible of the clericalism that harms us all.

## **Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism**

All human systems, without exception, exhibit both functional and dysfunctional characteristics. Systems analysts, whatever methodology they apply to resolving dysfunctions, note particular difficulties when the system in question has “wicked problems” (also called adaptive challenges and, sometimes, “messes”). Such systems have multiple stakeholders, numerous uncertainties, complex interactions, and a tangled web of power centers and political issues—a description that surely matches the situation we face in the Church today.

Our document aims to address the key component fueling that dysfunction: clericalism. We do so by adapting one of the strategies for addressing “messes”: listening to those who live within the dysfunctional system, hearing their experiences, and thus, we hope, empowering us all to become the agents of the changes needed.

---

From the “Letter to the People of God” by Pope Francis, August 20, 2018:

*It is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God’s People. ... Such is the case with clericalism, an approach that “not only nullifies the character of Christians, but also tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people.” Clericalism, whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today.*

At a meeting of Boston area regional Voice of the Faithful representatives, Our Lady Help of Christians Parish Hall, Newton MA, 2003:

*In 2003, parishioners throughout Boston gathered almost weekly to discuss responses to the continuing revelations of child sex abuse by clergy. At one such meeting, a gentleman brought a priest friend who was to talk about the issues he faced because of the abuse scandal. During the gathering, people turned to the question of how best to support the survivors who had suffered as well as the many priests who were not guilty of crimes. One lady, explaining why she was attending, said, “We must fix this because we are the Church.” The guest priest immediately interrupted and in a loud voice declared, “YOU are not the Church!” Pointing to himself and to his Roman collar, he said, “WE are the Church!”*

When displayed so clearly, we can easily recognize the clericalism Pope Francis denounces. We also know well what tends to happen when lay people encounter such clericalism. They find another parish; they leave the Church; they never speak up again in meetings with priests; they abdicate all decision-making to the priest; they become audiences rather than participants in the parish’s life and sideline observers within the Church. Or all of the above. They abdicate their baptismal responsibilities.

Equally damaging are the effects of clericalism on the priest: overwork, isolation, loneliness, unrelieved stress, the expectation that he and he alone will handle all the parish business and be responsible for all the parish problems. Other impacts—mental and physical health problems, addictive behavior, and other stress-related illnesses—may be less obvious immediately, but the tolls are well-known within the Church as are the most egregious of the excesses that clericalism has enabled: predatory sexual behavior by the clergy and coverups by bishops as well as by some members of the faithful.

Less obvious, but perhaps more insidious, are the ways clericalism permeates the entire structure of the Church, separating lay people from clergy, ordinary clergy from bishops, and all of us from the many-layered Vatican bureaucracy that so often seems out of touch with the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Clericalism creates a façade behind which serious systemic problems are minimized, hidden, and sometimes completely denied.

This paper will consider the dysfunction of clericalism and the ways it interferes with the generosity and service that ordained people offer to the faith community. We also consider the ways clericalism damages the spiritual growth of lay people, and how it hampers the roles both clergy and lay must play for the Church to fully accomplish its mission.

We look at both sides: the clerical culture and training that give rise to clericalism in the clergy, and the attitudes of lay people that reinforce clericalism. Together, their behaviors help segregate the clergy as “other” and “above” rather than positioning us properly in complementary roles participating in the mission of Christ and the Church. We illustrate such behaviors primarily through anecdotal testimony reported in this paper.

Ultimately, this paper aims to illuminate how clericalism corrupts and frustrates what the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit intend for the Church of our time. By raising the consciousness of both ordained and lay people, we may become more purposeful and effective in confronting the seductive and toxic power of clericalism in today’s Church.

## **Experiencing Clericalism**

We must first grapple with a definition of clericalism, because defining a problem is the key to addressing its resolution. Entire books have been devoted to describing clericalism. Yet no one definition or book contains the entire truth. Clericalism permeates our ecclesiology and fosters numerous grave problems, each worth detailed examination. For purposes of this paper, we will simply underline what most definitions of clericalism include: an expectation, leading to abuses of power, that ordained ministers are better than and should rule over everyone else among the People of God.

Our goals are to reduce as much as humanly possible any trace of clericalism within ourselves, to help others understand clericalism and guard against its encroachment in their own lives, and to join with all the baptized in rooting out behaviors that spread clericalism and weaken our already damaged Church. We already can easily identify clericalism when a priest declares that he and his fellow priests are “the Church”—no matter how we define the word “clericalism.”

More difficult are the subtle influences clericalism wields on all of us. These lie most often at the level of experiences, not cerebral assessments.

**We typically encounter clericalism as an *experience*** (there is no seminary class entitled “Clericalism and How to Acquire It”). We feel it during a meeting at the parish, in remarks during or after Mass, in an assumption that of course Father never picks up the tab, in the total silence before a meeting if someone other than Father is asked to pray, in the expectation that a priest will be perfect at all times and always have the answer to any problem. Bishops experience it when they learn that assistants, priests, and lay people will tell them only what they think the bishop wants to hear, not what he needs to hear or should hear—people often censor their true opinions when speaking with bishops, or with priests.

The social system that governs these experiences, like all social systems, is complex and multi-leveled and has “rules.” Most of these rules play out unconsciously in the lives of the members who live within a system. When a social system is in crisis, when it faces great change, its members often respond by working harder to enforce its rules and by censoring those it deems are “breaking the rules.” This censoring, or demand for orthodox behavior, occurs even when the rules are clearly failing and the system is in crisis.

Today, the Church is in crisis and the unconscious rules that drive its social system are failing. Those who confront the *status quo* of the Church’s clerical structure should not be surprised that leaders of the *status quo* and those uncomfortable with change show alarm—they may resist the obvious and tend to address the crisis by trying to enforce the system’s rules more rigorously or to assert rules that no longer work or apply.

Nor should we assume that resistance to addressing the problems in our failing system comes only from Church leaders, or the hierarchy, or the clergy and laity who dislike change. Those who demand change without also seeking the “conversion of activity” cited by Pope Francis set up impediments too. **We all participate in the system *status quo*, whether we resist its rules or we conform.**

We must all take responsibility for confronting and minimizing the problems because all of us, lay and ordained, contribute to conditions that allow clericalism to infect the Church. These contributions emerge, often unconsciously and unexamined, from our cultural heritage.

A culture tells us what to value, how to behave, and to whom we should listen. From *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood* by George B. Wilson, S.J.:

*In large areas of our lives we act the way we do because we have taken on the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of people who held significance for us ... The expected attitudes and behaviors of a particular culture can become so powerful that it becomes all but impossible for its members to even conceive of other ways of being. The culture becomes ... imprinted in the psyche, making other ways of organizing life to appear not just as other but as threats to the stability generated by the normative culture. ...*

*It would be a fatal mistake to view a clerical culture as being generated only by its clergy. Like any other culture, the clerical culture is the product of everyone affected by—or implicated in—its continuance.*

When we strive to identify clericalism and its conditions, to address unexamined behaviors, we can begin to see particular examples arising from our own experiences, as these stories show:

*A longtime Catholic school teacher, somewhat overweight, always wore pantsuits rather than dresses or skirts when ministering at Mass. One day the pastor awaited her arrival in the sacristy and said she must now wear dresses at Mass. She replied that she did not feel comfortable in dresses and in fact owned no dresses or skirts. The next day in her mailbox at school, she found \$50 in an envelope from the pastor—to buy a dress. She no longer ministered at Mass while he was pastor.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*An associate pastor told the new deacon that he was to serve him, the priest, not the parish family. He was to be available at all times to the priest.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*In his Sunday homily, the pastor noted that his Catholic school teachers had just received a raise, so he expected to see a substantial increase in their weekly offering.*

What impelled the ordained priests in these anecdotes to behave as they did? Perhaps a sense of entitlement that began in their family of origin, was reinforced during seminary formation, and then left unchecked during their early days of ordained ministry. Excessive concern about appearances and what is “owed” the ordained probably contributed.

On the other hand, the priests in these anecdotes also could be described as “simply jerks.” Yet we should not excuse clericalism as a factor in *being a jerk*. When priests, and lay people, judge such actions to be *normal* behavior, their acceptance stems from the sub-cultural reservoir of clericalism.

When clericalism plays out in the **lives of the ordained**, they display an attitude and a belief contrary to the Gospel, i.e., that the ordained are the real Christians and everyone else is kind of second class. Teachings about ontological change in the very being of a priest feed this attitude.

For priest, deacon, or bishop, the consequences of such behavior and attitudes can be isolation, an inability to listen to or understand others, an excessive deference to “chains of command” rather than to Gospel truths. As a corollary, the cleric with this attitude diminishes and judges as unimportant many very real and vulnerable persons he encounters. Such attitudes and behaviors are subtle and unconscious. They are especially difficult to discern in oneself. They even may seem to be logical applications of a “rule.” For example:



*It was a parish's tradition that during the Our Father at Mass everyone would hold hands. The altar servers would go to the altar to hold the celebrant's hands during the prayer. A visiting priest refused the servers' hands and afterwards said that he never lets anyone touch him or his hands before or during Mass. He said his hands are sacred because they hold the host and the wine, consecrating it into the Body and Blood of Jesus. Therefore, he would not hold hands with anyone or even shake hands with anyone prior to or during the Mass.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*A Director of Religious Education (DRE) preparing students for Confirmation held an instructional meeting for details about the sacrament. Afterwards, a parent asked if her daughter could be the sponsor for her son because the two were very close. Unfortunately, her daughter would be 16 one week after confirmation and therefore technically, by seven days, too young to be a sponsor. When the DRE shared the situation with the pastor and said she had suggested that it would be permissible, the pastor refused: "If you go down to get your driver's license before you're of age, they won't let you get your license. So why should the Church make such an allowance?" When the DRE tried to explain why the girl should be approved (the Confirmation date each year is schedule-dependent, not a required date), the pastor turned and walked away. The discussion was over.*

The assumption that the ordained may set rules at will, demand a separatism from the non-ordained, and dictate codes of dress reinforces the barriers that too often separate the faithful into "ordained" and "everyone else." Similar barriers—ones created naturally in any hierarchy—separate Vatican officials from bishops and bishops from priests. Indeed, the latter separation, dubbed *hierarchicalism* by those studying its effects, is seen as a "hyper version" of the clericalism that infests the Church. Rev. Mark Slatter described that version in an article ("Clerical identity crisis: Flock and pasture can't tell shepherd who he is," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 11, 2019):

*Hierarchical culture is the gold carrot for those predisposed to its allurements. In its crassest forms, it not only seems unbreakable but comes with a breathtaking lack of shame over its paraded grotesqueries of entitlement, aristocratic airs, and blind ambition ... The psychology makes people incapable of rousing themselves from the false values propping up the illusory self-image; an inner Rubicon is crossed where it lacks the quality of temptation, as something I ought to wrestle with. After several decades, too much of the self has been invested in a specific way of being human.*

**For lay people**, clericalism can be equally subtle. It can stifle personal faith development and spiritual growth, prevent a full investment in the life of the parish, encourage an over-deference to the power of the ordained: "Father is always right"; "Father must always lead prayers"; "I depend on you, Father, to get me to heaven."

*On the first Sunday of Advent, a priest inadvertently donned a green vestment and presided at the early Sunday morning Mass. After the Mass, an anxious sacristan drew the priest's attention to a purple vestment that had been dry-cleaned in anticipation of the season. (There were several other purple vestments in the closet as well, so the priest had his pick but chose the green.) The sacristan was most apologetic and anxious when she showed Father the purple vestment, because she said she knew that someone like herself should never correct a priest—in her early years of service, a priest had once sternly instructed her so. (This priest, however, accepted the correction with grace and gratitude.)*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Some of our older parishioners almost worship their clergy. Whatever Father wants, that's the way it's going to be. Father doesn't like chocolate cake so we only order white cakes. Father doesn't like to see people with bulletins during Mass so we hide the bulletins before Mass and no one can have one until Mass is over. The older parishioners give Father or Deacon big hugs and tell him, "Oh I just love you so much. You are the best priest [or Deacon] we've ever had." When a new priest or Deacon comes along, they do and say the same thing to him.*

Clericalism in lay people also blocks the necessary feedback that helps keep the Church faithful to the gospel, and it blocks the feedback the ordained need to properly serve the community.

Within the lay-clergy relationship, clericalism casts clerics as a privileged fraternity whose sacred status guarantees them eternal protection from the reproaches of the world, even when they do wrong, and—equally—can lead lay people to an expectation that clergy will be perfect in all things at all times. Father is never allowed to just have a bad day.

Yet no matter how disordered our Catholic culture may become, its participants remain essential: the visible, clerical participants as well as the lay people whose participation may be less visible and even unacknowledged. We value and need the services of the ordained in order to form a vibrant Eucharistic community; the non-ordained constitute the bulk of that community and make their own contributions to its health.

If the social system bringing us together fails to meet our needs and instead favors power, privilege, and control, we must confront not only the effects of that dysfunction—secrecy, sex abuse, declining attendance at services, a dwindling number willing to call themselves Catholic, and so on—but also the foundational cause that enables these failures: the often unconscious culture of clericalism.

## Cultural Separation and the Ecclesial Structure

Priests typically live aside and apart from the people they serve. They are culturally and often physically far removed from the realities of the communities that surround them. They spend most of their adult lives in a clerical culture that dominates almost every facet of that life, from specified educational paths to socialization opportunities, from living conditions to financial remuneration, in working relationships restricted by oaths of obedience, and in an isolation enforced by mandated celibacy.

Cultural separation is not unique to the priesthood, of course, nor is culture necessarily a bad influence. The term “culture” itself 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.

Almost every profession has its own special culture, and that culture supports and protects its members, provides them with useful information, 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. At the same time, to those outside the culture and those who depend on them for services, the specialized cultures can be opaque and sometimes threatening. They also can evolve into damaging and harmful systems.

Within the Catholic Church, such evolution into damaging and harmful behavior is labeled clericalism: an overriding set of beliefs and actions in which the clergy are viewed as different, separate, and exempt from the norms, rules, and consequences that apply to everyone else.

Such attitudes can emerge easily within the Roman Catholic Church culture, because the culture has some characteristics that distinguish it from the cultures of other social systems:

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

Although most organizations, especially nation-states, have hierarchical structures, many also have some checks and balances on power, e.g., separating the executive, the legislative, and the judicial powers. These can serve as brakes on excesses, on abuses, and on the tendencies of one activity center to eclipse another. The structures that work the best also permit outside and independent overview when corruption or law-breaking is suspected.

But in the Roman Catholic Church, all three powers have long been exercised by the pope and the Vatican Congregations that report directly to the pope, by bishops in their dioceses, and by

pastors in their parishes. Although the Second Vatican Council emphasized the collegiality of the bishops, a decentralization of authority, and an active and meaningful role for the laity, the predecessors of Pope Francis re-emphasized a centralized hierarchical authority.

Even after the latest adoption of a new Code of Canon Law, supreme authority rested with the Pope; administrative authority ostensibly flowed from the Pope but in fact most often rested with Cardinals and Vatican Curia officials; territorial authority rested with bishops; some limited territorial authority rested with pastors and priests. Lay input, as experienced today, is by invitation only, with no defined authority over even the smallest of decisions pertaining to a parish.

*A retiring pastor, recognizing the shortage of priests, suggested to the Bishop that he would stay as pastor as long as he was in good health, if the Bishop would appoint a lay administrator to handle the “business” of the parish. The bishop said no. If there was a priest there was no need for a lay administrator.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Our priests are from a missionary order, and they try to support lay participation but they just can't see lay people being “in charge.” By virtue of his ordination, a priest is almost always in charge of the parish or worship community, even if a lay person would be immensely more qualified. In every instance, a church employee's boss is ultimately an ordained male. Younger or less experienced priests arrive who are immediately “the boss” in some capacity (even if they are not the pastor). The ordained are not only in a more secure position than established staff, they also automatically have more authority than staff.*

*Lay people always need to “lead from behind,” even if they are immensely more qualified to lead an activity.*

Within such a structure (all power residing in one small sector), the habits and behaviors of the rulers have few counterweights to curtail extremes. Its structure allows the leaders to produce authoritative decrees rather than attempt collaborative or collegial discernment. Clericalism has emerged from this structure and led to disastrous consequences. One of the most disastrous has been the enabling of clergy sexual abuse and its cover-up by the hierarchy.

Sometimes the damage inflicted remains hidden, because only the priest or deacon or staff involved know what happens. Sometimes it remains hidden because the impulse to avoid criticizing or condemning a cleric has become so inbred in Catholics, both cleric and lay.

*A man in his 70s admitted in the local hospital that when he was a teenager the priest in his rural parish had molested him for four years. Hospital medication had lowered his inhibitions and led him to tell the female hospital chaplain. The chaplain immediately informed the local Catholic pastor, who promptly informed the diocese. The Director for Safe Environment developed a plan to inform the rural parish community of the “reasonable report” that a*

*sexually abusing priest was in the parish 50 years ago—so that any others who had been molested could receive help if needed.*

*The Vicar General first contacted the current pastor of the rural parish and told him of the report. The current pastor, who had served the parish for more than 35 years and knew the now-deceased predator priest, opposed the Vicar General's plan, saying, "Why upset the parish about something that happened so long ago? Maybe it was just this one person."*

*The Vicar General ignored the pastor's objections. When the faith community was informed of the report, there was a silence that betrayed that the secret was not restricted to just the victims. It was a secret known by more than a few within the community, for more than 50 years. Five more adults came forward and spoke confidentially to diocesan staff, saying they too had been molested by the same pastor 50 years ago. Each of them thought they were the only one sexually abused. None of them thought they could tell their parents or anyone else what had happened because as young children and teenagers they thought no one would believe them or they would be punished for lying.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*The parents of a 25-year-old son were leaving their home to celebrate the 25th Ordination Anniversary of the priest who had molested their son 10 years before. Before they left, he finally worked up the courage to tell his unknowing parents what had happened. His parents replied, "That's OK, son; we forgive you." Then they went to the celebration.*

These are the types of responses that ultimately led to so many headlines about clergy sex abuse this century. Report suppression, secrecy, and attributing blame to the victims stemmed from the dysfunction of clericalism. Investment in a belief that priests could do no wrong—or, if they did, news of such failure must never be revealed—allowed the rot to spread.

But there are other consequences as well, including those that damage priests who become isolated within the culture and those that damage our faith communities.

Jesus and His disciples modeled a very different type of structure for the Church, one of servant leadership. The imperial form we know today grew from later choices, made by humans.

## **An Imperial Hierarchy in a Modern World**

The Roman Church's hierarchical system was designed to provide to a fledgling Church an authoritative presence in the Roman Empire. It succeeded in that ambition, and as the Church grew it adapted the same structure to the now-global Church. The development in the Church of this Roman imperial hierarchical structure essentially peaked somewhere during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

When Vatican II emerged, it was during an era when the entire world had begun to dismantle imperial structures. In that same vein, the Council brought attention to the role of lay people, and it called us to return to the earliest roots of the Church, to complementary roles. But while Vatican II sought to “open a window,” it did not directly address the historic structures the Church had borrowed from ancient Rome. The separation of clergy and laity persists, as does the clericalism that holds the culture in place.

Today, our system most closely mimics a feudal kingdom rather than the early Church’s community of faithful. The ecclesial structure favors and supports clerics (knights, dukes, kings/monsignors, bishops, cardinals)—especially those elevated to the level of bishops—at the expense of the entire People of God.

*A priest came to say Mass at a neighboring church and when introducing himself told the congregation that he was “King” in his parish and town. (The priest was serious.)*

\*\*\*\*\*

*At a pastoral council meeting, a new pastor told his council that he would not have anyone on the council who disagreed with him. He told them that Canon Law says that the pastor is in charge and therefore it’s his way on all matters. When it was brought to his attention that sometimes discussion can yield other options or opinions, he made it very clear that he would choose his council members and there was to be no opposition.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*The parish staff must learn and then use the technology platform chosen for the parish. But when a parish priest refuses to use that platform, the parish is expected to pay for alternative technology even if it doesn’t work with parish software.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Several times we have had a priest who flat out refused to perform part of his job assignment. Nothing was done about it because the other priests in the house said, well, they had to live with him. To do the tasks refused by the priest, the pastor then hired a lay person without having funding for this additional staffing—and without reducing the compensation the priest and his religious order received, a reduction that could have offset the costs for the job he was no longer doing.*

When clericalism prevails at every level, the expectation is for clerical control, clerical recognition, and clerical benefit, with lay people marginalized. Within the clerical hierarchy, the expectation continues, as priests yield to bishops who yield to the Curia, who yield (supposedly) to the current Pope.

However, this centralization of authority, whether at the global or the local level, is not the greatest vulnerability of the Church's current structure. Its greatest weakness is the attempt to apply ancient and medieval sensibilities and culture to a 21<sup>st</sup> century world. The inhabitants of today's world are more educated, more mobile, more technologically empowered, and far more independent than the populace that existed when the Roman imperial structure was established. In earlier centuries, the clergy usually were the best educated in a community, with the strongest foundations in theology, scriptural studies, and liturgy. In modern nations, lay people with such degrees and training typically outnumber clergy. In earlier centuries, we could assume that clergy could handle all the business and administrative needs of the parish. In modern economies, it's the lay person who usually has the skills and training needed for such management tasks.

Despite these realities, the model of the priest as the sole "ruler" of a parish or a diocese persists within Church structure. Those who seek to adapt to more collegial practices rarely obtain ongoing support. A parish where the pastor encourages lay people to step into appropriate service roles and provide input for the parish's communal life can see that practice revert instantly to "my way or the highway" when a new pastor arrives. If a bishop supports efforts to develop more meaningful roles for the laity, the next bishop can, by immediate decree, abolish all such participation and require "clergy only" for all pastoral roles. The culture of the Church remains embedded in the assumption that structures adopted from ancient centuries, even if they are not working, must be followed for the Church to carry out its mission today.

This misplaced assumption plays out in numerous ways.

*A DRE was attending a continuing education class that was inspiring and challenging. She mentioned it to the deacon, encouraging him to join her, thinking that he might like it. His response was that he had done his education to become a deacon and that these classes were for "regular people, not someone who was ordained." He added, "I go when I am mandated to go and don't need more education."*

\*\*\*\*\*

*A visiting priest at a parish with no pastor gave a homily in which he criticized the parish for their style of crucifix, for their style of statues, and for their style of music. After Mass, he told those in the sacristy that the problem with the parish was that women are troublemakers. The sacristan who had assisted him prior to Mass was a woman.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*A local priest from an adjacent parish came to concelebrate a funeral with the parish priest. During the funeral Mass the pastor broke the large host into pieces during the Lamb of God prayer. Then he presented the concelebrating priest with a consecrated host like those to be given to the congregation attending the funeral. While the pastor elevated the sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord to the people, the concelebrating priest's hand came around*

*from behind the pastor and switched the regular congregation host with a part of the large host that had been broken. It was obvious that the concelebrating priest felt that he should receive only the “priest’s communion” and not the Bread offered to the laity.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*The female lay associate who directs the youth confirmation program is not invited to the dinner and gathering the bishop requests with the priests after the confirmation, but the male liturgy/music minister always is invited.*

From a deacon who assumes that his education must be complete because he is ordained, to the assumption that priesthood confers superior artistic judgment, to the marginalization of the non-ordained (especially women), the clericalism embedded within Church structure harms our faith communities. It is not difficult to find overt examples.

*Fifteen priests gathered at a local parish for their monthly Priest-Deanery meeting. The elected dean presented a report from the previous Presbyteral Council meeting about a diocesan plan to have pastors evaluated by a selected group of parishioners. As ones who shared parish life with the pastor, they would have input on the bishop’s evaluation of the pastor’s job performance. The dean asked for comments. I thought the draft appeared to be reasonable and balanced in its approach. It allowed for confidentiality and requested feedback on important areas of a pastor’s ministry.*

*After the dean presented the overview of the evaluation tool, a recently appointed pastor said that he opposed the idea of consulting parishioners. “I have spent eight years of my life in seminary formation to learn what it is to be a priest,” he said. “I am accountable only to my bishop. **The people of the parish have not been trained or informed** about what the duties and responsibilities of a priest are. **They cannot give appropriate evaluation** of a priest because of that.”*

*The room fell silent. None of his brother priests said anything, including me. The dean moved on to other items on the agenda. The draft for the evaluation of a pastor remains an “option” within the diocese.*

Perhaps it is well to insert a note at this point to confirm that all the anecdotes you are reading in this paper come from recent personal experiences of those—clergy and lay—who shared their stories with us. These are not from the past. They are stories from this century, unless identified specifically as from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. They are who we as Catholics are today, except in the few pockets of enlightenment where clericalism is recognized and confronted directly.

Pope Francis persistently condemns this clericalism. He has taken steps to strengthen *synodality* in the life and operation of the Church, as a prescription for reducing and eventually eliminating clericalism. However, as a people, we have centuries of our *unexamined culture* to reinforce the habits and beliefs that separate us into “ordained” and “other.” No prescription will be effective



unless we confront the ways we feed clericalism as well as all the ways clericalism harms us, whether we be ordained or non-ordained. The feudal system is dying, amidst great tension. Accepting this reality is therapeutic, so that new life can arise.

To clear the way for new life, we must examine the ways clericalism harms even those who seem to benefit from it as well as measure our current clerical culture against the Christian community culture initially envisioned by Jesus and the Apostles.

## **Clericalism Hampers Growth and Grace**

It may seem, at first, that those who enjoy a defined authority and position via ordination gain all the benefits from an ecclesial structure that favors clerics. But we must not assume that clericalism harms only lay people. Priests themselves suffer when clericalism limits their growing into maturity as human beings.

All human beings are to grow and develop as our lives unfold. The grace of God is given to all so that we each may become who God calls us to be. As Christians, we believe that the Holy Spirit will serve as helper and guide to assist us in this growth process. Ordained priests, no less than lay people, are immersed in the human condition and must seek human, psychological, and spiritual maturing as God wills it.

Sometimes the cultural environment around a human being allows that individual the freedom and resources to flourish—advancing in “holiness” or becoming more of what God is calling him or her to be. Sometimes the cultural environment is toxic to the human growth and development called for by the grace of God.

The cultural environment that begets clericalism arrests or stalls—is toxic to—human growth by creating an imbalance among the three identities a priest manages: human being, Christian, and ordained minister. When mired in the mind-set of clericalism, an ordained priest inverts these priorities. As a result, the ministry he provides will not serve the spiritual needs of the faith community or his own.

### ***Growing as a Human***

In their human spiritual journey, ordained priests manage three identities:

- “I am a human being.”
- “I am a Christian.”
- “I am an ordained priest.”

All three must properly develop to enable a priest’s ministry and to serve the gospel. As written in the AUSCP document on priestly formation (2018): “The specialness of Holy Orders is found in the call to pastoral service to people, to be servant-shepherds of God’s sheep. Being grounded

in, embracing, and living out the Word of God and being in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ are the foundation of being a Christian and thus of being a priest in the Church.”

**“I am a human being”:** Whether Christian or not, lay or ordained, our lives all rest on a human foundation. Spiritual thoughts and comfort with theological language may set the ordained minister apart from others on the surface, but the surface still rests on the same foundation: He is a human being.

Pastoral work calls the ordained to embrace his humanity, experience his own vulnerabilities, and immerse himself in pastoral life to learn more about the realities of his own human condition. It should not lead him to lose touch with his own human gifts.

*A musically talented university graduate—composer, singer, performer—went to seminary to study theology. In a short time, the seminary environment and culture progressively closed down his creativity. He soon found himself unable to play his guitar, to compose, to sing and perform. He was not told to stop. Rather, the distorted climate of the seminary suppressed his human gifts. His inability to exercise his talent persisted throughout his years of theological training. Happily, he persisted in his studies and, once out of the seminary, situated in the more human setting of parish life and ministry, his creative spirit and talents gradually came back to life.*

The Jesus we meet in the Gospels also traveled a path of human growth. As an adolescent, Jesus returned to Nazareth from the Jerusalem Temple with Mary and Joseph and to his home “where he grew in wisdom and age.” Later, as someone acculturated in Jewish 1<sup>st</sup> century perspectives, Jesus encountered a Syro-Phoenician woman and a Roman Centurion, both non-Jews, and learned that his mission was to go beyond his Jewish community. Living out his mission, Jesus violated the religious norms of the time that forbade contact with prostitutes, tax-collectors, sinners, and lepers. Thus, we see in the Gospels how the unfolding of his human life drew Jesus beyond conventional Jewish boundaries, beyond conventional rabbi behavior, and into an immersion in the human condition.

Even the Gospel of John, which provides our most highly developed Christology, presents Jesus as “the Word made flesh.” The New Testament also presents Jesus as King, Messiah, Rabbi, Lord, and our High Priest—yet before those roles, Jesus is first born from the dust of the earth, born of woman. As Jesus of Nazareth grew day by day, Our Incarnate Lord (like us in all things but sin) had his own human consciousness unfold. Because Christ was immersed into what it is to be fully human, he became the means of salvation for all humankind.

A deacon’s, priest’s, or bishop’s ministry becomes a sacramental sign as well when ordination and humanity are both accepted and embraced. As happened with Jesus, the grace of God comes into the human condition through the human life and ministry of the priest.

**“I am a Christian”:** Ordained ministers are also Christians, and the ordained minister’s thinking must place his baptism as the foundation on which his ordination rests. His ordination is a particular ordering within the Church community of being baptized into Christ. Thus, while

serving the faith community in the ministerial priesthood, the ordained should recognize, value, and celebrate the diverse and powerful presence of Christ in the lives of other baptized People of God.

It should be liberating for a bishop, a priest, a deacon or a lay person to see *Baptism*—life as a Christian—as the foundation that defines all the roles within the faith community. It should be liberating to realize there are many other members besides the ordained who are *alter Christi* in all sorts of circumstances. What ordained minister, for example, has not attended a dying person and initially thought he is bringing Christ to the dying only to realize that the person dying becomes Christ, in that moment, for the priest?

It should be liberating to realize that the role of Christian brings us all together in one holy endeavor, as one bishop was reminded:

*A bishop had to resign from his diocese and, concerned for the appearance this would present, asked, “What should I tell the people?” The response from Rome was: “Tell them that the church belongs to Christ! The bishop is leaving his role but the Body of Christ lives on.”*

**“I am an ordained priest”:** In the first half of life, human beings grow “out”—establishing their identities in the world. In the second half of a human life, we are challenged to grow “down” into ourselves. Educational institutions provide diverse degrees, and we graduate or become certified or licensed or ordained. These are mile posts in the outward discernment into life.

A young man contacting the Vocations Office, filling out an application for entrance into a seminary and doing the work and outward discernment required of a seminarian, must come up with answers to such questions as “Who am I in the world?” And, “How do I fit into this world that I am growing into?”

In the best case, he learns that being a good priest (deacon, bishop) requires him to have an incarnational grounding: to be one who lives in and is aware of his humanity. He also must value the gift of being a Christian—an adopted child within God’s family. Finally, as a third priority and one that must build on the first two of being a good human and then being a good Christian, he must discover more profoundly what it means to be ordained in service of the Gospel.

An ordained person’s affirmation cannot come at the cost of de-valuing the roles others have within the Body of Christ. Ordained ministers need a clear and healthy understanding of who they are and what role they must fulfill, but it should always be with a humble attitude toward other roles and different vocations within the whole Body of Christ.

### ***Clericalism Stalls Human Growth***

When an ordained priest inverts his priorities, it arrests or stalls his human development and leads to clericalism. The groundwork for this failing may begin with the laity, in the family home. Catholic families often elevate the position of a boy who wants to become a priest. He

assumes a role somewhat like that of an only child, regarded as one deserving special treatment and accolades. How many stories can we think of with the ingredients recounted here?

*His mother named him after Pope Pius XII. At his Baptism, she set him on the altar and dedicated him to be the priest of the family. Of the eight children (the seventh born) he was the one she most tended to, the one everyone declared to be “good.” He went off to seminary in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade but left after two years. This did not please his mother, who prayed he would return to his “true vocation” one day. Instead he joined the military, served four years, married, and had children. He was in his mid-thirties when he overheard his mother telling her sisters she did not understand why he had not died in Viet Nam, because she was so sure that was to be his role in the family once he did not become a priest.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*After “Sam” said he was going to be a priest, the associate pastor let him organize all the altar servers, direct the visiting priests, and order everyone around. He told his own mother she wasn’t worthy of taking Communion! The boy was 16 and wearing cassocks all day Sunday and he hadn’t even left for seminary yet. No one in the congregation seemed to think this was strange. His mother told everyone how special and important he was.*

When a young man leaves infancy and adolescence to enter a seminary for priestly formation, he is likely to find additional affirmation that he is special and “chosen.” Instead of growing as human/Christian/priest, seeing his role as the servant ministering to God’s people, the seminarian may incorporate a notion that he deserves to be separate from and valued more highly than others—he *experiences* the reinforcement of his “separateness” and “higher calling.”

In his blog post on Pray Tell: Worship, Wit & Wisdom (“Challenging Clericalism,” January 2, 2019), Prof. Richard R. Gaillardetz says a “problematic theology” underlies this separation: “We can see the rise of clericalism in the way in which ministers’ vigorous insistence on a distinctive clerical identity obscures their solidarity with the whole people of God. This obsession with a distinct clerical identity is, in turn, often grounded in a problematic theology of Holy Orders.” That theology, he continues, assumes that ordination magically confers competency that the *ordinand* never possessed before.

*Such a theology presumes a very privatized notion of priestly vocation. It moves too easily from a sense of God’s call to the individual’s acceptance of that call, overlooking entirely the necessary mediating role of the church as the context in which that call is discerned, assessed and cultivated.*

Contemporary seminary formation too often ingrains such attitudes in those preparing for priest-hood. With time, those attitudes give rise to clerical behaviors that are offensive to people, behaviors which have contributed significantly to the current crises in the Catholic Church.

**The seminary system** intends to foster the human development of persons who may become priests. It fails some, and some survive as persons in spite of it, but some emerge from those years as clericalists. Quoting again from the AUSCP document on priestly formation:

*Our perception is that the way the current Program of Priestly Formation has been implemented in many seminaries has more often than not resulted in priests who do not see themselves as Christ-like servants of God's people. They tend to articulate their status using concepts such as "MY Mass," "MY priesthood," "ontological change in my being," and Alter Christus in ways contrary to a Vatican II understanding of the call to pastoral service. The repeated emphasis on such notions undergirds a sense of distance, separation, elitism, clericalism, insensitivity and superiority, all of which have been critiqued by Pope Francis. These attitudes undercut the ministry of pastoral service to which a priest is called.*

The focus on pastorhood in training rather than on service and an emphasis on governance rather than collegiality were characteristics that two former seminary professors, C. Colt Anderson and Christopher M. Bellitto, ("The Reform Seminaries Need: Scarlet Fever," *Commonweal*, April 8, 2019, online, and the April 12, 2019, print version) noted:

*Seminarians know that, given the shortage of priests in the United States, it won't be long after they're ordained that they'll be pastors with a parish of their own. We often heard conversations in the lunchroom that indicated as much: "When I'm pastor, I'm going to put my place on the map." We heard very little talk of service or shared leadership, collegial relations with parish councils, or facilitating the talents of parishioners. The parish, it was clear, belonged to the pastor and not the people. Once, Cardinal Francis George explained to a group of seminarians in Chicago that Pope Benedict XVI stressed that the role of the priest and bishop was governance, not leadership. This was not unusual. Seminarians are fed a consistent message: Their role is to rule over the laity and the religious as a result of their ontological change at ordination, not as a result of their virtue, knowledge, or model behavior. They are being trained to be autocratic bosses, not servant leaders.*

The undercutting of pastoral service may yield another debilitating form of clericalism, one that directs itself against other priests. Adherence to protocols and rigid conformity has produced priests who consider it their duty to "correct" any priest they deem to be less than rigorous in upholding the rituals than he himself was taught.

*A seminarian in his diaconate year was assigned to a progressive and vibrant Catholic parish. He often criticized the pastor because the pastor did not always stick specifically to the language in the Roman missal. The pastor also conducted a monthly laying-on of hands, after Communion, for those who wished blessings. The seminarian complained that these practices were not the way he was taught in the seminary.*

*The seminarian told others that he would rather have a parish with only one or two parishioners who were good staunch Catholic pray-ers than have a church full of people who were not solid committed Catholics with proper prayer habits. If anyone in a parish he led had problems, he would post regular office hours so they could come in for help.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*The pastor had served a two-priest parish alone for 11 months and thus warmly welcomed a new associate pastor. Soon thereafter, the pastor invited the associate to concelebrate Mass with him at the large local nursing home. The associate declined, making various excuses, but when the pastor persisted the associate said he would attend and sit with the residents. He would not concelebrate a Mass with the pastor. Curious, the pastor asked why. The associate explained that his conscience would not allow him to concelebrate because the pastor occasionally changed some words in the Roman missal when saying Mass. Therefore, the associate regarded concelebration as a sacrilege; it would be sinful.*

*When the pastor expressed his shock at such a claim, the associate tried to reassure him by saying that he also had corrected a bishop who used the wrong words. The bishop had thanked him, he added. (The pastor wondered if the bishop had been sincere.)*

When the newly ordained lives out his early years of ordained ministry, he typically conceives his priorities as, first, to be a good priest (or deacon); second, to be a good Christian; and third, to have an accurate awareness of his humanity, i.e., a member of the human race. When this order of priorities remains the pattern—thus inverting the priorities important for human development and growth—the priest weakens or ignores his own humanity.

However, when human and spiritual development matures in an ordained person's life, the order of priorities properly adjusts: first, I am a good person; second, I am a good Christian; third, I am a good priest. Those who are more experienced in pastoral work may try to address lapses in this necessary adjustment, as this example shows.

*The Archbishop of a large metropolitan diocese observed that some of the newly ordained were saying their first Mass in Latin rather than in English. He became even more alarmed when he saw a glossy photo of a soon-to-be-ordained seminarian, who had put on a cassock, cape, cane, and biretta for the photo. The bishop called the seminarian and told him not to dress that way again and to stop distributing such photos. The Archbishop now worries about what underlies the seminarian's behavior.*

Absent strong correctives to emerging clericalism, however, a priest may expect that once ordained he will have all that he needs for fulfillment. As clericalism inflates the power of that priest, he may distort or even reject good pastoral practices and short-circuit his own human growth. His priorities become unbalanced.

*A pastor told a group of junior high boys that if they wanted to drive nice cars, take fancy vacations, and wear expensive clothes, they should become a priest when they grow up. He then showed them his new Cadillac and Gucci shoes.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*A pastor claims repeatedly, “I love being a priest.” However, the pastor also makes it known that he dislikes: Sunday Masses that are too early or too late; hearing confessions; making hospital visits; meeting with couples preparing for marriage; attending administration or commission meetings. He loves his status as a priest, not the duties of a pastor.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*The priest’s first career was unsettled and unfulfilling. He worked for a technology company as an engineer. Becoming an ordained priest seemed like a better option. He entered the seminary, learned the rules and “technology” associated with being a priest, and was ordained. But in his pastoral work he saw people who in his estimation did not take “being Catholic” seriously enough. He became quick to judge and flew into rages with individuals he said were not “doing Catholic” correctly. His reactions and the stress of the pastoral environment generated a deep personal crisis.*

The parishioners served by each of these priests will likely find themselves distracted from their own paths to spiritual growth unless they can ignore or work around the obstacles placed in front of them by their priests.

The health of the ministerial priesthood and diaconate and the health of the entire Church require us to name clericalism for its failures not just in ministry to all the People of God, not just in blocking the collegial community of the faithful, but also in the way it stalls or arrests the psychological/human/spiritual growth of ministers. It is toxic to those ordained and to the life of the Church. It also is not what the early Church saw as the path Jesus sent them to travel.

## **Priesthood from the Beginning: What Did Jesus Intend?**

The earliest followers of Jesus saw him as replacing the Temple itself—including Temple-based worship and the priesthood that attended it. Jesus himself asserted this replacement. He did not establish a clerical caste with privilege and perks, nor did the early disciples.

Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew, a member of the tribe of Judah. From that tribe came the kings of Israel, individuals like King David. As a descendant of David, Jesus belonged to this kingly lineage. Israel’s priests all came from the tribe of Levi, the tribe of both Moses and his brother Aaron. After Yahweh directed Moses to name Aaron the high priest of Israel, all of Israel’s high priests were Levites, as were the other functionaries involved in Temple worship.

Jesus was in no way associated with this Levitical priestly caste. He worshiped at the Temple as a faithful Jew, but he was not a priest serving the Temple. Instead, Jesus most likely was one of the Pharisees: a pious, knowledgeable, and practicing layman.

Nor is there any indication in the Gospels that those Jesus gathered as his closest disciples were connected to the Temple and the priests serving there. As Jesus himself embodied in his public ministry, he called his disciples to be messengers, apostles, and proclaimers of the good news.

Jesus started a movement of *missionary disciples*, and he warned them to maintain the simplicity and humility that he himself embodied. He told them not to accept formal titles such as Rabbi or Father. He empowered them to heal at times but cautioned them not to acquire an elevated sense of themselves as someone special with exclusive powers.

Nor did Jesus provide a compendium of priestly duties. Instead, he gave his disciples only a few core commands: to love God above all, and to love others. He instructed his closest disciples to imitate him in that he came to serve and not to be served, and he demonstrated this by washing their feet during the Last Supper. The call and role of the apostles from the beginning was very different from the priests serving the Temple.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* presents the Risen Christ as High Priest but as a unique type of priest: a priest **according to the order of Melchizedek**. Melchizedek is a mythic kind of figure in the Scriptures, obscure but symbolic and referenced only a few times. The reference sets up a contrast with the Temple priests who served according to the order of Levi. The *Letter to the Hebrews*, written near the end of the first century C.E., used the contrast to help those familiar with Israel's priestly tradition understand that the high priesthood of the Risen Christ **replaced the Jewish priestly tradition**.

As “a priest according to the order of Melchizedek,” the Risen Lord was not connected to a specific temple but instead encountered persons “out in the field”—the way Melchizedek helped Abraham name the God who called him and assured Abraham that God was an active agent in his life. Rather than offer ritual sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple as the Levite priests did, Jesus of Nazareth used his own presence, time, and talent “in the field.” His public ministry moved from one place to another. He helped people know God as a loving and merciful parent. Melchizedek's priesthood brought Abraham to God the Most High; the Risen Christ's personhood and priesthood connects us to God as loving parent. Whenever we think or talk about the priesthood of the Risen Jesus, we must see it as defined by the “order of Melchizedek.”

During the Last Supper, Jesus identified the sacrifice he was offering as the sacrifice of himself: once, forever, and for all. He provided strong ritual imagery for this sacrifice by identifying himself with the bread that was broken and the wine that was poured. He was laying down his bodily life for them: *This is my body which will be given up for you*. He was pouring out his life-blood for them: *This is the cup of my blood, the blood of a new and eternal covenant that will be poured out for you and for all*. The disciples were to unite their lives with the life of his covenant body and blood made in sacrifice for all.



The ritual sharing of his body and blood came with the instruction to “do this in memory of me” so that the disciples would remember what Jesus embodied and participate in it. They too were to lay down their lives—embody their lives—in service. This included accepting “the cross” as Jesus himself had. The disciples would miss the point if they simply performed the ritual without reference to their own lives. They would fail to keep his core commands: love God, love others, lay down your lives in service. As the *Letter to the Romans* emphasizes:

*Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. ... Let love be sincere; ... love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor; do not be haughty, ... associate with the lowly.” (Romans 12:1, 9-16 passim)*

## Priesthood Evolves and “Laity” Emerge

Unfortunately, in the centuries following the *Letter to the Hebrews*, the tradition of Jewish Temple priesthood and that of Rome’s pagan temple priesthoods co-opted the Scriptural understanding of the Risen Jesus as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Over a three-century span of time, the elders of the missionary disciples that Jesus sent forth came to be seen as a special caste of priests and overseers.

Their special status was enhanced when the Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity. Then, when a later emperor declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Empire, the status of bishops and priests grew even more exalted. They became “clerics”—recognized dignitaries with civic and imperial authority.

The choices made to adopt imperial trappings may have served the early Church’s needs. It no doubt helped continue the spread of Christianity. But over time this clerical status, initiated for civic and imperial purposes, had a predictable human result. Many of the clerics started behaving like persons “lording it over” those who were not clerics in both church and society. Ultimately, the specialness of priests and bishops became not only part of civil law but also, in 12<sup>th</sup> century Church teaching, was ratified by the sacrament of Holy Orders. By the year 1200, the Christian Church consisted of two distinct groups: the clergy, and those who were not—the “laity.” Clerics secured control over the community, the assembly of God’s people.

The presence of a Roman imperial governance culture continues today. It plays out when the input and participation of lay people is marginalized or ignored. Women, especially, find their contributions deemed less important than those of the ordained.

*The female business manager of the faith community says her work, no matter how outstanding, is rendered invisible because Father gets all the credit. The worst example occurred during the bishop’s blessing of chapel artwork. The business manager, over two years, had been significantly involved in the capital campaign to raise funds for the chapel renovation and sanctuary artwork, then helped run a national search to solicit designs, organize the submissions and supervise the selection of two artists. Finally, she coordinated*

*the work of the artists and many other trades people and volunteers for the final production and hanging of the artwork. Yet at the dedication Mass, the bishop thanked every priest in attendance by name, including visiting priests who had nothing to do with anything that had been done. Even though the pastor sat the business manager next to the priests and had told the bishop of her role, the bishop gave her no acknowledgment.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*The new bishop who arrived in the mid-1980s had a good reputation as an ecumenical leader and a civil-rights advocate, a forward-thinking bishop. After his arrival, he arranged Masses and receptions in numerous parishes, so he could meet the people “one on one.” The one I attended was huge, hundreds of people waiting to meet him after the Mass. I noticed that as each person came forward in line, the bishop extended his right hand, palm down, so his ring was prominent and available for kissing. One lady, after kissing the ring, held onto his hand and said she prayed that he would be as open and understanding as she had heard, that she was upset about the position of women in the Church who were not respected, were seen as second-class citizens, and so on. After about five minutes, the bishop smoothly withdrew his hand and patted her on the shoulder. “You are wearing such a lovely dress this evening,” he said, as his assistant led her away and the next person stepped forward.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*While lay staff are asked to be open to evaluation and feedback, seminarians and priests are exempt from that expectation. The only evaluation deemed important is that of the current bishop or other clerical supervisor. Some priests openly state that a lay person is not qualified to evaluate a parish priest. This assumption extends to staff and congregation having no say in the selection of a new priest or pastor.*

Today, it is not uncommon for us to hear such stories. This experience of clericalism, whether we articulate each instance of its many tentacles or simply feel that “something is not right” in the Church, undergirds most of the problems we identify in the Church.

## **Strategies to Address Clericalism**

Unfortunately, clericalism also infects some of the solutions proposed to mitigate the Church’s problems today. Some clerics—and lay people too—believe that following rules, policing rituals, and clearing out those who do not share the same vision of Church as theirs will somehow restore its “holiness.”

*A pastor was assigned to a new parish that was vibrant and involved. It was his first pastorate. He insisted that all liturgies, services, and prayer*

*opportunities had to follow the Roman Missal exactly. There was no room for parish traditions or lay-led prayer experiences. He dissolved the liturgy committee. He forced the long-time, much-loved DRE to resign and hired a friend who had no experience in parish ministry, then directed the parish to pay the entire cost of the new DRE's education. He forced the finance director to retire and hired a bookkeeper he planned to train in his own ways. This was just the beginning of his many changes to reform the parish into his "ideal, correctly functioning" parish. The once-vibrant, active, packed church began to shrink under his "I am THE priest and it's my way or the highway" method of leadership.*

*He was eventually moved to another church but the damage to the parish was done. The results of his clericalism yielded division and an ineffectual parish. Many of the involved parishioners left, the ministries have dwindled considerably, parish council has become a puppet, and only a handful of loyal parishioners remain who are committed to revitalizing the Spirit-led vibrancy that once existed in the parish. The clericalism that was forced on the parish has resulted in a now suffering parish.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*A pastor was asked by a married couple if he would celebrate a Mass for their 40th anniversary. To their great surprise, he asked if they were still having sexual intercourse, noting that the wife was post-menopausal. They said, "Yes." The pastor said he would not do a Mass because sexual intercourse should be done only when there was the possibility of conceiving a child. The couple had their 40th anniversary elsewhere.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*At his first Sunday Mass a new pastor told the congregation that he expected to be there for 30 years and there would be some immediate changes. If it's not in the Missal it's not being done—no deviations or even slight changes.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*A man came forward to receive Holy Communion. The priest placed the host in the communicant's open hand. After noticing who it was and remembering that he was in a marriage "outside the church," the priest snatched back the host from the communicant's hand. Some parishioners left the parish because of the priest's behavior.*

We also hear that a smaller Church, with just a few staunch believers, will be better than a universal Church that welcomes all. One bishop summarized that idea as welcoming a shrinking Church: "We should never be afraid of a smaller, lighter church if her members are also more faithful, more zealous, more missionary and more committed to holiness ..." This concept is repeated frequently in conservative Catholic circles.

Or we hear, from those fed up with the problems they see in the Church, that tossing out every ritual and every cleric will “cleanse” the Church. But every baptized person needs the affirmation and support of their faith community to “grow in Christ”—including those whose specialized ordained ministry serves the health and well-being of the Church community. Also, those engaged in ordained ministry need a clergy culture that, when rightly serving the church, enables them more clearly to lay down their lives (embody Christ with their lives) in service.

Neither extreme—a shrinking, non-inclusive Church or a cleric-less, headless community—is what Jesus, the Risen Lord, Christianity’s one and only high priest, a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, intended.

A better alternative to these extremes is synodality, a preference of Pope Francis as he takes steps that could return today’s Church to the way of life and governance recommended by Vatican II. While calling for an end to clericalism and those factors that generate it, Pope Francis has adopted a new constitution for the synod of bishops and called for a churchwide adoption of *synodality* as the church’s operational mode from top to bottom—papacy to parish, bishop to parishioner, including all the hierarchs and clerics in between. Michael Sean Winters recently explained the concept (“Distinctly Catholic” column, *National Catholic Reporter*, March 13, 2019):

*Synodality is about more than structures. It is about listening to each other. Synodality requires that we do not seek to ‘win’ an argument about what the church should do, so much as we, together, seek the Spirit’s prompting and move forward together, always together. ... Synodality is about much more than simply a different mode of decision-making. It is about putting childish ways aside and becoming adult Christian disciples. It carries forward the vision and the ecclesiology of Vatican II and, more importantly, of the Gospels.*

Synodality as imagined by Pope Francis includes major structural changes in Church processes, starting with the Vatican, where he has integrated lay persons—men and women—in substantive roles. The 2018 Synod on Young People included lay persons with voting authority, another step forward. At the 2019 meeting of global episcopal conferences on child abuse and coverups, Pope Francis required the bishops to listen to lay people speaking about the realities of sex abuse within the Church.

He faces much opposition in this effort, and there is no doubt it will take time for the efforts to break down the wall of hierarchical dominance and affect the dominant clerical culture. Lasting changes also require the support of all the baptized—clergy and, most especially, the laity—if the Church is to sustain such efforts rather than revert to an ecclesial structure that excludes meaningful participation by all the baptized.

## Conclusion

Our aim has been to raise the consciousness of readers to the expressions of clericalism and its problems. Clericalism betrays the teachings of the scriptures and ignores the best practices of the first three centuries of Christian faith and life. Both clerics and lay persons can be afflicted with the disease. Both are often unaware that their mode and manner, their self-understanding and their sense of ministry, have wandered far from the example of Jesus.

*Jesus called them together and said: "You know how those who exercise authority among the Gentiles lord it over them; their great ones make their importance felt. It cannot be like that with you. Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest, and whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all. Such is the case with the Son of Man who has come, not to be served by others, but to serve, to give his own life as a ransom for the many. (Matthew 20: 25-28)*

Only in and through Jesus, the Risen Lord, do the baptized become priests as well as prophets and kings. The "priesting" of the baptized and the ordained exists to imitate and to conform to Christ and is not to be distorted by the disease of clericalism. We are all to "have among ourselves the same attitude that is [ours] in Christ Jesus, each looking out not for his own interests, but everyone for those of others." (Philippians 2:5, 4)

Pope Francis is quick to advise the members of the church to "dialogue, dialogue, dialogue." What use are the "many parts" of the one body of Christ if they do not engage with respect and openness and discern together where the Spirit of God wants to take the Church in this 21<sup>st</sup> century? Every member of our world Church community can do something to change the toxic culture of clericalism.

While Pope Francis confronts clericalism on the *macro* level, those of us at the grassroots have much work to do on the *micro* level. We hopefully will end up with a Church that is less Roman but far more Catholic and Spirit-driven.

**Let the dialogue begin, and may its outcomes lead us to lasting change.**

## Resources Consulted

Anderson, C. Colt and Christopher M. Bellitto. “The Reform Seminaries Need: Scarlet Fever.” *Commonweal*, April 8, 2019. <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/scarlet-fever>.

Association of U.S. Catholic Priests. “Preparing the Sixth Edition of the Program for Priestly Formation: Five Overriding Concerns.” January 25, 2018. Accessed on web site <https://www.uscatholicpriests.org/priestly-formation-1>.

Baldovin, John F., S.J., Liam Bergen, Boyd Taylor Coolman, James Flavin, Richard Gaillardetz, Thomas Groome, Megan Hopkins, Emily Jendzejec, Karen Kiefer, Richard Lennan, Elyse Raby, and Jacqueline Regan. “To Serve the People of God: Renewing the Conversation on Priesthood and Ministry.” *Origins* 48, no. 31 (December 27, 2018): 484–493.

Bonnot, Rev. Bernard R. (2018). *Jesus as Priest*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

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

Faggioli, Massimo. “Legacy and Potential.” Filmed October 6, 2018, at VOTF National Conference in Providence RI. Video, 1:08:43. <https://vimeo.com/296955758> accessed via <http://www.votf.org/content/speakers-votf-2018-national-conference>.

Francis. “Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God.” Vatican City, 20 August 2018. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180820\\_lettera-popolo-didido.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didido.html).

Gaillardetz, Prof. Richard R. “Challenging Clericalism.” *Pray Tell: Worship, Wit & Wisdom* blog, January 2, 2019.

Slatter, Rev. Mark. “Clerical identity crisis: Flock and pasture can’t tell shepherd who he is.” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 11, 2019.

Wilson, George, S.J. *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood*. Liturgical Press, 2008.

Voice of the Faithful. “Clerical Culture Among Roman Catholic Diocesan Clergy.” Needham MA: Voice of the Faithful, Inc., 2013. <http://www.votf.org/Clericalism.pdf>.

Winters, Michael Sean. “Sixth Year May Go Down as the Most Decisive in Francis’ Papacy.” *National Catholic Reporter*. March 13, 2019. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/distinctly-catholic/sixth-year-may-go-down-most-decisive-francis-papacy>.