



# the BridgeDialogues

laity & clergy reimagining the church

A collaborative effort of Voice of the Faithful, FutureChurch, & Association of U.S. Catholic Priests

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The model we provide asks you to participate equally in sharing your perspectives, to set aside whatever expectations you may hold about “the other” or their thoughts and feelings, and to listen instead with heart and mind to what each other say.

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This collaboration begins long before the Dialogue session itself, with a commitment from one lay person and one cleric to serve as co-facilitators for the session(s).

## Introducing the BridgeDialogues

Welcome to the BridgeDialogues, a collaborative effort by the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests (AUSCP), FutureChurch (FC), and Voice of the Faithful (VOTF). We designed the dialogues and the accompanying resources to help bridge the gaps that too often prevent lay people and clergy from addressing **together** the problems besetting our Church.

The model we provide asks you to participate equally in sharing your perspectives, to set aside whatever expectations you may hold about “the other” or their thoughts and feelings, and to listen instead with heart and mind to what each other say.

The model also depends on a collaborative environment, one where facilitators establish and maintain the format of the discussion rather than lead it. This collaboration begins long before the Dialogue session itself, with a commitment from one lay person and one cleric to serve as co-facilitators for the session(s).

*The use of co-facilitators is a primary requirement for holding the BridgeDialogues.* If we are to bridge the gaps between ordained and lay in addressing problems, we must model collaboration at all stages. The co-leaders must share the work and share the responsibility for producing any documents or materials needed, setting up the meeting space or making phone calls, and they must work together when facilitating each session.

Included in the current package are this Introduction, a step-by-step model for conducting BridgeDialogues, and a set of resources for conducting dialogues aimed at addressing the problems of clericalism:

- Introducing the BridgeDialogues (this document)
  - The Dialogue Model—guidelines on conducting BridgeDialogue sessions
  - Model 1: two documents—“Introduction to Clericalism” and “Clericalism: Let’s Talk”—for dialogue(s) on understanding the dimensions of clericalism
  - Model 2: two documents—“Clericalism: An Overview” (a video transcript) and “Overview Questions”—for session(s) related to the video presentation
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by Prof. Massimo Faggioli; the video link is included in the Resources document.

- Model 3: “Pope Francis quotes” includes several examples of what Pope Francis has said about clericalism, with related questions after each quote
- Model 4: “Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism,” a lengthy paper addressing how the faithful experience clericalism, with question templates suitable for multiple sessions
- Bibliography & Resources: a list of additional readings and resources for learning more about clericalism and/or developing your own dialogue sessions
- Handout: “Clericalism: Ask Yourself”—questions suitable for use either as a handout after a dialogue session on clericalism, or as questions for additional sessions

## A final thought

Participating in The BridgeDialogues carries an expectation that you will set aside status, rules, cultural attitudes, and any norms that segregate responsibilities within our faith community—at least for the duration of the sessions.

## From the “Letter to the People of God” by Pope Francis: August 18, 2018

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. ... [C]lericalism [is] 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.

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***The BridgeDialogues model depends on a collaborative environment, one where facilitators maintain adherence to the session guidelines rather than serve as leaders who direct the discussion or provide “answers” to questions. Use the following Startup Guidelines to begin and then follow the Session Guidelines during the dialogues.***

## Starting Up

***Step 1: Obtain commitments from one cleric and one lay person as facilitators.***

This is not just the first step but also a **primary requirement** for holding BridgeDialogues. If we are to bridge the gaps between ordained and lay in addressing problems, we must model collaboration at all stages. Facilitators must share the work of producing any documents or materials needed, setting up the meeting space or making phone calls, and facilitating each session.

***Step 2: Select a resource and outline the questions to ask.***

Choose the paper, book, video, or other resource that will serve as the basis from which you launch the dialogue sessions. Alternatively, you may decide that questions on a selected topic could serve as the basis. *The current dialogues focus on Clericalism, and we provide both the resources and sessions models for you to use.* However, BridgeDialogues may be adapted to any set of issues that need your faith community’s combined efforts, lay and clergy, to address.

***Step 3: Invite participation. Choose the venue.***

Invite participation with a description of the dialogue model and purpose along with the topic for your session(s). Consider including a brief summary of expectations with the invitation. Also, be sure to obtain contact information so that you may call participants ahead of time to go over the guidelines and expectations. When you reserve the venue, look for spaces that feel comfortable for about a dozen people or ones where you can close off space so the attendees are not tiny dots in a cavernous hall.

**Limit participation to a maximum of 12 to 15 people.** Holding multiples sessions is better than one large session where no one can fully engage in the dialogue desired.

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#### **Step 4: Prepare the participants.**

Ensure that all participants know beforehand what you expect from them. Here's a short list of what each should know:

- A collaborative discussion does not use speakers and a standard Q and A format. Instead, it is similar to a book group where each person reads material prior to the discussion, then comes to express their own feelings and thoughts about the material.
- During sessions, no one seeks to "answer" another's thoughts or ideas, but rather to talk about what "I think" and "I feel" and "I had an experience"—the "I" statements must prevail. It matters less what a rule or fact or event is than what I think or feel about the rule or experience or event. Be sure participants understand this format AND are prepared to share your thoughts and feelings.
- What is shared in a session will remain confidential to that session unless the person who shared information gives their express permission to report their comments elsewhere.

After talking with a prospective participant, send them (or direct them to) the resource(s) you will be using for the planned session(s).

#### **Step 5: Set up the meeting space.**

Arrange chairs in a large circle so that each person can see the one speaking. Consider using a "talking stick" as an aid to remind people to speak one at a time—anything can serve as this "stick": a rock, a large medal, a three-minute timepiece, a hat, a baton, even an actual stick. The idea is that only the person holding the talisman may speak (except the facilitator, who may need to remind the speaker that it is another's turn). When one person finishes, they hand the talisman to the person on their right. This person may speak or may decline to speak at that particular time and hand the talisman to the next person. Those who decline should be invited after one cycle to speak before others speak a second time.

#### **Step 6: Run the session.**

Conduct the session, following the instructions in "Running a Session." Use one of the resources included in this package and its related questions for your session, or develop other questions for those resources, or specify your own topic and questions using our templates as design models.

## Running a Session

Remember, these sessions require co-leaders, so you both share the duties of the facilitator. Your goals are to involve as many attendees as possible in the discussion, to encourage respectful attention to different views, and to prevent one or two voices from dominating a session. This does not mean cutting off a persistent voice. In any such setting, some people will speak more than others. But you can encourage those who have not yet contributed by inviting them to speak before others have a second chance to speak.

Here is a format for the session that you may find useful.

- **Greeting and Introductions**

Introduce yourselves, ask each person to introduce themselves and, depending on the size of the group, perhaps say what they hope to learn or how they heard about the session. The goal is not necessarily to obtain answers to these questions but rather to "lubricate the voices" (get everyone

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talking from the start). [You may not need the introductions each time if you hold multiple sessions with the same group.]

- **Opening Prayer**

Use a multi-stanza prayer and go around the room having each person say a few lines of the prayer. Again, your goal is to lubricate the voices and let everyone participate from the beginning.

- **Ground Rules (remind attendees of this at each session)**

1. Everyone is invited to contribute. Make sure everyone has a chance by not taking more than three or four minutes each time you speak.
2. Try not to speak twice until everyone has had a chance to speak once—but don't feel compelled to speak until you are ready. (If you are using a talking stick, where each person hands the "stick" to the right, advise everyone that they may pass the stick if they are not yet ready to speak. Be sure to return to them later to ask if they are ready.)
3. Respect each other's opinions and contributions.
4. Anything said during this session remains confidential to this session.

- **Session**

1. Use questions or topics you have prepared for the discussion. Perhaps begin with your own initial thoughts (briefly) about the issue.
2. Hand the "talking stick" to the next person and proceed around the room. When you feel the first question/topic has been addressed, pose the next question/issue.
3. Continue until about 10 minutes prior to the end of the scheduled time. Then ask what "next steps" the group sees as useful in light of the session's exchanges. If it's a next meeting, try to get best days/times from the participants. If it's wider sharing, offer to set up ways for that to happen or designate someone from the group to do so.

- **Closing Prayer**

## Tips and Potential Problems

It is rare, but no matter how prepared you are, no matter how long you spent "vetting" and preparing everyone, someone may disrupt the session. Perhaps by speaking too long. Perhaps by veering wildly off-topic. Perhaps by directing personal comments at another participant. Plan beforehand for how you will handle any such issues. Because there are two of you running the session, one of you is always available to guide a disruptive person away from the circle. Do not worry though—disruption rarely happens; you just want to be prepared in case it does.

### ***Some possible ways to defuse a situation:***

- Take advantage of the slightest pause in the offending speaker's monologue to thank them and ask them to hand the talking piece to the person on the right. Be quick!
- If the offending speaker's monologue ends, remind everyone of the ground rules before the next

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person speaks. However, if the offender is making a personal attack on someone else, please interrupt immediately to remind them of the ground rules and that we are here to listen to each other's thoughts, not to critique them: "We want to hear what you yourself think."

- Even though you, as a facilitator, do not direct the conversation, you should speak up if someone jumps to an entirely different topic. Gently interrupt and thank them for their observations, but "for this evening, perhaps we can return to the topic of X" [clericalism or the selected topic].
- If a disruptive person will not cooperate, move to their side and ask if you can discuss his/her "very interesting idea" with them elsewhere while the others continue with their own discussion.



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One of the most disastrous consequences of clericalism has been the clergy sexual abuse scandal and the cover-up by the hierarchy.

There are other consequences as well, including some that are damaging to the priests isolated within the culture.

## Introduction to Clericalism written by Voice of the Faithful

Many Catholics are unaware of the extensive consequences of the clerical culture in which priests and the hierarchy spend most of their adult lives. From specified educational paths to socialization opportunities, from living conditions to financial remuneration, in working relationships restricted by oaths of obedience and isolation enforced by celibacy, priests typically live aside and apart from the people they should serve—they are culturally and often physically far removed from the realities of the communities that surround them.

Almost every profession has its own special culture, of course, and that culture supports and protects its members, provides them with useful information, and presents relevant educational opportunities. As examples, think of the cultures of police, doctors, and unions.

These cultures have positive benefits for the members within the culture. However, at the same time, to those outside the culture and those who depend on them for services, these specialized cultures can be opaque and sometimes threatening.

This paper considers the culture of Roman Catholic diocesan clergy in the United States and how that culture often leads to unhappy consequences within the Catholic Church. Clearly, one of the most disastrous consequences has been the clergy sexual abuse scandal and the cover-up by the hierarchy. But there are other consequences as well, including some that are damaging to the priests isolated within the culture.

## What Is Culture?

The term “culture” applies to the interlocking forms of an organization’s life, whether that organization is a family, a corporation, a nation-state, or even a profession or trade. George Mendenhall, a noted scholar of biblical and Near Eastern cultures, describes culture as a “meaningful arrangement of technology, the means by which a people provide for material needs; society, or people’s relationships; and ideology, a people’s way of thinking.

This paper will describe some key elements of the clerical culture of diocesan clergy in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States—a culture where the

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provision of material needs, the relationships with people, and the way of thinking are controlled almost entirely via strict hierarchical structure. All diocesan priests live their lives within this culture.

Our focus in the paper is on the possible unhappy consequences of this clerical culture, but we are fully aware that not every priest will succumb to the most compromising elements of the clerical culture. We all know priests who are generous servant leaders in their parishes and communities. It should also be noted that diocesan clerical culture differs from the cultures of the various Religious Orders in the Church—each of which has its own culture depending on its history and mission.

## What is the Clerical Culture?

In his book, *Clerical Culture: Contradiction and Transformation*, Father Michael Papesh describes the clerical culture as “precisely the constellation of relationships and the universe of ideas and material reality in which diocesan priests and bishops exercise their ministry and spend their lives.”

For a more negative description, consider that of David Gibson in *The Coming Catholic Church*. He describes clericalism as “the reflexive notion that clerics are a privileged fraternity whose sacred status guarantees them eternal protection from the reproaches of the world, even when they do wrong.” Gibson had the clergy sexual abuse scandal in mind.

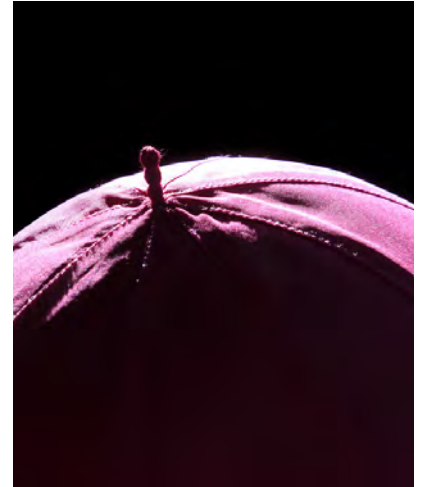
With awareness of the clerical culture as background, in 2011 a Voice of the Faithful committee analyzed the then-newly completed John Jay Report: “The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010.” The committee agreed with many of the findings of the study, but noted that the terms “clericalism” and “clerical culture” did not appear at all. The committee criticized this omission:

VOTF faults the Report for describing, but not naming, much less citing as a principal cause, an overriding set of beliefs and behaviors in which the clergy view themselves as different, separate and exempt from the norms, rules and consequences that apply to everyone else in society—the very essence of a clerical culture or clericalism.

Despite the omission of this label, the John Jay study did identify factors that, in essence, describe clericalism. According to the report, four factors provided opportunities for priests to abuse children: “the authority of the priests; the public perception of them; the isolation of their positions; and the high level of discretion and lack of supervision in their positions” (p.92). Thus, although the term “clerical culture” is not used, the study could not have provided a clearer description of that culture.

This culture of the diocesan priesthood also has characteristics that distinguish it from the cultures of other professions:

- The hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the church
- Papal allegiance
- An ordination which is said to confer an ontological change
- Special education and training
- Celibacy requirements
- Clothing and dress—especially liturgical dress
- Special privileges concerning compensation and lifestyle





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## Hierarchical Structure and Patriarchy

Although most organizations, especially nation-states, have hierarchical structures, most also have a balance of power, thus separating the executive, the legislative, and the judicial powers. But in the Roman Catholic Church, all three powers are exercised by the pope and the Vatican Congregations that report directly to the pope. Despite the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the collegiality of the bishops, under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI a re-emphasis on Rome's authority took place.

In addition, the hierarchy of the Church is a patriarchy. Only men are allowed into the priesthood and, thus, all bishops and cardinals are male. This excludes female input into the decision-making of the Church and effectively cuts the leadership of the Church off from the gifts of the wisdom of women at every level of Church governance.

## Papal Allegiance

Allegiance to the pope is secured by a series of oaths and promises taken by cardinals, bishops and priests. Chief among these is the oath sworn by cardinals upon their elevation: "I, [name and surname], Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, promise and swear to be faithful henceforth and forever, while I live, to Christ and his Gospel, being constantly obedient to the Holy Roman Apostolic Church, to blessed Peter in the person of the Supreme Pontiff [name of current pope], and of his canonically elected Successors, to maintain communion with the Catholic Church always, in word and deed; not to reveal to anyone what is confided to me in secret, nor to divulge what may bring harm or dishonor to Holy Church [emphasis added]; to carry out with great diligence and faithfulness those tasks to which I am called by my service to the Church, in accord with the norms of the law. So help me Almighty God."

Bishops take a similar oath at their ordinations. Diocesan priests, in turn, make a promise of celibacy and of obedience to their bishop. (Religious Order priests take solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience rather than celibacy/obedience to a diocesan bishop.) This chain of oaths and promises ensures allegiance to the pope and places possible restraints on the right of conscience on those swearing fidelity.

## Ontological Change

The notion that ordination confers an ontological change on the one ordained did not appear in Roman Catholic theology until the 15th century, and it was not much emphasized until modern times. The concept came into use at the Council of Trent when it became important to identify the special power that enables the priest to transubstantiate bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

Ontological (pertaining to the being or nature of the individual) change implies that the ordained are essentially different—their human essence differs—from the non-ordained. The notion that priests are "ontologically" different from the non-ordained is affirmed in the Second Vatican Council Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, section 10: "Though they differ essentially [*italics added*] and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood or hierarchical priesthood are none the less ordered to one another; each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ." Pope John Paul II emphasized this ontological change in his encyclical *Pastores dabo vobis*, which is directed to the training of seminarians. Many of the younger priests—those who call themselves "John Paul priests"—identify strongly with this concept.

Contemporary theologians, such as Edward Schillebeeckx and Paul Lakeland, however, have suggested that this concept of an "ontological change" should be challenged in favor of a more functional understanding.

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Whatever the outcome of theological development, however, a person who perceives himself as ontologically different from others can feel—consciously or not—that he is superior to others.

## Seminary Education and Training

Ever since the Council of Trent diocesan priests have been educated in seminaries that are closed off from the rest of the world. For several decades after the Second Vatican Council, some seminaries began housing would-be priests near universities and they attended classes with other students. But recently the Vatican has been insisting that diocesan priests should be educated primarily in seminaries. The aims, according to Vatican officials, are to ensure that seminarians receive doctrinally correct teaching and to protect them from temptations against their commitment to celibacy.

Although formation in the seminaries has greatly improved in the last two decades as a result of the sexual abuse scandal and the encyclical *Pastores dabo vobis*, separate housing effectively separates seminarians from the lives of those they are called to serve. It also separates them from association with women. Although today a small number of women are appointed to some seminary faculties, most faculty members are priests. The seminary remains a male bastion.

Clearly this enclosed environment may protect the candidates, but it also can close them off from experiences that are shared by their peers outside the seminary, and it can cut them off from an understanding of the problems and conflicts experienced by the people they are called to serve.

Thus, as with the characteristics of hierarchical structure and patriarchy, papal allegiance and belief in ontological change, seminary education and training in the clerical culture operate to separate a priest from the community rather than to help him understand the people he is expected to serve. The separation is then reinforced by other characteristics specific to diocesan clerics in the Roman Catholic Church: celibacy, independence, clothing, and special privileges.

## Celibacy

Most Catholics know that celibacy, although required of priests in the Roman Rite, is not essential to the priesthood. Many of the Apostles were married, and celibacy was not made obligatory for Latin Rite priests until the Lateran Councils of 1123 and 1139. In the Eastern Rites that are in union with Rome, there have always been both married and celibate priests.

There is no doubt that celibacy, freely chosen, can be a sign of the Kingdom of Heaven and a commitment by the priest to total service to the faithful. The question here is whether mandatory celibacy has negative consequences for those who aspire to serve the faithful.

The John Jay study did not consider celibacy to be a cause of child sexual abuse and our committee agreed, because the vast majority of celibate priests did not abuse children. Also, we all know priests for whom celibacy has freed them from other responsibilities, allowing them to concentrate their energies on serving the gospel and the people with generosity, compassion, and leadership. Nevertheless, celibacy is a chief element in the clerical culture.

Celibacy contributes to the cementing of the priest's loyalty and obedience to the bishop, because his loyalties are not divided between his wife and family and the Church. A married priest has split loyalties, to his wife and family, and to his bishop.

In contrast, celibacy ties the priest, in a unique way, to his promise of obedience to the bishop. It becomes one more link in the chain that not only distinguishes the priest from the rest of the faithful, but also ties

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him more tightly into the clerical culture and shores up the institutional loyalty.

## Relative Independence

Although priests owe obedience to their bishop, in most of their daily activities they are relatively independent. Once a man is ordained he receives very little supervision. He is not subject to performance appraisals, receives very little feedback from other priests—and certainly not from the faithful in any constructive manner—and is seldom monitored in his daily activities. This relative independence allowed some priests to gain unobserved access to children, and it was one of the contributing factors in the clergy sexual abuse scandal—a fact that was noted in the John Jay study.

Some astute lay leaders in the Church have suggested ways to improve oversight. The Leadership Roundtable for Church Management, composed mostly of successful business men and women, has recommended a series of performance standards to ensure that priests receive the necessary supervision and monitoring to guarantee that their pastoral service is above reproach. (The standards are applicable to both priests and lay ministers.)

## Clothing and Dress



The clerical collar worn by priests establishes them as different from the non-ordained. This can have many positive consequences because people will recognize priests as ones who could assist them with problems they may face, and with spiritual counseling and advice. Many professions and trades, such as doctors, police, firefighters, judges, and so on, wear special uniforms that set them apart and allow others to recognize them for their special expertise.

But priests who wear the collar also may come to consider themselves as superior to others. Similarly, while liturgical garments may be required for priests to perform their functions as presiders at liturgy, they also can become attractive means of separating the wearers from others. For some there is an attraction to moving up the ladder to acquire the red piping of the position of monsignor or the red vestments of a bishop.

## Special Privileges

Although the normal compensation for diocesan priests is relatively small in comparison to many of their parishioners, priests have many special advantages and privileges that others do not. They receive health and dental insurance, a pension, an annual retreat, and a continuing education allowance. They are usually provided with room and board, a month's vacation, and one day off a week. Because their lives are seen as lonely, and often are lonely, many priests receive gifts of clothing and cash as well as invitations to meals or entertainment from compassionate parishioners throughout the year. Priests are seldom responsible for the cleaning and upkeep of their rectories and the property, including lawn care and snow shoveling. And they need not bother with property taxes and household insurance bills.

Above all, if they obey all the rules, priests are guaranteed a lifetime employment—regardless of how competent or incompetent they are. These privileges effectively shield them from experiencing the financial problems faced by their parishioners.

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## Summary

All of these factors, and many others, can lead priests to view themselves as privileged persons. Many priests, of course, manage to escape this sense of superiority and to focus on their roles as servant leaders of the parish community. Indeed, many priests invest themselves fully in their ministries and wear themselves out in serving others.

But the temptations of clerical elitism are always there, and it is inevitable that many will fall subject to these temptations. The clerical culture can provide a comfortable life for many of the diocesan clergy, but also can make it too easy to deny or avoid dealing with the inadequacies and personal failings that are part of being human. By placing our priests on a pedestal, we only contribute to their possible feelings of being specially privileged. We need to pray regularly for our priests that they not become absorbed in the clerical culture but invest themselves fully in serving the spiritual needs of the community.

We need to recognize that we are all called to holiness. We are the Church. As Cardinal Newman once said, "The Church would look awfully silly without us." We have a right to call on our priests for leadership, but we can also offer our own God-given gifts to help shape a truly loving Eucharist-centered community.

Some form of clerical culture will always be with us as long as we make distinctions between priests and laity. But we can all work together to reduce the temptations to condescension and elitism among our clergy. As Fr. Michael Papesh states: "The point persons for clerical culture change are priests. Changing the culture cannot be, foremost, the work of the laity. The transformation means a renewal of the spirituality and a reform of the way of life for the ordained. It needs to be led by priests, and strongly supported by the laity, who will hold priests accountable and keep priests focused."

We can hope that, with the model of simplicity offered by Pope Francis, this transformation is well begun.

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## Clericalism: Ask yourself (prepared by Voice of the Faithful)

Here are some questions that both lay and ordained Catholics can ask themselves by way of raising awareness individually and collectively about the negative affects of clericalism.

### For Priests

- Consider the impact of exclusive language on girls and women—as well as boys and men—when they always hear: “pray for us men and for our salvation” .... God is always a He ... the disciples are told to go out and be “fishers of men” ... Why not pray for us and our salvation? Use “God” in place of “He” where it’s easily substituted? Emphasize that Jesus taught women, despite the strictures of the time, and included them in his teachings?
- Do you say a Mass, celebrate a Mass, or preside at a Mass? To build community, choose words that encourage all to consider themselves participants.
- When you offer prayers during Mass, do you always lead with the pope, then the bishop and priests and only at the end get to the lay people who constitute 98% of the faithful? Do you always say “priests, religious and laity” instead of “laity, religious, and priests”? Constant subordination in language has an effect.

### For Lay People

- When out with clergy, do you “use” the priest’s status for a better seat in a restaurant or theater, a discount on a product, a nicer parking space?
- Do you avoid making parish-related decisions and wait for Father to decide? (And blame Father if a decision proves unpopular!)
- Do you insist that Father lead the prayer at a meeting, or do so yourself when you are the moderator or leader?

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## Clericalism: Let's Talk (prepared by Voice of the Faithful)

There are subtle ways that language and pastoral relationships can feed clericalism. But how do YOU experience such barriers? And what can you do about it—how do you guard against clericalism in your own behaviors while removing the barriers others may use to hold you on “your side” of the lay/clergy divide? Use the following questions to open up the discussion.

1. *For both clergy and lay people:* Do you agree that the priest/pastor is the “point person” to begin effecting change in clergy/lay relations? What is the greatest challenge in moving lay people from deferential agreement to honest conversation?
2. *For clergy:* Have you ever thought of your lay sisters and brothers as “priestly”?  
*For lay people:* What might be the impact of treating lay people this way?
3. *For clergy:* Do you provide opportunities for listening and honest feedback?  
*For lay people:* Do you actually provide honest feedback?  
*For both:* How can you overcome such reluctance?
4. *For both clergy and lay people:* What do lay people need to STOP doing to help narrow the gulf between priests and laity? What do priests need to do and/or stop doing?
5. *For clergy:* Do lay people in your parish lead faith-sharing activities that include priests as equal participants (NOT as leaders)?
6. *For both clergy and lay people:* Is there anything else about clericalism that you would like to share?

## Something to Consider

Choose one thing you can do differently in the way you relate to others, both priests and lay people, after reflecting on the “take aways” from this gathering.



# the BridgeDialogues

laity & clergy reimagining the church

A collaborative effort of Voice of the Faithful, FutureChurch, & Association of U.S. Catholic Priests

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## Professor Massimo Faggioli

Presentation at 2018 VOTF Conference



It's a great pleasure to be here. And, yes, when I received the invitation more than one year [ago], I could not imagine how timely this would have been today, this last year. Actually, starting at the end of 2017 with the publication of the report of the Royal Commission in Australia, this last year has been really, I believe, a new kind of crisis. And here, I want to acknowledge the role of the Voice of the Faithful, because I think it has been essential, and it will be essential, because this is a new kind of crisis.

This crisis is not an American crisis; it is a global crisis. There's no question that around the world, there's nothing like Voice of the Faithful, and this is something I want to say because it's important to say that.

What I'm going to do in the next 40 minutes or so is to—I wouldn't say provide you with a cold shower, but to explain what are the opportunities and challenges for the Catholic laity in the Church of today. Because what this crisis, this second phase or chapter of the abuse crisis tells us is that there is a vertical crisis of the hierarchical leadership that is simply not comparable with 2002. It's much bigger, much more serious, much more complicated by issues that we were not talking about 16 years ago, like the role of LGBT culture in the Catholic Church, for example. So, it's a totally new moment.

What is new about this moment of the crisis is that there is a huge vacuum in the Catholic Church, a vacuum of power—well, the power is still there where it used to be. There is a vacuum of authority, who has a voice to speak that can be listened to. And this vacuum has been filled in ways that are visible and invisible. Just this week, we have heard of initiatives of the Napa Institute, for example, of this new group called the Red Hat Ranking Group, this kind of thing. So, there's a huge vacuum that is being filled by some forms of the Catholic laity. This is not clerical power, as these are technically lay people.

This says something about how complicated it is today to think about the solutions of this crisis with a language and a Catholic theology of the laity, of lay people, that I think gives us opportunities. But we should be aware of the limits of this theology. My job today will be mostly to show what are the problems within the theology of the laity and the role of the Catholic laity in the Church; and after that, to say

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something about what are the opportunities. I am not going to address directly the role of Pope Francis in all this, but I'm sure it will come up in the questions and answers afterwards.

The problem is that the Catholic Church today assumes that the Second Vatican Council opened enormous spaces for the Catholic laity. This is an assumption that, like most assumptions that are unquestioned, is problematic, if not untrue, because one of the problems is that theology of the lay people, of the role of the lay people, that was discussed and approved at the Second Vatican Council, the most important Church event in these last five centuries—1962, 1965—is a theology of the lay people, of the role of the lay people, that, as soon as it was approved at Vatican II before 1965, it was already very old. It aged incredibly rapidly.

Why? Because its mostly based on an idea of the lay people that is elaborated in some countries—in France, especially, but France, Belgium in the 1950s—and it is still based on a definition of the lay person that sees the lay condition as a concession to human frailty.

So, here, Vatican II really tries to overcome this.

So. I'm a strong believer that there is no Catholicism imaginable without Vatican II. We should build on Vatican II and build something stronger, higher. I don't think it is possible to imagine the future of the Catholic Church going back from the 1960s. But we should be aware that there are limits to that.

The theology of the laity of the Second Vatican Council is aware that in the 1950s, the idea of the lay person in the Catholic Church is still framed in terms of lack of something, which is the canonical definition of the lay people in canon law. There is no positive definition of the lay person, but it is negative in the sense that the lay person is a non-ordained person. So, it's still the canonical definition of the lay person, which is now the least important of all definitions or typologies of who is the lay person.

Vatican II tries hard. And if you want to have two different chapters in one same document, then Vatican II, [which] reflects this ambiguity, is the second chapter of the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. Chapter 2, which says, it doesn't matter if you are ordained or not, we are the people of God. And that is the future that Vatican II was looking forward to. And just a couple of pages after, Chapter 4 of *Lumen Gentium*, you have a separate chapter on the lay person in the Catholic Church, which still reflects the old definition: Lay people are those who are not ordained and those who are supposed to help the Church with secular issues, secular realities.

So, this is the ambiguity. There is another thing that Vatican II tries to do very hard, is to say—and this is more visible in other documents, like *Gaudium et spes*, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the last document approved by Vatican II, which, interestingly, is very afraid and cautious in using the word 'lay people.' It uses much more [often the word] secular.

Because *Gaudium et spes* basically says this: The Catholic Church should be aware that there is a secular dimension in all of us. Even if you are a priest, a bishop, a monk, we all have a secular dimension. And so this is complicated, especially into English, because English lacks a few words that are used in Latin, Italian, French, and German, this distinction between what is lay and secular. Because in English, secular means something a bit different.

So, here, Vatican II has an insight that it cannot work, that the theology of the laity cannot work with 1950s ideas. But Vatican II goes back and forth from a 1950s Canon Law definition of a lay person and a more forward-looking understanding of what is the secular and lay dimension of the Catholic laity.

The fundamental limit of the Second Vatican Council, what it says on the laity is that it is one of those issues of the Second Vatican Council that cannot count on a prescriptive set of statements and of laws. They are all stated in terms of wishes that are issued to Church leaders. This should happen; this is advisable; this would be good. So it's clearly a council that had, again, an insight on the untenable limits of the theology of the



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1950s. But all those bishops had gone to the seminary in the 1920s and 1930s.

The youngest among them—because some of them went to the seminary in the early 20th century during the anti-modernist crisis, which is the most serious intellectual catastrophe in the Catholic Church, which is something that some Catholics, lay Catholics, again, would like to repeat today. Because when you try to say that the sex abuse crisis is part of a new understanding of sexuality in the Catholic Church in a positive way, you are basically calling for a new anti-modernist crisis. So, this is not just history.

So, there are limits. Because this theology of the lay people works only if it is accepted by the clerical hierarchy, so there is no institution for the laity or of the laity that can automatically translate some ideas into the Church's practice. And as you know, the most important official act of interpretation of the Second Vatican Council after Vatican II is the Code of Canon Law of 1983, which has a definition of who is a person in the Church that, famously, is non-theological but is juridical. It comes from Roman law. The person in the Catholic Church, according to canon law, is not a person/member because he or she is baptized, which is a sacramental notion of personhood in the Catholic Church, but is a physical person, which is the Roman law understanding of a person. But here you see that post-Vatican II doesn't really help to implement that shift towards a really full theology of the laity in the Catholic Church.

I'll give you just a few examples. So, here, lay people are incorporated in the office of sanctifying in liturgical ministries, but laity by themselves do not have powers in the Church coming from God, only the hierarchy. And so lay people have other business to do. The office of governing: The lay people have a right to be governed—[laughter]—which is important because right now this is not happening, as you all know. And so there is a total panic mode in the Catholic Church, especially in the United States.

So, I think that my right to be governed is not being respected now, actually. But this is another, separate issue. But Vatican II says that there is no right to govern for lay people. They have a right to be governed, but there's no right to govern. And finally, for the office of teaching in the Catholic Church, the idea that lay people can work for the Church as theologians—lay people like myself—is totally unheard of until Vatican II. It is something that appears ... in the late 60s-70s, but it is not part of the reflection of the Second Vatican Council on the lay people. So here, you see how many limits there are to what Vatican II says about the lay people.

So, here, very briefly, I think it's important, before talking about laity today, to have a very quick picture of the different phases in Church history with different kinds of lay people in the Church.

The first part is the 1st century or so until the mid-second century. More or less, there's no real distinction in lay/clergy. There is a variety of ministries, a variety of charisms. We don't really know if we can apply our [inaudible] of the Church of today to the early Church. Actually, we cannot.

The second phase is the Church of the Martyrs. The third, especially the 3rd and early 4th centuries, is the beginning of a hierarchical organization in the Catholic Church. But it is a functional differentiation that is minimal compared to the fundamental unity of the Catholic Church, because it's a church that is being subject to persecution and martyrdom. And when you are martyred, your church is going to be more united. Look at China today. We think they are two different churches. No, they are two episcopal lines that are different, but it is one Catholic Church, which is some sense the flip side of the U.S. problem, where we have one episcopal line but a very divided Church.

The third phase is the so-called Imperial Church, when the Church becomes much more hierarchical, in some sense because it mirrors the empire. When you relate to the empire, you become more imperial, right? And so that's why we have, from the 5th century on, a much more visible and deep differentiation of roles, especially between lay and the ordained people. What is the important difference between lay people and ordained people is not as we usually assume, because lay people can marry and clergy cannot. This is something that happens much later. [Instead] it's about something that I think is very close to the

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heart of this crisis of today. Who is in charge of managing the money and the resources? And if you go back to the most classical definition given in the Middle Ages, in the 12th century, by the first legislator of the Catholic Church that tried to organize systemically the law of the Church, the Bolognese monk Gratian, he said famously, there are *duo genera christianorum*—forgive my Latin—there are two orders of Christians: the lay people and the ordained.

Interestingly, he said this—and this has become the theology of the Catholic Church for the clergy and laity for the last 10 centuries—he says this not on the basis of sacraments. No, he is talking about the administrative law of the Church. You have two different kinds of Christians according to whether they are legally able to manage and to make decisions on the finances, resources, of the Catholic Church, or if they have no right to do that.

So, it is a whole theology that is built on administration, which is—pay attention—is something that is coming back right now. Because if you think that the Catholic Church should be like a corporation, your theology will be built on a theology of a corporation. Theology always builds on something else. Rarely does it just proceed from Scripture.

This is the Imperial Church, which is a large chunk of Church history until the Reformation. You have, as you know, Martin Luther, de-clericalizes the Church, or that church that follows him. And by reaction, Catholicism hyper-clericalizes Catholicism.

This is what happens at the Council of Trent. And, one has to say, the Council of Trent builds a Church that works on the assumption that the Church works or fails if the episcopate, if the bishops, work or fail. This is something Vatican II doesn't change. It is fundamentally an episcopal idea of the Church that is built on the episcopate. This has worked, to some extent, between Trent and the 20th century. Now, we see the collapse of that.

This is a big historical turn that we are seeing. It's not just another crisis, but that goes to the heart. It undermines, fundamentally, something that has been built, I think, five centuries ago. And so, there is a long process of dismantling, one, and two, clearing the way from the rubbles, and three, rebuild. It's a very long process.

The fourth phase in Church history is the Catholic Church between the 17th century and today, which is a slow shift from, as I said, a deeply clerical church, the Church of the Council of Trent, and of the century later, the 17th century, which makes a theological elaboration of the submission of the lay people to clerical power. What happens, which is really new compared to the Middle Ages, which are more secular, in some sense. It's a clericalization of culture and of formation, which is something whereby the Middle Ages is less clerical, again.

And then you have the 20th century with Vatican II in the middle of it, which knows exactly that the Middle Ages is not going to come back. That is the past. Well, until the 1930s-1940s, the Middle Ages is the model that explicitly the Church wants to go back [to]—politically, religiously, theologically. It makes us laugh, because there are some Catholics today who are saying that—that we should go back to the Middle Ages. They say that on Twitter, usually, which is all kind of fun. [Laughter.]

Vatican II says, we have this medieval legacy, and this legacy of Trent, we have a much different challenge from that of the empire in the Middle Ages or the challenge of Martin Luther in the 16th century, which is the challenge of the secular world. How is this Church able to interact with the secular global world? Only with the 1% in the Catholic Church of the ordained, or less than 1%, that are able to do things? And all the rest are the audience? Of course not. So, Vatican II really tries to keep something of the past that is workable and open a new path towards the future.

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So, here, as I said, there are clearly myths in the theology of the lay people at the Second Vatican II. There's ambiguity; there is unresolved tension. And that's one problem. There is also another problem, which is that, together with the theological ambiguity of those documents and the elaboration of those documents, we now live in a Church, and in a Church in the world, where the Catholic laity has become fundamentally something different from what Vatican II had in mind, an experience about the lay people. It's a different kind of lay people.

I'll start with this. Until Vatican II and until the 1970s, I would say, in the Catholic Church there is one fundamental assumption, which is no longer true, I believe. It's this assumption: The conservative voices and the status quo in the Catholic Church are the ordained people. All the rest are lay people and they all want a progressive kind of church. This is the major change from the theology of the Second Vatican Council and the experience of the lay people. You have, both in the hierarchy and in the lay people today, a much more interconnected, intersected voices, cultures, and ideas of a church that wants to remain as it is until it burns down, probably, or going back to a new kind of Middle Ages, with Twitter or with social media on one side. And you have cultures of change on both sides.

At Vatican II, [there was a] defensiveness of the council against some radical theologies of the laity, because back then the idea was, "lay people want to change everything." Let's give them something we can still work with. Now, to be very blunt, I'm as shocked and ashamed as you are for the performance of the Catholic bishops. I have two small kids in a Catholic school in the Philadelphia area, so it is very practical for me. But I can assure you that as a Catholic theologian, I am more afraid of some lay people in the Church than of some clergy. This is something that no one would accept at Vatican II.

So, we have a lay Catholic laity that are much more fragmented and divided along social and economic lines, ethnic lines, national lines. Nationalism is infiltrating Catholicism, and it is remixing a lot of what it means to be in favor of a lay-driven church or a clerical church. So, it's a much more divided laity. If you want to change the Church, you cannot count on the existence of one laity. It has become a political market, in some sense. You cannot assume that being a lay people means something automatically in terms of change.

Also, because one of the major changes from the Second Vatican Council is that, now, lay people in the Catholic Church, without the issue of gender, means nothing. It means nothing.

I would like to quote, "It's the A-gender." The agenda means nothing without the gender issue, which is something that is never part of any debate at the Second Vatican Council. It's still too early, because Vatican II closes before 1968, which is when a few things explode, including the gender issue in the Catholic Church.

In the church of Vatican II and of the 1970s-80s, if you ask a bishop or pope, what do you in mind for your typology the profile of the lay people in the Church? It's still fundamentally a white, Anglo-European person. Today, this is the minority in the Catholic Church globally, and that means a number of things that we don't know what they mean, actually.

So, here, there is the theology of the lay of Vatican II. And until recently, it is dominated by this idea that there is a kind of way, of style, of being a lay member of the Church that echoes or mirrors or reminds us of a certain ethics of citizenship, of being a citizen.

Now, the collapse of political representation, the collapse of our trust in the political institutions, in the judiciary—I'm not saying anything else—has enormous consequences, because it's the same Catholic laity. It's the same Catholic laity in this and other countries.

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So, it is much more complicated. Much more complicated, also, because at Vatican II, there is a fundamental consensus as to the fact that the Church lives in this world and there is no real idea until recently that the Church can escape this world. If you have followed the Catholic debate these last couple of years, I don't know if you have heard of this book and of this debate on the Benedict option, which is the idea that the only survival for the Church is to retreat from the world. This is also interesting because this is an idea that comes from Catholic lay people, who suddenly think they will all want to become monks, again on Twitter, because this is ... [Laughter.] So, this is a new face of the Catholic laity.

I say this just to give you an idea of how complicated it is to make easy assumptions on what is the clerical identity and what is the lay identity. In some sense, this may be the beginning of a return to the earlier centuries, to the pre-5th century. So, it's not an accident that you talk about financial transparency, because this is how everything begins: two orders of Christians. We may go back to a church where it is already like this today, where the fact of wearing a collar or being married says almost nothing about your Catholicism, because this is what it is. It says almost nothing about your ideas, your theology, your lifestyle.

As you know, there are bishops and priests and cardinals that lead a much more glamorous lifestyle than me with two small kids. I can assure you—much more glamorous. So, whether it's legal and moral or not, it's secondary. My life, with two small kids, four and seven, is much more monastic—[laughter]—I can assure you. And this is not just me; it's the vast majority of Catholic parents. So, it says almost nothing if you're ordained or not. It says something in a liturgical setting, and even more in terms of who holds power. But, essentially, what kind of a Church you want, you have to ask many more questions.

So, what do we do with this? I think this—that we need to be sure that we cannot limit our debate on [whether] the theology of the Second Vatican Council on the laity and the rest, was it good or bad. This is part of the ... tradition. We need to build something on that tradition. But we cannot spend much time saying, was it good or bad, because it is a distraction.

I think the Catholic laity in the Church of today in this crisis has to reclaim not roles or functions that are not there, yet, but to reclaim spaces that are there already. So, here—and I think that an organization like Voice of the Faithful has provided a very important example of this—we need to make the best possible use of what is there already without making abstract claims.

I think that the present crisis has reshaped the agenda of the Catholic Church of now and of the next decade. I think that this Church is in survival mode in some sense, because, as I said before, this is the most serious crisis since the Reformation.

The Church survived the Reformation but in a very different way, and I think we are at this moment. So, there is no question that the future of the Catholic Church is in the hands of the lay people. My impression is that the lay people can be successful in fulfilling the mission it has. It's going to be more effective without making abstract claims, and it will be more effective reclaiming spaces that are available in the constitution of the Catholic Church—the constitution not as a document, but in the order of the Catholic Church. Because what we see is that the chaos in the Catholic Church today can be used for destruction or for rebuilding.

And this is, if there will be destruction or rebuilding, it will depend on what kind of action the Catholic laity will take, because in this Church history, the role of the hierarchy and of the papacy and of the Vatican has historically been much more about reaction and response to something that happens in the Church, much more than action to solve problems.

So, we have a distorted view, I think, of the papacy in this last century or so because of the media. We think that everything happens there. It happens there, but mostly, in Church history,

it is the papacy reacting to something happening with the lay people, in the empire, on the periphery, and

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so on. This is, I think, a fundamental dynamic of the Catholic Church. I don't think we can expect actions that come from there right now. They can come from us and can come from you.

We should keep this in mind in terms of what reaction will be triggered by our action. That's how I see that. It may be seen as vague advice, like drink a glass of water in the morning because it's good. It sounds like that. But I am trying to limit my remarks this morning to what cannot work and what hasn't worked in these last few decades than about what to do. I think we can talk about this now in the debate.

So, I thank you for your patience. [Applause.]

## Q&A Period

Q: When Father Orsi spoke to us many years ago, he mentioned that basically the governance or structure of the Church followed the public by about 200 years. Do you think that is still true? Are we in the 1600s, the 1800s, or are we really still back in the Middle Ages?

MF: It's very hard to disagree with Father Orsi, who's one of my good friends, and I don't disagree. There are clearly some aspects of the way the Church is governed; that is, before we accepted the idea, for example, of the separation of powers. This is not yet there. So, that is certainly true. The Catholic Church has accepted constitutional ideas for the political behavior or ideas of Catholics in the secular realities, but not within the Catholic Church. So this is certainly true.

I think there is something new that came up in these last few years, which is the very strong push to see the Catholic Church as a corporation. I'm not saying this just to defend Pope Francis, because he's not the CEO of the Catholic Church. That is one problem. And it's the minimal problem. But the major problem is that if you accept the corporatization of the Catholic Church, you will have a Church enslaved to money. And what's going on right now is that there are some groups, especially in this country, who are literally trying to buy the Catholic Church. [Applause.] So, this is dangerous, because, as we all know, capitalism is promiscuous. It is going to bed with everyone.

The Catholic Church, I think, now, is facing this. So, the big problem is, how to respond against the sex abuse crisis with accountability and transparency, justice system and so on, without becoming a victim of the corporate vision of the Catholic Church? Because this would also mean that there will be churches in the global Catholic Church that would become enslaved to the Catholic churches where there's money. This is what's going to happen.

So, I would complement what Father Orsi said. He's totally right.

Q: [Inaudible.]

MF: We need to change the governance model, I believe, without falling into a corporate model. So, how to do that is way beyond my "pay grade," so to speak, but this is the problem. Because we cannot make the jump from a medieval idea to a post-modern Google/Apple idea, because I think that would be destructive of the most defenseless in the Catholic Church. This is my concern. Because those who are trying to buy the Catholic Church are not doing that for moral reasons, but because they want to shape the Catholic Church according to their model of what the Church is, which is driven by a certain capitalistic idea. And I think it would be bad, because it's, first of all, unfaithful to the Gospel, and it would have enormous consequences.

Q: I've got a few questions here that have to do with the fruitful spaces available to us right now. You mentioned that the lay folks need to fill the spaces that are available. Could you tell us a little bit more about what you think those spaces here?

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MF: Sure. Here, one of the big changes that happens between Vatican II and now, especially because of Pope Francis, is that Francis said, we have talked for 50 years about the collegiality in the Catholic Church, collegial church, which means that bishops have to work together. And Pope Francis says, we don't need just that; we need a synodal church where it is not really important at the synodality level who is a bishop, who is a priest, and who is a layperson. He said that many times. What hasn't happened so far is the invitation of making our local churches more synodal. So here, I think Catholic laity have a responsibility to ask from the bishops to open a synod in the churches. And they are terrified because they don't know what they're going to get—first. And second, they're terrified because they don't know what's going to happen on the front of the criminal justice against them.

So, the laity have the right to live in a synodal church. I think it would be necessary to ask formally of every bishop and every parish priest, we want to have moments and spaces when the lay people can talk and can talk not just for show, but can talk to be listened to for something to change. This is not happening because all of the bishops, or most of them, were appointed in this last 20, 30 years, exactly because of their opposition to their model of the Church. This is the conundrum. The Church right now has to work with this cohort, officials that were raised, chosen, and promoted because they are against a collegial church.

On the other hand, they know they are in the weakest possible spot in the Catholic Church right now. So, I know that you can count right now on a sympathetic press, and I think there should be formal public requests. And I don't know if it takes more courage for them to say yes or to say no—honestly. If you say yes, you don't know what you're going to get, and it may be bad. If you say no, you're sure it's going to be bad, right? [Laughter.]

Q: Do you have any ideas on how Voice of the Faithful or the laity can provoke the ordained to abandon clericalism?

MF: How many days do I have? [Laughter.] The problem is this—I've just said something that reflects my opinion on most of the bishops today. The real problem is that the young generation of priests tend to be even more clerical. [At] this moment is a clash between those who want to have a less clerical church and not the status quo. Because the status quo doesn't exist anymore, basically. It's between those who want to go back to the 1950s, or the 1950s, or the 1350s, right? This is the problem.

I think we have a right to be furious with our bishops and so on. [But] let's not be fooled by the idea that the next generation will necessarily be more open to this. In the Catholic Church, many things do not need permission. I think that especially in a church like in the U.S., where there is a very strong sense of citizenship, of ownership, of the Church, it's less clerical than in Italy, for example—my own country. I can assure you.

So, we cannot have, as a goal, to replace formally all these bishops and priests. I'm reluctant to that—not because it's utterly impracticable, I think, but because that's not the point. I think that those bishops who covered up and abused, they should absolutely [be removed]. I would limit myself to this without making of that fight against the bishops an ideological one, because I don't see that as a battle that we can win.

We have to demonstrate that the Church lives without them, or survives without them, on the one side. And on the other side, there is the job of theologians like me making a case for the unsustainability of a model where only bishops or priests can manage finances. It's a very confused moment. If you look at the young generation of seminarians, it's hard.

Q: Right. I see them. They're in cassocks and everything, which is definitely turning back the clock. The role of women and their money—how can we make that make a change to the Church? You mentioned the issue of gender, and the issue of women comes up all the time. And women probably have the money—Catholic money. How can women make their voices heard with their money or by withholding their money?

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Is that going to have any impact at all?

MF: Of course. Very briefly, here. I think there is, politically, in the Catholic Church today, much more consensus on the fact that we need to have more transparency, accountability, and so on, and lay voices where decisions are made. This is something where I see a large consensus across the ideological spectrum. I think it would be bad for that issue to match that with broader claims about women priests, for example, on which there is no consensus in the Catholic Church, right now. I'm totally in favor and on the record on women deacons. I think it should happen tomorrow morning. [Applause.] There's no question. Women priesthood, the issue right now, would automatically alienate large portions of the Catholic Church.

If we want to be realistic, this is my assessment. So, here, there is no ideological or theological objection to the fact that women should sit on boards. And this is something where I believe there is a space in this moment to make that case, which is one of those decisions, again, that when saying yes may be dangerous, but if you say no, it's a PR disaster. I believe this is one of those issues where there is the most space as compared to others, I guess.

Q: Can we use a different term besides laity? Is there a different term we should be using?

MF: Yes, we should use "Christian." [Applause.] It's an old debate. The whole issue at the Second Vatican Council was, are lay people Christians, fully Christian, like the ordained? So that was 50 years ago. Right now, the theological consensus is [that] all Catholics, even the ordained, they are lay people, they have some lay component in them. All of the ordained are lay people, have a lay component.

Q: Well, before they were ordained, they were lay.

MF: Well, before, but it's not something you leave. Being lay comes from your baptism, and that never leaves you. So, here, we should use 'laity' only when we talk about canonical issues, canon law, right? So where is power? But functionally, in terms of ministry, of testimony, we should use 'Christian.' This is an easy answer for a very complex issue. But the theology of the laity is 20th century, and I think it should be used in quotes now.

Q: So, 'Christian' refers to a whole broad spectrum of different churches. Is that any point of confusion?

MF: Well, if you don't want to use 'Christian,' I would say 'witness of Jesus of Christ' or 'testimony of Jesus Christ,' but Christian" is something that should be more visible than your being lay or ordained. I think we should limit our discussion on the laity when we talk about the institutional questions of power and authority. There, canon law is still binding. But theologically, that division between the lay people and the ordained has been blurred for decades. Who is more lay between me and the president of a Jesuit university? Have you seen his apartment? [Laughter.] In terms of lifestyle and of personal spirituality, this is largely irrelevant right now—whether you are a lay or an ordained person. This is gone. This is worse than medieval; it's archaeological. [Laughter.]

Q: Are you sure the demographic tipping point on the majority of the Church is white European, or was that late? And I think you had mentioned that that was—I've forgotten which century in which you mentioned that was happening.

MF: Well, I'm not an expert on this. It's clear that the majority of the Catholic laity, if not already, it's going to be very soon in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Q: So that's the next question. The Church is increasingly becoming a non-white church. How do we learn the skills to live and share the power? Because the white church may not have as many people but it has a lot of the money, and yet the bigger portion of the Church is not.

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MF: Well, I can just tell you that the problem is that this Catholic Church lives in a more globalized world. It's a more globalized church, where different national geo-cultural identities have now more difficulties to communicate than before. We have become more fragmented than before. The churches tend to become a bit more nationalistic or national than before.

But this question is still right in saying that there is a lot of learning that is not taking place. I go every year for a few weeks to Australia, for example, to teach. And it's a fairly similar culture to the Irish Catholicism. But it's a totally different Catholic culture. It's very different. And I've learned a lot from them.

For example, in terms of how to get out of this abuse mess in the United States, I think we should learn something from Australia, actually. Do some of the things that they have done, the USCCB, for example, they should do something, and this is not happening. And so this is a key point, I believe.

Q: How is the Church in Australia so different from ours?

MF: Well, there is no separation between church and state. This is a constitutional difference.

Q: What do you mean, no separation between church and state?

MF: Well, most countries in the world have no separation between church and state. The U.S. is an exception, in a sense. [Australia is] different in the sense that it has become much more open to a multi-cultural, indigenous Catholic culture of the native aboriginals, so this is very different. It has huge problems, but the difference is that intra-Catholic debate is not dominated by the two-party system that has become typical of the U.S. Church. So, in this country, the two-party system in Congress has basically produced a two-party Church. This is something that you don't have [in Australia]—yet. We'll see.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Australian Church, appointed by the Australian bishops, had been run by a lay person, Frank Sullivan. The plenary council that they are preparing for 2020-2021 has as an executive committee where lay people are the majority right now. Just to give you a few ideas.

Q: Thank you. So, one last question, because we're just about out of time, and of course, this is the million-dollar question. As long as the Church continues to collect money from us, are they ever going to be compelled to listen or motivated to change? And the question that always comes up is, I like what my parish does, I don't want to stop funding my parish or the good works that they do and the ability for me to go to mass, but I really don't feel comfortable giving money to the Church that's going to wind up at the diocese and be used in coverups, etc.

MF: This is a complicated question. I think here there should be a form of consensus objection in terms of giving money. This is something I totally agree with. On the other hand, I wouldn't be too confident in the fact that our refusing to give money to the Catholic Church can stop the system, because the system can find your money and my money 10 times, where they know already there is money for their agenda.

It must be something that is about a moral argument. We cannot think we can strangle the institution by withholding our money. It has to be that [but] together with a larger argument. Because, again, this is what's happening. All of these new watchdogs, anti-reform or reform-in-their-own-way Catholic groups have deep pockets, unlimited checkbooks, so this is not a problem. We need to use that argument because, for local churches, it's still important, but together with a moral argument and a theological argument that can only limit itself to that amount of dollars, I think.

Q: Thank you, Massimo. [Applause.] [End.]





# the BridgeDialogues

laity & clergy reimagining the church

A collaborative effort of Voice of the Faithful, FutureChurch, & Association of U.S. Catholic Priests

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## Discussion questions after viewing or reading Massimo Faggioli's talk

*After viewing Prof. Faggioli's talk and/or reading the transcript, use these questions—or those you devise on your own—as a way to begin the dialogue. Note that you may spread questions over multiple sessions or use these initial questions as springboards to later sessions and other questions about how clergy and lay people both experience and engender clericalism.*

1. What most surprised you about Prof. Faggioli's comments regarding Vatican II? Do you see lay people in the Church as simply "the non-ordained"?
2. Were you surprised to learn that the original distinction between lay and ordained was an administrative separation rather than a sacramental one? Does that affect your understanding of "proper roles" today for priests and parishioners?
3. Which would have the strongest positive effect on reducing clericalism: seeing both clergy and laity sharing the status of "priestly people," or seeing both as sharing a similar status because they are "the baptized"?
4. Prof. Faggioli says groups trying to promote a corporate model for the Church set up a Church "enslaved to money." Would a corporate Church have any effect on the clericalism already embedded in the hierarchy, or is it just a newer version of the older administrative model that feeds clericalism?
5. What would be your first "prescription" for the Church to curb clericalism? Can you take steps towards that goal today?

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## What Pope Francis has to say about clericalism

1. "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 condemn-

ing today. To say 'no' to abuse is to say an emphatic 'no' to all forms of clericalism." (Letter to the People of God, August 20, 2019 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180820\\_lettera-popolo-didio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html))

*Question: How do you respond to Pope Francis saying "that clericalism (is) an approach that not only nullifies the character of Christianity but also tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people"?*

2. "Clericalism, far from giving impetus to various contributions and proposals, gradually extinguishes the prophetic flame to which the entire Church is called to bear witness in the heart of her peoples. Clericalism forgets that the visibility and sacramentality of the Church belong to all the People of God not only to the few chosen and enlightened." ([http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160319\\_pont-comm-america-latina.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160319_pont-comm-america-latina.html))

*Question: How do you respond to Pope Francis stating that "clericalism forgets that the visibility and sacramentality of the Church belongs to all the People of God, not only to the few chosen and enlightened"?*

3. "Leaders of the Church have often been Narcissus, flattered and sickeningly excited by their courtiers. The court is the leprosy of the papacy. Sometimes when I meet a cleric, I suddenly become anti-clerical. Clericalism shouldn't have anything to do with Christianity." (2013 Interview in La Repubblica at <https://snd->

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denjpic.org/2013/10/05/pope-francis-the-court-is-the-leprosy-of-the-papacy/)

*Question: Have you ever shared the experience of Pope Francis that "sometimes when I meet a cleric I suddenly become anti-clerical"? If so, describe your experience.*

4. "Clericalism, my dear ones, is our ugliest perversion. The Lord wants you to be shepherds; shepherds of the people, not clerics of the state." (Pope Francis meeting with seminarians from the Sicilian coastal city of Agrigento on November 24, 2018, <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2018/11/26/clericalism-is-ugly-perversion-pope-tells-seminarians/>)

*Question: What do you think of Pope Francis telling seminarians that "Clericalism is our ugliest perversion" and "the Lord wants us to be shepherds of the people and not clerics of the state."?*

5. "There is that spirit of clericalism in the Church, that we feel: clerics feel superior; clerics distance themselves from the people. Clerics always say: 'this should be done like this, like this, like this, and you – go away!' It happens "when the cleric doesn't have time to listen to those who are suffering, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned: the evil of clericalism is a really awful thing; it is a new edition of this ancient evil [of the religious 'authorities' lording it over others]." But 'the victim is the same: the poor and humble people, who await the Lord.'"

~Homily in Casa Santa Marta, December 13, 2016

*Question for priests: Have you ever caught yourself as a cleric thinking as Pope Francis states "this should be done like this, like this, like this and you- go away...when the cleric (you) doesn't have time to listen to those who are suffering, the poor, the sick? Or have you noticed this in others/*

6. "A clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making." ~Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*

*Question: Pope Francis affirms that "a clear awareness of the responsibility of the laity..." may be rooted in their "not being given the formation needed" or "because ...room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to excessive clericalism." Have you been aware of these issues and dealt with them and if so how?*

7. "But I often think of Jesus knocking on the door, but from inside, because we [do not] let him go out,



There is that spirit of clericalism in the Church, that we feel: clerics feel superior; clerics distance themselves from the people. Clerics always say: ‘this should be done like this, like this, like this, and you – go away!’ It happens when the cleric doesn’t have time to listen to those who are suffering, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned: the evil of clericalism is a really awful thing; it is a new edition of this ancient evil [of the religious ‘authorities’ lording it over others. But the victim is the same: the poor and humble people, who await the Lord.

because we often, without witness, hold him prisoner to our formalities, our closures, our selfishness, our clerical way of life. And clericalism, which is not just clerics, is an attitude that affects all of us: clericalism is a perversion of the Church. Jesus teaches us this path of exit from ourselves, the path of witness. And this is the scandal – because we are sinners! – that we do not go out of ourselves to give testimony.”

~Meeting with young Italians, August 11, 2018

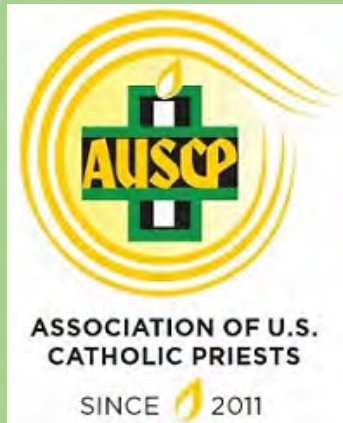
*Question: Have you ever thought as Pope Francis thinks “ of Jesus knocking on the door but from inside, because we don’t let him go out because we hold him prisoner to our formalities, selfishness, our clerical way of life.” If so, when and what did you do about the situation?*

8. “The lack of consciousness of belonging to God’s faithful people as servants, and not masters, can lead us to one of the temptations that is most damaging to the missionary outreach that we are called to promote: clericalism, which ends up as a caricature of the vocation we have received. A failure to realize that the mission belongs to the entire Church, and not to the individual priest or bishop, limits the horizon, and even worse, stifles all the initiatives that the Spirit may be awakening in our midst. Let us be clear about this. The laypersons are not our peons, or our employees. They don’t have to parrot back whatever we say. Clericalism, far from giving impetus to various contributions and proposals, gradually extinguishes the prophetic flame to which the entire Church is called to bear witness. Clericalism forgets that the visibility and the sacramentality of the Church belong to all the faithful people of God (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 9-14), not only to the few chosen and enlightened.”[2]  
~Meeting with the bishops of Chile during apostolic trip to Chile, January 16, 2018

*Question: Have you ever noticed in yourself or other clerics that a “lack of consciousness of belonging to God’s faithful people as servants and not masters can lead us to one of the temptations that is most damaging to the missionary outreach that we are called to promote, clericalism which ends up as a caricature of the vocation we have received.”? If so, what have you done or not done about it?*

9. "If we hope for a new and living chapter of faith in this [Latin American] continent, we will not get it without women. Please, do not let them be reduced to servants of our ingrained clericalism. For they are on the front lines of the Latin American Church, in their setting out with Jesus, in their persevering amid the sufferings of their people, in their clinging to the hope that conquers death, and in their joyful way of proclaiming to the world that Christ is alive and risen. I would like to repeat something I recently said to the Pontifical Commission for Latin America. It is imperative to overcome the clericalism that treats the *Christifideles laici* as children and impoverishes the identity of ordained ministers."  
~Address to Conference of Latin American Bishops, September 7, 2017

*Question: What do you think of Pope Francis affirming that " if we hope for a new and living chapter of faith in this (Latin American) continent we will not get it without women.." and "do not let them be reduced to servants of our ingrained clericalism."? Is this true in your country and what do you want to do about it?*



## ***Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism***

**Produced by the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests in collaboration with Voice of the Faithful and lay people and clergy across the nation; endorsed by FutureChurch.**

# ***Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism***

Presented at the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests National Assembly, June 2019

## **Dedicated to:**

- All baptized persons who suffer because of the evil of clericalism
- All ordained priests who humbly serve God's people
- All the faithful who help baptized and ordained priests to be human, Christian, and priestly

## **Document Editors: Fr. Kevin Clinton and Donna B. Doucette**

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## **Special Thanks**

We are indebted to the people who shared with us their first-hand stories about experiencing clericalism and allowed us to use them. The stories were edited for grammar and length. We selected the stories (there are many others) that best illustrated a particular behavior. We do not identify the individuals in the stories because our aim is not to “call out” anyone for their actions but to demonstrate the ubiquity of clericalism in Church structure. Almost every story selected had at least one similar to it, if not identical, in its specifics but from a different parish, another diocese, a different region in the country. Clericalism in our Church today is global.

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## Preface

When we were asked to prepare a document about clericalism within the Church, we quickly realized that our challenges would be two-fold. One was the sheer volume of books, articles, editorials, and pronouncements on the topic. What could we say that would help advance the literature already available? What new perspectives or visions could we offer to move forward on efforts to confront and root out clericalism?

Our other challenge was to produce a document that would “ring true” with both clergy and laity. Could we help us all to see the problem clearly and begin to recognize its manifestations? Could we frame the discussion so as to encourage clergy and laity together to confront actions and attitudes that contribute to clericalism?

To answer the challenges, our writing team of priests and lay people chose an experiential approach, one that speaks from our own experiences within the Catholic Church. Some of us come from the Association of United States Catholic Priests (AUSCP), another from the Voice of the Faithful (VOTF), others from years of engagement with the life and the ministries of a Catholic faith community. We have all lived within and interacted with many others in the ecclesial environment of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. We also reached out beyond ourselves and asked other clergy and lay people for their stories about encounters that illustrate clericalism and its effects. We do not identify the individuals in these stories because our aim is not to single out anyone for their actions but to demonstrate the ubiquity of clericalism in Church structure.

As we note in our document, “We typically encounter clericalism as an *experience*.” Using only scholarly definitions and explanations when discussing clericalism cannot communicate this lived experience of clericalism in the Church. To fully understand clericalism, we also must hear the voices of those who experience abuse of power by someone whose role is to accompany others on their spiritual journeys, and we must hear the voices of the ordained for whom lay expectations may be unrealistic and exceed their human capacity. It is this element, personal experiences “at the roots,” that we hope to add to the academic, historical, and theological writings on the topic.

We convey these experiences through stories selected to illustrate points we are making. The value of this approach was demonstrated when we sent the draft paper out to selected clergy and lay people for review. For some, the stories resonated with their own experiences and they could add examples of their own. This correlated with our own discovery that for each point we chose to illustrate, there were multiple reports from which to select.

Other reviewers called a few stories “odd” or “extreme,” or said it must have occurred long ago because no one would do this today. This reaction, too, could be expected—we all generalize from our particular experiences and some of us are fortunate to live within a faith community where clericalism has been muted. However, sad to say, the testimony we use does come from today’s Church, not yesterday’s, and for each selected testimony there are others like it.

We hope that our words help us all rise to the challenge of today in confronting and ultimately removing as many vestiges as possible of the clericalism that harms us all.

## **Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism**

All human systems, without exception, exhibit both functional and dysfunctional characteristics. Systems analysts, whatever methodology they apply to resolving dysfunctions, note particular difficulties when the system in question has “wicked problems” (also called adaptive challenges and, sometimes, “messes”). Such systems have multiple stakeholders, numerous uncertainties, complex interactions, and a tangled web of power centers and political issues—a description that surely matches the situation we face in the Church today.

Our document aims to address the key component fueling that dysfunction: clericalism. We do so by adapting one of the strategies for addressing “messes”: listening to those who live within the dysfunctional system, hearing their experiences, and thus, we hope, empowering us all to become the agents of the changes needed.

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From the “Letter to the People of God” by Pope Francis; August 20, 2018:

*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. ... 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.*

At a meeting of Boston area regional Voice of the Faithful representatives, Our Lady Help of Christians Parish Hall, Newton MA, 2003:

*In 2003, parishioners throughout Boston gathered almost weekly to discuss responses to the continuing revelations of child sex abuse by clergy. At one such meeting, a gentleman brought a priest friend who was to talk about the issues he faced because of the abuse scandal. During the gathering, people turned to the question of how best to support the survivors who had suffered as well as the many priests who were not guilty of crimes. One lady, explaining why she was attending, said, “We must fix this because we are the Church.” The guest priest immediately interrupted and in a loud voice declared, “YOU are not the Church!” Pointing to himself and to his Roman collar, he said, “WE are the Church!”*

When displayed so clearly, we can easily recognize the clericalism Pope Francis denounces. We also know well what tends to happen when lay people encounter such clericalism. They find another parish; they leave the Church; they never speak up again in meetings with priests; they abdicate all decision-making to the priest; they become audiences rather than participants in the parish’s life and sideline observers within the Church. Or all of the above. They abdicate their baptismal responsibilities.

Equally damaging are the effects of clericalism on the priest: overwork, isolation, loneliness, unrelieved stress, the expectation that he and he alone will handle all the parish business and be responsible for all the parish problems. Other impacts—mental and physical health problems, addictive behavior, and other stress-related illnesses—may be less obvious immediately, but the tolls are well-known within the Church as are the most egregious of the excesses that clericalism has enabled: predatory sexual behavior by the clergy and coverups by bishops as well as by some members of the faithful.

Less obvious, but perhaps more insidious, are the ways clericalism permeates the entire structure of the Church, separating lay people from clergy, ordinary clergy from bishops, and all of us from the many-layered Vatican bureaucracy that so often seems out of touch with the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Clericalism creates a façade behind which serious systemic problems are minimized, hidden, and sometimes completely denied.

This paper will consider the dysfunction of clericalism and the ways it interferes with the generosity and service that ordained people offer to the faith community. We also consider the ways clericalism damages the spiritual growth of lay people, and how it hampers the roles both clergy and lay must play for the Church to fully accomplish its mission.

We look at both sides: the clerical culture and training that give rise to clericalism in the clergy, and the attitudes of lay people that reinforce clericalism. Together, their behaviors help segregate the clergy as “other” and “above” rather than positioning us properly in complementary roles participating in the mission of Christ and the Church. We illustrate such behaviors primarily through anecdotal testimony reported in this paper.

Ultimately, this paper aims to illuminate how clericalism corrupts and frustrates what the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit intend for the Church of our time. By raising the consciousness of both ordained and lay people, we may become more purposeful and effective in confronting the seductive and toxic power of clericalism in today’s Church.

## **Experiencing Clericalism**

We must first grapple with a definition of clericalism, because defining a problem is the key to addressing its resolution. Entire books have been devoted to describing clericalism. Yet no one definition or book contains the entire truth. Clericalism permeates our ecclesiology and fosters numerous grave problems, each worth detailed examination. For purposes of this paper, we will simply underline what most definitions of clericalism include: an expectation, leading to abuses of power, that ordained ministers are better than and should rule over everyone else among the People of God.

Our goals are to reduce as much as humanly possible any trace of clericalism within ourselves, to help others understand clericalism and guard against its encroachment in their own lives, and to join with all the baptized in rooting out behaviors that spread clericalism and weaken our already damaged Church. We already can easily identify clericalism when a priest declares that he and his fellow priests are “the Church”—no matter how we define the word “clericalism.”

More difficult are the subtle influences clericalism wields on all of us. These lie most often at the level of experiences, not cerebral assessments.

**We typically encounter clericalism as an *experience*** (there is no seminary class entitled “Clericalism and How to Acquire It”). We feel it during a meeting at the parish, in remarks during or after Mass, in an assumption that of course Father never picks up the tab, in the total silence before a meeting if someone other than Father is asked to pray, in the expectation that a priest will be perfect at all times and always have the answer to any problem. Bishops experience it when they learn that assistants, priests, and lay people will tell them only what they think the bishop wants to hear, not what he needs to hear or should hear—people often censor their true opinions when speaking with bishops, or with priests.

The social system that governs these experiences, like all social systems, is complex and multi-leveled and has “rules.” Most of these rules play out unconsciously in the lives of the members who live within a system. When a social system is in crisis, when it faces great change, its members often respond by working harder to enforce its rules and by censoring those it deems are “breaking the rules.” This censoring, or demand for orthodox behavior, occurs even when the rules are clearly failing and the system is in crisis.

Today, the Church is in crisis and the unconscious rules that drive its social system are failing. Those who confront the *status quo* of the Church’s clerical structure should not be surprised that leaders of the *status quo* and those uncomfortable with change show alarm—they may resist the obvious and tend to address the crisis by trying to enforce the system’s rules more rigorously or to assert rules that no longer work or apply.

Nor should we assume that resistance to addressing the problems in our failing system comes only from Church leaders, or the hierarchy, or the clergy and laity who dislike change. Those who demand change without also seeking the “conversion of activity” cited by Pope Francis set up impediments too. **We all participate in the system *status quo*, whether we resist its rules or we conform.**

We must all take responsibility for confronting and minimizing the problems because all of us, lay and ordained, contribute to conditions that allow clericalism to infect the Church. These contributions emerge, often unconsciously and unexamined, from our cultural heritage.

A culture tells us what to value, how to behave, and to whom we should listen. From *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood* by George B. Wilson, S.J.:

*In large areas of our lives we act the way we do because we have taken on the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of people who held significance for us ... The expected attitudes and behaviors of a particular culture can become so powerful that it becomes all but impossible for its members to even conceive of other ways of being. The culture becomes ... imprinted in the psyche, making other ways of organizing life to appear not just as other but as threats to the stability generated by the normative culture. ...*

*It would be a fatal mistake to view a clerical culture as being generated only by its clergy. Like any other culture, the clerical culture is the product of everyone affected by—or implicated in—its continuance.*

When we strive to identify clericalism and its conditions, to address unexamined behaviors, we can begin to see particular examples arising from our own experiences, as these stories show:

*A longtime Catholic school teacher, somewhat overweight, always wore pantsuits rather than dresses or skirts when ministering at Mass. One day the pastor awaited her arrival in the sacristy and said she must now wear dresses at Mass. She replied that she did not feel comfortable in dresses and in fact owned no dresses or skirts. The next day in her mailbox at school, she found \$50 in an envelope from the pastor—to buy a dress. She no longer ministered at Mass while he was pastor.*

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*An associate pastor told the new deacon that he was to serve him, the priest, not the parish family. He was to be available at all times to the priest.*

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*In his Sunday homily, the pastor noted that his Catholic school teachers had just received a raise, so he expected to see a substantial increase in their weekly offering.*

What impelled the ordained priests in these anecdotes to behave as they did? Perhaps a sense of entitlement that began in their family of origin, was reinforced during seminary formation, and then left unchecked during their early days of ordained ministry. Excessive concern about appearances and what is “owed” the ordained probably contributed.

On the other hand, the priests in these anecdotes also could be described as “simply jerks.” Yet we should not excuse clericalism as a factor in *being a jerk*. When priests, and lay people, judge such actions to be *normal* behavior, their acceptance stems from the sub-cultural reservoir of clericalism.

When clericalism plays out in the **lives of the ordained**, they display an attitude and a belief contrary to the Gospel, i.e., that the ordained are the real Christians and everyone else is kind of second class. Teachings about ontological change in the very being of a priest feed this attitude.

For priest, deacon, or bishop, the consequences of such behavior and attitudes can be isolation, an inability to listen to or understand others, an excessive deference to “chains of command” rather than to Gospel truths. As a corollary, the cleric with this attitude diminishes and judges as unimportant many very real and vulnerable persons he encounters. Such attitudes and behaviors are subtle and unconscious. They are especially difficult to discern in oneself. They even may seem to be logical applications of a “rule.” For example:

*It was a parish's tradition that during the Our Father at Mass everyone would hold hands. The altar servers would go to the altar to hold the celebrant's hands during the prayer. A visiting priest refused the servers' hands and afterwards said that he never lets anyone touch him or his hands before or during Mass. He said his hands are sacred because they hold the host and the wine, consecrating it into the Body and Blood of Jesus. Therefore, he would not hold hands with anyone or even shake hands with anyone prior to or during the Mass.*

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*A Director of Religious Education (DRE) preparing students for Confirmation held an instructional meeting for details about the sacrament. Afterwards, a parent asked if her daughter could be the sponsor for her son because the two were very close. Unfortunately, her daughter would be 16 one week after confirmation and therefore technically, by seven days, too young to be a sponsor. When the DRE shared the situation with the pastor and said she had suggested that it would be permissible, the pastor refused: "If you go down to get your driver's license before you're of age, they won't let you get your license. So why should the Church make such an allowance?" When the DRE tried to explain why the girl should be approved (the Confirmation date each year is schedule-dependent, not a required date), the pastor turned and walked away. The discussion was over.*

The assumption that the ordained may set rules at will, demand a separatism from the non-ordained, and dictate codes of dress reinforces the barriers that too often separate the faithful into "ordained" and "everyone else." Similar barriers—ones created naturally in any hierarchy—separate Vatican officials from bishops and bishops from priests. Indeed, the latter separation, dubbed *hierarchicalism* by those studying its effects, is seen as a "hyper version" of the clericalism that infests the Church. Rev. Mark Slatter described that version in an article ("Clerical identity crisis: Flock and pasture can't tell shepherd who he is," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 11, 2019):

*Hierarchical culture is the gold carrot for those predisposed to its allurements. In its crassest forms, it not only seems unbreakable but comes with a breathtaking lack of shame over its paraded grotesqueries of entitlement, aristocratic airs, and blind ambition ... The psychology makes people incapable of rousing themselves from the false values propping up the illusory self-image; an inner Rubicon is crossed where it lacks the quality of temptation, as something I ought to wrestle with. After several decades, too much of the self has been invested in a specific way of being human.*

**For lay people**, clericalism can be equally subtle. It can stifle personal faith development and spiritual growth, prevent a full investment in the life of the parish, encourage an over-deference to the power of the ordained: "Father is always right"; "Father must always lead prayers"; "I depend on you, Father, to get me to heaven."

*On the first Sunday of Advent, a priest inadvertently donned a green vestment and presided at the early Sunday morning Mass. After the Mass, an anxious sacristan drew the priest's attention to a purple vestment that had been dry-cleaned in anticipation of the season. (There were several other purple vestments in the closet as well, so the priest had his pick but chose the green.) The sacristan was most apologetic and anxious when she showed Father the purple vestment, because she said she knew that someone like herself should never correct a priest—in her early years of service, a priest had once sternly instructed her so. (This priest, however, accepted the correction with grace and gratitude.)*

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*Some of our older parishioners almost worship their clergy. Whatever Father wants, that's the way it's going to be. Father doesn't like chocolate cake so we only order white cakes. Father doesn't like to see people with bulletins during Mass so we hide the bulletins before Mass and no one can have one until Mass is over. The older parishioners give Father or Deacon big hugs and tell him, "Oh I just love you so much. You are the best priest or Deacon we've ever had." When a new priest or Deacon comes along, they do and say the same thing to him.*

Clericalism in lay people also blocks the necessary feedback that helps keep the Church faithful to the gospel, and it blocks the feedback the ordained need to properly serve the community.

Within the lay-clergy relationship, clericalism casts clerics as a privileged fraternity whose sacred status guarantees them eternal protection from the reproaches of the world, even when they do wrong, and—equally—can lead lay people to an expectation that clergy will be perfect in all things at all times. Father is never allowed to just have a bad day.

Yet no matter how disordered our Catholic culture may become, its participants remain essential: the visible, clerical participants as well as the lay people whose participation may be less visible and even unacknowledged. We value and need the services of the ordained in order to form a vibrant Eucharistic community; the non-ordained constitute the bulk of that community and make their own contributions to its health.

If the social system bringing us together fails to meet our needs and instead favors power, privilege, and control, we must confront not only the effects of that dysfunction—secrecy, sex abuse, declining attendance at services, a dwindling number willing to call themselves Catholic, and so on—but also the foundational cause that enables these failures: the often unconscious culture of clericalism.

## Cultural Separation and the Ecclesial Structure

Priests typically live aside and apart from the people they serve. They are culturally and often physically far removed from the realities of the communities that surround them. They spend most of their adult lives in a clerical culture that dominates almost every facet of that life, from specified educational paths to socialization opportunities, from living conditions to financial remuneration, in working relationships restricted by oaths of obedience, and in an isolation enforced by mandated celibacy.

Cultural separation is not unique to the priesthood, of course, nor is culture necessarily a bad influence. The term “culture” itself applies to the interlocking forms of an organization’s life, whether that organization is a family, a corporation, a nation-state, or even a profession or trade.

Almost every profession has its own special culture, and that culture supports and protects its members, provides them with useful information, presents relevant educational opportunities—as examples, think of the cultures of police, doctors, and unions. These cultures have positive benefits for the members within the culture. At the same time, to those outside the culture and those who depend on them for services, the specialized cultures can be opaque and sometimes threatening. They also can evolve into damaging and harmful systems.

Within the Catholic Church, such evolution into damaging and harmful behavior is labeled clericalism: an overriding set of beliefs and actions in which the clergy are viewed as different, separate, and exempt from the norms, rules, and consequences that apply to everyone else.

Such attitudes can emerge easily within the Roman Catholic Church culture, because the culture has some characteristics that distinguish it from the cultures of other social systems:

- The hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the Church
- Papal allegiance
- An ordination said to confer an ontological change
- Special and separate education and training
- Celibacy requirements
- Clothing and dress—especially liturgical dress
- Special privileges concerning compensation and lifestyle

Although most organizations, especially nation-states, have hierarchical structures, many also have some checks and balances on power, e.g., separating the executive, the legislative, and the judicial powers. These can serve as brakes on excesses, on abuses, and on the tendencies of one activity center to eclipse another. The structures that work the best also permit outside and independent overview when corruption or law-breaking is suspected.

But in the Roman Catholic Church, all three powers have long been exercised by the pope and the Vatican Congregations that report directly to the pope, by bishops in their dioceses, and by



pastors in their parishes. Although the Second Vatican Council emphasized the collegiality of the bishops, a decentralization of authority, and an active and meaningful role for the laity, the predecessors of Pope Francis re-emphasized a centralized hierarchical authority.

Even after the latest adoption of a new Code of Canon Law, supreme authority rested with the Pope; administrative authority ostensibly flowed from the Pope but in fact most often rested with Cardinals and Vatican Curia officials; territorial authority rested with bishops; some limited territorial authority rested with pastors and priests. Lay input, as experienced today, is by invitation only, with no defined authority over even the smallest of decisions pertaining to a parish.

*A retiring pastor, recognizing the shortage of priests, suggested to the Bishop that he would stay as pastor as long as he was in good health, if the Bishop would appoint a lay administrator to handle the “business” of the parish. The bishop said no. If there was a priest there was no need for a lay administrator.*

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*Our priests are from a missionary order, and they try to support lay participation but they just can't see lay people being “in charge.” By virtue of his ordination, a priest is almost always in charge of the parish or worship community, even if a lay person would be immensely more qualified. In every instance, a church employee's boss is ultimately an ordained male. Younger or less experienced priests arrive who are immediately “the boss” in some capacity (even if they are not the pastor). The ordained are not only in a more secure position than established staff, they also automatically have more authority than staff.*

*Lay people always need to “lead from behind,” even if they are immensely more qualified to lead an activity.*

Within such a structure (all power residing in one small sector), the habits and behaviors of the rulers have few counterweights to curtail extremes. Its structure allows the leaders to produce authoritative decrees rather than attempt collaborative or collegial discernment. Clericalism has emerged from this structure and led to disastrous consequences. One of the most disastrous has been the enabling of clergy sexual abuse and its cover-up by the hierarchy.

Sometimes the damage inflicted remains hidden, because only the priest or deacon or staff involved know what happens. Sometimes it remains hidden because the impulse to avoid criticizing or condemning a cleric has become so inbred in Catholics, both cleric and lay.

*A man in his 70s admitted in the local hospital that when he was a teenager the priest in his rural parish had molested him for four years. Hospital medication had lowered his inhibitions and led him to tell the female hospital chaplain. The chaplain immediately informed the local Catholic pastor, who promptly informed the diocese. The Director for Safe Environment developed a plan to inform the rural parish community of the “reasonable report” that a*

*sexually abusing priest was in the parish 50 years ago—so that any others who had been molested could receive help if needed.*

*The Vicar General first contacted the current pastor of the rural parish and told him of the report. The current pastor, who had served the parish for more than 35 years and knew the now-deceased predator priest, opposed the Vicar General’s plan, saying, “Why upset the parish about something that happened so long ago? Maybe it was just this one person.”*

*The Vicar General ignored the pastor’s objections. When the faith community was informed of the report, there was a silence that betrayed that the secret was not restricted to just the victims. It was a secret known by more than a few within the community, for more than 50 years. Five more adults came forward and spoke confidentially to diocesan staff, saying they too had been molested by the same pastor 50 years ago. Each of them thought they were the only one sexually abused. None of them thought they could tell their parents or anyone else what had happened because as young children and teenagers they thought no one would believe them or they would be punished for lying.*

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*The parents of a 25-year-old son were leaving their home to celebrate the 25th Ordination Anniversary of the priest who had molested their son 10 years before. Before they left, he finally worked up the courage to tell his unknowing parents what had happened. His parents replied, “That’s OK, son; we forgive you.” Then they went to the celebration.*

These are the types of responses that ultimately led to so many headlines about clergy sex abuse this century. Report suppression, secrecy, and attributing blame to the victims stemmed from the dysfunction of clericalism. Investment in a belief that priests could do no wrong—or, if they did, news of such failure must never be revealed—allowed the rot to spread.

But there are other consequences as well, including those that damage priests who become isolated within the culture and those that damage our faith communities.

Jesus and His disciples modeled a very different type of structure for the Church, one of servant leadership. The imperial form we know today grew from later choices, made by humans.

## **An Imperial Hierarchy in a Modern World**

The Roman Church’s hierarchical system was designed to provide to a fledgling Church an authoritative presence in the Roman Empire. It succeeded in that ambition, and as the Church grew it adapted the same structure to the now-global Church. The development in the Church of this Roman imperial hierarchical structure essentially peaked somewhere during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

When Vatican II emerged, it was during an era when the entire world had begun to dismantle imperial structures. In that same vein, the Council brought attention to the role of lay people, and it called us to return to the earliest roots of the Church, to complementary roles. But while Vatican II sought to “open a window,” it did not directly address the historic structures the Church had borrowed from ancient Rome. The separation of clergy and laity persists, as does the clericalism that holds the culture in place.

Today, our system most closely mimics a feudal kingdom rather than the early Church’s community of faithful. The ecclesial structure favors and supports clerics (knights, dukes, kings/monsignors, bishops, cardinals)—especially those elevated to the level of bishops—at the expense of the entire People of God.

*A priest came to say Mass at a neighboring church and when introducing himself told the congregation that he was “King” in his parish and town. (The priest was serious.)*

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*At a pastoral council meeting, a new pastor told his council that he would not have anyone on the council who disagreed with him. He told them that Canon Law says that the pastor is in charge and therefore it’s his way on all matters. When it was brought to his attention that sometimes discussion can yield other options or opinions, he made it very clear that he would choose his council members and there was to be no opposition.*

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*The parish staff must learn and then use the technology platform chosen for the parish. But when a parish priest refuses to use that platform, the parish is expected to pay for alternative technology even if it doesn’t work with parish software.*

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*Several times we have had a priest who flat out refused to perform part of his job assignment. Nothing was done about it because the other priests in the house said, well, they had to live with him. To do the tasks refused by the priest, the pastor then hired a lay person without having funding for this additional staffing—and without reducing the compensation the priest and his religious order received, a reduction that could have offset the costs for the job he was no longer doing.*

When clericalism prevails at every level, the expectation is for clerical control, clerical recognition, and clerical benefit, with lay people marginalized. Within the clerical hierarchy, the expectation continues, as priests yield to bishops who yield to the Curia, who yield (supposedly) to the current Pope.

However, this centralization of authority, whether at the global or the local level, is not the greatest vulnerability of the Church's current structure. Its greatest weakness is the attempt to apply ancient and medieval sensibilities and culture to a 21<sup>st</sup> century world. The inhabitants of today's world are more educated, more mobile, more technologically empowered, and far more independent than the populace that existed when the Roman imperial structure was established. In earlier centuries, the clergy usually were the best educated in a community, with the strongest foundations in theology, scriptural studies, and liturgy. In modern nations, lay people with such degrees and training typically outnumber clergy. In earlier centuries, we could assume that clergy could handle all the business and administrative needs of the parish. In modern economies, it's the lay person who usually has the skills and training needed for such management tasks.

Despite these realities, the model of the priest as the sole "ruler" of a parish or a diocese persists within Church structure. Those who seek to adapt to more collegial practices rarely obtain ongoing support. A parish where the pastor encourages lay people to step into appropriate service roles and provide input for the parish's communal life can see that practice revert instantly to "my way or the highway" when a new pastor arrives. If a bishop supports efforts to develop more meaningful roles for the laity, the next bishop can, by immediate decree, abolish all such participation and require "clergy only" for all pastoral roles. The culture of the Church remains embedded in the assumption that structures adopted from ancient centuries, even if they are not working, must be followed for the Church to carry out its mission today.

This misplaced assumption plays out in numerous ways.

*A DRE was attending a continuing education class that was inspiring and challenging. She mentioned it to the deacon, encouraging him to join her, thinking that he might like it. His response was that he had done his education to become a deacon and that these classes were for "regular people, not someone who was ordained." He added, "I go when I am mandated to go and don't need more education."*

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*A visiting priest at a parish with no pastor gave a homily in which he criticized the parish for their style of crucifix, for their style of statues, and for their style of music. After Mass, he told those in the sacristy that the problem with the parish was that women are troublemakers. The sacristan who had assisted him prior to Mass was a woman.*

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*A local priest from an adjacent parish came to concelebrate a funeral with the parish priest. During the funeral Mass the pastor broke the large host into pieces during the Lamb of God prayer. Then he presented the concelebrating priest with a consecrated host like those to be given to the congregation attending the funeral. While the pastor elevated the sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord to the people, the concelebrating priest's hand came around*

*from behind the pastor and switched the regular congregation host with a part of the large host that had been broken. It was obvious that the concelebrating priest felt that he should receive only the “priest’s communion” and not the Bread offered to the laity.*

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*The female lay associate who directs the youth confirmation program is not invited to the dinner and gathering the bishop requests with the priests after the confirmation, but the male liturgy/music minister always is invited.*

From a deacon who assumes that his education must be complete because he is ordained, to the assumption that priesthood confers superior artistic judgment, to the marginalization of the non-ordained (especially women), the clericalism embedded within Church structure harms our faith communities. It is not difficult to find overt examples.

*Fifteen priests gathered at a local parish for their monthly Priest-Deanery meeting. The elected dean presented a report from the previous Presbyteral Council meeting about a diocesan plan to have pastors evaluated by a selected group of parishioners. As ones who shared parish life with the pastor, they would have input on the bishop’s evaluation of the pastor’s job performance. The dean asked for comments. I thought the draft appeared to be reasonable and balanced in its approach. It allowed for confidentiality and requested feedback on important areas of a pastor’s ministry.*

*After the dean presented the overview of the evaluation tool, a recently appointed pastor said that he opposed the idea of consulting parishioners. “I have spent eight years of my life in seminary formation to learn what it is to be a priest,” he said. “I am accountable only to my bishop. **The people of the parish have not been trained or informed** about what the duties and responsibilities of a priest are. **They cannot give appropriate evaluation** of a priest because of that.”*

*The room fell silent. None of his brother priests said anything, including me. The dean moved on to other items on the agenda. The draft for the evaluation of a pastor remains an “option” within the diocese.*

Perhaps it is well to insert a note at this point to confirm that all the anecdotes you are reading in this paper come from recent personal experiences of those—clergy and lay—who shared their stories with us. These are not from the past. They are stories from this century, unless identified specifically as from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. They are who we as Catholics are today, except in the few pockets of enlightenment where clericalism is recognized and confronted directly.

Pope Francis persistently condemns this clericalism. He has taken steps to strengthen *synodality* in the life and operation of the Church, as a prescription for reducing and eventually eliminating clericalism. However, as a people, we have centuries of our *unexamined culture* to reinforce the habits and beliefs that separate us into “ordained” and “other.” No prescription will be effective

unless we confront the ways we feed clericalism as well as all the ways clericalism harms us, whether we be ordained or non-ordained. The feudal system is dying, amidst great tension. Accepting this reality is therapeutic, so that new life can arise.

To clear the way for new life, we must examine the ways clericalism harms even those who seem to benefit from it as well as measure our current clerical culture against the Christian community culture initially envisioned by Jesus and the Apostles.

## **Clericalism Hampers Growth and Grace**

It may seem, at first, that those who enjoy a defined authority and position via ordination gain all the benefits from an ecclesial structure that favors clerics. But we must not assume that clericalism harms only lay people. Priests themselves suffer when clericalism limits their growing into maturity as human beings.

All human beings are to grow and develop as our lives unfold. The grace of God is given to all so that we each may become who God calls us to be. As Christians, we believe that the Holy Spirit will serve as helper and guide to assist us in this growth process. Ordained priests, no less than lay people, are immersed in the human condition and must seek human, psychological, and spiritual maturing as God wills it.

Sometimes the cultural environment around a human being allows that individual the freedom and resources to flourish—advancing in “holiness” or becoming more of what God is calling him or her to be. Sometimes the cultural environment is toxic to the human growth and development called for by the grace of God.

The cultural environment that begets clericalism arrests or stalls—is toxic to—human growth by creating an imbalance among the three identities a priest manages: human being, Christian, and ordained minister. When mired in the mind-set of clericalism, an ordained priest inverts these priorities. As a result, the ministry he provides will not serve the spiritual needs of the faith community or his own.

### ***Growing as a Human***

In their human spiritual journey, ordained priests manage three identities:

- “I am a human being.”
- “I am a Christian.”
- “I am an ordained priest.”

All three must properly develop to enable a priest’s ministry and to serve the gospel. As written in the AUSCP document on priestly formation (2018): “The specialness of Holy Orders is found in the call to pastoral service to people, to be servant-shepherds of God’s sheep. Being grounded

in, embracing, and living out the Word of God and being in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ are the foundation of being a Christian and thus of being a priest in the Church.”

**“I am a human being”:** Whether Christian or not, lay or ordained, our lives all rest on a human foundation. Spiritual thoughts and comfort with theological language may set the ordained minister apart from others on the surface, but the surface still rests on the same foundation: He is a human being.

Pastoral work calls the ordained to embrace his humanity, experience his own vulnerabilities, and immerse himself in pastoral life to learn more about the realities of his own human condition. It should not lead him to lose touch with his own human gifts.

*A musically talented university graduate—composer, singer, performer—went to seminary to study theology. In a short time, the seminary environment and culture progressively closed down his creativity. He soon found himself unable to play his guitar, to compose, to sing and perform. He was not told to stop. Rather the distorted climate of the seminary suppressed his human gifts. His inability to exercise his talent persisted throughout his years of theological training. Happily, he persisted in his studies and, once out of the seminary, situated in the more human setting of parish life and ministry, his creative spirit and talents gradually came back to life.*

The Jesus we meet in the Gospels also traveled a path of human growth. As an adolescent, Jesus returned to Nazareth from the Jerusalem Temple with Mary and Joseph and to his home “where he grew in wisdom and age.” Later, as someone acculturated in Jewish 1<sup>st</sup> century perspectives, Jesus encountered a Syro-Phoenician woman and a Roman Centurion, both non-Jews, and learned that his mission was to go beyond his Jewish community. Living out his mission, Jesus violated the religious norms of the time that forbade contact with prostitutes, tax-collectors, sinners, and lepers. Thus, we see in the Gospels how the unfolding of his human life drew Jesus beyond conventional Jewish boundaries, beyond conventional rabbi behavior, and into an immersion in the human condition.

Even the Gospel of John, which provides our most highly developed Christology, presents Jesus as “the Word made flesh.” The New Testament also presents Jesus as King, Messiah, Rabbi, Lord, and our High Priest—yet before those roles, Jesus is first born from the dust of the earth, born of woman. As Jesus of Nazareth grew day by day, Our Incarnate Lord (like us in all things but sin) had his own human consciousness unfold. Because Christ was immersed into what it is to be fully human, he became the means of salvation for all humankind.

A deacon’s, priest’s, or bishop’s ministry becomes a sacramental sign as well when ordination and humanity are both accepted and embraced. As happened with Jesus, the grace of God comes into the human condition through the human life and ministry of the priest.

**“I am a Christian”:** Ordained ministers are also Christians, and the ordained minister’s thinking must place his baptism as the foundation on which his ordination rests. His ordination is a particular ordering within the Church community of being baptized into Christ. Thus, while

serving the faith community in the ministerial priesthood, the ordained should recognize, value, and celebrate the diverse and powerful presence of Christ in the lives of other baptized People of God.

It should be liberating for a bishop, a priest, a deacon or a lay person to see *Baptism*—life as a Christian—as the foundation that defines all the roles within the faith community. It should be liberating to realize there are many other members besides the ordained who are *alter Christi* in all sorts of circumstances. What ordained minister, for example, has not attended a dying person and initially thought he is bringing Christ to the dying only to realize that the person dying becomes Christ, in that moment, for the priest?

It should be liberating to realize that the role of Christian brings us all together in one holy endeavor, as one bishop was reminded:

*A bishop had to resign from his diocese and, concerned for the appearance this would present, asked, “What should I tell the people?” The response from Rome was: “Tell them that the church belongs to Christ! The bishop is leaving his role but the Body of Christ lives on.”*

**“I am an ordained priest”:** In the first half of life, human beings grow “out”—establishing their identities in the world. In the second half of a human life, we are challenged to grow “down” into ourselves. Educational institutions provide diverse degrees, and we graduate or become certified or licensed or ordained. These are mile posts in the outward discernment into life.

A young man contacting the Vocations Office, filling out an application for entrance into a seminary and doing the work and outward discernment required of a seminarian, must come up with answers to such questions as “Who am I in the world?” And, “How do I fit into this world that I am growing into?”

In the best case, he learns that being a good priest (deacon, bishop) requires him to have an incarnational grounding: to be one who lives in and is aware of his humanity. He also must value the gift of being a Christian—an adopted child within God’s family. Finally, as a third priority and one that must build on the first two of being a good human and then being a good Christian, he must discover more profoundly what it means to be ordained in service of the Gospel.

An ordained person’s affirmation cannot come at the cost of de-valuing the roles others have within the Body of Christ. Ordained ministers need a clear and healthy understanding of who they are and what role they must fulfill, but it should always be with a humble attitude toward other roles and different vocations within the whole Body of Christ.

### ***Clericalism Stalls Human Growth***

When an ordained priest inverts his priorities, it arrests or stalls his human development and leads to clericalism. The groundwork for this failing may begin with the laity, in the family home. Catholic families often elevate the position of a boy who wants to become a priest. He



assumes a role somewhat like that of an only child, regarded as one deserving special treatment and accolades. How many stories can we think of with the ingredients recounted here?

*His mother named him after Pope Pius XII. At his Baptism, she set him on the altar and dedicated him to be the priest of the family. Of the eight children (the seventh born) he was the one she most tended to, the one everyone declared to be “good.” He went off to seminary in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade but left after two years. This did not please his mother, who prayed he would return to his “true vocation” one day. Instead he joined the military, served four years, married, and had children. He was in his mid-thirties when he overheard his mother telling her sisters she did not understand why he had not died in Viet Nam, because she was so sure that was to be his role in the family once he did not become a priest.*

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*After “Sam” said he was going to be a priest, the associate pastor let him organize all the altar servers, direct the visiting priests, and order everyone around. He told his own mother she wasn’t worthy of taking Communion! The boy was 16 and wearing cassocks all day Sunday and he hadn’t even left for seminary yet. No one in the congregation seemed to think this was strange. His mother told everyone how special and important he was.*

When a young man leaves infancy and adolescence to enter a seminary for priestly formation, he is likely to find additional affirmation that he is special and “chosen.” Instead of growing as human/Christian/priest, seeing his role as the servant ministering to God’s people, the seminarian may incorporate a notion that he deserves to be separate from and valued more highly than others—he *experiences* the reinforcement of his “separateness” and “higher calling.”

In his blog post on Pray Tell: Worship, Wit & Wisdom (“Challenging Clericalism,” January 2, 2019), Prof. Richard R. Gaillardetz says a “problematic theology” underlies this separation: “We can see the rise of clericalism in the way in which ministers’ vigorous insistence on a distinctive clerical identity obscures their solidarity with the whole people of God. This obsession with a distinct clerical identity is, in turn, often grounded in a problematic theology of Holy Orders.” That theology, he continues, assumes that ordination magically confers competency that the *ordinand* never possessed before.

*Such a theology presumes a very privatized notion of priestly vocation. It moves too easily from a sense of God’s call to the individual’s acceptance of that call, overlooking entirely the necessary mediating role of the church as the context in which that call is discerned, assessed and cultivated.*

Contemporary seminary formation too often ingrains such attitudes in those preparing for priesthood. With time, those attitudes give rise to clerical behaviors that are offensive to people, behaviors which have contributed significantly to the current crises in the Catholic Church.

**The seminary system** intends to foster the human development of persons who may become priests. It fails some, and some survive as persons in spite of it, but some emerge from those years as clericalists. Quoting again from the AUSCP document on priestly formation:

*Our perception is that the way the current Program of Priestly Formation has been implemented in many seminaries has more often than not resulted in priests who do not see themselves as Christ-like servants of God's people. They tend to articulate their status using concepts such as "MY Mass," "MY priesthood," "ontological change in my being," and Alter Christus in ways contrary to a Vatican II understanding of the call to pastoral service. The repeated emphasis on such notions undergirds a sense of distance, separation, elitism, clericalism, insensitivity and superiority, all of which have been critiqued by Pope Francis. These attitudes undercut the ministry of pastoral service to which a priest is called.*

The focus on pastorhood in training rather than on service and an emphasis on governance rather than collegiality were characteristics that two former seminary professors, C. Colt Anderson and Christopher M. Bellitto, ("The Reform Seminaries Need: Scarlet Fever," *Commonweal*, April 8, 2019, online, and the April 12, 2019, print version) noted:

*Seminarians know that, given the shortage of priests in the United States, it won't be long after they're ordained that they'll be pastors with a parish of their own. We often heard conversations in the lunchroom that indicated as much: "When I'm pastor, I'm going to put my place on the map." We heard very little talk of service or shared leadership, collegial relations with parish councils, or facilitating the talents of parishioners. The parish, it was clear, belonged to the pastor and not the people. Once, Cardinal Francis George explained to a group of seminarians in Chicago that Pope Benedict XVI stressed that the role of the priest and bishop was governance, not leadership. This was not unusual. Seminarians are fed a consistent message: Their role is to rule over the laity and the religious as a result of their ontological change at ordination, not as a result of their virtue, knowledge, or model behavior. They are being trained to be autocratic bosses, not servant leaders.*

The undercutting of pastoral service may yield another debilitating form of clericalism, one that directs itself against other priests. Adherence to protocols and rigid conformity has produced priests who consider it their duty to "correct" any priest they deem to be less than rigorous in upholding the rituals than he himself was taught.

*A seminarian in his diaconate year was assigned to a progressive and vibrant Catholic parish. He often criticized the pastor because the pastor did not always stick specifically to the language in the Roman missal. The pastor also conducted a monthly laying-on of hands, after Communion, for those who wished blessings. The seminarian complained that these practices were not the way he was taught in the seminary.*

*The seminarian told others that he would rather have a parish with only one or two parishioners who were good staunch Catholic pray-ers than have a church full of people who were not solid committed Catholics with proper prayer habits. If anyone in a parish he led had problems, he would post regular office hours so they could come in for help.*

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*The pastor had served a two-priest parish alone for 11 months and thus warmly welcomed a new associate pastor. Soon thereafter, the pastor invited the associate to concelebrate Mass with him at the large local nursing home. The associate declined, making various excuses, but when the pastor persisted the associate said he would attend and sit with the residents. He would not concelebrate a Mass with the pastor. Curious, the pastor asked why. The associate explained that his conscience would not allow him to concelebrate because the pastor occasionally changed some words in the Roman missal when saying Mass. Therefore, the associate regarded concelebration as a sacrilege; it would be sinful.*

*When the pastor expressed his shock at such a claim, the associate tried to reassure him by saying that he also had corrected a bishop who used the wrong words. The bishop had thanked him, he added. (The pastor wondered if the bishop had been sincere.)*

When the newly ordained lives out his early years of ordained ministry, he typically conceives his priorities as, first, to be a good priest (or deacon); second, to be a good Christian; and third, to have an accurate awareness of his humanity, i.e., a member of the human race. When this order of priorities remains the pattern—thus inverting the priorities important for human development and growth—the priest weakens or ignores his own humanity.

However, when human and spiritual development matures in an ordained person's life, the order of priorities properly adjusts: first, I am a good person; second, I am a good Christian; third, I am a good priest. Those who are more experienced in pastoral work may try to address lapses in this necessary adjustment, as this example shows.

*The Archbishop of a large metropolitan diocese observed that some of the newly ordained were saying their first Mass in Latin rather than in English. He became even more alarmed when he saw a glossy photo of a soon-to-be-ordained seminarian, who had put on a cassock, cape, cane, and biretta for the photo. The bishop called the seminarian and told him not to dress that way again and to stop distributing such photos. The Archbishop now worries about what underlies the seminarian's behavior.*

Absent strong correctives to emerging clericalism, however, a priest may expect that once ordained he will have all that he needs for fulfillment. As clericalism inflates the power of that priest, he may distort or even reject good pastoral practices and short-circuit his own human growth. His priorities become unbalanced.

*A pastor told a group of junior high boys that if they wanted to drive nice cars, take fancy vacations, and wear expensive clothes, they should become a priest when they grow up. He then showed them his new Cadillac and Gucci shoes.*

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*A pastor claims repeatedly, “I love being a priest.” However, the pastor also makes it known that he dislikes: Sunday Masses that are too early or too late; hearing confessions; making hospital visits; meeting with couples preparing for marriage; attending administration or commission meetings. He loves his status as a priest, not the duties of a pastor.*

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*The priest’s first career was unsettled and unfulfilling. He worked for a technology company as an engineer. Becoming an ordained priest seemed like a better option. He entered the seminary, learned the rules and “technology” associated with being a priest, and was ordained. But in his pastoral work he saw people who in his estimation did not take “being Catholic” seriously enough. He became quick to judge and flew into rages with individuals he said were not “doing Catholic” correctly. His reactions and the stress of the pastoral environment generated a deep personal crisis.*

The parishioners served by each of these priests will likely find themselves distracted from their own paths to spiritual growth unless they can ignore or work around the obstacles placed in front of them by their priests.

The health of the ministerial priesthood and diaconate and the health of the entire Church require us to name clericalism for its failures not just in ministry to all the People of God, not just in blocking the collegial community of the faithful, but also in the way it stalls or arrests the psychological/human/spiritual growth of ministers. It is toxic to those ordained and to the life of the Church. It also is not what the early Church saw as the path Jesus sent them to travel.

## **Priesthood from the Beginning: What Did Jesus Intend?**

The earliest followers of Jesus saw him as replacing the Temple itself—including Temple-based worship and the priesthood that attended it. Jesus himself asserted this replacement. He did not establish a clerical caste with privilege and perks, nor did the early disciples.

Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew, a member of the tribe of Judah. From that tribe came the kings of Israel, individuals like King David. As a descendant of David, Jesus belonged to this kingly lineage. Israel’s priests all came from the tribe of Levi, the tribe of both Moses and his brother Aaron. After Yahweh directed Moses to name Aaron the high priest of Israel, all of Israel’s high priests were Levites, as were the other functionaries involved in Temple worship.

Jesus was in no way associated with this Levitical priestly caste. He worshiped at the Temple as a faithful Jew, but he was not a priest serving the Temple. Instead, Jesus most likely was one of the Pharisees: a pious, knowledgeable, and practicing layman.

Nor is there any indication in the Gospels that those Jesus gathered as his closest disciples were connected to the Temple and the priests serving there. As Jesus himself embodied in his public ministry, he called his disciples to be messengers, apostles, and proclaimers of the good news.

Jesus started a movement of *missionary disciples*, and he warned them to maintain the simplicity and humility that he himself embodied. He told them not to accept formal titles such as Rabbi or Father. He empowered them to heal at times but cautioned them not to acquire an elevated sense of themselves as someone special with exclusive powers.

Nor did Jesus provide a compendium of priestly duties. Instead, he gave his disciples only a few core commands: to love God above all, and to love others. He instructed his closest disciples to imitate him in that he came to serve and not to be served, and he demonstrated this by washing their feet during the Last Supper. The call and role of the apostles from the beginning was very different from the priests serving the Temple.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* presents the Risen Christ as High Priest but as a unique type of priest: a priest **according to the order of Melchizedek**. Melchizedek is a mythic kind of figure in the Scriptures, obscure but symbolic and referenced only a few times. The reference sets up a contrast with the Temple priests who served according to the order of Levi. The *Letter to the Hebrews*, written near the end of the first century C.E., used the contrast to help those familiar with Israel's priestly tradition understand that the high priesthood of the Risen Christ **replaced the Jewish priestly tradition**.

As “a priest according to the order of Melchizedek,” the Risen Lord was not connected to a specific temple but instead encountered persons “out in the field”—the way Melchizedek helped Abraham name the God who called him and assured Abraham that God was an active agent in his life. Rather than offer ritual sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple as the Levite priests did, Jesus of Nazareth used his own presence, time, and talent “in the field.” His public ministry moved from one place to another. He helped people know God as a loving and merciful parent. Melchizedek's priesthood brought Abraham to God the Most High; the Risen Christ's personhood and priesthood connects us to God as loving parent. Whenever we think or talk about the priesthood of the Risen Jesus, we must see it as defined by the “order of Melchizedek.”

During the Last Supper, Jesus identified the sacrifice he was offering as the sacrifice of himself: once, forever, and for all. He provided strong ritual imagery for this sacrifice by identifying himself with the bread that was broken and the wine that was poured. He was laying down his bodily life for them: *This is my body which will be given up for you*. He was pouring out his life-blood for them: *This is the cup of my blood, the blood of a new and eternal covenant that will be poured out for you and for all*. The disciples were to unite their lives with the life of his covenant body and blood made in sacrifice for all.

The ritual sharing of his body and blood came with the instruction to “do this in memory of me” so that the disciples would remember what Jesus embodied and participate in it. They too were to lay down their lives—embody their lives—in service. This included accepting “the cross” as Jesus himself had. The disciples would miss the point if they simply performed the ritual without reference to their own lives. They would fail to keep his core commands: love God, love others, lay down your lives in service. As the *Letter to the Romans* emphasizes:

*Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. ... Let love be sincere; ... love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor; do not be haughty, ... associate with the lowly.” (Romans 12:1, 9-16 passim)*

## Priesthood Evolves and “Laity” Emerge

Unfortunately, in the centuries following the *Letter to the Hebrews*, the tradition of Jewish Temple priesthood and that of Rome’s pagan temple priesthoods co-opted the Scriptural understanding of the Risen Jesus as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Over a three-century span of time, the elders of the missionary disciples that Jesus sent forth came to be seen as a special caste of priests and overseers.

Their special status was enhanced when the Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity. Then, when a later emperor declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Empire, the status of bishops and priests grew even more exalted. They became “clerics”—recognized dignitaries with civic and imperial authority.

The choices made to adopt imperial trappings may have served the early Church’s needs. It no doubt helped continue the spread of Christianity. But over time this clerical status, initiated for civic and imperial purposes, had a predictable human result. Many of the clerics started behaving like persons “lording it over” those who were not clerics in both church and society. Ultimately, the specialness of priests and bishops became not only part of civil law but also, in 12<sup>th</sup> century Church teaching, was ratified by the sacrament of Holy Orders. By the year 1200, the Christian Church consisted of two distinct groups: the clergy, and those who were not—the “laity.” Clerics secured control over the community, the assembly of God’s people.

The presence of a Roman imperial governance culture continues today. It plays out when the input and participation of lay people is marginalized or ignored. Women, especially, find their contributions deemed less important than those of the ordained.

*The female business manager of the faith community says her work, no matter how outstanding, is rendered invisible because Father gets all the credit. The worst example occurred during the bishop’s blessing of chapel artwork. The business manager, over two years, had been significantly involved in the capital campaign to raise funds for the chapel renovation and sanctuary artwork, then helped run a national search to solicit designs, organize the submissions and supervise the selection of two artists. Finally, she coordinated*

*the work of the artists and many other trades people and volunteers for the final production and hanging of the artwork. Yet at the dedication Mass, the bishop thanked every priest in attendance by name, including visiting priests who had nothing to do with anything that had been done. Even though the pastor sat the business manager next to the priests and had told the bishop of her role, the bishop gave her no acknowledgment.*

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*The new bishop who arrived in the mid-1980s had a good reputation as an ecumenical leader and a civil-rights advocate, a forward-thinking bishop. After his arrival, he arranged Masses and receptions in numerous parishes, so he could meet the people “one on one.” The one I attended was huge, hundreds of people waiting to meet him after the Mass. I noticed that as each person came forward in line, the bishop extended his right hand, palm down, so his ring was prominent and available for kissing. One lady, after kissing the ring, held onto his hand and said she prayed that he would be as open and understanding as she had heard, that she was upset about the position of women in the Church who were not respected, were seen as second-class citizens, and so on. After about five minutes, the bishop smoothly withdrew his hand and patted her on the shoulder. “You are wearing such a lovely dress this evening,” he said, as his assistant led her away and the next person stepped forward.*

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*While lay staff are asked to be open to evaluation and feedback, seminarians and priests are exempt from that expectation. The only evaluation deemed important is that of the current bishop or other clerical supervisor. Some priests openly state that a lay person is not qualified to evaluate a parish priest. This assumption extends to staff and congregation having no say in the selection of a new priest or pastor.*

Today, it is not uncommon for us to hear such stories. This experience of clericalism, whether we articulate each instance of its many tentacles or simply feel that “something is not right” in the Church, undergirds most of the problems we identify in the Church.

## **Strategies to Address Clericalism**

Unfortunately, clericalism also infects some of the solutions proposed to mitigate the Church’s problems today. Some clerics—and lay people too—believe that following rules, policing rituals, and clearing out those who do not share the same vision of Church as theirs will somehow restore its “holiness.”

*A pastor was assigned to a new parish that was vibrant and involved. It was his first pastorate. He insisted that all liturgies, services, and prayer*

*opportunities had to follow the Roman Missal exactly. There was no room for parish traditions or lay-led prayer experiences. He dissolved the liturgy committee. He forced the long-time, much-loved DRE to resign and hired a friend who had no experience in parish ministry, then directed the parish to pay the entire cost of the new DRE's education. He forced the finance director to retire and hired a bookkeeper he planned to train in his own ways. This was just the beginning of his many changes to reform the parish into his "ideal, correctly functioning" parish. The once-vibrant, active, packed church began to shrink under his "I am THE priest and it's my way or the highway" method of leadership.*

*He was eventually moved to another church but the damage to the parish was done. The results of his clericalism yielded division and an ineffectual parish. Many of the involved parishioners left, the ministries have dwindled considerably, parish council has become a puppet, and only a handful of loyal parishioners remain who are committed to revitalizing the Spirit-led vibrancy that once existed in the parish. The clericalism that was forced on the parish has resulted in a now suffering parish.*

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*A pastor was asked by a married couple if he would celebrate a Mass for their 40th anniversary. To their great surprise, he asked if they were still having sexual intercourse, noting that the wife was post-menopausal. They said, "Yes." The pastor said he would not do a Mass because sexual intercourse should be done only when there was the possibility of conceiving a child. The couple had their 40th anniversary elsewhere.*

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*At his first Sunday Mass a new pastor told the congregation that he expected to be there for 30 years and there would be some immediate changes. If it's not in the Missal it's not being done—no deviations or even slight changes.*

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*A man came forward to receive Holy Communion. The priest placed the host in the communicant's open hand. After noticing who it was and remembering that he was in a marriage "outside the church," the priest snatched back the host from the communicant's hand. Some parishioners left the parish because of the priest's behavior.*

We also hear that a smaller Church, with just a few staunch believers, will be better than a universal Church that welcomes all. One bishop summarized that idea as welcoming a shrinking Church: "We should never be afraid of a smaller, lighter church if her members are also more faithful, more zealous, more missionary and more committed to holiness ..." This concept is repeated frequently in conservative Catholic circles.



Or we hear, from those fed up with the problems they see in the Church, that tossing out every ritual and every cleric will “cleanse” the Church. But every baptized person needs the affirmation and support of their faith community to “grow in Christ”—including those whose specialized ordained ministry serves the health and well-being of the Church community. Also, those engaged in ordained ministry need a clergy culture that, when rightly serving the church, enables them more clearly to lay down their lives (embody Christ with their lives) in service.

Neither extreme—a shrinking, non-inclusive Church or a cleric-less, headless community—is what Jesus, the Risen Lord, Christianity’s one and only high priest, a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, intended.

A better alternative to these extremes is synodality, a preference of Pope Francis as he takes steps that could return today’s Church to the way of life and governance recommended by Vatican II. While calling for an end to clericalism and those factors that generate it, Pope Francis has adopted a new constitution for the synod of bishops and called for a churchwide adoption of *synodality* as the church’s operational mode from top to bottom—papacy to parish, bishop to parishioner, including all the hierarchs and clerics in between. Michael Sean Winters recently explained the concept (“Distinctly Catholic” column, *National Catholic Reporter*, March 13, 2019):

*Synodality is about more than structures. It is about listening to each other. Synodality requires that we do not seek to ‘win’ an argument about what the church should do, so much as we, together, seek the Spirit’s prompting and move forward together, always together. ... Synodality is about much more than simply a different mode of decision-making. It is about putting childish ways aside and becoming adult Christian disciples. It carries forward the vision and the ecclesiology of Vatican II and, more importantly, of the Gospels.*

Synodality as imagined by Pope Francis includes major structural changes in Church processes, starting with the Vatican, where he has integrated lay persons—men and women—in substantive roles. The 2018 Synod on Young People included lay persons with voting authority, another step forward. At the 2019 meeting of global episcopal conferences on child abuse and coverups, Pope Francis required the bishops to listen to lay people speaking about the realities of sex abuse within the Church.

He faces much opposition in this effort, and there is no doubt it will take time for the efforts to break down the wall of hierarchical dominance and affect the dominant clerical culture. Lasting changes also require the support of all the baptized—clergy and, most especially, the laity—if the Church is to sustain such efforts rather than revert to an ecclesial structure that excludes meaningful participation by all the baptized.

## Conclusion

Our aim has been to raise the consciousness of readers to the expressions of clericalism and its problems. Clericalism betrays the teachings of the scriptures and ignores the best practices of the first three centuries of Christian faith and life. Both clerics and lay persons can be afflicted with the disease. Both are often unaware that their mode and manner, their self-understanding and their sense of ministry, have wandered far from the example of Jesus.

*Jesus called them together and said: "You know how those who exercise authority among the Gentiles lord it over them; their great ones make their importance felt. It cannot be like that with you. Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest, and whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all. Such is the case with the Son of Man who has come, not to be served by others, but to serve, to give his own life as a ransom for the many. (Matthew 20: 25-28)*

Only in and through Jesus, the Risen Lord, do the baptized become priests as well as prophets and kings. The "priesting" of the baptized and the ordained exists to imitate and to conform to Christ and is not to be distorted by the disease of clericalism. We are all to "have among ourselves the same attitude that is [ours] in Christ Jesus, each looking out not for his own interests, but everyone for those of others." (Philippians 2:5, 4)

Pope Francis is quick to advise the members of the church to "dialogue, dialogue, dialogue." What use are the "many parts" of the one body of Christ if they do not engage with respect and openness and discern together where the Spirit of God wants to take the Church in this 21<sup>st</sup> century? Every member of our world Church community can do something to change the toxic culture of clericalism.

While Pope Francis confronts clericalism on the *macro* level, those of us at the grassroots have much work to do on the *micro* level. We hopefully will end up with a Church that is less Roman but far more Catholic and Spirit-driven.

**Let the dialogue begin, and may its outcomes lead us to lasting change.**

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# the BridgeDialogues

laity & clergy reimagining the church

A collaborative effort of Voice of the Faithful, FutureChurch, & Association of U.S. Catholic Priests



## Discussion Questions after reading “Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism”

*After reading the paper “Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism,” use these questions—or those you devise on your own—as a way to begin the dialogue. Note that you may spread questions over multiple sessions or use these initial questions as springboards to later sessions and other questions about how clergy and lay people both experience and engender clericalism.*

1. What story (or stories) in the testimony most resonated with you? Did any stories surprise you?

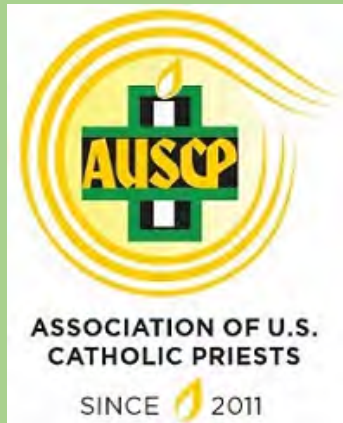
2. *For lay people:* Have you ever changed parishes, stopped attending functions, or withheld donations because of the way a pastor or other cleric treated you? Without expressing your feelings or saying why you are doing so?

*For clergy:* Have you felt frustrated by expectations that you will please every parishioner all the time? Do you make unilateral decisions on most issues because you dread “negotiating” with different parish factions?

3. Think of a time when you experienced clericalism or, even inadvertently, acted in a clericalist manner (remember, anyone can promote clericalism). How could you have acted or spoken differently in that situation?

4. If you can imagine ways to alter or call out (nicely) the clericalist behavior cited in Question 3, would you actually do it? (Be super honest with yourself!) If not, what do you need to change or learn in order to address that behavior?

5. What is the biggest obstacle for you, personally, in seeing and trying to remove clericalism and its many branches?



## ***Clericalism: Additional Readings***

**Additional readings on the issue of clericalism in the Roman Catholic Church**

**Provided by the Working Group on Clericalism to accompany its paper  
“Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism, June 2019**

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## Learn More by Exploring These Resources

Association of U.S. Catholic Priests. "Preparing the Sixth Edition of the Program for Priestly Formation: Five Overriding Concerns". Found at <https://www.uscatholicpriests.org/priestly-formation-1>.

Boston College Seminar. "To Serve the People of God: Renewing the Conversation on Priesthood and Ministry." Found at <https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/bc1/schools/stm/continuing%20education/encore/pdf/To%20Serve%20the%20People%20of%20God.pdf>

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## Take Action

Here are some actions to consider as you work to reduce clericalism in your community and in our Church.

### 1. Organize BridgeDialogues

Using one of the templates in the Clericalism package, speak with others in your parish or faith community or a local Catholic university about holding dialogues. Perhaps you will have only one cleric interested in joining you at first, but it's a start. Keep talking! Once you begin bridging the gaps, address one of the "close to home" problems in your community. Widen the group of participants. Repeat sessions or develop new ones to help address the many problems clericalism raises.

### 2. Join Your Parish Pastoral Council

You don't need formal dialogue sessions to address clericalism; you can begin by adding your own voice on parish matters. Attend pastoral council meetings and offer your views when appropriate. Join the council when there are open seats—ask when such elections or appointments occur, and if they are not scheduled or not publicized, ask why. Clericalism requires the cooperation of the laity to prevail, so you share in the responsibility to identify and to address it when it appears. Not by turning away or ignoring the actions that feed clericalism but by showing up, asking questions, and being honest about how actions and activities feel to you.

### 3. Urge the Reform Seminary Education

The Association of U.S. Catholic Priests has written a letter to Cardinal Joseph Tobin, Chairman of the Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, expressing their concern about the need to update seminary formation programs. They address five major areas of concern and offer specific recommendations for each area. Their proposal is grounded in the teachings of Vatican II, the talks and writings of Pope Francis regarding priesthood and formation, and what they have learned based on their own experience as candidates for the priesthood, as seminary faculty, and in their pastoral experience as parish priests.

The five concerns include:

- Faithfulness to Vatican II
  - Call to Service
  - A Pastoral Model of Priestly Formation
  - Psychosexual Development and Celibacy
  - Discernment Processes and Faculty Formation
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Read more about their efforts at the link below:

<https://www.uscatholicpriests.org/priestly-formation-1>

To support their effort, FutureChurch has developed a downloadable letter template to send to your bishop and to chairman Cardinal Tobin asking the committee to seriously consider the AUSCP proposals including the recommendation to confer widely with lay Catholics as new guidelines are developed.

To download the letter template, personalize it, and send it to your bishop and to Cardinal Tobin, go to <https://www.futurechurch.org/take-action-urge-our-bishops-to-implement-effective-programs-for-priestly-formation>.

#### 4.. Promote Discussion of Women Deacons

As Pope Francis continues to collect information about women deacons, we ask Catholics to continue educating and discussing women deacons using our resource, Deacon Chat. Go to <http://catholicwomen-deacons.org/support/deaconchat>.



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The responsibilities and rights of the laity to participate in the work and mission of the Church are based on Scripture and tradition, formulated in Church teachings—especially those from the Second Vatican Council—and codified in Canon Law.

## Responsibilities and Rights of Laity prepared by Voice of the Faithful

“According to the knowledge, competence, and prestige which [the laity] possess, they have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals, with reverence toward their pastors, and attentive to common advantage and the dignity of persons.” (Canon 212 §3)

The responsibilities and rights of the laity to participate in the work and mission of the Church are based on Scriptures and tradition, formulated in Church teachings—especially those from the Second Vatican Council—and codified in Canon Law.

Inherent in this right, and explicit in various Canons, is the right of the laity to freely form associations. Although such associations may not use the term Catholic unless sanctioned by Church authorities, Christian faithful either as lay persons alone or in an association with clerics, may organize in a “common endeavor to foster a more perfect life, to promote public worship or Christian doctrine, or to exercise other works of the apostolate ...” (Canon 298 §1)

That the faithful may feel compelled, in the face of the sex-abuse crisis, its cover-up by bishops, and the financial and pastoral repercussions of those failings, to form associations for the reform and renewal of the Church itself, is a sad comment on the needs of our Church today. But such associations are a necessary step for participating in “the common priesthood of the faithful” and thus “in the one priesthood of Christ.”

(The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, #10)

## An Emerging Church

In its earliest days, the Church had no clergy, no laity, simply a community of believers.

“They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. ... All who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2: 42, 44).

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Very soon during that first century, however, it became necessary for the people to elect representatives to distribute food, keep accounts, and perform administrative functions that would leave the missionaries (apostles) free to spread the word of God. From such modest beginnings, we read further in the Acts of the Apostles, arose needs to affirm the true leaders within a community, to settle disputes among members and between cities, and to counteract false teachings. Century after century, as the Church grew in size and breadth, this need to establish structure increased.

But these structures remained open to the people: in 215 A.D, St. Hippolytus referred to bishops being chosen by all the people; around 250 A.D., St. Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage, declared that he never took action without the “counsel and consent of the people”; the election of St. Ambrose as bishop of Milan in 373 was at the demand of the people gathered there; and Pope Celestine I (422-432) insisted that the desire and consent of the clergy and the people was required for selection of a bishop.

Gradually, however, our increasingly structured Church focused in official documents, century after century, on the development and rights of hierarchical offices. The laity, when they were described at all, mostly were described as recipients of whatever actions their pastors and bishops took. This imbalance continued until the Second Vatican Council renewed the focus on the entire People of God.

## The People of God

Among the documents from the Second Vatican Council, there are two that most directly address the rights and responsibilities of the laity: The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (also known as *Lumen Gentium* from the first words in its text), and Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (also called *Apostolicam Actuositatem*).

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church describes the entire Church, from Christ as the light of all nations, to the hierarchical structure of the episcopate, to the activities of laity and religious. All are interrelated, and each participates in its own special way in the one priesthood of Christ (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, #10). Indeed, pastors are exhorted, as a “noble duty,” to acknowledge the ministries and charisms of the laity and to accept their works (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, #30):

*Let the spiritual shepherds recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the Church. Let them [the shepherds] willingly employ their [the laity] prudent advice. Let them confidently assign duties to them [the laity] in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action. Further, let them encourage lay people so that they may undertake tasks on their own initiative. Attentively in Christ, let them consider with fatherly love the projects, suggestions and desires proposed by the laity.”*  
(The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, #37)

The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity repeats this call for the laity to use their special gifts within the apostolate of the Church—because “without it the apostolate of the pastors is often unable to achieve its full effectiveness”—and declares specifically the rights of the laity to form associations for such purposes.

*For this reason the faithful should participate in the apostolate by way of united effort. They should be apostles both in their family communities and in their parishes and dioceses, which themselves express the community*

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*nature of the apostolate, as well as in the informal groups which they decide to form among themselves. (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity #18)*

Of course, the Church would prefer that the opinions of the laity channel through the “organs erected by the Church for this purpose” (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, #37). But where a local or diocesan authority fails to establish or to allow such organs (through open and independent lay councils, for example), or where the authority itself has failed to promote the good of the People of God—as in decades-long sex-abuse crimes and coverups—the laity are obliged to speak through their own freely formed associations. It is a right derived from union with Christ and baptism into the Church:

*The laity derive the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head; incorporated into Christ’s Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself. ... For the exercise of this apostolate, the Holy Spirit Who sanctifies the people of God through ministry and the sacraments gives the faithful special gifts also ... to build up the whole body in charity. From the acceptance of these charisms, including those which are more elementary, there arise for each believer the right and duty to use them in the Church and in the world for the good of men and the building up of the Church, in the freedom of the Holy Spirit ... (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity #3)*

Descriptions of the laity’s rights and responsibilities in the documents of Vatican II also find expressions in the canon law.

## Codification in Canon Laws

The Code of Canon Law, as revised and then issued in 1983, included a new section, “Book II: The People of God,” which derived its canons from the documents of Vatican II. In it, the Church specifies that all who are “incorporated in Christ through baptism” (Canon 204 §1) are the people of God who, through that baptism, share in Christ’s “priestly, prophetic, and royal function.”

The canons also, of course, admonish the laity to be faithful, to be obedient, to treat with reverence their pastors and bishops. But equally critical is the recognition (Canon 212 §2 and §3) of the right of the faithful to provide input to the community, to share opinions and information with each other and with their pastors and bishops, and to freely organize their own associations:

*Canon 215: The Christian faithful are at liberty freely to found and direct associations for purposes of charity or piety or for the promotion of the Christian vocation in the world and to hold meetings for the common pursuit of these purposes.*

Although other canons seek to balance this right with a call to seek approval, nowhere is such approval required unless the lay association wishes to call itself Catholic in title or to link to a religious community:

*Canon 299 §1: By means of a private agreement made among themselves, the Christian faithful are free to establish associations to pursue the purposes mentioned in Canon 298, §1, [see below] without prejudice to the prescript*

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of Canon 301 §1 [which restricts to ecclesiastical authority the right to create associations that “propose to hand on Christian doctrine in the name of the Church”].

Canon 298 §1: *In the Church there are associations distinct from institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life; in these associations the Christian faithful, whether clerics, lay persons, or clerics and lay persons together, strive in a common endeavor to foster a more perfect life, to promote public worship or Christian doctrine, or to exercise other works of the apostolate such as initiatives of evangelization, works of piety or charity, and those which animate the temporal order with a Christian spirit.*

## Additional Information

The right of the laity to form associations such as the Voice of the Faithful is so clear and stems so obviously from the teachings and practices of the Church that dozens of noted theologians signed a petition in 2002 asserting precisely that right. A copy of that petition is included in this paper.

For additional references, see the Vatican Web site for the texts of Canon Law and the documents of Vatican II.

Code of Canon Law:

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_INDEX.HTM)

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church:

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vatii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)

Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity:

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vatii\\_decree\\_19651118\\_apostolicam-actuositatem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html)

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**[WWW.THEBRIDGEDIALOGUE.ORG](http://WWW.THEBRIDGEDIALOGUE.ORG)**

Voice of the Faithful ([www.votf.org](http://www.votf.org))

FutureChurch ([www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org))

Association of U.S. Catholic Priests ([www.uscatholicpriests.org](http://www.uscatholicpriests.org))

Questions? Write to [debrose@futurechurch.org](mailto:debrose@futurechurch.org)

Take our survey at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TheBridgeDialogues>

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