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**THE MINISTERIAL DISENGAGEMENT BY PRIESTS IN  
THE POST MODERN ERA AND ITS IMPACT**

by

David Estrada

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Faculty of the Department of  
Theological Studies  
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In partial fulfillment of the  
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## **THE PROBLEM: THE MINISTERIAL DISENGAGEMENT BY PRIESTS**

In this day and age, it comes as no surprise to read or hear that Christianity is in trouble. For Catholic Christians in particular, there is a multiplicity of studies and their conclusions that offer a variety of insights and observations regarding this reality. In the minds of many individuals who profess themselves to be Catholic at least by affiliation if not by common practice, the Catholic Church (Church) has failed to remain relevant and sensitive to the needs and beliefs of its followers.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, given the reality of that perception, the Church has reached a point where the vast majority of Church leaders, including many of those most senior, would acknowledge this as a statement of fact rather than of opinion or conjecture. The reality of declining Church attendance with all of its ramifications has not only served to emphasize the seriousness of the situation, but also to call for serious introspection and a re-commitment by its ministers, particularly the clergy, to the mission proclaimed and mandated by Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An April 2009 study (revised in February 2011) by The Pew Forum On Religion and Public Life revealed that former Catholics had left the Church because they were either unhappy with Church teachings, had married a non-Catholic, or were dissatisfied with the priests at their parish. As reported in The Pew Forum On Religion and Public Life, *Faith In Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2009), 9.

<sup>2</sup> According to a March 2021 Gallup report, the decline in church membership among Catholics from 1998-2000 to 2018-2020 is steeper than among other religious groups (down 18 points, from 76% to 58%). Per Gallup, this mirrors the historical declines in church attendance documented among Catholics, but not among Protestants. As reported in: Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," *Gallup News*, March 29, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

Today, priest ministers often appear to be minimally engaged with the faithful, meeting essential obligations as assigned and being unavailable or unreachable for other requests, sometimes even refusing to provide assistance when requested. Remaining sequestered from the community, they minister from a distance on their own terms, appearing when they choose to do so, preferring, apparently, that other capable and authorized ministers perform in their place as often as possible. Although not common to all priests, this situation has none the less continued to manifest itself in a variety of ways over the course of the last several years.

This behavior can cause a “sense of abandonment” among those parishioners affected, leading many of them to question their faith, leave the parish or even the Church, in search of a more compassionate or fulfilling experience. In the pages that follow, I will attempt to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the problem by exploring its cause(s) and effects within the context of this post-modern era and its current events while also examining its theological implications. I will conclude by providing two plausible solutions that would certainly help remedy this situation.

I begin by sharing a case study that reveals the problem of priest disengagement and its effect on an individual seeking help. Although I could not do an exhaustive study of that event, it does attest to the problem.

### **A Cry for Help**

Several months ago, as the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic was beginning to manifest itself in its most virulent form, I received a desperate phone call from a young woman with whom I’d been acquainted for a few years. Although no longer a

parishioner, we had maintained occasional contact over time as a matter of friendship and mutual concern. We had initially met after she had approached the parish to request that she be allowed to enroll in the parish's RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) process, a program in which I, as a deacon, have taken a very active role over the last several years. Immediately upon beginning the process, she became very enthused about the program and was ardent in her commitment to complete her initiation. After doing so, she chose to remain active in the parish, particularly by assisting with the RCIA program for the next few years. However, due to job commitments, she eventually found it necessary to resign from the program while still remaining visible from time to time when visiting the parish

As I responded to her phone call and our conversation began, she informed me that she was reaching out for prayer and support. Her father had been suffering from Covid-19 over the last few weeks, and had now been hospitalized for several days. Unfortunately, however, he was not responding well to treatment. Concluding that he did not appear to have the ability to effectively "fight" the disease, the doctors had advised the family that should he continue to remain in his current condition much longer, which now seemed likely to be the case, he would gradually become sicker and die. After some deliberation, the family, not wanting him to die in the hospital, had decided to bring him home where he would still be able to receive some level of care as he gradually succumbed to the disease.

Heartbroken, the young woman was now reaching out for support as well as assistance in obtaining the last-rites for her father. She had made several attempts to contact her parish rectory but was unable to reach anyone. After making several phone

calls, and leaving messages, no one had as yet answered her request for assistance. Therefore, unable to reach anyone by phone, she then had driven to the church to request assistance but no one responded to her knocks at the rectory/business office door. She had by now made several attempts to reach someone, and no one had as yet responded to her requests for assistance. She was therefore now seeking my assistance as a friend and deacon.

Upon hearing her cry for help, I informed her that I would do all that I could to help resolve the situation and address her father's need. I reassured her that someone, including myself, would come to her father's bedside if no priest could be located.

Recognizing the need for her father to receive the Last Rites of the Church, particularly the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, and perhaps the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Viaticum, I informed her that although I would not be able to confer the Anointing of the Sick or administer Reconciliation, I would be able to lead a prayer service intended to seek comfort and peace for her gravely ill father and also for the peace and well-being of the family. I shared that God was indeed aware of her father's need and desire, and that He would never abandon her father or family during this critical time. I emphasized that if her father were to die without a final anointing, God would most certainly welcome and embrace him with "open arms" as he enters into eternal life, thereby recognizing the wonderful father and husband that he has always been. I then indicated that I too would attempt to locate a priest prior to attending to her father and she agreed.

Sensing that her father's remaining time in this world was rapidly diminishing, I immediately attempted to reach priests I knew through other access opportunities

available to me as a deacon. Fortunately, a priest quickly responded to my attempts, and he contacted the young lady shortly thereafter. They subsequently made the necessary arrangements, and a few hours later her father received the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist, and Anointing of the Sick. He died the following day.

Some time later, it was gratifying to hear the young woman sincerely express her gratitude on the family's behalf for the ministerial comfort and attention given to her father despite the difficulties she had encountered previously. Thankfully due to her faith and internal disposition, she was able to overcome any feelings of abandonment or disaffiliation, as she later shared. The outcome could have easily been otherwise.

In assessing the situation, it was a disappointing and sad experience when reconstructing and evaluating all that transpired in this case. Although Covid-19 restrictions had severely impacted ministerial life, protocols had reportedly already been established within her parish to prevent any difficulties that would impede parishioners from receiving help, support, or any essential services. Yet, these protocols failed when no one made him/herself available to respond to the young woman's pleas for help.

The Church's Baptismal teachings tell us that through Baptism, each of us is configured to Christ and commissioned to carry out the work of evangelization and salvation among all of God's people. It is through the agency of the Church as Christ's representative that we are all called to serve one another by utilizing our God given gifts and talents in whatever way we can. With that perspective in mind, priests, by virtue of their office freely accepted, have committed themselves to use their gifts and talents in tending to the sacramental needs of the faithful. Yet, today, this often fails to happen. A contextual look at the problem will help us better understand this issue.

## **The Problem in Context**

As previously noted, it comes as no surprise when we read or hear today that Christianity is in trouble. In the case of the Church, this sentiment has often been associated with the priesthood in particular to the point where it is not uncommon to hear people comment that the priesthood is “in trouble” as well. This priesthood crisis too is not a startling or totally unexpected reality that has suddenly manifested itself from some unknown source or cause. It has been a developing and progressively worsening situation over the last several decades. The cause, which can be attributable to a number of contributing factors, some more complex than others such as the necessity for a celibate priesthood and the prevailing priest sexual abuse crisis, has seriously impeded the desire of many men to pursue or even consider a vocation/calling to the Catholic priesthood.

While the Church has undoubtedly benefitted from the dedication and commitment of those many priests who have sustained the Church over time through their tireless efforts while carrying out their various priestly ministries, the former prestige and honor afforded to priests by society as a whole over the last several decades has slowly eroded and been seriously damaged, particularly by the issues noted above.

In the United States, the signs and trends leading to this current state of affairs have long been evident since the era of the “revolutionary sixties” and the gradual onset of the evolving post-Modernism mentality. Accompanied at that time by the “aggiornamento” (renewal) agenda promoted and accomplished by the Second Vatican



Council (Vatican II), the Church of that era began to question, rethink, and reevaluate its place and position as it faced challenges from both within and without. Among the lay faithful, the opportunity for change made real by the convocation of Vatican II was generally positive and cautiously optimistic, but the unanticipated resistance that subsequently manifested itself by many seasoned Church leaders at the conclusion of Vatican II was disappointing and highly confusing. Why would many of the ordained refuse to implement welcomed change, a cry often voiced by many as the pronouncements of Vatican II and their meaning began to unfold? Long serving priests whose concept of the priesthood was embedded in the bestowal of sacramental power and authority as confectors of the Eucharist, struggled to understand what was happening, while others more in tune with the times ventured into new ways of doing ministry both with and in the midst of those whom they served. To the amazement of the lay faithful, they were suddenly being invited to participate in the Eucharistic Celebration (Mass) rather than merely observe it, as was their custom. Simultaneously, it's not unreasonable to surmise that many priests perceived these changes as a dilution of their sacramental power, authority, and leadership, which they considered to be essential ingredients of their own self-identity. That was now being threatened.

In commenting about this situation which began to emerge following the adjournment of Vatican II in 1965, theologian Thomas Rausch states:

What is clear is that in the years following the Second Vatican Council, the way the priesthood is both understood and experienced has changed in a number of ways.... Priesthood in the contemporary church is increasingly understood in terms of ministry and service, not power and authority. But the frequent reduction of priesthood to ministry has left a certain confusion as to what specifically constitutes the meaning of

priesthood.<sup>3</sup>

Noting remarks made by the late theologian Avery Dulles regarding Vatican II, Rausch further states:

... the official theology of the priesthood has been changed considerably by the Second Vatican Council. The Council moved beyond the emphasis on the sacred functions of prayer, worship, and sacrifice which had characterized Catholic theology for more than fifteen hundred years by teaching, sanctifying, and governing, thus adding the royal and prophetic functions to the traditional cultic understanding of priesthood.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, these observations by Rausch and Dulles regarding the pre-Vatican II Church also coincide with the pre-Vatican II teachings of Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, a theologian and widely popular and influential Roman Catholic Bishop who had a significant media presence from 1930 to 1968 and is considered by some to be one of the first televangelists. In his book *The Priest Is Not His Own*, written and published as Vatican II began, Sheen provides a dated perspective on the priesthood that initially seems poised to challenge what the Council would later promulgate when speaking about the priesthood. He notes that the celebration of Eucharist, the most sacred function of worship, reminds priests that they are victims. The Eucharist commits them to both life and death, priesthood and victimhood. He further adds:

Seminarians say: 'I am studying for the priesthood.' How often does a seminarian say or even think, "I am studying to be a priest-victim?" We insist on the dignity of our priesthood by quickly reprimanding those who show us disrespect. But do we ever insist on the indignity of our

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., *Priesthood Today: An Appraisal* (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Avery Dulles, "Models for Ministerial Priesthood" *Origins* 20 (1990) 286-287; quoted in *Ibid.* 2-3.

victimhood?<sup>5</sup>

While the concept of “priest as victim” is understandable (since Jesus, whom we are called to imitate, was clearly a victim), it can also promote feelings of oppression and suffering which can threaten or disturb one’s sense of happiness or well-being.

Sheen’s perspective on the priesthood, which was taught in the pre-Vatican II parochial school of my youth, would initially seem difficult to reconcile with Vatican II’s new priestly image of ministry and service as noted by Rausch above.

However, as Sheen subsequently proceeds to explain and illustrate his beliefs, he describes the ministry of priesthood more in terms of a priest-servant (an insight reflective of the thought emerging from the work of Vatican II) than that of a priest-victim who suffers unmitigated oppression and suffering. Nonetheless, a limited and misunderstood concept of Sheen’s priest-victim observation is what implanted itself in the minds of many of the faithful and clergy. For as I heard voiced by the parishioners of my childhood on numerous occasions, the priesthood was erroneously associated with a life of suffering, impoverishment, and deprivation since they had “given it all up” for Christ. This sentiment often served to invite misplaced admiration as well as a misguided obligation to support the needs of the priests. Tacitly accepted as a part of the clerical cultural norm of the time, privileged treatment was perceived as a benefit of priesthood.

This narrow perception of priesthood is still evident today, particularly among the faithful living in more traditional and restrictive cultures where the priest continues to

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<sup>5</sup> Fulton J. Sheen, *The Priest Is Not His Own* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), 22-25.

maintain a prominent position despite the various challenges that have more recently confronted the Church and the priesthood, particularly the child sexual abuse crisis as noted above. Privileged treatment is difficult to resist, and, if not addressed, can derail or interfere with a minister's openness and ongoing commitment to ministry when required.

In a recent article appearing in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles Weekly periodical *Angelus*, theologian and author Rev. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, provides still another interesting insight regarding, in this case, the influence of post-Modern thought within our culture and the manner in which it has impacted everyone, including our priests as well.

Rolheiser quotes Timothy Keller, theologian and pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, who states that "we are a 'therapeutic culture' (where only our own truth and feelings matter) and a culture that has a 'religion without grace' (its vision and virtue go no further than what echoes in our emotions and willpower.)"<sup>6</sup> In sharing the thoughts of Timothy Keller, Rolheiser has identified and appropriately emphasized a critical dynamic that has crept into society and now permeated it, namely a total commitment to one's own personal priorities at the expense of ignoring or losing sight of others' priority needs and necessities. This behavior certainly challenges if not contradicts the message advocated by Jesus in the gospels and presents a rapidly emerging problem which, given the human condition,

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy Keller, "The Fading of Forgiveness: Tracing the Disappearance of the Thing We Need Most," *Comment*, 39, No. 2 (Spring 2021), <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/browse/print-issue/the-dynamics-of-moral-agency/>; quoted in Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, "The Fading of Forgiveness," *Angelus* 6, No. 18 (September 10, 2021): 8.

exempts no one from the propensity to seek one's own good before that of others. This has more and more become an issue within the institutional structure of the Church, particularly among the clerical priesthood and its association with the concept of servant priesthood.

Interestingly, the late theologian Carl F. Starkloff, S.J., attributes this development, as manifested in this country, to be an outgrowth of the concept stemming from the American Protestant tradition evident at the nation's founding and endorsed by the founding fathers who asserted religious freedom of conscience and the right of dissent by the individual. Starkloff then points to and affirms the late sociologist Robert N. Bellah's<sup>7</sup> assertion that in the quest of individual freedom, there has been "the loss of any sense for the common good."<sup>8</sup> In essence, as we often see demonstrated today, the welfare of an individual is too often deemed more important than the collective welfare of all concerned.

Servant priesthood maintains that a priest, like Jesus the servant, puts aside his own interests and priorities, and sometimes even his own way of doing things, to be at the service of another. To be engaged in effective ministry is not simply a matter of convenience or time; it is being in a loving and caring relationship with all of God's people.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert N. Bellah was an American sociologist and Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. He is known internationally for his work dealing with the sociology of religion. He died in 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Carl F. Starkloff, "The Church as Covenant, Culture, and Communion," *Theological Studies*, 61, No. 3 (September 2000): 413. Accessed November 30, 2021: <http://electra.lmu.edu:2048/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/church-as-covenant-culture-communion/docview/212629521/se-2?accountid=7418>.

Still another challenge to the identity of the priesthood emerged with the restoration of the permanent diaconate in the Roman Rite of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1968. As ministers who participate in the sacrament of Holy Orders, the role of the deacon in the modern world has been difficult to define universally. Prior to its restoration, the role of deacon was temporary and highly ceremonial, with little ministerial responsibility or accountability attached to it. It was considered merely a “stepping stone” to the priesthood. However, upon its re-emergence as a legitimate fully functioning office within the hierarchical structure of the Church, it was often perceived by some priests as an attempt to weaken their priestly authority rather than as an ordained and separate ministry uniquely its own. Not only did this complicate the working relationship priests and deacons, it created an initial strain on the deacon’s ability to function as a fully recognized minister, a problem that continues to exist in some places today. Not knowing how to respond to the presence of a deacon within the community, some priests chose to relegate less desirable tasks to them under the guise of helping relieve their workload or perhaps as a means of affirming their own perceived self-identity.

The persistence of this problem can be gleaned from the actions of some dioceses within the United States which afford transitional deacons (those individuals whose ultimate goal is the priesthood) preferential treatment and special ceremonial places of honor apart from the established diaconate community within the diocese. This has only served to perpetuate the separation between both orders as the veiled and subtle message of superiority manifests itself.

Today, priests face significant challenges due to a variety of factors, such as the

declining number of priests due to aging and burn-out, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the continually decreasing number of Church members. These and other realities have only served to increase their burden. Given the post-Modern mentality prevalent today at every level of society, no one, including the ordained, is immune from its influences, especially as driven by society's penchant toward secularism and individualism. Coupled with the influences of the pre-Vatican II Church which still exist in some measure today, priests, in their desire for success and self-preservation, can easily lose sight of their commitment to the mission they have embraced since baptism. Upon reflection, this can certainly apply to all of the faithful as well.

Having presented some of the more prevalent causes and influences attributable to the ministerial problem of priestly disengagement, let us now turn to the Christian theological perspective rooted in Scripture and Tradition for additional insight and understanding. Engaging in this theological process has served to guide the Church and its ministers in all their activities. It will certainly help form and define a plausible solution that may well help resolve this situation.

### **Theological Component**

The office of the priesthood as perceived and carried out within the universal Catholic Church (Church) is undoubtedly the most familiar to its members and nonmembers alike. Although other notable and essential ministerial offices exist and function daily, the priesthood has managed to maintain a prominent, if not always popular or respected, position within the Church since its inception. Yet, despite its significance and importance, the priesthood as witnessed within the United States and

other longstanding Christian nations seems to be distancing itself more and more from its fundamental responsibility to unhesitatingly serve the faithful both spiritually and sacramentally whenever needed.

In the years immediately preceding and following the conclusion of Vatican II, the Catholic priesthood has been immersed in a transformative experience that has rocked its very foundations. As a member of the faithful and active observer of the pre-Vatican II priesthood of the “1950's and '60's” to the twenty-first century, it's important to note, from this perspective, that the priesthood has changed significantly from that time by gradually veering away more and more from its practical responsibilities to love and care for God's people as mandated by our common baptismal call in general and the priest's vocational call in particular. A review of the Church's historical development through the variety of cultural trends and thought that have emerged over time will hopefully serve to clarify this belief.

To understand the consistent prominence of the priesthood and its importance within the Church, it is helpful to have a familiarity with the historical context of the priesthood in conjunction with the life, teachings, and witness of Christ as he walked this earth. It necessitates an understanding of the mission and purpose of Jesus Christ which eventually led to the subsequent establishment of Christianity with its early practices following Christ's departure from this world and ascension into heaven. By pursuing this objective, one can gain greater insight into the development of the priesthood with its essential role service to the people of God, and where that ministerial commitment may be less apparent when it comes to fulfilling some of its primary responsibilities.



In delving into the historical/developmental context of Christianity and how it relates to the Catholic priesthood evident today, it is important to recall and consider the ministerial practices and teachings of Jesus as well as the multitude of revelatory insights and instructions he provided throughout his years of public ministry as recorded in the New Testament scriptures. Further, the subsequent traditions that began to emerge amongst his followers during and following his earthly departure, such as the teachings and early practices of the early Jewish Christians, provide relevant details on the development of the Christian lifestyle with its unique common ministerial practices and beliefs.

When we read and explore the New Testament scriptures for insight into the life of Jesus, particularly the four canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John which reveal him from four similar but yet different perspectives, a “new” way of living begins to unfold and present itself by what Jesus says and teaches as well as by the manner in which he ministers to those around him. We observe Jesus say and do things that fulfill and transforms the Mosaic/Old Law to which his Jewish followers had been committed through faithful observance. In fulfilling the Old Law, he establishes a new order, a new law, a new way of doing things. Or, in the words of theologian Elizabeth Johnson, “Jesus took this good news which he preached in spoken parables and enacted it in living parables.”<sup>9</sup>

In reading and studying the many scriptural statements and actions attributed to

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), 5.

him, two of the most profound are Jesus' mandates to:

... love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. (Jn. 13:34)

and,

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age. (Matt. 28:19)

When we consider the core values articulated by Christianity throughout the ages, these mandates are undoubtedly primary foundational principles essential to the authentic practice of a Christian lifestyle and ministry. The gospels are filled with numerous accounts of Jesus ministering to the people which clearly exemplify and model these mandates, particularly when attending to the needs of those who resided in the margins of society, namely the poor, sick, women, and outcasts. Jesus consistently and habitually tended to the welfare of all whom he encountered, and urged his followers to do the same, often to the chagrin of the Jewish leaders and scholars. The early Christians were certainly influenced by the words and example of Jesus as exemplified by the early accounts of their activities as the Church began to grow and prosper under the leadership of his successors, namely the apostles (including Paul of Tarsus) and other faithful followers over time. In his book *People of God*, Professor Anthony Gilles tells us (when speaking of the early second and third century Church):

... the *lifestyle* of Christians played an important role in attracting converts. The biblical account in Acts [of the Apostles] reflects the actual historical situation in many places: prayer, study, disciple, sharing of possessions

and communal service.... A contemporary historian describes this Christian lifestyle by writing, "See how these Christians love one another!"<sup>10</sup>

As time progressed and the institutional Church began to establish and manifest itself, this mandate "to love one another" would be absorbed into the ongoing tradition of the Church and extend to all of God's people, especially the Offices of Deacons, Priest, and Bishop as they evolved. Theologian and professor Kathleen Cahalan affirms this call to love and also to service quite clearly in her book *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*.

She states:

The love command that guides disciples is stated clearly in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.... In John's gospel he places the love commandment in the context of the new community that Jesus has formed.<sup>11</sup>

And later she adds:

...disciples are stewards of a vocation, the gifts received for service in the community. Like Paul [of Tarsus], disciples must become stewards of these gifts: 'Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.' (1Pet. 4:10)<sup>12</sup>

This commitment to service in the early Church was further manifested by the apostles' laying on of hands upon the heads of those men chosen for ministerial service to the community, often believed to be the first deacons, who were being called upon to serve the widows and those in need of food. (Acts 6:1-6) This initial version of service to those in need as carried out within the early Church obviously begins to associate

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<sup>10</sup> Anthony E. Gilles, *People of God: The History of Catholic Christianity* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2000), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22

formal ministry with a duty to love and serve those in need. As theologian Kenan Osborne points out in his book *Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church*, the ministry of Jesus was a ministry of love of God the Father and of our neighbor as well as a ministry of service, and served as the initial basis for ministry within the Church.<sup>13</sup> It is certainly consistent with emerging Christian values to see this manifestation of early Church ministry as prefiguring what would eventually become formal or ordained ministry within the Church.

Concurrent with the spirit of love and service that enveloped the early Church, was the spirit of evangelization which began to manifest itself and take effect in response to Jesus' call to go and make disciples of all nations. (Mt. 28:19) This call to action and service, rooted in each of the faithful's baptismal identity, remains the same to this very day. As disciples of Jesus, the early Christians worked for the successful spread of early Christianity throughout the world. This has remained a primary responsibility of all the baptized, especially priests and other ordained Church leaders acting within the scope of their respective ministries.

Not a great deal of detail is known about how the institution of the priesthood evolved over time. Historical theologian Jonathan Hill tells us that for a period of time there was confusion over the terminology used in identifying those individuals whom we today label as priests, and it was apparent that the Church was divided into a number of different communities throughout a region under the sole leadership of a bishop who

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<sup>13</sup> Kenan B. Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 28-29.

acted independently from those in other communities.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, judging from the rapid spread of Christianity, it seems apparent that those who ministered were aware of the need to love and care for those to whom they ministered.

Over time, apostolic succession through the establishment of an ordained ministry began to emerge and be recognized. An office of priesthood gradually began to take shape, and it, like the office of the bishop, received spiritual, governmental, and teaching authority.<sup>15</sup> As these phases of ministerial development were occurring, church leaders and ministers continued to attend to the needs of the people.

A significant change occurred, however, upon the legitimization of Christianity following the Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in the year 312. According to Anthony Gilles, the seeds of clericalism began to be planted. Prior to Constantine, priests and bishops did not work for the Church full time, but instead had to work in other occupations to support their families. But then, Gilles adds:

With Constantine, however, the clergy, being among the most educated and skilled people in the empire, were drawn into the service of the State. They were given titles like "most illustrious," the forerunner of today's "reverent" or "excellency." ... This process by which the clergy came to be seen as separate and implicitly of more importance than the laity, had a tremendous impact on how the Church thought of itself. ... After Constantine, the Church came to be thought of as a pyramid, with popes, bishops, priests, and eventually all sorts of other ranks, placed at the top, and the laity placed at the bottom.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christianity: The Early Church to the Reformation* (S.I.: Lion Scholar, 2020), 40. Accessed October 27, 2021: <http://electra.lmu.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2700403&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

<sup>15</sup> Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J. *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith* (Naples: Sapientia Press, 2007), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony E. Gilles, *People of God: The History of Catholic Christianity* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2000), 7.

As one can glean from Gilles' insights, this development prefigured the hierarchical configuration that came to define the institutional Church with the clergy dominating the higher positions. Moreover, although the call to serve the State did by no means directly or immediately affect all of the priests serving their communities, its long-term influence on the laity's perception of the priesthood as individuals with an elevated status and entitled to privilege is still accepted by many of the faithful at the present time and too often not refuted by the clergy.

This is an important fact to keep in mind today when considering the priesthood's self perception over time and its sense of privilege as it relates to its openness and willingness to attend to the various, and sometimes quite sudden and unanticipated, needs of the faithful as they present themselves. It is certainly fitting to note whether the office of the priesthood is faithfully and consistently adhering to the Christian values of love and service to its brothers and sisters in the manner Jesus taught us. Or has clericalism, with its sense of power and prestige, prevailed and continued to overshadow and interfere with the call to serve?

According to Avery Dulles, the problematic perpetuation of clericalism lies in the fact that Christianity has always had an institutional side that is in fact a deformation of the true nature of the Church. It possesses a mentality that views the clergy (i.e., bishops and priests) as having "all power and initiative ...while the faithful people play a passive role and seem to have a lower position in the Church."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: The Crown Publishing Group: Image Classics, 2002), Kindle Edition, 27, 31.

In his book *Priesthood Today: An Appraisal*, theologian Thomas P. Rausch adds another interesting dimension to the emergence of clericalism and its impact on the priesthood. He notes that between the fourth and the tenth centuries, the pastoral [or priestly] office underwent a process of sacralization or sacred characterization which, in addition to clericalism, “had the effect of erecting barriers between the priest and the people.”<sup>18</sup> Rausch too, as did Anthony Gilles above, underscores the fact that priests were granted privileges, honors, and marks of distinction previously reserved to high imperial officials. Additionally, their use of Latin (as it became less and less the common language of the people) in the liturgy made them distinct and, to some extent, even sacred.<sup>19</sup>

Another important factor to consider is that as the Church moved more and more into the Middle Ages, a method of scholarship and learning emerged which accentuated and combined both faith and reason when writing about the truths of the Christian faith. Referred to as the Scholastic Movement or simply Scholasticism, it produced a number of exceptional theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and Anselm of Canterbury. According to Gilles, Scholasticism was very helpful in developing the Church’s teaching on the seven sacraments. In doing so, particular attention was given to the Eucharist and the belief that it was indeed the true presence of Christ.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, by the

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas P. Rausch, S.J. *Priesthood Today: An Appraisal* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 18.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony E. Gilles, *People of God: The History of Catholic Christianity* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2000), 74.

association of the Eucharist with the priesthood, Scholasticism's emphasis on the Eucharist served to reinforce the concept of the sacramental power and sacredness of the priesthood as those individuals who conformed the Eucharist and brought it to the faithful, a point noted by Rausch above. Osborne as well affirms this emphasis on Eucharist and power adding that the sacrament of order was the very essence of scholastic theology.<sup>21</sup>

Within the Middle Ages, as the sacramental power of the priest became more prominent, Rausch notes that in rural communities where contact with the bishop was limited at best or nonexistent, the priest became the primary minister of the community, and the celebration of the Eucharist his principal responsibility. Developing Church law defined the priesthood in terms of sacramental power which eventually led to the concept of the priest possessing a sacred power,<sup>22</sup> which is a belief still maintained today by many of the faithful. As those ministers who bring the Eucharist to the community on a daily basis, they were and still are viewed by many of the faithful as sacred and holy individuals. However, as Avery Dulles tells us:

Like every good thing, however, the sacral concept of the priesthood can be exaggerated. It can lead to a superstitious exaltation of the priest as a person possessed of divine or magical powers.... The danger is that the priest will be viewed as a substitute for the community – as one who stays close to God so that the laity, relying on his intercession, may be worldly.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Kenan B. Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 212.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: The Crown Publishing Group: Image Classics, 2002), Kindle Edition, 159.



There have been a number of instances during which this author has heard the faithful attest to the power contained within the hands of the priest, thereby making him the only legitimate dispenser of the sacraments. This can most often be observed during the celebration of the Mass as the Eucharist is being distributed to the faithful. It is not uncommon to observe the faithful positioning themselves to receive the Eucharist from the priest rather than from the deacon or extraordinary minister. Although some priests have publicly refuted this practice, others have not found it necessary to do so, thereby ignoring an erroneous understanding of priestly power and ministry at the expense of an appropriate understanding of the Eucharist and its efficacy. While the importance of the priest carrying out that particular ministerial activity cannot be denied, it is equally as important that his and the other assisting ministers' role be clearly understood as a manifestation of Christ ministering to his people in love and service.

For a priest, the perception of oneself as a sacred and holy individual can certainly lead to an inflated sense of grandiosity and self-importance that can interfere with his sense of obligation to those individuals whom he wrongfully deems below his status and even perhaps not meriting his attention. They might too easily be overlooked or simply considered beyond the scope of those whom he has been called to serve. Yet the Church, as the presence of Christ on earth, has never ceased requiring that its ministers love and serve one another in the manner Jesus taught regardless of whomever they may be.

Through the ages, despite the elevated status of the priesthood which continued to become more and more evident, the ministerial work designated to the priesthood, especially the celebration of the Eucharist, continued to flourish with much of the non-

sacramental work being performed by deacons (until their suppression on the fifth century) and the laity. Kenan Osborne tells us that in the early centuries of the Church, deacons played an important role in the pastoral ministry by in many ways being more visible to the Church than the presbyters.<sup>24</sup> Although the reasons for this occurrence are not precisely known, Thomas Rausch suggests that it may have been attributable more to the perceived inseparable link between the community and its leader, which can be anyone so designated such as a deacon or layman, rather than the link between the priest and Eucharist which would reserve all power and authority of the Church to the priest as presider over the Eucharist.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, it's interesting to keep in mind that from a historical perspective, the ministry of the Church often lacked the presence of a priest.

With the advent of the Protestant Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century, the priesthood came under serious attack. Kenan Osborne tells us:

Both Luther and Calvin raise[d] substantive issues vis-à-vis the sacrament of order, as regards both its practice and its theological description. ....the view of both Luther and Calvin on priestly ministry were considered a serious threat to the integrity of the Church.<sup>26</sup>

This was primarily due to the ongoing abuses of the priestly office which, by that point in time, had become quite evident to the faithful. According to Osborne, there were far too many priests at that time. He states:

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<sup>24</sup> Kenan B. Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 129.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., *Priesthood Today: An Appraisal* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 26-27.

<sup>26</sup> Kenan B. Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 247.

... it seems that a large group of them were morally deficient, intellectually unqualified and professionally incompetent. Men became priests simply for economic reasons....<sup>27</sup>

In response to this and other claims made by the Protestant reformers, the Church convened the Council of Trent (Council), which among other reforms, addressed many of the abuses within the priesthood. The Council legislated disciplinary procedures to curb abuses, established seminaries to adequately and appropriately form priests, and did all that it could to restore the dignity and spirituality of the priesthood. According to Osborne, the theological exposition on the priesthood espoused by the Council of Trent influenced the entire teaching on the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church up to the convening of Vatican II.<sup>28</sup> Contained within the Council's reaffirmation of the priesthood was a reemphasis on the power and authority of the priest as well as on the sacred functions of prayer worship, and sacrifice.<sup>29</sup>

Trent's response created a very interesting dynamic within the Church which was to have repercussions to the present day. Not only did it reemphasises and reinvigorate the sacral viewpoint of the priesthood, it in effect endorsed clericalism, if not by intent, then by a need to strongly pose a defense of the Church, especially the institution of the priesthood. While the dire situation created by the impetus of the Reformation needed a strong response, the Church did precisely that be defending the priesthood and itself as the source of all power and authority. The priesthood, among the other ordained

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 276-277.

<sup>29</sup> Avery Dulles, "Models for Ministerial Priesthood," *Origins* 20 (1990) 286-287; quoted in Thomas P. Rausch, S.J. *Priesthood Today: An Appraisal* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 3.

leaders of the Church, was now placed in the position of defender of the faith and bearer of the truth. Its knowledge and authority were not to be questioned by the faithful, a sentiment still held by many today.

Overlooked, however, and nearly totally forgotten by the Council of Trent, was the fundamental importance of Jesus' own priestly ministry. As noted by Kenan Osborne, the Eucharist is mentioned by the Council as the central focus of the priesthood, but:

Jesus' own ministry as the source of all Christian ministry is never alluded to. The Characteristics of that ministry of Jesus, as portrayed in the gospel, are not used as the criterion for Christian ministry.... Nonetheless, no adequate theology of priesthood can be developed without a thorough christological base.<sup>30</sup>

Osborne's observations present a very important insight into the subsequent ministerial concept of priesthood as lived out by priest ministers in the years following the Council of Trent up to Vatican II. With the reemphasis on the power and authority of the priesthood, the faithful once again perceived the priesthood as holy and sacred despite the perceived abuses, a belief that became deeply ingrained in the minds of all. The priest once again gained an unchallenged position of prominence as the faithful rallied around the Church and his leadership in defense of the faith. It was a commonly accepted belief that a priest could do no wrong, especially in the minds of the faithful who were directed to rely solely on the priest and the Church for guidance and salvation. As I observed at that time, this was generally the belief of the laity in the years preceding Vatican II. Any perceived challenges to the faith were to be placed in

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<sup>30</sup> Kenan B. Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 277-278.

the hands of the priest who would direct and guide those under his pastoral care. For some, it appeared as though the priest provided a ministry of rules and regulations rather than a ministry of empathy, understanding, love and concern that addressed the practical needs of the faithful as they lived their lives.

With the arrival of the Enlightenment movement in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the secular age was born. It created an immediate tension between the theology of the Church and the movement itself as it proceeded to proclaim the death of the Christian God while proclaiming the superiority of the human mind noting that science and reason, not religion, lead humanity to the truth.<sup>31</sup> As one can surmise, this raised considerable alarm within the Church as it now struggled, on the heels of the Protestant Reformation, to deal with still another attack upon the Church. Over time, as Modernism, with its proclaimed independence and freedom from the opinion and rule of authority, made its way into society in search of the truth, the Church once again turned to its leaders to oppose it. As leaders within their respective communities, the priests proceeded to do so in accord with the institutional demands of the Church, despite their inability to question that authority if motivated to do so for any particular reason or concern. Perhaps some experienced a sense of powerlessness in that regard which only served to feed any resentment they may have felt.

Further, while Modernists sought complete freedom from the intense oversight and scrutiny of the Church in order to permit scholars the freedom to exercise their critical reason in accordance with contemporary scientific methods, the Church

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<sup>31</sup> Anthony E. Gilles, *People of God: The History of Catholic Christianity* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2000), 147.

responded by imposing permanently binding dogmatic decisions<sup>32</sup> that only served to further delay the Church's ability to delve into and further explore the mystery of Christ through his life and ministry as revealed in the scriptures.

In response to the Church's condemnation of Modernism and, concurrently, the motivation to pursue speculative thought, a movement began in France, approximately in the 1930s, focused on historical research. According to Rausch, it was a reaction to the dominance of neo-scholasticism<sup>33</sup> within the Church that motivated its establishment.

It represented an effort to overcome the rupture between theology and life and enter into dialogue with contemporary thought.... There method was a *ressourcement*, a French term for a "return to the sources" of Catholic faith and life in the Scriptures, the liturgy, and the fathers of the Church."<sup>34</sup>

Initially rejected by the Church as not being in harmony with neo-scholasticism and therefore a threat to Roman orthodoxy, it eventually rose to prominence during Vatican II. It was instrumental in the development of several of its major pronouncements, including the understanding of priesthood in terms of ministry and service rather than power and authority.<sup>35</sup> However, the servant model of priesthood has been difficult to

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<sup>32</sup> Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith* (Naples: Sapientia Press, 2007), 17.

<sup>33</sup> Neo-scholasticism was the philosophical viewpoint officially and prominently recognized by the Church in the 19th and 20th centuries. It applied the doctrines of scholasticism to contemporary political, economic, and social problems. See for example, Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, August 2, 1879, Vatican website, [https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_04081879\\_aeterni-patris.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html).

<sup>34</sup> Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., *Systematic Theology: A Roman Catholic Approach* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 16-17.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17. See also John Hill, "Priesthood as Style," *The Australasian Catholic Record* 92 (2015), no. 1: 32-40, accessed December 11, 2021, <http://electra.lmu.edu>:

implement due to what Donald Cozzens, in his book *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, attributes to the long term priest identity issues that surfaced upon conclusion of Vatican II and the implementation of the liturgical changes involving the priest. He states:

The evolution from the cultic model of priesthood to the emerging models more or less accurately grouped under the servant-leader model was bound to produce considerable anxiety on the part of the priest and a certain unease on the part of both priests and laity.<sup>36</sup>

This situation continues to persist as priests seek a stable and universal understanding of their priesthood that is common to all.

As time progressed, the various demands of the Church upon the priests as ministers, teachers, and guardians of the faith seem to have created a sense of exaggerated victimization by virtue of their ordination into Christ who suffered for all, as expressed by Fulton Sheen in his book *The Priest Is Not His Own*.<sup>37</sup>

Reflective of the thought associated with the Seventeenth-Century French School of Spirituality, Sheen's observations, published shortly after the beginning of Vatican II, appear in some respects to coincide with the spirituality of Pierre de Bérulle, the founder of the French Congregation of the Oratory which was committed to preaching, teaching, and the revival of the French clergy. As noted by theologian Philip Sheldrake in his book *The Spiritual Way: Classic Traditions and Contemporary*

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2048/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/priesthood-as-style/docview/1676141129/se-2?accountid=7418.

<sup>36</sup> Donald B. Cozzens, *The Changing Face Of The Priesthood* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), Kindle Edition.

<sup>37</sup> Fulton J Sheen, *The Priest Is Not His Own* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 22-25.

*Practice*, Bérulle advocated both a Christ-centered and incarnational spirituality as well as “a somewhat dark view of human nature that gave rise to a spirituality of abasement and servitude to God’s will.”<sup>38</sup> Bérulle’s spirituality of abasement and servitude can certainly be reconciled with Sheen’s concept of priest as victim.<sup>39</sup>

Further, while a priest’s self-victimization may well conflict with his sense of privilege and exalted status, it may, on the other hand, support his sense of entitlement to minister as he chooses in light of his victimization.

Today, in this post-Modernism era, wherein the search for objective truth has been essentially abandoned and its existence even denied, skepticism, relativism, and individualism have slowly begun to dominate the society’s interpretation of the world and life. For priest ministers, this has created a daunting challenge in his dealings with the faithful, especially if he too has been influenced or affected by current thought and the general movement of society away from the objective truth. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson makes this point in her book *Quest For The Living God: Mapping Frontiers In The Theology of God* where, in writing about modern society, she maintains that:

Believing Christians [have] found themselves a cognitive minority scattered in a wider culture that bore the stamp of other influences, both secular and religious. Consequently, a variety of viewpoints have pressed themselves on the average person, along with a wide array of values according to which one could live one’s life.... At the very least, the

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<sup>38</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *The Spiritual Way: Classic Traditions and Contemporary Practice* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press Academic, 2019), 81.

<sup>39</sup> Pierre de Bérulle, a cardinal, and statesman, was very influential in the founding of the Order of St. Sulpice (or Sulpicians), a voluntary company of priests who ran seminaries and sought to improve the spiritual formation of diocesan clergy. It is noteworthy that Sulpicians came to the United States in 1791, and have subsequently assisted bishops here by providing ongoing seminary education and formation for seminarians and priests.



modern atmosphere of skepticism [has] made all truth claims sound relative.... As a result, Christian faith was thrown into crisis.<sup>40</sup>

While this phenomenon has obviously affected the faithful's commitment to faith, it has also seriously interfered with priests' commitment to ministry in light of the increasing number of Church members turning away from the Church in search of their own truth. As a result, many priests have felt a sense of discouragement and lack of motivation to minister, especially in a spirit of love and service, feeling that their efforts are of little or no avail. They too struggle to find the meaning of life and of their vocation. Further, in more recent times, the priest sexual abuse crisis and the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic have only served to self-limit their activity while exacerbating their sense of frustration.

Two recent events, one personally witnessed by this writer and the other told by a colleague, will serve to illustrate what can occur when the traditional clerical mentality collides with the individualism and relativism prevalent in post-modern thought in the course of considering and/or engaging in ministerial activity. This phenomenon can at times seriously affect and/or impair a minister's willingness or sense of obligation to effectively minister as Jesus instructed.

The first event concerns a revelatory comment made by a Catholic cemetery director who was engaged in meeting the demands of a very active cemetery agenda which regulates the solemn and successful internment of many individuals on a daily basis. In the course of our conversation, he indicated that for a significant period of

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<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 27.

time, it has been extremely difficult to obtain the services of a priest or deacon to preside at the funeral services or graveside liturgies that occur numerous times daily at that location. Unfortunately, this has been occurring with increasing frequency, whereas this had never happened before. In his attempts to locate a priest or deacon, his request has been simply declined for no apparent reason.

The second event, told by a colleague who witnessed the incident, concerns a Middle-Eastern man who, while lying on a gurney in a hospital emergency room, requested the Anointing of the Sick from a priest tending to other patients. After requesting the priest's assistance, the priest simply ignored his request and passed him by for no apparent reason. The patient later suggested that it was perhaps his Middle-Eastern physical appearance, including his beard and accent, that may have deterred the priest from ministering to him. Nonetheless, a rabbi, who was also attending to other patients, heard the patient's request and responded to his need. Reminiscent of the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), a spirit of love and care ultimately prevailed.

Since the conclusion of Vatican II, the contemporary priesthood, as noted earlier by Rausch and Cozzens, has been struggling as it tries to identify itself more in terms of ministry and service, not power and authority.<sup>41</sup> Although this has been evident in some of the ways by which priests have chosen to engage the community and be of service, the shadow of clericalism nonetheless continues to linger.

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., *Priesthood Today: An Appraisal* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 2.

This adherence to clericalism and its privilege has been difficult to always recognize and then overcome. Although some progress has been made, its presence is clearly visible when one observes the manner in which permanent deacons are treated in various places and events. Often, deacons are categorized as transitional or permanent. Although the diaconate is a single clerical order, those individuals destined for priesthood are identified as transitional, and thereby given special seating in major celebrations in front of the gathered diaconal community. They are granted preferential placement at the front of processions or else placed in their own separate space. In major celebrations, they are given preferential access to functional ministerial roles within the celebration while any remaining unfilled roles are then delegated to the rest of the community.

If the Church is earnestly intent upon removing the vestiges of clericalism from the priesthood, it would certainly benefit from looking at its own local customs and practices. In his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)*, Pope Francis voices concern about the still too prevalent presence of clericalism, and tells us that as evangelizers, pastors must be willing to “take on the ‘smell of the sheep’” who they care for.”<sup>42</sup> Jesus makes this quite clear in his command to Peter that he feed his sheep. (John 21:15-19) This obviously means that one enter the pasture, and not hesitate “to dirty his/her hands.” This commitment to ministry was made quite vivid to me when a friend shared that on his walk on the Camino de Santiago/The Way of St. James in Spain, he was forced by weather to settle for the night near a flock of sheep.

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<sup>42</sup> Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium): Apostolic Exhortation* (Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2014), Digital Edition, 8, 25.

The smell was very “ripe” and the experience quite unforgettable. In like manner, all who minister and are summoned to attend the sheep, should expect no less. Although the demands of ministry may often be environmentally unpleasant and even inconvenient, one must not lose sight of his/her baptismal call as defined by the gifts and talents he/she has committed to the service of others. As dispensers of sacraments by virtue of their ordination, priests “ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” (John 13:14-15)

Jesus consistently demonstrated this behavior as he proceeded to tend to the marginalized, particularly the poor and lepers, by touching them, blessing them, and responding to their needs. If priests are to be effective ministers as imitators of Christ, it is essential that they not lose sight of Jesus’ pastoral ministry and the events which define it as contained throughout the vast majority of the Gospel writings. That is the identity of the priesthood.

The ministerial presence of the priesthood remains absolutely essential for the ongoing welfare of the Church. It must be ever ready to fulfill its role in keeping with the spirit of Christ, the ultimate high priest and minister, who perpetually remains the leader, guide, and source of effective ministry for all of God’s people. The following proposes one possible way to overcome the lingering impediments of clericalism and privilege.

### **An Initial Plan**

As the Church confronts the various challenges it continues to encounter during this era of religious unrest and uncertainty, the role of the priesthood, as noted above,

has been particularly affected as priests struggle to faithfully and consistently respond to the needs of the faithful who remain immersed in this secularized and self-indulgent society. Many of the faithful, who view the Church through the lens of their own individualized perspective, which can often be errant or limited in its understanding of the faith and the role of the priest, nonetheless expect and even demand that a priest quickly respond to their needs as often as requested and on their terms. This unrealistic expectation, when then combined with other unanticipated crises and events impacting society in general and the priesthood in particular, such as Covid-19 pandemic and the child sexual abuse crisis noted above, can impose a significant strain upon the morale, enthusiasm, and willingness of the priest to function as he ought. For example, the shame generally and publically assigned to the priesthood as a result of the sexual abuse crisis has certainly taken its toll over the last several years as has, more recently, the ministerial limitations imposed upon priests due the Covid-19 pandemic. As in any other profession, priests also need to feel a sense of appreciation and validation despite what some members of the Church may choose to believe.

Still other important causes contributing to this situation and requiring focused attention when evaluating this current state of affairs are the remnants of clericalism still visibly evident today among the priest clergy coupled with the priest's personal post-modern views, opinions, beliefs, and practices. These realities can certainly influence behaviors and at times lead to serious frustration, depression, and even resistance or resentment on the part of the priest as well as the faithful when expectations are not met. The priest may feel unappreciated, underutilized, and simply disregarded while the faithful feel ignored and neglected. As a result, the priest may often feel less than

willing to minister to the faithful as necessary. Yet, as officers of the Church<sup>43</sup>, priests are required to address the needs of the faithful. For as theologian Richard Gula tells us:

The commitment to provide service as an officer of the church includes the commitment to the other's best interest. This entails fulfilling our fiduciary duty of subordinating self-interest so as to give a greater preference to the needs of the other over our own, even when this comes as a personal inconvenience and demands some personal sacrifice.<sup>44</sup>

Gula then continues by stating that when an officer of the church fails to make himself available, whether it means not answering the door, the mail, or the phone, a priest (among other ordained ministers) can fall short morally by allowing ministerial obligations to get reduced to only what is necessary to meet minimum requirements. This is in fact contrary to the ministerial practice of Jesus who always gave preference to the needs of others over his own.<sup>45</sup>

Given these ministerial realities which continue to manifest themselves among some priests, the paramount question that arises is what can be done to help mitigate these practices and reinvigorate, motivate, and support every priest in his effort to carry out his ministry to its fullest extent? The following presents two pastoral practices/methods that can directly address this issue and help provide a solution to this

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<sup>43</sup> In his book, *Just Ministry: Professional Ethics for Pastoral Ministers*, Richard Gula, ascribes the title of "officer of the Church" to ordained ministers who, as pastoral ministers with professional duties and obligations, act as official representatives of the Church. See Richard M. Gula, *Just Ministry: Professional Ethics for Pastoral Ministers* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 35.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

situation. One practice is currently being utilized to some extent while the other practice is being proposed.

### **Archdiocesan, Regional, and Parish Pastoral Councils**

In September 2003, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles celebrated the conclusion of a three-year extensive consultation (or synodal) process convened by the Archbishop of Los Angeles in which all of the faithful of the Archdiocese (i.e., ordained, religious, and laity) were invited to participate. Entitled *The Synod of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles 2003*, it concluded its work with the establishment and proclamation of six Pastoral Initiatives, nine Pastoral Priorities, and fourteen Pastoral Strategies approved and signed into local Church law by the then incumbent Archbishop of Los Angeles, Cardinal Roger Mahony. As local Church law, each of the 288 parishes within the Archdiocese was subsequently now obliged to implement each of these initiatives, priorities and strategies as they could.<sup>46</sup>

Drawing upon Vatican II's strong reemphasis on the power and importance of Baptism through which all men and women are reconfigured in the image and likeness of Christ,<sup>47</sup> a sentiment that had been largely forgotten and overlooked in the wake of the Protestant Reformation and the Church's forceful response in defense of the priesthood

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<sup>46</sup> Cardinal Roger Mahony and the People of God of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, *Gathered and Sent: Documents of the Synod of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles 2003* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2003), 17.

<sup>47</sup> Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)," in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, gen. ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), No. 7, Kindle Edition.

and its sacramental powers, the Archdiocesan Synod was now being convened clearly recognizing that:

...all Christians have, through faith and baptism, a “sense of the faith [Sensus Fidelium],” which is generally more acute in proportion to their personal faith and holiness. The Spirit filled community is a bearer of revelation, and its experience of the faith is an authentic theological font.<sup>48</sup>

As it proceeded with its preparations, the Synod Organizing Committee (Committee) well understood that the voice of the faithful, along with that of the ordained, was an invaluable resource in determining the present and future needs of the local Church. Avery Dulles makes this point even clearer by noting that the “sense of the faithful,” which includes both the ordained and the laity, is an infallible sign of the truth when they both agree.<sup>49</sup> However, the voice of the faithful had historically been ignored for centuries, and it was the intent of the Committee to change that dynamic due to the cultural trends manifesting themselves in the local Church. The faithful had been long expressing their desire to participate in the governance of their Church where transparency and accountability on the part of all involved would be forthcoming. As noted above, remnants of clericalism were still quite evident in the local Church, and this reality coupled with the growing impact of post-modern thought with its secular counter-Gospel values had given rise to the faithful’s demands to be heard.

Sensitive to the appeal of the faithful, particularly in light of the emerging post-Vatican II Church with its major pronouncements affecting the role of the laity in the

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<sup>48</sup> Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith* (Naples: Sapientia Press, 2007), 45.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.



Church, the Committee began its process. As members of the Committee, we were made increasingly aware, as noted earlier by Thomas Rausch, that the priesthood was beginning to be understood more in terms of ministry and service rather than power and authority, and this was giving rise to the notion of shared responsibility among all the faithful in achieving ongoing ministerial success within the local Church. Effective governance would require collaboration and consensus among all of the participants. Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon make this point in their book *Urgings of the Heart*, where they note:

In order for a community to function as an affective instrument of God's compassion, collaboration among community members is vitally important. The absence of collaboration weakens the ministerial outreach of the Christian community and cripples its ability to respond to those in need.<sup>50</sup>

Among the many tasks and priorities being simultaneously imposed was the immediate establishment of Regional (one for each of the five regions comprising the Archdiocese) and Archdiocesan Councils, two pastoral bodies that had not previously existed. Also to be established in each parish, if not already existing, was a Parish

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<sup>50</sup> Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon, *Urgings of the Heart: A Spirituality of Integration* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 138-139.

Pastoral Council in accord with Canons 228 and 536<sup>51</sup> of the Catholic Code of Canon Law. Further, as defined by the Synod, such a body is to be:

...a standing commission of qualified lay persons, clerics, and religious, representative of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction within which they function, gathered to assist and counsel the pastors of the Church as experts or advisors. Pastoral councils may be established on the levels of the parish, deanery, vicariate (region), and diocese.<sup>52</sup>

The establishment of these bodies was to exemplify a consultative process that would meet the request of the faithful through collaboration, consensus and joint decision making.

In 2004, the five Regional Pastoral Councils were established and commissioned by the Archbishop, followed by the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council a year later. As consultative bodies comprised of the ordained, religious, and lay faithful, these entities have since served to assist the Regional Bishops and Archbishop by advising and assisting them in the exploration, investigation, planning and administration of various projects and priorities. As noted above, among the goals of the archdiocesan and

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<sup>51</sup> Can. 228: §1. Lay persons who are found suitable are qualified to be admitted by the sacred pastors to those ecclesiastical offices and functions which they are able to exercise according to the precepts of the law. §2. Lay persons who excel in necessary knowledge, prudence, and integrity are qualified to assist the pastors of the Church as experts and advisors, even in councils according to the norm of law.

Can. 536: §1. If the diocesan bishop judges it opportune after he has heard the presbyteral council, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish, over which the pastor presides and in which the Christian faithful, together with those who share in pastoral care by virtue of their office in the parish, assist in fostering pastoral activity. §2. A pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by the norms established by the diocesan bishop. As found in *Code of Canon Law: New English Translation* (Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1998), 67, 177.

<sup>52</sup> Cardinal Roger Mahony and the People of God of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, *Gathered and Sent: Documents of the Synod of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles 2003* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2003), 93-94.

regional councils was the establishment of a collaborative environment in which the building of consensus and joint decision making could be achieved as in the case of parish pastoral councils. Although the final decision resides with each Bishop, consensus continues to be the desired norm.

As an individual involved in the formation and establishment of these councils, it soon became apparent that there was a measure of resistance among some of the ordained at the prospect of the laity being involved in issues affecting the spiritual welfare of their respective parishes and/or the archdiocese. As the call for their formation grew louder and the work of implementation grew archdiocesan wide, a measure of discomfort and disagreement could be detected coming from the ordained as the laity began to express their knowledge, expertise, and familiarity with the issues at hand. This became even more evident with the establishment of Parish Pastoral Councils, some of which had been in existence prior to the Synod mandate.

At the parish level, where there was little or no accountability being observed such as at the Regional and Archdiocesan levels where the Archbishop and Regional Bishops presided over their respective councils in an open and transparent manner. At the parish level, the priest pastor has often been the sole convener and decision maker, limiting the lay members to tacit approval of his decisions within a private and discreet forum. Further, in many other cases, priests didn't hesitate to express their reluctance and resistance to form a Parish Pastoral Council by simply refusing to do so, an occurrence still being encountered today.

By purposeful design, the majority membership of the Archdiocesan, Regional, and Parish Councils consists of lay faithful while the ordained membership is much

smaller in comparison. The voice of the faithful or the *sensus fidelium* is provided with ample opportunity to express its concern, opinions and recommendations in the course of the Councils' discussions and deliberations. This has served to neutralize or soften any manifestation or semblance of clericalism from interfering with the Council's ability to conduct its affairs with candor. Further, although the final decision resides with the Archbishop, Bishop, or pastor, a strong sense of community is formed within the Council itself as well as the greater respective jurisdiction it represents through the transparency and mutual accountability being practiced within each council. In a fully functioning Council which chooses to appropriately recognize and utilize the voice of the laity, any vestiges of post-modern secular thinking can be much more easily recognized and dealt with as the council addresses various issues and seeks remedies. When a council is functioning well, thanks to the inspiration and guidance of the Spirit, the benefits are quite apparent as the clergy and laity form a real bond based on their common ministerial goal, mutual friendship, and ongoing support for each other efforts. Attitudes can change, new insights can take root and flower, and the overall climate of the community served by the council can benefit from a sense of mutual care. Priests become more committed to serving the community by joining together with the laity to better understand their needs, thereby leading to collaborative efforts, consensus, and mutual decision making. Based on my familiarization with those councils and its members who have established successful councils through their ongoing dedication and commitment to the process, priestly ministry functions well in these parishes as does the community's ongoing relationship with its priests. Relationships are regularly established between the clergy and laity, and needs are addressed in a timely manner.

However, despite the successes noted above, there remain many challenges. Although mandated, parish pastoral councils have yet to be formed in many parishes. Further, although a pastor's lack of accountability may be a large contributing factor, the problem caused by a change of parish leadership at various intervals can quickly quash any successful dynamic within a council which has already been established. The new leadership may have a non-collaborative mindset which can quickly derail any gains between the priest and laity within a parish.

Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon note the difficulty that can be encountered when trying to create a collaborative environment within a Church structure, such as a parish or even an archdiocese. They comment that although the concept of collaboration may have significant appeal, its implementation has often proven to be quite challenging.

They note:

Tensions and strains inevitably surface when we encounter major differences in theologies and spiritualities, philosophies and worldviews, personalities and temperaments, personal struggles and needs. These differences generate conflict that must be consciously dealt with if collaboration is to succeed. Shared ministry requires that we trade our individualistic and competitive attitudes for ones which appreciate and encourage the unique gifts each member brings to the work of the group.<sup>53</sup>

Nonetheless, the Councils have proven to be a remarkable and effective resource and aide toward meeting the needs of the local Church through the combined efforts of all the faithful, particularly the clergy in general and priests in particular where vestiges of clericalism and post-modern individualism still haunt the local Church environment.

Thanks to the visionary quest of the Archbishop of Los Angeles and the efforts of all who

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<sup>53</sup> Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon, *Urgings of the Heart: A Spirituality of Integration* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 138-139.

were involved, *The Synod of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles 2003*, new voices, new insights, and collective progress is being made despite the challenges that remain. Continued pursuit of this goal leading to widespread collaboration and consensus is essential for the ongoing welfare of the Church.

### **Lay Membership in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)**

Having now considered some of the benefits derived from the Archdiocesan Synod of 2003, particularly the emergence of the various councils, it is important to also consider one other venue within the structure of the Catholic Church of the United States that could benefit from a similar collaborative experience to that Archdiocesan, Regional, and Parish Councils. Establishing such a structure, such as expanding the voting membership of the USCCB to include lay members, could well lead to a wider and insightful understanding of the Church's ongoing mission and how Conference leadership determines the manner in which it is to be lived out within its larger national jurisdiction beyond any single diocese or archdiocese. A collaborative role in which the lay faithful could voice their beliefs, fears, and desires, and thereby influence the final outcome of relevant issues and positions as they are finally determined by all the conference members would grant significantly more credibility to the bishops' ability to truly understand the opinions and ongoing needs of the faithful. In this post-modern era dominated by an individualistic and secular mentality, credibility in the work and decisions of the conference has often been sorely lacking.

Collaboration certainly appears to be the sentiment of Pope Francis who, having called upon the Holy Spirit to grant wisdom and guidance to all of God's people,

proceeded to inaugurate a worldwide Synod in which all Church members would be invited to participate in a worldwide consultative endeavor to discern the current times with all of its struggles, divisiveness, and hopes for a better future. In his message, the Pope called for all to listen to the voice of the Spirit as it manifested itself through the faithful's sharing of their needs and concerns within the Church today.

In the Pope's ongoing efforts to decentralize Church authority to the extent that bishops' conferences, for example, would be allowed to retain jurisdiction in certain matters considered to be more within their competency, it is apparent that the collaborative spirit of Vatican II has reemerged in a new and more meaningful way. With the Church's renewed emphasis on the baptism of the faithful who, having now been configured to Christ, are called to develop and exercise their various gifts and talents in the service of others, a call to ministry within the conference can and should also include having a place and voice in the work and decisions of the conference.

Expanding the voting membership of the Conference to include lay members would also serve to help address many of the remaining issues that can be directly attributed to the surviving clerical mentality. Seeing, reading, and hearing about the laity interacting with the ordained on equal footing, particularly with the bishops, would certainly help eradicate any expectation of privilege on the part of the ordained, especially in the treatment of the local parish priest. This would also serve to place the clerical status in its proper place among all of the faithful who together are made in the image and likeness of God, one no better than the other. May the people of God ever keep that truth in their minds and hearts.

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