

## Clericalism v Accountability

**W**hat is clericalism? The dictionary says it's *a policy of supporting the power or influence of the clergy in secular matters, or of maintaining or increasing the power of a religious hierarchy*. Either definition should give cause for concern. Generally the word is used to refer to deference or privilege either being given to a priest, or being assumed by a priest, solely because he *is* a priest - as if the words "ordination" and "elevation" were somehow interchangeable! There is also a tendency for people to put priests on a pedestal whether they like it or not, and whether they deserve it or not.<sup>1</sup> Some examples:

**I**t's bad enough when, at a parish function, people in line for food or a drink will insist that, as a priest, you go ahead of them, but it's worse still when you see priests automatically walk to the front of the line as if they have a right as a priest (whatever that means) - a clerical right. On one level that's clericalism.

**A**nother example would be people giving deference to the opinion of a priest because he's a priest when, in fact, he may have no knowledge or expertise whatsoever on the subject in question. It's even worse when the priest himself insists on his opinion, refusing all other advice, because he's the priest. That's clericalism too.

**O**f course it can also work the other way. It will be reported to the priest that, let's say, a toilet is running over or an outside drain is blocked, as if "Father" is the only one who can fix these things. He isn't. That can be convenient clericalism!

**T**he priest can't have it both ways. As I said earlier, there's a danger that a priest who effectively insulates himself in his "clerical tower" can become a law unto himself, feeling he is accountable to, and responsible only for, himself. As unfortunate as such a situation might be, if that is his choice then he only has himself to blame if the people leave everything for him to do. That is clericalism also.

**B**oth the definitions above use the word "power" and the last thing the priesthood should be is a power trip. What it may involve is "authority" but that is a very different thing to power, though it too can be used wrongly.

**T**he various definitions of the word power include words like "ability" and "capacity" - someone may have power but what is important is their ability, their capacity, to exercise well the authority that their position gives them. The word "authority" itself implies having a right to act or decide or judge, but doing so from a base of knowledge or experience or belief. And so any power or authority that a

---

<sup>1</sup> It's too easy to fall off a pedestal and it can be a long drop!

priest may have isn't to be wielded autocratically. It should be accorded to him by the people to whom he ministers on the basis that his ministry reflects knowledge, experience and conviction. Vocation to priesthood comes from God and ministry is founded on that call. When Pilate said to Jesus, 'Surely you know I have the power to release you and I have the power to crucify you?' his reply was, 'You would have no power over me if it had not been given you from above.' Food for priestly thought.

**H**aving said all of that, we move on to accountability.

**A**t his priestly ordination, the candidate is asked by his bishop:

*Are you resolved, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to discharge without fail the office of priesthood in the presbyteral order as a conscientious fellow worker with your bishop in caring for the Lord's flock?*

*Are you resolved to celebrate the mysteries of Christ faithfully and religiously as the Church has handed them down to us, for the glory of God and the sanctification of Christ's people?*

*Are you resolved to exercise the ministry of the word worthily and wisely, preaching the Gospel and explaining the Catholic faith?*

*Are you resolved to consecrate your life to God for the salvation of his people, and to unite yourself more closely every day to Christ the High Priest, who offered himself for us to the Father as a perfect sacrifice?*

**A** priest is accountable first and foremost to God but he puts that into practice principally through his accountability to his bishop. That is the commitment contained in the first of those questions, a commitment renewed annually at the Chrism Mass. But he is also accountable to the people to whom he ministers, as those other questions make clear, a commitment also renewed annually.

**H**ow someone exercises his priesthood is perhaps a measure of how seriously he takes his responsibilities and accepts his accountability. Of course some aspects of this may not always sit too well with the people, especially those who may prefer a quiet life to being taught and challenged. What is it they say? (returning to the analogy of boats): "Every ship is safer in harbour, but that's not what ships are for". And then there's that saying about Jesus, something to the effect that he comforted the upset and upset the comfortable. If we truly share Our Lord's own ministry then that's what we priests have to do also - even when it involves risk. Realistically we can't please all of the people all of the time, but we do have to please God all of the time. Again, though, priests can't do that from a position of power nor can they do it on their own.

**I**n an ideal world the call to priesthood would come “from the people for the people” - from God, yes, but a person identified by the community and called into priestly service of that community. Sadly, however, things don’t work that way and, heeding perhaps Our Lord’s own caution that a prophet is never accepted in his own country, priests are usually appointed anywhere other than to their home parishes.

**I**f we did have “home-grown” priests in that sense, they would be much more aware of and sensitive to the history of the community and of its church. As things are, in many ways a priest is a “passing guest” and yet that can’t become an excuse for not investing himself or his energies in a parish simply because he won’t be there forever, anymore than it can be an excuse for people detaching themselves from his spiritual leadership.

**C**ertainly in the case of long-established parishes, many families will have lived there for years, perhaps their whole lives. In every sense of the word it is *their* parish – they have grown up in it, they have supported it, they have celebrated their sacraments in it and it’s where they worship week in, week out. Every once in a while they will lose their priest and a new one will arrive and before long he may start changing this, and moving that, and doing things differently. I can sympathise with people who find it unsettling and perhaps resent what they see as interference by a newcomer. However, from the moment a priest arrives it becomes his parish also, and if he didn’t feel at home or consider the parish to be his home, questions ought to be asked – of the people and of him.

**L**iturgical changes often require structural changes and that’s why altars were brought forward and pulpits disappeared, fonts were relocated and altar rails were removed – it wasn’t just the whim of the priest. Change and adaptation continues to be necessary from time to time but because change is never very popular, the priest who has to carry them out risks upsetting people even though that isn’t his intention. However it is all part of that same aspect of responsibility that we just talked about. A priest must lead, must do what he feels to be right and good for the majority, and must do and teach what the Church says must be done and taught, otherwise he is useless to the people.

**T**hings can’t stay the way they’ve always been – we are members of a pilgrim church, a church on the move, and while we may not always be happy with change we do have to trust in the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit and respond generously to the spiritual growth and development that the Spirit brings about. It’s in our Creed – “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life”. And it’s the priest’s responsibility to challenge the people spiritually and to invite them forward in their pilgrimage of faith. If he fails to do that, settling instead for a quiet life, then he will be just like the man in the gospel parable who took his one talent

and buried it for safe keeping - and we all know what happened to him when his master called him to account. Jesus himself told that story, so we can't ignore its implications just because we aren't comfortable with them. But it's amazing how often people do exactly that, choosing to ignore the teaching of the priest and holding instead to their own (often old) ideas and practices. "He's only the priest, what does he know?" What's wrong with that picture?

This is perhaps the positive face of clericalism – a priest's legitimate efforts on behalf of the people because he is the priest, their priest. That's what the bishop sent him to do, that's what God calls him to do, and so that's what he does. But it's not about power, it's about invitation; and it's not about autocracy, it's about co-operation. In that sense there should be accountability in the other direction: that the people of a parish be accountable to their priest for the degree to which they trust and follow his pastoral and spiritual leadership and by their involvement in all aspects of their shared parish life.

*Jesus said: 'I am the good shepherd;  
the good shepherd is one  
who lays down his life for his sheep.  
The hired man, since he is not the shepherd  
and the sheep do not belong to him,  
abandons the sheep and runs away  
as soon as he sees a wolf coming  
because he is only a hired man  
and has no concern for the sheep.*

(Jn 10 v 11-13)

\* \* \*

Fr Neil McNicholas