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## Roman Collar

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## Roman Collar

The typical official garb of a Roman Catholic priest includes a shirt, usually black, with some white collar showing in front. When I was a young priest I had a concern that wearing the uniform would make me seem to others somehow less a human person and more an impersonal "function." Over time, I became much less concerned about myself, and far more interested in wearing the Roman collar when it might be helpful to people, and not wearing it when it might interfere with the service I hoped to provide. Becoming uneasy about what others might think about us, rather than having their welfare as our main concern, can occur at times in any of our lives, not just in those of young priests.

We all have a healthy interest in how others regard us. Human society depends on how we behave toward one another much more than on the specific titles we hold as parents, teachers, business-persons, professionals, and other positions that we can name. But we are also subject to habitual thought-patterns that can interfere with the quality of our relationships. We may never discover how we came to acquire some erroneous thoughts that lead us away from our true selves, but when we are able to recognize such operative ideas, we can change them.

One criterion for identifying long-held but less-than-helpful thoughts that might be affecting our interactions with others will become clear only upon careful reflection: does habitual, and therefore usually unconscious reasoning, lead to unity or division? God, as Trinity, is totally interactive and absolutely unified in a free exchange of love. We, whom God has created "in his image and likeness," are at our best when our relations with others tend towards unity. Of course we must take care to distinguish trustworthy persons from those who are not, and we know that not all forms or expressions of unity are appropriate for all persons and all circumstances. But the decisions we make about our specific words and actions in relating with others can always and everywhere bear the mark of grace: the intention of fostering honest peaceful union.

If we had to become "God-like" in all our relationships through our own efforts, which of us would likely become "gold medalists?" We could never, even with the best coaches, guides, gurus or advisors, come close to achieving the potential that God has in mind and heart for each one of us. But we are never alone in any of our least attempts at encouraging rather than hindering union of minds and hearts among those with whom we interact.

Before we were old enough to buy them, materials for creating hand-made cards and gifts were often provided for us by family members and teachers who wanted us, for our sakes, to become used to thinking of others, and trying to please them in suitable ways. God is even more pleased to provide us with personal presence, "grace," in all the initiatives we take that promote unity among his beloved children.

Some days, even wearing a Roman collar can be a sign of respect for others, rather than mark a priest as a functionary. Likewise, all the names and titles that we might bear, as well as any symbolism in what we wear, are means we can use to express more adequately who we are.