

We can only move forward when we name the evil of clericalism

Aug 23, 2018 by [Thomas Rosica](#) NCR Online Thursday, August 23, 2018

As finger pointing and efforts to blame individuals or groups for the massive crisis in the church today continues, and many church leaders, experts, those claiming to be theologians and justifiably angry and indignant Catholics diagnose the current tragic state of affairs in the church, theories abound. In some misinformed minds, the current abuse crisis is caused by obligatory celibacy for priests in the Latin Rite, homosexual members of the clergy and episcopacy, alcoholics, bishops unwilling to submit their resignations, etc., yet there is one glaring word that many avoid speaking: the evil of clericalism that is at the root of the crisis.

We have a God-given right to be angry over the current situation but no right to despair. We must be in total solidarity with victims, repent, fast, pray and work together for a true cleansing of the temple — of the church. We must pray that our anger and frustration not lead us to hopelessness but to a deeper witness of faith especially in such difficult times. It is not enough for us to simply feel terrible about the situation and say that we are sorry. We must dismantle forever the structures and systems that allowed such a moral catastrophe to engulf the church. And these structures include the process of appointments of bishops and the naming of Cardinals. Until the church at her highest levels names this great evil of clericalism and rids the church of it, we will not move forward.

In his [letter to "the People of God"](#) Aug. 20, Pope Francis dares to name that evil:

It is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God's People. Indeed, whenever we have tried to replace, or silence, or ignore, or reduce the People of God to small elites, we end up creating communities, projects, theological approaches, spiritualities and structures without roots, without memory, without faces, without bodies and ultimately, without lives. This is clearly seen in a peculiar way of understanding the Church's authority, one common in many communities where sexual abuse and the abuse of power and conscience have occurred. Such is the case with clericalism, an approach that "not only nullifies the character of Christians, but also tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people."

Clericalism, whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today. To say "no" to abuse is to say an emphatic "no" to all forms of clericalism.

Having worked with the Vatican on many large and small projects over the past years and having had the opportunity to preach retreats to many groups of bishops in the United States, Canada and Ireland, I often heard criticisms from bishops against Francis for his frequent reprimands against clericalism. Not a few bishops have said to me: *"Tell the Pope to tone it down when he rails against clericalism and when he is too harsh with priests and seminarians."* I went away from many of those encounters convinced that rather than "toning down the volume," the pope should increase his stern warnings against clericalism. Francis is wise and knows exactly of what he speaks. We are facing what is at the core of the current crisis: clericalism, the club mentality and a corrupt system of cronyism and ugly *omertà* that has seriously infected the church.

In his conclave-changing address to the cardinals on March 7, 2013, four days before his election to the See of Peter, then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio identified what he believes is the church's fundamental illness: ecclesiastical narcissism.

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"When the Church does not come out of itself to evangelize," he said, "it becomes self-referential and then gets sick." That inward-looking Church, bent over on itself, obsessed with her own image, which doesn't look sufficiently to Christ and doesn't reflect him, his light and his love for those walking in darkness, quickly succumbs to what he called the worst evil of all, a "spiritual worldliness ... living in itself, of itself, for itself."

That, for Francis, is the fundamental corruption of the church that needs to be reformed. The future pope then laid out what would become his own mission or platform at the end of his five-minute intervention that Friday morning in the Synod Hall of the Vatican: "The next pope," he declared, must be a man who, "from the contemplation of Jesus Christ and from worshipping Jesus Christ, will help the church get out of herself and go to those on the outskirts of existence." That spiritual exodus, Francis believes, is the fundamental conversion that the church needs — and it's one on which he wants to lead not only priests and curial officials, but laypeople as well.

In a 2011 interview with an Argentinian Catholic news agency, then-Cardinal Bergoglio said this contagious spiritual sickness comes from a clericalism that passes from clergy to laypeople.

We priests tend to clericalize the laity. We do not realize it, but it is as if we infect them with our own disease. And the laity — not all, but many — ask us on their knees to clericalize them, because it is more comfortable to be an altar server than the protagonist of a lay path. We cannot fall into that trap — it is a sinful complicity.

Clericalization means focusing fundamentally on the things of the clergy and, more specifically, the sanctuary, rather than on bringing the Gospel to the world. Clericalism infects the clergy when they become too self-referential rather than missionary. But it afflicts laypeople worse, when they begin to believe that the fundamental service God is asking of them is to become major donors, recipients of Papal honors, "ministers of hospitality," lectors or extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist at church rather than to live and spread the faith in their families, workplaces, schools, neighborhoods and in places where we priests cannot enter.

The reform that is critically needed, then-Cardinal Bergoglio continued in that interview, is "neither to clericalize nor ask to be clericalized. The layperson is a layperson and has to live as a layperson with the power of baptism, which enables him or her to be a leaven of the love of God in society itself, to create and sow hope, to proclaim the faith, not from a pulpit but from his everyday life. And, like all of us, the layperson is called to carry his or her daily cross — the cross of the layperson, not of the priest." Clericalism afflicts many lay Catholics today. While the reforms of the Second Vatican Council have done much to eradicate clericalism, some of it never died, and there is a new wave of it that is alive in the church today.

Ordained ministers and lay persons suffer from clericalism. If we are to learn anything from the current crisis facing the church, reform, healing, renewal must come about from every single member of the church, most especially lay women and men who have been commissioned by their baptism to be salt and light, leaven and hope, agents of renewal and witnesses to hope. As members of the church, we must decide once and for all that cronyism has no place among us. But this cronyism is not restricted to the ordained or people of the church, as it occurs in secular guilds and associations, such as academia, the legal and medical establishments, and the agents of public-safety — the police and military. Any internal and cloistered bodies that answer only to themselves without transparency, honesty and accountability are destined for irrelevance or ruination.

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In his daily homilies at the Santa Marta Guest House where he resides, Francis speaks often about clericalism. It is a path taken by those who, unlike the good shepherd, concern themselves with money and power and not with people who are suffering and neglected. ... Unlike a good shepherd, who is always close to and moved by those who suffer, the clerics who criticized Jesus were perhaps more concerned with "when the religious service would end so they could go and count how much money was made in the offerings," the pope said.

Good shepherds like Jesus who "are not ashamed of touching the wounded flesh" of the suffering are a "grace for the people of God" and a reminder that "not only them, but us as well, will be judged" on the treatment given to the hungry, the sick and the imprisoned, he said.

The church's first pope from the global south [wrote](#) that it's not possible to talk about the laity while ignoring "one of the strongest problems that Latin America has to face — and I ask you to pay special attention to this — clericalism." Francis called Catholic priests in Latin America to remember they serve the laity, and not the other way around, describing clericalism as one of the strongest challenges that the church faces. He also accused the Catholic hierarchy on his home continent of generating a "lay elite," formed by those who work in the "things of the Church," instead of helping ordinary baptized people live their faith in everyday situations.

"I remember the famous expression: 'It is the hour of the laity,' but it seems that the clock has stopped," Francis said. "Watching the People of God is to remember that we all entered the Church as laity."

"It's never the shepherd who tells the laity what they have to do or say [in public life], they know it as well or even better than us," Francis wrote in that message in March 2016, to Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, who heads the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops and is also President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America.

Clericalism, the pope wrote, "nullifies the personality of Christians" and it also "leads to the functionalization of the laity, treating them as 'errand boys [or girls]'."

"Our role, our joy, the joy of the shepherd is precisely in helping and stimulating, as many did before us, so that it's the mothers, the grandmothers, the fathers who become the true protagonists of history," Francis wrote.

Helping the laity to become the real protagonists, he said, is not "a concession of our good will," because it's their "right."

"The laity are a part of the holy, faithful people of God, and for this reason, the protagonists of the Church and the world, whom we're called to serve and not by whom we're to be served," Francis wrote.

Francis has warned the hierarchy against the temptation of believing that a "committed lay person" is she or he who does the work of the church or things for the parish or the diocese. The church, Francis wrote, must recognize the lay person "for their own reality, for their own identity, for being immersed in the heart of social, public and political life."

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Poorly trained priests can become 'little monsters'

During a closed-door meeting of 120 superiors of religious orders who gathered at the Vatican for their regular assembly in late 2013, Francis spoke out powerfully against clericalism to leaders of consecrated life. The Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica* provided a report of the three-hour, informal question and answer session.

The pope cautioned that seminary formation must be "a work of art, not a police action" where seminarians "grit their teeth, try not to make mistakes, follow the rules smiling a lot, just waiting for the day when they are told 'Good, you have finished formation.' "

For Francis, "this is hypocrisy that is the result of clericalism, which is one of the worst evils." He was even more emphatic when he noted that priestly formation "must form their hearts. Otherwise we are creating little monsters. And then these little monsters mold the people of God. This really gives me goose bumps."

The reform of the church already evident in the words and witness of Francis may be starting, but it won't be stopping at the revamping of the Vatican Curia and the renewal of the clergy. It also will involve a thorough reform of the laity, since some of the cancers the cardinals elected him to confront in Rome metastasized throughout the people of God. It will happen only with a massive change of mentality of the entire people of God.

A final, personal note

This past weekend, I was asked by my religious community — the Basilian Fathers — to assist them with a Mission Appeal in a parish in north Philadelphia. The date and venue were chosen months ago — before the terrible events of this summer. I arrived at a small parish on Saturday to preside and preach at four Masses for a small, blended community of elderly Italians, Americans and newly arrived Hispanic women and men from a host of countries in Latin America.

When I realized that I was going to the "ground zero" of Pennsylvania, I had no small amount of trepidation. What could I possibly say to several congregations of people I had never met at such a critical moment of their and our ecclesial lives? The pastor at the parish suggested I not address the abuse situation, thinking that Philadelphia had already dealt with the situation several years before! I disagreed and decided to weave the current situation into my homilies about Jesus who satisfies the hungers and thirsts of the human family. I am very glad that I did. After each Mass, many people came up to me and thanked me very much for not avoiding the current mess in the church but for asking the people to become part of the solution by their dependence on Jesus who is in the boat with us. I heard some very powerful stories from the people after each Mass.

After the Saturday evening Mass, a man and his spouse who attended the Mass invited me to join them for dinner. During the course of our meal, the man told me that he was an abuse survivor. He said: "I was not abused by a priest or bishop but by a health care practitioner." He shared with me his shocking story. The abuser is now in jail, having abused several other victims as well." The man thanked me for simply listening to him and told me that I helped him from afar — via internet — how to remain close to Christ in the church.

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The exodus to reform

Francis concluded his letter to the people of God with these stirring and penetrating words:

"It is essential that we, as a Church, be able to acknowledge and condemn, with sorrow and shame, the atrocities perpetrated by consecrated persons, clerics, and all those entrusted with the mission of watching over and caring for those most vulnerable. Let us beg forgiveness for our own sins and the sins of others. An awareness of sin helps us to acknowledge the errors, the crimes and the wounds caused in the past and allows us, in the present, to be more open and committed along a journey of renewed conversion.

Likewise, penance and prayer will help us to open our eyes and our hearts to other people's sufferings and to overcome the thirst for power and possessions that are so often the root of those evils. May fasting and prayer open our ears to the hushed pain felt by children, young people and the disabled. A fasting that can make us hunger and thirst for justice and impel us to walk in the truth, supporting all the judicial measures that may be necessary. A fasting that shakes us up and leads us to be committed in truth and charity with all men and women of good will, and with society in general, to combatting all forms of the abuse of power, sexual abuse and the abuse of conscience.

Francis has begun the exodus leading to this reform, taking us by example to the peripheries of human existence and tracing for us the journey ahead. Will we follow?

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