

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*In a conversation with one of my contemporary priest acquaintances, he lamented the move to the more traditional in his diocese. He said that when he was ordained, he was one of the few who wore his clerical attire and thus considered conservative, but not so anymore with new clergy coming into his diocese.*

*Darrick Taylor gives his reflection of the generational shifts that form priests at varying times in history, and how each one feels he is right in his thinking, and why some longer ordained feel threatened by the younger priests who seem to be gaining ascendancy even though the older generation holds the reins of power right now.*

*The bolding in black is the author's own emphasis. The color additions are my highlights.*

# The Generational Divide in the Priesthood

*DARRICK TAYLOR*



**This past Christmas Eve, I attended a Midnight Mass while visiting family for the holidays.** The Mass was in the old Roman Rite, provided by one of the religious orders dedicated to it, in communion with Rome. When the priest and his servers processed toward my pew, I received a surprise: the priest was a younger man I had known years before. I last saw him nearly a decade ago in Rome. When I first met him, he was a member of one of the newer religious orders, founded in the 1990s.

He was a good and devoted priest, but the religious order he was a part of was, to put it mildly, none too concerned with the liturgy, and very much inspired by Vatican II ideals (and the witness of John Paul II). Yet here he was, presiding at the altar, chanting the older rite in Latin. His homily concerned Christ's incarnation and touched on the necessity of faith in Christ and the Church for salvation, themes I rarely have heard in ordinary parishes. (He was always a good homilist, for what it is worth.) **That younger priests are drawn to the older rite and to traditional spirituality** I have long known, but seeing this priest made visible for me the generational divide within the priesthood today. It is one of those topics that can be delicate to speak of but is almost impossible to ignore: younger priests care more about orthodoxy, liturgy, and tradition than those ordained in previous decades. Many could produce anecdotes like the one above, but a recent [survey](#) of priests in the United States confirms this.

In general, priests ordained since 2000 have much more traditional attitudes toward sexuality and a host of other moral questions, are more skeptical of the idea of women in holy orders, are more exclusive concerning salvation, and are more pessimistic about the state of the Church in the United

States than previous cohorts, who are more “liberal” on virtually all of these questions. These are generalizations, of course, but they match up with much anecdotal evidence. And this generational divide is at the heart of the wider divisions of faith currently roiling the Church.

### **What is the cause of this generational divide?**

Years ago, the sociologist Karl Mannheim created the “sociology of generations,” in which he theorized that cohorts of individuals were shaped by what he called “generational location.” By this he meant the modes of behavior, belief, and formative experiences of youth that affect contemporaneous groups. For many older priests, their “generational” location was the 1960s, with all of its upheavals, and Vatican II. Likewise, those very social upheavals of that era and their aftermath—the sexual revolution, the general decline in trust for authority especially—have been the catalyst for many of the younger clergy.

Today, that older generation largely occupies positions of leadership, and their priorities dominate the Church’s councils. The most “progressive” of that older generation see the Vatican II era as a watershed moment in history, superior to those that came before and after them. Their priestly identity hinges on the experience of “liberation”: freedom from rules, dead customs, rituals, traditions, and beliefs.

They came of age when the Church was still large and influential but also very forbidding, seemingly impervious to change. As they were the first cohort of seminarians exposed to academic historicism in their formation (the idea that all beliefs, ideas, even faith itself, are historically conditioned, and essentially mutable), it is not hard to see why they so willingly jettisoned so much as out of date. The idea that the Gospel is primarily about Jesus freeing us from rules is a

common refrain among these types of priests. Anything else is for them false, inauthentic.

**For younger priests, their formative experiences are very different**—that of a declining institution that has lost its way as a result of the social and cultural disturbances, not to mention scandals and corruption in the Church itself. They inhabit a world in which everything that once was solid and stable is now up for grabs, both in society and in the Church. As a result, many seek to ground their priestly identity in the call to moral heroism preached by John Paul II, and the perennial appeal of the Church's traditional theological, liturgical, and devotional life so dear to Benedict XVI. Rather than being a conduit to free the spirit from dead traditions, younger priests want to find in the Church a rock of stability in the midst of spiritual and social chaos. What their elders consider "nostalgia" for a bygone era, they consider part of the Church's perennial heritage. When you consider how bound up these formative experiences are with differing theological positions—at their extremes, irreconcilable ones—divisions in the Church become much clearer. It is a natural tendency of one generation to want to distinguish itself from another, like a son attempting to free himself from his father's influence. Perhaps for this reason, some older priests see in the attraction of younger priests for the old liturgy or for older devotions a matter of mere affectation, a means of distinguishing themselves from the previous generation rather than a genuine spiritual impulse. I think it is likely that some older priests see in their younger colleagues' embrace of tradition a rebuke—implicit mostly but sometimes explicit—of their own priesthood.

As with so many other issues in the Church, the most ideological of [this older generation](#) have found their champion

in Pope Francis. Francis has made clear, on numerous occasions, his contempt for younger clergy and seminarians drawn to tradition (and lay Catholics for that matter). He has accused them of being “rigid,” hypocritical, even mentally ill, referring to them as “little monsters.” These appalling outbursts are unworthy of a spiritual father and bishop of Rome, but I doubt Francis would make them if he did not think a large number of (older) priests shared his views.

I have personally never heard any priest I know speak ill of Francis, but the ill-feeling must be mutual. I recall seeing an interview with Fr. Ian Kerr, the Newman scholar, who claimed that seminarians at the English College in Rome privately referred to Francis as “Fat Frank.” The journalist Damian Thompson has claimed a priest acquaintance of his was waiting with anticipation for Francis’ passing. **This kind of conflict is terrible for the Church**, but what to do about it is another matter. Sometimes Church watchers like to invoke the “biological” solution to the Church’s problems, especially with regard to the clergy. But generational conflicts have a way of perpetuating themselves. In the 1970s, the priest-sociologist Fr. Andrew Greeley (a “liberal” figure to be sure) published studies detailing the clergy’s disagreements over moral issues, suggesting the Church would eventually have to give in to their changing opinions. Now that generation, which enjoyed such a demographic advantage with the Baby Boom of the mid-twentieth century, seems to fear the same process might work against them. Diatribes like those of Pope Francis are perhaps a reflection of this.

For myself, I side with the younger priests in this, rather than their elders. Most older priests I know are faithful men, and I don’t mean to cast aspersions on them. It seems obvious to me that the solutions to the current crisis in the Church

most of them still espouse—Vatican II and the reforms of the 1960s—have long since failed and need to be abandoned. A recovery of the Western Church’s larger Tradition is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for not only the Church’s flourishing but its survival. As a layman with a strong sense of history, it seems to me that the tendency of the Boomer generation of priests to exalt *their* experience of what the Church should be, at the expense of its past, is one of its more damaging legacies. **The Church has no future if she cannot embrace her past.**

Benedict XVI once wrote that his decision to make the old Roman Rite more widely available was motivated by his desire to ensure “that the Church is one with herself inwardly, with her own past.” The Church cannot be at peace with itself if the Church, in the person of her priests, is at war with itself.

If I could speak to all those decent priests who find in their younger confreres, like the one I encountered at Christmas, a frightening repudiation of what they have dedicated their lives to, I would tell them that these younger priests only seek the Truth in all its fullness, **Who stands outside both the experience of the older and younger generations. There is nothing to fear in this, for embracing the Church’s immemorial worship and spirituality will bring to light whatever was good in their priesthood, rather than condemning it.** We should pray fervently for all our priests, and we should hope that this divide will be healed—for the good of all, especially those young priests who will carry the Church into an uncertain future.

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