

New study of priesthood should be received as a “wake-up” call

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The release of **The Catholic Project's study of priests** and the data revealed therein should be welcomed by all Catholics. I must say, however, that data did not surprise me in the least – especially the negative elements. The major fact that has already grabbed everyone's attention is that most priests do not trust their bishops; that could surprise only those who do not listen to priests. The study maintains that this disturbing factoid is directly related to the worst aspects of the "Dallas Charter." Here I disagree. I believe the more draconian measures of the Charter merely brought to light what had been simmering below the surface for years.

Given the nature of my work for decades, I generally visit fifteen or more dioceses every year, dealing with bishops, priests, and teachers. And I have daily phone contact with those groups. Further, I provide a "listening ear" for dozens of priests – most of them young. This affords me a unique perspective from which to evaluate situations. Here is some of what I hear "on the ground."

- When the chancery office phone number pops up on a priest's phone, he freezes in fear.
- When called into the chancery, many priests now bring with them a civil lawyer for protection because they know they will be confronted with the diocesan Sanhedrin, comprised of bishop, vicar general, judicial vicar, priest personnel director and, yes, the diocesan attorney.
- When complaints are made against a priest – whether of a sexual, financial or personality nature – priests believe that they are already judged and found guilty.
- 100 positive letters in a priest's file count for little or nothing against one negative letter, especially if that letter comes from a woman.
- Octogenarian dissenting parishioners all too often find strong chancery support when they grouse about the content of a young priest's preaching or his *ars celebrandi*.
- The "generation gap" between the oldest priests and the youngest often makes rectory life a living hell.
- Priests grossly resent the drumbeat of unwarranted chancery intrusion into their pastoral ministry.

- One bishop, confronted by both clergy and laity seeking more just compensation for his priests, replied: “Keep them poor, keep control.” Truth be told, the episcopal desire for “control” is frequently manifested in a managerial demeanor, more reflective of a CEO than of the father or brother envisioned by the Church’s theology and the Code of Canon Law.
- Priests intensely resent the fact that when a bishop is accused of sexual abuse, he remains on the job, continues to wear clerical garb and to live in diocesan housing. When a priest is accused, he is given a matter of hours to vacate his residence, doff the collar, and be ready to be dispatched to one of the clerical gulags.

Pastors in the “old days” ruled as minor monarchs (not a good thing) and effectively held bishops at bay. It was not unknown that in a pastor-bishop conflict, the pastor would bar the bishop from his parish until a resolution was achieved. Today, bishops are absolute monarchs (also not a good thing), especially when dealing with “conservative” or “traditional” type priests, proving true the Irish adage that “the willing horse gets flogged the most.”

This imperious style transcends ideology, as one can find a hierarch on either side of the aisle operating in the same fashion. When rational discourse has been exhausted – if it even begins – all too many bishops resort to reminding the priest that on the day of his ordination, he put his hands into those of the bishop, promising “obedience and respect.” Most bishops forget that that beautiful medieval feudal gesture signified a two-way relationship. Yes, the knight indeed promised “obedience and respect,” in return for which the lord promised him loving protection!

This negative picture has consequences:

- Not a few younger priests remind bishops that “it’s a seller’s market” in the priesthood today, meaning that bishops need priests far more than priests need bishops. The adversarial relationship works both ways.
- Many priests – particularly those under the age of 40 – are prepared to leave active ministry, rather than submit to the horrors of the gulags or to live in fear of what could befall them at any moment.
- One concrete result of all this is that priests are not recruiting replacements for themselves. And, most interesting, not a few devout

parents who would have prayed for years to have a priest-son, now actively discourage their boys because they don't want them to experience what they have come to know so many priests experience. How many dioceses this past spring had not a single priestly ordination? How many dioceses did not have a single new seminarian this fall?

Priests are not perfect, as history well demonstrates. However, they are the indispensable links in the chain that keeps the whole structure alive. Mafia bosses, not known for humility, did know, however, that they had to keep the "foot-soldiers" content. To be sure, thankfully, there are many good bishops, and their dioceses are thriving because their priests feel supported and appreciated. This study should be received as a "wake-up" call: We cannot conduct business as usual.

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