

# The Pastoral Care of The Clergy

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by Christopher Kennedy

A few years ago, it would have sounded unthinkable liberal to say that a priest should not let a week go by without spending an evening socially with laymen. To many maybe it still does. But the point is obvious enough; there is no better way for a priest to cut through platitudes and pat answers and learn to address himself directly to realities than through candid and honest conversation with lay friends, on a level of social parity and about matters of common human interest, and not merely those of a professional, ecclesiastical nature. Such exchanges would benefit particularly the young priest and help him overcome the brash and insensitive enthusiasm which is so often the product of much education and little experience. This would appear to be what Vatican II's Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests means in its statement that 'the Word of God ought not to be explained in a general and abstract way, but rather by applying the lasting truth of the Gospel to the particular circumstances of life.' In its first chapter this decree states that, although priests are taken from among men and ordained for men, they are nevertheless to 'live on earth with other men as brothers,' and in a manner which is marked by such human virtues as affability and sincerity. 'They are not to be separated from the people of God or from any other person.' The reason for this is quite clear: 'They cannot be of service to men if they remain strangers to the life and conditions of men.'

When this decree was being debated in the Council, however, one voice, raised in protest, insisted that all priests, but especially the younger clergy, must be told by the Council of the danger of choosing friends exclusively from among the laity. In making this point, the speaker gave clear voice to the outmoded bias against the laity that considered them incompetent as co-workers, and unworthy, and even dangerous, as friends. There are still too many vestiges of such clericalism. For instance, one diocese in the United States has among its relatively recent synodal statutes the statement that frequent socializing with the laity is unbecoming to the clerical state. One of the major active religious orders also retains the following similar item in its constitutions (which were revised a few years ago): 'All shall avoid conversation with seculars, not only with women but also with men, as being harmful to the spirit of devotion.' Another major active religious order is said to have an almost identical article in its constitutions.

These attitudes are not usually so badly asserted, but they certainly prevail very widely throughout clerical circles. Priests tend to gather regularly in set groups to vacation, dine and play cards or golf together, as might members of any profession. But they are apt to resent anyone's prolonged absence from such gatherings, particularly if it has occurred in favour of lay company. Such an absence, for one thing, appears to be taken as an implicit criticism of their company. But this is not simply a manifestation of suspicion of friendship with the laity, but of suspicion of friendship itself. Since their seminary days priests have been told to avoid close individual friendships, even among themselves. Seminary training encouraged them to run in a pack, and warned most seriously against 'particular friendships.' The implication in this warning was most unsubtle: the surest way to avoid sexual lapses is to avoid altogether the risk which is inherent in any affective expression of human love. However, that policy is possibly the surest way to produce such lapses. Only love can give us self-control and to love at all involves risk. C. S. Lewis reminded us: 'The alternative to tragedy, or at least the risk of tragedy, is damnation.'

But priests need friendship and human affection as much as anyone, perhaps more. Both are necessary for personal and spiritual development and so for the effectiveness of the priestly ministry. To exclude friendship and human affection from the training and lives of priests closes them off from and makes them 'strangers to the lives and conditions of men,' so that it is no wonder if they are unable to apply relevantly 'the truth of the Gospel to the particular circumstances . . . the important and unimportant events of life.'

Such isolation, however, is not simply the product of this puritanical attitude towards friendship. It is quite evident that a similar alienation occurs in other walks of life. Many a profession has the propensity for becoming a closed society with a jargon which hinders its ability to communicate with outsiders and can result in a calloused and perfunctory treatment of the very people it is meant to serve. This is true of the medical, legal, academic and military professions and not simply of the clergy. Impersonality and incommunicability, then, are defects to which a clergyman is as liable as any other person whose work tends to isolate him from and place him above those he serves. Whether it be the isolation of the staff-room, the ward-room or the rectory TV room, a steady diet of shop-talk and professional jargon will work its attrition upon one's ability to relate articulately and sympathetically with the rest of mankind. But since priests aspire to such a high ideal and make such strong claims to be able to succeed, such human weakness becomes less tolerable in them than in others. It is tragic, then, for priests to spurn the company of the laity as something fraught with hazards, when as ministers of God's work they need more than most the benefits of a wide and varied human converse in order to serve that word unto others well.

However, since most priests can claim a very wide contact with all

conditions and sorts of men in the course of their work, it is not the fact but the terms of these relationships that must be lacking. It is not merely professional isolation that impedes the openness and authenticity of their human relationships but above all the burden of authority and rank. That this is the case in other professions too cannot be denied. But there is a particular *hybris* which afflicts priests and inclines them to think themselves better than the rest of men. Though why this should be, when they have such an intimate contact with men's consciences is indeed a mystery, for nothing can be as humbling as the contrition and basic goodness of others as these are revealed to a confessor in the sacrament of Penance. But still there is an ever present assumption that by their very vocation priests are somehow placed above others. It is as if they considered themselves a spiritual master-race, superior to the non-Aryan horde. Paul Ricoeur calls this 'the passionate deviation of ecclesiastical authority into clerical power.' In other words, priests often unconsciously arrogate unto themselves the authority to which they are in service, and extend the limits of the Truth to which it rightly belongs. Priests thus turn service into a domination instead of a ministrations. In the end, this passion for power refuses to admit any truth in criticism, indeed even to permit it, and so does violence to the truth and, as history shows, often enough to men.

Obviously there is here a radical misunderstanding of the nature of the authority and rank that priesthood entails, and at the same time a common and human instance of the way in which authority and rank corrupt and dehumanize personality. 'The kings of the gentiles,' Christ said, 'lord it over them . . . but not so with you. On the contrary let him who is greatest among you become as the youngest and him who is the chief as the servant. For which is greater, he who reclines at the table or he who serves? Is it not he who reclines? But I am in your midst as he who serves.' Christ's authority is a service, not a dominion, and those who are chosen as its instruments do not come into it as a personal possession which they are somehow entitled to by vocation and rank or in reward for good deeds and sacrifices. 'Consider your own call, brethren; there were not many wise, according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble. But the foolish things of the world has God chosen to put to shame the "wise", and the weak things of the world has God chosen to put to shame the strong . . . lest any flesh should pride itself before him'.

First of all, then, authority does not *belong* to the priest. The only authority in the church is that of God himself. In the events and truths of revelation, in the Word of God himself, rests that authority. 'The authorities' in the church merely exercise this authority as its servants and instruments. 'He who hears you hears *me*'. Thus in administering the sacrament of Penance a priest says, 'May Our Lord Jesus Christ absolve you and *by his authority* I absolve you . . . in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'. Secondly, it is a mis-

conception to think of the sacrament of Holy Orders as conferring any sort of rank. It merely entitles and enables priests to serve their brethren. At the root of this misconception is the notion that the priest receives a higher vocation than the layman he is ordained for. But there is only one christian vocation: perfection. Christ told us all, 'You are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'. There are no other perfections, no evangelical counsels designed simply for those with so-called higher vocations. There can be no higher vocation than that radical call to perfection from the Sermon on the Mount, a call which priests together with all other christians received in baptism. Priests do not have a calling to a higher, personal (subjective) sanctity. Their *ministry* has a pre-eminent objective sanctity, of course, but they themselves do not. They are simply bound, because of the sanctity of that ministry, to make a special effort to respond to that calling to holiness which we all have as christians. They can never afford to forget that although taken from among men, they are ordained for men, and never cease to be men; they are 'brothers among brothers with all who have been reborn at the baptismal font'. Priests too are weak and sinful men, as they attest every time they say the *Nobis quoque peccatoribus*. They too are full of human failings and inadequacies and are just as much in need as anyone else of the mercy of the God before whose judgment they will stand with no right to expect special consideration because of their office. Only out of this awareness of shared humanity, only out of weakness, can priests sincerely and effectively act as instruments of God's words. As fathers and teachers they do have special sacramental power to speak *God's* nourishing and healing words to sinful men. But they have no right to consider themselves as anything but one with those to whom they speak.

The final effect of this misconception of authority is that without any right to do so, priests will stand on God's dignity even when not performing his sacred rites and speaking his words. Yet the only consideration which should affect a priest's manner in non-sacramental associations with the laity are those human considerations of courtesy which affect the laity's own dealings with each other. Actually when the clergy attempt to insist on superior position in social circumstances, the foolishness of such a claim becomes painfully apparent. What could be more demeaning for them than to converse at length on a purely social level with someone who is in every human respect their equal or better, and be 'Father-ed' to death by him? There is no other ordinary title which can be properly used without the addition of its bearer's name. But who is at fault? Not the laity, for if they place their priests on theologically unwarranted and humanly untenable pedestals, it is because their priests have demanded that they do so.

Then how could it be the responsibility of the laity to cure the clergy of their superiority complex? This responsibility arises because priests are unable to help themselves. Priests may recognize their ills very well, but they forget them in practice. They do not know these things

existentially or, if you will, operatively. Even the so-called 'new breed' priests are too constrained by heritage, training and environment to be free of clericalism on every level, least of all on the level of unconscious attitude and manner. Because priests are not always capable of recognizing their clericalism, they need outside help.

Therefore, if the laity want the clergy to speak to them in realistic language, they will have to help by speaking to them in that way. Instead priests are encouraged, trapped and fixed in their unreal and irrelevant impersonality. They are treated with excessive respect or rotarian heartiness; or else they are condescended to and reduced to social parasitism. For example, they are invited to family dinners but not included among friends one invites in for an evening for fear their presence would inhibit festivity. In sum, priests seldom have a chance to achieve an association personal enough to permit a layman to speak candidly to them and say what he really thinks, to say nothing of criticizing their clerical manners.

Some of the responsibility for eliminating these ills must lie with those enlightened and emancipated laity who can see clerical alienation more clearly and objectively than the clergy. But progressive catholics simply complain that there are plenty of holy, intelligent priests but too few who can talk with any parity, or empathy, and least of all any comprehension, with today's balky, angry young catholics. To turn to those priests who are disillusioned, however, offers little enough hope or satisfaction for those who seek the ideal church but are still too burdened by the real. The laity should stop merely complaining about priests and do something themselves about the reformation of clerical life and manners. It would surely not be impossible, for instance, for laymen to cultivate the intimate friendship of a priest. Certainly this might cost something: At times it would be a strain; sometimes it would inhibit social occasions. Forbearance and supreme tact would be necessary, and it would be a long time before there was much chance for candour. But all real friendship takes time, cannot be force-grown, and a priest's probably more than most. Undoubtedly such efforts might often miscarry and fresh starts might have to be made. But it should be worth the price to personalize the ministry and life of priests.