

The Royal Commission, clericalism and celibacy

We continue to feel the impact of the abuse scandals, so we keep informing ourselves on these matters. (I won't repeat all I've said previously, but all I say should be understood in light of my earlier comments.) Today we'll reflect on some *causes* suggested as contributing to abuse.

One cultural factor within the Church that's discussed is 'clericalism', which might be defined as the error of thinking the clergy are there not to *serve*, but to *be served*. The priesthood becomes a sort of elite club, and the dignity and welfare of the laity are downplayed. So defined, it's clearly opposed to the Gospel, and we can well see how it would facilitate abuse.

A danger, however, is if under the term 'clericalism' things are grouped that are actually part of a *healthy* expression of priestly identity (itself surely a key factor in preventing abuse). We should be alert to where the crisis is possibly being used to push other agendas and to try to associate with abuse anything in the Church the person dislikes.

Regarding priestly identity, it's an infallible teaching of the Church that Holy Orders, like Baptism and Confirmation, imprints an indelible character on the soul. (Council of Trent, DS 1609; 1774) The special spiritual identity of the priest – coming from God, not his own merit – is a reality. And the hierarchy does have authority from Christ to serve the people by teaching, sanctifying and governing. None of this is clericalism, unless it gets twisted into an attitude that the priest is there to lord it over people.

A famous principle is that the *misuse* of something doesn't take away its *right use*. So just because authority can be abused – whether of clergy, or police, or judges – doesn't mean we get rid of authority but that we have safeguards, checks and balances. Neither should we imagine there's even a taint attaching to the good things just because our minds can make a sort of association between the good things and their misuse. We must never give evil the victory of imagining that it *takes away* the goodness of good things.

Really, any good thing can be misused. Thus we don't find it unbelievable when even good things God himself has established (whether in creation or redemption) indirectly become an occasion for evil. In the end, that's how evil always works. (cf. St Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* I 48-49; I-II 75, 1) And the only way to totally remove the possibility of evil is to totally remove all the good things.

Virtue, the philosophers tell us, lies in 'the mean' – the rationally balanced middle position. (Aristotle *Ethics* 2, 6; St Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* I-II 64) For example, the virtue of courage is the mean between the opposite vices of cowardice and foolhardiness (which is when people irrationally and unnecessarily rush into danger). Now, courage doesn't become tainted or suspect just because we can easily group it in our minds with foolhardiness. As a general principle, any virtue can be grouped in our minds with its perversion – but that doesn't discredit virtue. So with the various expressions of priestly identity that remind the priest of who he is meant to be: we should beware of the fallacy whereby opponents of such expression try to taint it by association with clericalism (its perversion) – for example by saying it's part of a 'culture' of clericalism.

It's when we lose the awareness of virtue lying in the mean that we rush from one vice into its opposite vice, thinking we need to get as far away from the first vice as possible. It reminds us that in the big picture of human well-being we need to keep balance, and not 'throw out the baby with the bathwater'. With abusers, there were some who seemed highly 'clericalist' and some at the opposite extreme apparently lacking a full sense of priestly identity. So to genuinely combat abuse, we need to cultivate the healthy mean, in which priests are reinforced in their sense of being true spiritual fathers and brothers. (Vatican II *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 3, 9).

Another factor discussed in connection with abuse is celibacy. Here the Royal Commission agreed with earlier research findings that priestly celibacy doesn't directly cause abuse. However, it judged it to be an *indirect* factor that could facilitate abuse, combined with other factors. It is relevant to repeat here what I said last year: 'Prior study has rejected that it is a direct cause: being celibate does not cause deviant tendencies – people's inclinations don't get easily modified in this way. But what may have happened is that those whose inclinations were already deviant were less attracted to marriage and so more easily came towards priesthood. Here is where the psychological screening introduced in more recent decades is crucial.'

Again, that a good thing has in some way facilitated a bad thing does not necessarily mean we should abolish the good thing, but maybe that we should bring in suitable safeguards – as now already occurs. However, the Commission wanted the Australian Church to ask the Holy See to make priestly celibacy 'optional'.

It's actually misleading to describe celibacy as 'compulsory' – no one is compelled to make this commitment not to marry, and indeed only makes it after a long period of discernment that celibacy is God's calling for him, and then swearing a public oath that his choice is fully free. What does happen however is that the Church (as she has discerned for long ages to be more spiritually beneficial, all things considered) normally chooses for priestly ordination in the Latin Church only those who have made this free commitment.

For the Church to also ordain married men would actually do nothing to decrease the number of abusers. The men with a celibate commitment would still be in the priesthood. Their number would be added to by married candidates, but supposing a given unmarried priest to be an abuser, he would still be in the same position to commit the abuse as before. The difference would come when statistics were calculated. Supposing married men were indeed less likely to abuse, then the total *percentage* of abuser priests would go down, but the actual *number* of abusers would remain the same at best (if zero married men abused), or even increase (if there were any abusers at all among the married). It might just seem like less because the greater overall number of priests diluted the overall percentage of abusers. So: good public relations for the Church maybe, but no individual child would be saved from abuse thereby.

So we pray that the decisions made in response to this tragedy don't damage good and necessary things in the Church, for no real benefit; but that reason, wisdom and balance prevail, fostering a holistic moral vision of the welfare of each and everyone, now and in eternity.