

ABOLISHING THE PRIESTHOOD

The idea of abolishing the priesthood has been proposed to overcome the clericalism which is its central problem.

Let's take a close look.

If we did abolish the priesthood, we would have to reconstruct it in some form.

We cannot organize and serve a billion Catholics without a structure of full-time priests or their equivalent. The problem we would face if priesthood were abolished would be more traumatic than what we have now.

Once people begin to organize in significant numbers they sooner rather than later call for a full-time person or group, paid and with authority, to give them unanimity on a number of issues.

This is why all religious bodies, from a single church organization to a huge world-wide gathering require such a group to make decisions on behalf of all. We may call them ministers or imams, rabbis or priests but they function broadly in the same way and are there for roughly the same reason.

The problem can be addressed with something far less radical and far more efficiently. The objective is to eliminate clericalism, in the different forms it takes. Clericalism is self-seeking rather than service oriented.

The guidelines on how to do this necessitate two actions:

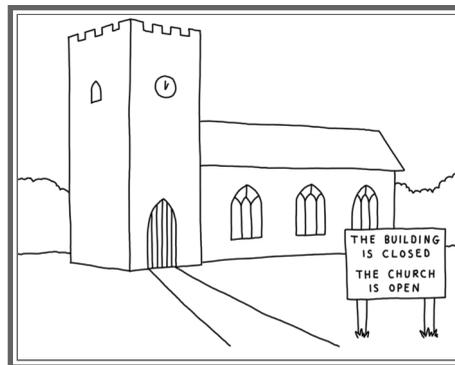
- A description of the authority given to a leader
- A designation of the one to whom the leader is answerable

The Catholic Church drifted into authoritarian clericalism because it gave too much authority to a few leaders and made them accountable primarily to themselves. This is a recipe for disaster rather than for service.

Let us take a look at changing these two excesses and say a word about the difference it would make.

To simply abolish the priesthood would create a vacuum which is open to being filled by those who are inept even if well intentioned. Thus we might emerge with something worse than the problem we seek to eliminate.

Our first task is addressing the selection and authority of the leadership team.



There should be a tripartite group charged with the task. The laity would have its own structure together with those chosen to represent priests and bishops. The groups are essentially equal to one another for the enterprise.

At stated intervals the three groups come together and decide what is unworkable in each group's approach. The objective is to have a structure that all three groups can affirm.

The central issues before each group must be clear. What does it mean to be a lay (baptized) person and how does this change the individual? What does it mean to be a priest (with full-time commitment to serving people at large?) What does it mean to be a bishop (with full-time commitment to helping people work in tandem with one another?)

Too often the concerns of lay or baptized Christians are not given sufficient attention. Yet almost all of the Church is lay. One gets the impression that a relatively small number of priests and bishops believe they can function well without consulting or giving attention to the agenda, wishes and critiques of the laity.

Yet priests and bishops are not better Christians than the laity. Nor do they have a clearer insight into how the Church should function. The best we can do is not the prerogative of any one group; it is an insight of the three groups side by side with one another

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If many of us believe it is self-destructive to abolish the priesthood, we must reflect on the fact that often priests or bishops have abolished the laity as a source of insight and inspiration for the Church at large. The vastness of the laity makes consultation with the laity more challenging but by no means impossible. The way we go about hearing the voice of the laity can and will occur once we are convinced that there is simply no Church without the laity.

It may be true that priests and bishops have been given authority to act as leaders but leaders need to take their mandate from the vast majority of lay Christians. It is crucial to give substantial weight to how they think about sexual ethics, a married priesthood, women as well as men in ordained service.

Before laity, priests or bishops speak on these issues they must hear the pluses and minuses on each issue from speakers who are theologically informed and who are free from a desire to win others to their own agenda.

Because the laity have been disregarded for so long, a great deal of work needs to go into this enterprise. It may be that priests

and bishops feel ready to make decisions in these areas. Certainly, the laity at large have the talent to understand the issues in their own terms and to contribute substantially to a wise formulation of the final decisions.

There are, furthermore, issues that are ethically urgent even if they do not seem so at first sight in all cases. These issues include the way we address issues on the storing of nuclear weapons, climate change, the role of women, the death penalty, racial justice, prison reform, economic fairness and balance, contraception, the legitimacy of divorce and remarriage, sexuality, and spirituality.

One of the anomalies we have become accustomed to in the Catholic Church is that almost all decisions on marriage are made by those who are not married and never have been. Who are the standard bearers who should present a particular Catholic viewpoint on certain issues? Jesus did not call bishops, priests and laity as such but he did expect sensitivity and relationality.



Faith, Hope and Love