

Clerical Religious Life in the First Decade of the New Millennium

By Paul Philibert, OP

About 10 years ago, a book edited by Paul Hennessy and published by CMSM entitled *A Concert of Charisms: Ordained Ministry in Religious Life*, presented an overview of issues touching religious priesthood.¹ It was positively received; both major superiors and other religious appreciated the contribution. How do things look a decade later? In what ways does the religious priesthood look different today than it did in the mid '90s?

First, an observation of some significant changes in the culture and the church more apparent to us now than 10 years ago. Most of them were already in the works in the early 1990s, but have become more visible and more influential in U.S. Catholic church life. I will discuss five of them: secularization, the clergy shortage coupled with the distinctive attributes of the younger clergy, the continued growth of lay ecclesial ministers, the clergy sex abuse scandal, and increasingly visible Vatican centralization and re-clericalization of Catholic dioceses. I will then try to explain how these factors relate to the responsiveness (or lack of it) of American religious to the challenges raised a decade ago.

Secularization

Some recent studies illustrate the power of our mass-mediated consumer culture as an organ of secularization.² Two effects of secularization are its trivialization of faith and religious ideas in the popular culture, on the one hand, and the unchecked growth of the media's capacity for moral manipulation, on the other hand. Vincent Miller calls these “cultural dynamisms that incline people to engage religious beliefs as if they were consumer commodities. . . . Thus, religious belief is always in danger of being reduced to a decorative veneer over the vacuousness of everyday life in advanced capitalist societies.”³ This means that the coherent unity of faith and church has been dissolved into free-floating components including beliefs, symbols and behaviors that no longer fit together into an organic whole and no longer imply global commitment to an aggregate of religious practice.

This happens in a different way in Western Europe, where secularization is leading to the marginalization of religion in their oldest Christian societies. Here in the U.S., secularization is infiltrating a strongly religious society so as to transform religious values and diminish them. Although baptized into the corporate body of Christ, people maintain robustly individualistic social attitudes. Although they recite the Nicene Creed when they go to church on Sunday, Christians hedge their religious bets with idiosyncratic religious understandings, convinced that “what's good for me is good for God.” The

¹ Paul K. Hennessy, ed., *A Concert of Charisms: Ordained Ministry in Religious Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

² See Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Society* (New York: Continuum, 2004); Quentin Schultze, *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Books, 2000); Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 2000).

³ Miller, 225.

result is the illusion of understanding based on broad superficialities, and the semblance of commitment based on comfortable self-interest.

In consequence, many people are convinced that strong feelings validate religious ideas. Consumer religion shares with the ethos of modernity from which it sprung a disdain for the authority of classical wisdom (in terms of studying and absorbing traditional wisdom on its own terms). Religious secularization in the Catholic world means, among other things, that no objective authority can make a decisive claim on the faithful's loyalties. By way of example, some young people returning enthusiastically from World Youth Day, replied to my question, "And what did you think about the Pope's moral teaching?" with a shrugged, "Oh, he's entitled to his opinion." Secularization changes the valences of moral commitment. For religious life, it is making formation an entirely new ball game.

The Clergy Shortage and the Attitudes of Younger Clergy

The decline in candidates for priestly formation is not news. However, we now have greater clarity about prospects for the future ministry force. In 1968 there were 8,159 priesthood candidates enrolled in American seminaries, whereas by 2001 there were only 3,483. During those same years, the number of American Catholics increased over 30 percent. Further, the aging of the clergy has advanced so that only about five percent of active priests are 35 and under, while those over 55 make up half the total. In the year 2000, the average age for diocesan priests in active ministry was 59 and for religious priests, 63. Sociologist Dean Hoge estimates that the replacement level of new priests stands at roughly 35 percent, meaning that for every 100 priests lost to death or retirement, only about 35 new ones are ordained.⁴

Religious priests make up one-third of the priests in the U.S. Since the 1990s there have been about three times as many diocesan seminarians enrolled in theology schools as religious candidates for ordination. It's clear to see that the number of religious priests will be declining at a faster rate than the number of diocesan clergy.⁵

Yet, the number of Catholics continues to rise. In 2000, it was about 61 million, and it can be expected to continue to grow, a result of new immigration, which is heavily Catholic, and to higher fertility levels of recent immigrants.⁶ These trends have placed new burdens upon priests. Twenty-five hundred Catholic parishes (13 percent nationally) now have no resident pastor. In some areas the percentage is much higher, as in the Upper Plains region where 33 percent of all parishes have no resident pastor; the same is true for one quarter of parishes in the Northwest region.⁷ One key to the church's response to the issue of fewer priests will be the relationship of priests to other ministers

⁴ Dean R. Hoge, *The First Five Years of the Priesthood: A Study of Newly Ordained Catholic Priests* (Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 2002) 2.

⁵ Bryan T. Froehle and Mary L. Gautier, *Catholicism USA: A Portrait of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000) 111-112.

⁶ Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood: Changes from Vatican II to the Turn of the New Century* (Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 2003) 15.

⁷ Froehle and Gautier, 113.

(religious, deacons, and lay ecclesial ministers) and the success of fostering teamwork in the coordination of ministerial tasks.

The more recently ordained, however, have a weaker inclination to empower lay ministers than older priests. As Dean Hoge puts it, “about half of them are unenthusiastic about lay ministers.”⁸ Hoge’s study points out three general ways in which the newer priests differ from their predecessors. They’re not interested in any effort to realize the spirit of Vatican II. Instead, “They take pride in having a longer view which is open to adopting practices even from the Middle Ages.”⁹ They hold to a sacramental and cultic theology of priesthood, insisting on their ontological and institutional distinctiveness. Finally, they frequently express a desire to reintroduce transcendence to the liturgy in order to restore a sense of sacredness and mystery, instead of today’s liturgy, which is “too Protestant” for them.¹⁰

The Continued Growth of Lay Ecclesial Ministers

There are at present roughly the same number of lay ecclesial ministers employed in parishes in the U.S. (in about 65 percent of all parishes) as there are priests working in parishes at this time—something less than 30,000 of each group. A 1997 survey of lay ministers by the National Pastoral Life Center showed a 35 percent increase in professional lay ministers doing parish work since 1992.¹¹ Two points are worthy of note here. First, older priests are more favorable toward lay ministers than the younger ones. Second, for younger priests, the growth of lay ministry seems to be a challenge to their priestly identity.

Hoge and Wenger commissioned a telephone survey of lay ministers working in parishes to inquire about their relationships with the newly ordained. It showed the greatest tensions occurring between older, more educated lay ministers (80 percent of them women in the survey) and younger priests.¹² Further, they found that the attitudes of the laity in the pews are even more in discord with the younger clergy than those of lay ministers. On the other hand, Hoge discovered that religious priests are distinctly more supportive of lay ministers and lay roles in the Church than diocesan clergy.¹³ This closer relationship of religious clergy to lay ministers may prove fruitful for new ministerial initiatives and possibly even for vocation recruitment.

The Clerical Sex Abuse Scandal

Commentators have observed the anger and embarrassment of priests caused by the miserable publicity surrounding the priest sexual abuse scandal. Many priests have lost confidence in their bishops’ pastoral concern for them. Further, Andrew Greeley claims that priests in general have underestimated the impact of the scandal upon lay attitudes

⁸ Hoge and Wenger, 52.

⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 51. See also Philip J. Murnion and David DeLambo, *Parishes and Parish Ministries: A Study of Parish Lay Ministry* (New York: National Parish Life Center, 1999).

¹² Ibid., 127.

¹³ Hoge, *First Five Years*, 28-9.

and loyalty, and that the younger priests are the most dismissive of the importance of the scandal.¹⁴

One significant result of the scandal is that for the first time Roman Catholic Sunday church attendance is lower than that of Protestants, according to a Gallup survey.¹⁵ No one yet knows what the overall result will be, but Greeley attempts to summarize: “I anticipate a reaction to 2002 like that to the birth-control encyclical—a decline in church attendance and a decline in financial contributions but no mass exodus from Catholicism. Catholics, even very angry Catholics, still like being Catholic.”¹⁶

Centralization and Re-Clericalization of the Church

The publication in April 2004 of a Vatican instruction entitled *Redemptionis Sacramentum* is another installment in a continuing movement of centralization of authority within the Vatican congregations. In the 1980s, we saw Roman Curial initiatives to diminish the autonomy of episcopal conferences. In the 1990s, the Vatican repeatedly prohibited the prophetic ministry of baptismal priesthood in lay liturgical preaching. Now the re-clericalization of the sanctuary (along with complete micromanagement of liturgical translations) is the most visible preoccupation of the Roman Congregations for the well being of the local church.

A noteworthy characteristic of the recent Instruction is its failure to refer to the church’s evangelical mission. On the one hand, the document is very explicit about excluding all except the ordained from ecclesial preaching; but, on the other hand, it neither instructs nor exhorts the ordained about the centrality of their ministry of the word for a living liturgy. Reading this Curial instruction, one might imagine that the real crisis in the church today is poor sanctuary etiquette, not a dire shortage of ordained ministers or an uncatechized laity.

Seven years ago, during a Vatican press conference for the release of the 1997 Instruction entitled *Some Questions Regarding Collaboration of Nonordained Faithful in Priests’ Sacred Ministry*, Archbishop Dario Castrillon Hoyos, pro-prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, noted that that instruction “provides norms to overcome the phenomenon of the clericalization of the laity and the secularization of the clergy.”¹⁷ This same language now finds its way into the new instruction (n. 47), underlining the persistent concern of the Curia to maintain a clear status for clerics as sacred and irreplaceable ministers of the sacraments in the church.

¹⁴ Andrew M. Greeley, *Priests: A Calling in Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 117, 124-5.

¹⁵ A Gallup Organization report shows that in December 2002, the percentage of Catholics who responded that they attend church “at least once a week” had declined to 28%. For the first time, Protestants (35%) are now more likely than Catholics to attend Sunday church services on a weekly basis. See “Catholic Church Attendance Drops This Year in Midst of Scandal” on the Gallup website at www.gallup.com. Cf. “Catholics’ Mass Attendance Continues Decline,” *The CARA Report* 9:1 (Summer 2003) 4.

¹⁶ Greeley, 131.

¹⁷ “Some Questions Regarding Collaboration of Nonordained Faithful in Priests’ Sacred Ministry,” *Origins* 27:24 (Nov. 27, 1997) 402 sidebar.

Returning to A Concert of Charisms

The chief challenge posed for review in *A Concert of Charisms* came from the Nygren-Ukeritis study that insisted that only religious institutes that succeed in clarifying their social and pastoral role in the church could hope to re-found and renew their institutes.¹⁸ One benchmark for success in this task of reviving role clarity for religious is recruitment. How are religious (especially clerical religious) succeeding at recruitment?

Remember Dean Hoge's estimate that the newly ordained now contribute only about a 35 percent replacement for those removed from ministry. In the last two years, with more than 350 active priests removed from ministry for accusation of sexual abuse, that percentage is probably even lower now. In any case, it is bound to be lower for clerical religious institutes whose recruitment (as we have seen) is only about one-third that of dioceses.

A number of religious institutes have withdrawn their men from parishes, but the foremost reason for this has to do with diminishing numbers, not with a question of principle. (Benedictine monasteries are an exception to this, in that several of them have withdrawn men from parishes in order to assure their capacity to live a full monastic experience.) Recruitment quite simply is poor. There has not been a turn-around since 1997.

Another central concern in *A Concert of Charisms* was to work with diocesan bishops so that the ministerial charism particular to an order or institute might be brought to benefit dioceses. Put more simply, the hope was expressed that religious clergy would be able to contribute the gifts distinctive of their institute in their work of ministry. There is an example of a Franciscan experiment along these lines reported in this issue of *Forum*. It would be valuable to have a clearinghouse that would collect data about projects of this kind.

We are clearer now than we were 10 years ago about a number of pastoral priorities that are characteristically the domain of clerical religious. I think of three in particular: adult faith formation, spiritual direction (especially for the clergy), and parish evangelization.

In 1999, the U.S. Catholic Bishops published a pastoral plan for adult faith formation entitled *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*.¹⁹ In this document they acknowledge that many Catholics are lukewarm in faith and have little understanding of what the church believes and practices. This document is wise and practical, containing concrete approaches for many different contexts. My impression is that adult faith formation has not really taken off in very many places. The U.S. pastoral situation and the hopes expressed in the bishops' document are an implicit invitation for clerical religious to espouse this project of re-catechizing the faithful.

¹⁸ Miriam D. Ukeritis and David J. Nygren, "Voices of Religious Priests: Data from the FORUS Study" in *A Concert of Charisms*, op. cit., 169-183.

¹⁹ *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1999).

Along the same lines, the best parishes—those with effective preaching and good liturgies—are often earnestly seeking parish missions and evangelical preaching to lead congregants (and their staff) to a deeper faith. There are some excellent examples of religious who have devised good programs of this kind for parish renewal. But the need is great—and the numbers could be greater.

A recently published reflection on priestly spirituality, *Stewards of God's Mysteries*, reflecting both papal and episcopal teachings, stresses the critical importance of spiritual direction in the lives of parish priests.²⁰ *Stewards* acknowledges how difficult it is for many priests to find trained and sympathetic spiritual directors. Here too is an area of evident need calling out for helpful initiatives on the part of clerical religious.

Another area that was and remains critical for the renewal of clerical institutes is recruitment and formation. As far as I know, we do not have any accurate data about the relative median age of diocesan and religious seminarians. Hoge reports the average age of priests at ordination in the year 2002 as 36.²¹ In dealing with older candidates, especially when the number of seminarians for a particular institute may be very small, there seems to be an inclination to overbalance affirmation and nurturing (understandably important qualities) against challenge and molding character. This is cause for concern.

Katerina Schuth's study of seminaries and the future of church ministry describes seminarians with distinctly different backgrounds. Some are deeply rooted in Catholic faith, some are only recently converted or re-converted, and others have "a rigid understanding of their faith and the church."²² The majority of seminarians, however, knows too little about the church and therefore requires specific attention to shortcomings in their understanding of Catholic teaching and spirituality before realistically entering into the academic curriculum for ordination. Schuth notes that each of the seminaries that she studied has a few students with a Tridentine orientation who have no use for Vatican II—"preconciliar students in a postconciliar church"—whose arrogance and assertiveness give them an impact that far outweighs their numbers.²³ Religious institutes seem to be receiving fewer such candidates, but they are not altogether absent.

As we saw, current research notes that clerical religious have a more positive relation to lay ecclesial ministers than do diocesan clergy. With approximately 30,000 lay persons in training for ministry in special programs and in schools of theology and an equal number in service as lay ministers, here seems to be a privileged population for recruitment to religious life. Many of these laypersons are married, and quite a number are older. But numbers are single, idealistic, bright, and deeply spiritual believers seeking to make ecclesial ministry the center of their lives. Tapping into this pool for candidates for religious life is a possibility worthy of attention.

²⁰ Paul J. Philibert, *Stewards of God's Mysteries: Priestly Spirituality in a Changing Church* (Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 2004).

²¹ Hoge, *First Five Years*, 3.

²² Katarina Schuth, *Seminaries, Theologates, and the Future of Church Ministry* (Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 1999) 78-9.

²³ *Ibid.*

Concluding Thoughts

Are religious institutes in the U.S. re-founding and renewing themselves in their local religious communities? Are they finding ways to improve community prayer, common study, and life-giving fraternal exchanges? Are they opening their lives—especially their lives of prayer—to the faithful in their environment? Are they becoming identified within the diocese for the quality of their ministry and for their passion for their charism? Are they at the service of the priests and religious of their diocese in their preaching and spiritual life ministries? These remain enduringly relevant questions, just as they were 10 years ago.

To be able to respond positively to these questions means coming to terms with the environmental factors that we reviewed in the first part of this article. Is television in the religious house a tool or a tyranny? Can priests of religious institutes be characterized as “learned pastors,” or are they seduced by the media culture like everyone else? Are age, cultural, and generational differences a misery or a treasury? Are the struggles of the American church to recover its public respectability and to establish a fully catechized laity a source of despair or a call to mission? Are the religious as a community and as individuals attentive to finding opportunities to befriend and accompany young adult Christians or aloof from those they find difficult to understand?

My final impression is that we are in a kind of limbo—a time of temporal attrition of indeterminate length—confident that there will be a future for us, but uncertain what it will look like. If Hoge is correct, those who will replace the senior members of our institutes will be generous and passionate about their leadership in the church, but with little interest in Vatican II and with a bias toward wanting life to be uncomplicated. Our younger religious clergy observe strenuous and frequently unsubtle initiatives coming from the Vatican encouraging them in restorationist attitudes. This creates more a state of ecclesiastical stalemate than of polarization. And what is worse, there is a disheartening absence of leadership to help us move beyond the stalemate.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin seems to have been the last public voice to speak for the church in our country with clarity, comprehensiveness, and passion. There are some strident episcopal voices speaking today, but they lack clarity because of their disregard of the renewal tradition, they are divisive rather than comprehensive, and they are often fevered rather than convincing. We must continue to talk to one another, share our successes and our dreams, and continue to retrieve our traditions.

Waiting in limbo can seem long. But, remember, it is not without hope.

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