

THE PUBLIC SQUARE

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CLERICAL SCANDAL AND THE SCANDAL OF CLERICALISM

— Russell Shaw admits that some people think he has become a nag on the subject. He has written several books and many more articles on the evils of clericalism. Charming is his 1993 book, which plays off the answer of an English bishop who was asked about the role of the laity—*To Hunt, to Shoot, to Entertain: Clericalism and the Catholic Laity*. Now Shaw has a new book coming out from Ignatius Press—*Nothing to Hide: Secrecy, Communication, and Communion in the Catholic Church*.

Shaw knows whereof he speaks. He was for several years an official spokesman of the United States bishops' conference and has ample experience with the secretive ways of church leaders who, as the old saw has it, think that the chief and maybe only role of the laity is to pray, pay, and obey. A strength of the new book is that Shaw knows that, both canonically and in pastoral common sense, there is a legitimate and necessary place for confidentiality and secrecy. Shaw is also well aware that the Church is not constituted as a democracy, as he also knows how frequently the observation that the Church is not a democracy is misused to avoid addressing the problem of clericalism.

He is notably faithful to the teaching authority of the Church, and, in fact, it is the authority of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent popes, especially John Paul the Great and Benedict XVI, that he repeatedly invokes in support of his indictment of clericalism. Although his book is not chiefly about the

sex-abuse scandal that broke in January 2002, he leaves no doubt that the scandal and the bishops' response to the scandal are part and parcel of the evils of clericalism.

"By clericalism," Shaw writes, "I mean an elitist mindset, together with structures and patterns of behavior corresponding to it, which takes it for granted that clerics—in the Catholic context, mainly bishops and priests—are intrinsically superior to the other members of the Church and deserve automatic deference. Passivity and dependence are the laity's lot. By no means is clericalism confined to clerics themselves. The clericalist mindset is widely shared by Catholic lay people."

The National Review Board, composed of laity, reported in March 2004: "Some witnesses likened the clerical culture to a feudal or a military culture and said that priests and bishops who 'rocked the boat' were less likely to advance. Likewise, we were told, some bishops did not want to be associated with any problem for fear of criticism because problems arose on their watch. As a result, problems were left to fester." The board also said: "In many instances, church leaders valued confidentiality and a priest's right to privacy above the prevention of further harm to victims and the vindication of their rights." "Indeed, church officials seemed to want to keep information from themselves." Contributing to the problem, said the board, was the "haughty attitude" of some bishops and the practice of placing priests on "a pedestal far above the laity."

Hard words, no doubt, but hard words that nobody should want to deny. Clericalism is the shadow side of Catholicism's high doctrine of ministry. In celebrating the sacraments, the priest acts *in persona Christi*. It is a breathtaking dignity and responsibility. In reflections on the priesthood, the words of the nineteenth-century writer Father Jean Baptiste Lacordaire are frequently

invoked: "To live in the midst of the world without wishing its pleasures; to be a member of each family, yet belonging to none; to share all sufferings; to penetrate all secrets; to heal all wounds; to go from men to God and offer Him their prayers; to return from God to men to bring pardon and hope; to have a heart of fire for charity and a heart of bronze for chastity; to teach and to pardon, console and bless always—what a glorious life!"

The glory is not diminished but in an odd way intensified by the unworthiness of the priest. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels," said St. Paul, and there is a tendency in some veins of Catholic thought to exult in the earthiness of the vessel. Recall the whisky priest of Graham Green's *The Power and the Glory*. Hounded and hunted by the anti-Catholic Mexican regime, he is in every way a broken man, until he remembers that, despite all, he still possesses the priestly power to put God on the tongues of men. Is it clericalism to exult in the indelible mark of holy orders heroically manifested under conditions of moral disorder and duress?

"This Is Not for You"

In *Milestones*, a memoir of his life before John Paul called him to Rome, Joseph Ratzinger writes about his ordination to the priesthood. His Bavarian village was given over to days of feasting and festivities in gratitude that a young man from among them had been made a priest. It was a heady experience for that young man, says Ratzinger, and he remembers whispering to himself again and again, "This is not for you, Joseph, this is not for you." This festivity, this honor, is not a tribute to him but a popular outburst of devotion to Christ and the ministry of his Church.

Whatever else may be meant by clericalism, it has its roots in the demonic twist by which the priest or bishop whispers to himself, "This is for me." Russell Shaw and others speak of clericalism in terms of *elitism*, and there is a great deal to that. But it is not quite right. The Church teaches that there is a "universal vocation to holiness." The only sadness, wrote the French novelist Leon Bloy, is not to be a saint, and he is right about that. Not everybody responds to the call to be a saint, or responds with the same radical openness to letting Christ actualize his holiness in their lives. Those who do, by the grace of God, give such unqualified permission are the saints, the elite to whose company we aspire. So there is elitism, and then there is elitism.

In the Catholic way of being Christian, great goods such as holiness are not left as free-floating ideals but seek instantiation—embodiment—in the forms of the Church's life. Thus, for instance, in the 1996 apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul revived the

language of higher and lower vocations. I say "revived" because, after the Second Vatican Council, such language was widely viewed with disfavor. The emphasis was on the *universal* call to holiness, and the *universal* priesthood of the Church in which all the faithful participate. While in no way denying those great truths, *Vita Consecrata* accents that there must be *particular* forms that communally embody the *universal* to which all aspire. Thus the consecrated life is *objectively* a higher expression of a universal vocation. Which in no way denies that, *subjectively*, a devout taxi driver may be closer to sainthood than a self-righteously comfortable monk at his prayers.

"This is not for you, Joseph, this is not for you." Would it have been better if those Bavarian villagers had had a less exalted view of the priesthood? Is the antidote to clericalism a reduced respect for the priestly office? One cannot help but suspect that this would result in the abandonment of something that is at the heart of The Catholic Thing. The remedy, rather, is a radical redirection and elevation of priestly dignity in terms not of power but of ministry. "The Son of Man came," Jesus said, "not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). That is to be the defining truth also for those who serve *in persona Christi*. There is no institutional fix for the perennial problem of clericalism. The answer is daily conversion by priests and bishops to our servant Lord.

Russell Shaw and other laypeople who decry the evils of clericalism put the Church in their debt. They are not anticlerical. They want priests and bishops to be the shepherds they are ordained to be. They are rightly disappointed and rightly outraged when clergy act like petty tyrants or sputtering bureaucrats defending their institutional turf. They are scandalized when, in response to the sex-abuse scandal, bishops treat their priests as expendable temporary employees. One bishop under legal and financial pressure infamously described his priests as "independent contractors." Attempting to ward off outside threats, bishops have self-servingly tried to demonstrate their "transparency" by publicly revealing the names of elderly and deceased priests against whom there was a rumor or allegation of misconduct from twenty, thirty, or even fifty years ago. In some cases, the allegations were investigated, in others not, and in almost all cases they are now beyond fair investigation. Their once honored reputations now destroyed, such priests are deemed guilty until proven innocent, and, from their nursing homes and from their graves, they are in no position to protest their innocence.

This is a great miscarriage of the "zero tolerance" policy adopted by the bishops in Dallas in 2002. It has not escaped the notice of many observers that zero

tolerance has not been applied in like manner to bishops who were complicit, or more than complicit, in the sexual abuse of minors. Never mind similar patterns of cover-up and corruption in religious orders or the lavender priests, both religious and diocesan, for whom the chief lesson learned from the sex-abuse crisis is to make sure their sexual partners are of legal age.

It is an unspeakable sadness. A sadness compounded by the fact that there has not been to date a collective statement by the bishops confessing their errors and their wrongs, and asking the forgiveness of God and the forgiveness of the Catholic faithful. "Mistakes were made" is not an act of contrition. Their lawyers strongly advise against such a statement, pointing out the legal liabilities entailed. One hopes that, in addition to consulting their lawyers, bishops have consulted their conscience, that "aboriginal Vicar of Christ" (Newman), and have pondered the much more ominous liability entailed by impenitence. Public offenses call for public penitence.

Contra some episcopal statements, the sex-abuse crisis is not "history." The invitation to "move on" is respectfully declined. The scandal has cost \$2 billion to date, and there is no end in sight. A greater cost is the betrayal of filial and fraternal trust between bishops and priests. And the cost to the victims of abuse is beyond measure. The criticism is raised that some of those who have most strongly decried the miscarriage of the "zero tolerance" policy and the consequent injustices perpetrated against many priests have not been as vocal in addressing the crimes and sins against the victims of abuse.

About zero tolerance of sex abuse there cannot be even the smallest scintilla of equivocation. Sex abuse is not limited to its legal definition but includes illicit sexual relations with those who are, by however thin a margin, of age. Some clergy speak of "sexually mature" homosexual relations that are said to be morally unproblematic. A chancery official tells the press that a priest who has been charged had sex only with young men who were of the age of consent, and therefore, he said, "there is no problem." The very real problem is not whether the other person was sixteen or eighteen.

Numerous bishops have engaged in long "listening sessions" with victims from which they emerge, sometimes teary-eyed, proclaiming that they were shocked, shocked, to discover the psychological and spiritual damage done to young men. At news conferences, surrounded by their lawyers and the lawyers of those who have been abused, or claim they have been abused, and are seeking large damages, bishops announce that their eyes have been opened. Perhaps so, but there is something just a little smarmy and manifestly self-serving in these carefully choreographed reeducation sessions.

Until confronted by evidence of psychological damage and the threat of massive financial penalties, these bishops were not shaken, outraged, scandalized, by the knowledge that priests were violating their sacred vows and leading others, whether young or not so young, into grave sin?

Of course, the sex-abuse crisis is about more than clericalism, and clericalism is about more than the sex-abuse crisis. Russell Shaw's *Nothing to Hide* has useful suggestions for creating a broader and collaborative relationship of mutual respect between clergy and laity. He notes, for instance, that there was great interest in diocesan councils and parish councils in the period following Vatican II, but in recent years that interest has dramatically declined. Bishops and priests say that the councils were more hindrance than help, that laypeople simply don't understand the complexities of diocesan and parish governance. Shaw protests the circularity of this line of reasoning: People are excluded because they don't understand and don't understand because they are excluded.

A Neurotic Vigilance

Like other critics of clericalism, Shaw addresses the long, long aftermath of the trusteeship controversies of more than a hundred years ago. With great difficulty, the bishops turned back the efforts of some Catholic laity to establish in this country a Protestant ecclesiology of congregational independence and lay control. A persuasive argument can be made that the bishops succeeded all too well. And parish pastors, too, who understand themselves to be bishops, or even popes, in their own domain frequently exhibit a neurotic vigilance against the real or imagined ghost of trusteeism.

There are many parts to the corruption that is clericalism. Would the Church be better governed with the active participation of competent laypeople in decision making? I expect the answer is yes. Would bishops and priests be more effective shepherds and less prone to defensiveness and secrecy if they cultivated patterns of trusted collaboration with the laity? Surely the answer is yes, as is demonstrated by bishops and priests who do precisely that.

In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, many laypeople of an anticlerical disposition seized on the teaching that the Church is the "People of God." Predictably, their anticlericalism met with a reaction of reinforced clericalism. That was dramatically the case in connection with the disastrous 1976 "Call to Action" conference in Detroit, where lay delegates, largely composed of church workers of one kind or another, led an attempted insurrection not only against episcopal governance but against the teachings of the

council in whose name the conference was convened.

These and other convolutions notwithstanding, the Church is the People of God, and the clergy, from the pope to the most recently ordained deacon, have no reason for being other than to serve the People of God in their ministry of service to God and his world. Asked by a bishop what he thought about the laity, John Henry Newman replied that we clergy would look pretty foolish without them. To which it needs only to be added that the laity are not there to prevent the clergy from looking foolish.

Lay participation in decision making is no panacea. And most laypeople most of the time have better things to do than to sit in meetings making decisions that they would just as soon, most of the time, leave to the clergy. Their participation does not necessarily result in better decisions made, but it is a service to clergy who need to cultivate the habits and arts of collaboration. To say that they are there for the sake of the clergy might, I suppose, be construed as another form of clericalism. There is no guaranteed way to counter the evils of clericalism. Russell Shaw and others make promising institutional suggestions, but, as aforesaid, there is no institutional fix.

The problem is perennial. Clericalism is the shadow side of the glory that is the Catholic priesthood. The best we can hope for is priests and bishops who in every circumstance emulate the young Father Ratzinger who whispered to himself, "This is not for you, Joseph, this is not for you."