

NCR

To immunize priests against clericalism, start with seminaries

Nov 16, 2018

Ken Briggs

How do you learn "clericalism"? As the Broadway show "South Pacific" said about human prejudice, "you've got to be carefully taught."

It's an attitude inculcated mostly in subtle ways, in little gestures and tainted language. It's absorbed in behavior and habits considered normal rather than aberrant, accepted as a natural way of life.

The upheaval sparked by priests' sex abuse and bishops' cover-up has pointed to clericalism as a major factor. The phenomenon has long plagued Catholicism as a contrived power grab based on arrogance and superiority. Its audacious presumption was that ordination was God's method of conveying higher status and authority on certain individuals, conferring rights to rule the church without the consent or advice of the laity. They alone were entitled to espouse what the church officially taught and exact sanctions for disobedience.

Clericalism as much as any other factor triggered attacks against the church for many centuries, the most explosive being the French Revolution. In the post-Reformation era, rising temporal powers with vain ambitions of their own found an equivalent in clerical efforts to preserve their accumulated privileges. The tensions have remained as the ordained class has struggled to hold on to its relative monopoly in the face of growing opposition from, among other things, the flowering of democratic spirit.

Pope Francis has voiced his disdain for clericalism front and center. He has bewailed tendencies by hierarchy to adopt the trappings of royalty and scorned exclusivity and smugness among clergy of every stripe.

It seems beyond doubt that this attitude of exceptionalism and impunity, however disguised it might be, has contributed greatly to abuse of many kinds, most grievously sexual exploitation in our time.

In the most twisted way, clericalism has been consciously or unconsciously used to justify the abuse as necessary to the fulfillment of the abuser's vocation. Years ago, I heard this first in the voices of women who had wanted to break off sexual relations with priests but were deterred by the priest's argument that she was enabling him to sustain his God-given ministry.

The presumption that clergy are set apart and above the laity is rarely a blatant act of egotism or power-seeking, but a process of osmosis through a thousand suggestions and hints. But stopping it seems to me the major objective if abuse is to end. The deeply embedded notion of entitlement must be reversed.

Perhaps steps are being taken to do that. If so, they are welcome, perhaps far-reaching. My focus is on how remedies might affect what seems the heart of the matter, seminary preparation. It is there I suspect the code language has been imparted and the rationalizations passed along, however covertly. Typically, those four years of shaping mind and spirit center on character and the priest's theological and pastoral relationship to the rest of humanity. Where specialness is injected at least subliminally in courses on moral doctrine and canon law. It is a profound formation conducted within a closed circle in relative isolation.

Perhaps it's time to let more fresh air into those rooms, to paraphrase Pope John XXIII's metaphor to introduce the Second Vatican Council. Open up seminary education to mainstream participation for a wide variety of Catholics who would offer insight, challenge and a different prism through which to appreciate the greater sources of wisdom and understanding of the Gospel. Emphasize collaborative learning. Abandon titles and special prerogatives.

This shift could begin to reorient would-be leaders away from the two-tiered hazards of clericalism and dreadful, isolated apartness. Priests immunized against clericalism likely become bishops free of that malady. It could be achieved under a variety of educational conditions.

The aim would be to crack open the casing that has too often served as an incubator for the attitude that has been devastating, a frame of mind that has torn asunder the very conviction of Oneness that gave rise to Christianity.

[Ken Briggs reported on religion for Newsday and The New York Times, has contributed articles to many publications, written four books and is an instructor at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania.]