**The Priesthood Has Meaning, and Not Just for Male Priests – By Kerry Weber**

Calls for the abolition of the Church’s clerical establishment ignore something important: the wishes of the faithful.

A few years ago, I was invited to my friend’s ordination to the priesthood. I was thrilled for him—a kind, holy man who’s passionate about justice—and honored to be included. But if I’m honest, I also expected to be a bit bored. Ordination liturgies can run several hours, and the rite requires some parts to be repeated for each candidate. With eight men up for ordination, I knew we’d be in it for the long haul. I imagined the experience as something akin to a graduation ceremony, where you root for the person you know and then tune out.

On the day of the liturgy, however, that repetition of the rite moved me deeply. As I watched this line of men I’d never met become priests in the Church I loved, I was struck by the beauty of this brief overlap in our lives, and by the way in which these men represented only a fraction of those ordained that year. We would all go our separate ways, changed by this experience and renewed in our desire to serve. I needed to root not just for my friend but for all of them.

With every new wave of [stories of sexual abuse](https://www.americamagazine.org/topic/sexual-abuse) by priests, it can be much harder not to create a spiritual bunker containing the people I like and leaving out the rest. I have felt despair and frustration at the crisis of abuse and the failure of leadership that got us here. The Church needs healing. It needs a new way forward.

But it also needs the priesthood.

In a recent [essay in *The Atlantic*](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/to-save-the-church-dismantle-the-priesthood/588073/), the author James Carroll imagines the Church without the priesthood as we know it. Some of my friends quickly dismissed the piece as a fruitless thought exercise or an irrelevant rant by an ex-priest. But while Carroll’s wrongheaded plan to rid the Church of most priests is at best overly simplistic and at worst schismatic, it is worth reading for what it reveals about the Church’s current situation.

I know plenty of Catholics who share his underlying anger over the clericalism, abuse, and misogyny present in parts of the Church. [I have felt it myself.](https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/08/15/what-can-i-say-my-kids-when-they-ask-why-we-keep-faith-church) I talk to lay Catholics who feel [unwelcome or unheard](https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/09/21/st-john-paul-ii-envisioned-big-church-so-why-are-millennials-feeling-excluded) at their parish. They fear that priests can no longer be trusted, or that even the good ones have [lost their ability to speak](https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/09/25/yes-millennials-brunch-thats-not-why-theyre-skipping-mass) with any sort of moral authority. The survivors of sexual abuse have borne the worst of this pain, and the ripple effects of this scandal and cover-up continue to spread.

At its core, the problem that Carroll is grappling with has less to do with the patriarchy or the priesthood than with the unaddressed pain of the faithful. The spiritual effects of despair and disillusionment can cause people to simply shut down, to stop caring, to wash their hands of an institution. And that should worry Catholics. Because the biggest threat to the priesthood is not an internal rebellion against it. It’s that a crucial number of people will one day consider the priesthood irrelevant.

Carroll draws strong ties between clericalism—the privileges that come with the assumption that priests are superior, morally and otherwise—and the abuse of power in the Church. Bureaucratic self-interest, to be sure, is indeed an insidious force in the Church and a [major cause](https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/08/23/sexual-abuse-and-culture-clericalism) of the sexual-abuse crisis. The solution to this, however, is not to dispense with the priests but to more widely disperse the power. Carroll and I likely agree that greater inclusion of women would be a good place to start. And the Church need not wait. Without any change to Catholic teaching, [more women could serve](https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/opening-doors) as advisers to key Vatican offices, and more stories of women from scripture could be included in the [lectionary](http://www.usccb.org/bible/liturgy/index.cfm). It is even canonically possible for laywomen to become cardinals.

A national [survey sponsored by *America*](https://cara.georgetown.edu/CatholicWomenStudy.pdf) last year showed further opportunities for growth: Six in 10 American Catholic women [support the possibility of women deacons](https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/05/17/we-asked-catholic-women-if-they-supported-possibility-women-deacons-here-what-they). And there is plenty of room for improvement in terms of including women at the parish level. Only 18 percent of Catholic women surveyed felt that their parish “very much” involved women in decision making. But interestingly, when asked if they felt their priest did a good job including women in decision making at the parish, 39 percent said “somewhat,” and 45 percent said “yes, definitely.” The power of personalism, perhaps.

Indeed, greater integration of the lives of the clergy and laypeople may be part of the answer to clericalism. The Church must create more [opportunities for bishops](https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/04/18/what-can-we-do-hold-bishops-accountable), especially, to interact with the people they are meant to serve. Early Church canons frowned upon transferring bishops from location to location, according to the Boston College theologian Richard Gaillardetz. In a [recent interview with *America*’s podcast](https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/04/25/how-can-we-shift-power-church) [*Deliver Us*,](https://www.americamagazine.org/deliverus) he said that as bishops have become more mobile, reassignments to larger dioceses have become nearly synonymous with career promotions.

Similarly, integrating priestly seminary studies with that of lay theology students and hiring lay professors at seminaries can also help keep future priests from becoming insular. “How can you form somebody to serve the people of God,” Gaillardetz [asked](https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/04/25/how-can-we-shift-power-church), “when you systematically separate them from the very people they’re supposed to serve?”

I am a journalist at *America*, a Jesuit publication about faith and culture. My own workplace, one that integrates laypeople with Jesuit priests and brothers, has both unique benefits and unique challenges. (Pro: Easy to find someone to celebrate my wedding Mass and baptize my kids. Con: Need to be careful about accidentally encountering a coworker in the confessional.) But the challenges are eased, and even made fruitful, by the fact that I can be honest with my co-workers, ordained or otherwise. I harbor no illusions that priests are perfect. (The feeling is mutual.) Our shared mission requires us to explain our lives to one another.

We also have the opportunity to attend Mass weekly in our office chapel. The Mass reminds us that, whatever our differences or difficulties, at the heart of our community is the Eucharist, which inspires, empowers, and humbles us. At the risk of sounding overly pious—but it’s what the Catholic Church teaches, and what I’m afraid I actually believe—it is through the prayers said by our priests that bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, a source of grace and peace and healing. Which is exactly what the Church needs and what so many people desire. The body of Christ also exists fully and powerfully in the people in the pews. We need both of these experiences of Christ—in the people and in the Sacrament—to move forward meaningfully as a Church.

To do away with either ignores the desires of one of the groups that Carroll posits are most likely to be ostracized by the current Church structures: Catholic women. In *America*’s survey, we asked women which aspects of the Catholic faith were important to their religious identity. Most women named two things: helping the poor (79 percent said “somewhat” or “very much”) and receiving the Eucharist (69 percent said “somewhat” or “very much”).

Carroll’s plan emphasizes the social-justice efforts that appeal to so many Catholics but neglects the desire of women, and Catholics more generally, to receive the real presence of the Eucharist at Mass. As the Southern Gothic Catholic fiction writer Flannery O’Connor once wrote about the Sacrament, “Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it.” Yet our survey showed that only 24 percent of women are going to Mass weekly or more. The structural problems of exclusion and power Carroll describes may be keeping some away. But the answer to exclusion cannot be more exclusion. The answer is to bring the priesthood and the laity closer together, not to abolish the former for the supposed benefit of the latter.

During my friend’s ordination Mass, as I joined the long line to receive the Eucharist, I was reminded of an image once described to me by another Jesuit as a way of understanding the Church. When walking up to Communion, he sometimes imagines the line stretching far in front and far behind, and he thinks of the millions of men and women who have walked this path before and all those who will follow, a chain of sincere, faithful, imperfect people. I felt grateful to be a part of that line of Catholics—ordained and laypeople alike—all walking forward in hope, spurred on by the cloud of witnesses above, rooting for us all.