

Fr. Perozich comments —

Power can be a gift for others' conversion, if used properly. Used improperly, it can be a tyrannical weapon which impedes salvation and grants benefits only to the one wielding power

Popes and bishops decry clericalism. It is important that they too look inward in order that they do not live the clericalism that they claim to oppose, not to use the word as a weapon to further their own power over people with whom they disagree.

Being drunk on power clouds the mind worse than any drug or alcohol use/abuse, and just like other addictions, it diminishes people in the circle of the cleric drunk on power.

My personal opinion is that those who drink in power are little boys inside with delayed psychological development trying to get even with those from their past, rather than forgiving and moving on in humility.

To Jesus be the power and the glory. To me be humility, contrition, and a heart open to Him for my conversion and of those to whom He sends me.

Clericalism Is Dead. Long Live Clericalism!

The clericalism that was once considered the realm of clergy who treated lay people like children has transferred its loyalty to a new generation of priests, who clothe their power-seeking ways in faux humility and New Yorker lingo.



- [Fr. Nicholas Ashmore](#)

“Oh, we don’t wear that around here.”

The whole room fell silent as the ancient priest stared at me. It was my first year of ordination and I and several other priests were waiting in the sacristy for school confessions to begin. The priest again pointed at my cassock and said louder, “No, really, we don’t wear that!” I tried to pass it off as a joke, but he kept up his bullying. No one, young or old, interceded. They just watched as I fended off his jabs with my meek attempts at humor. Finally, when he saw that I would not budge, he turned away, miffed at my disobedience to his clericalist rebuke.

Clericalism is indeed alive and well today. What was once considered the realm of the Monsignori and priests who believed lay people were to be like children—seldom seen and rarely heard—**has transferred its loyalty to a new generation of priests, who clothe their power-seeking ways in faux humility and New Yorker**

lingo. The old clericalism is dead. Long live the new clericalism!

How can this be? To understand this chameleon-like malady, **one must go past the appearances. Clericalism has little to do with mere externals.** It is far more insidious than a choice of clothing, hats, or even legitimate forms of the Missal. **Clericalism is a spiritual disease, a form of abuse of power.** As one colleague of mine defined it, “Clericalism is the use of the structures of an institution contrary to the values of that institution.” To put it another way, **it is the will to power made possible by the ecclesial culture of the day.**

In my experience, I have seen this clericalism in the priesthood in three distinct ways.

The first form of clericalism consists in the private and social behavior of the priest and presbyterate. This clericalism occurs when the lifestyle or culture of the priesthood is used to perpetuate sinful habits. This could be when a priest habitually uses pornography and masturbation without efforts of amendment. The solitude inherent to the clerical state allows him to continue a sin that, were he a married person, would have familial consequences.

Or **this can be seen when the culture of a presbyterate ignores or even encourages bachelor-like behavior, such as frat-boy parties, excessive drinking,** or even sexual rendezvous. Rather than brothers living in unity, the presbyterate becomes a boys’ club that protects its culture of excess and vice above all

things. Finally, the most extreme example of this is a culture that tolerates sexual abuse or predatory behavior; even a priest's criminal behavior may be excused because "he does so many other good things."

The second form of clericalism involves the pastoral and legal praxis of the cleric himself. Here, **the cleric considers his own judgment to be the true measure of the law and determines when and where certain moral teachings or legal norms should be applied, relaxed, or interpreted.** Examples of this abound. A priest may ignore marriage law and allow a person with a previous bond and no annulment to attempt new vows with another.

Or another priest may ignore liturgical norms and allow pre-recorded popular music to be played at a funeral. Or a person may reveal to him that he has a habit of a private sexual sin, and the priest may tell him not to worry about it because **"we don't teach that's a sin anymore,"** or, **"it's not a sin if you're addicted."** Finally, **a cleric in a high position of authority may overextend his power and presume to limit or encourage practices which are not granted him by law.**

These behaviors are often defended as "merciful," or "pastoral." However, they are the opposite. **When a priest disregards the moral law, he uses his spiritual authority to bind his flock to the sinful habits from which they are suffering, rather than to free them.** When he disregards the positive law, he implicitly teaches that all law is arbitrary. Eventually, a

disdain for law itself arises among the flock, and soon they believe any rule is an unjust imposition on their freedom. Thus, the disobedience of the priest becomes the disobedience of the people, and true charity is nowhere to be found.

The third form of clericalism is an advocacy for a purer Gospel, cleansed through the lens of contemporary biases. These clerics embrace luxury beliefs and defend them with specious argumentation and platitudes so superficial that they would make the most fervent “Coexist” bumper-sticker owner blush. They sugarcoat complex moral and theological issues and strawman their opposition with phrases like, “pre-conciliar,” “manualistic,” “judgmental,” or “pharisaical.” Putting themselves above even the Church Fathers, they sit as judges of Church teaching and choose doctrines with the same glee as a girl plucks the petals of painted daisies, proclaiming, “He loves me, he loves me not!”

I call their ideas “luxury beliefs” because these clerics do not bear the brunt of their damaging effects. Unlike lay people who must day in and day out fight to live in a culture that is becoming increasingly hostile not only to Christianity but to classical anthropology itself, **they can sit in their high castles and wax about inclusion, not worrying if their son or daughter is being manipulated by TikTok or sex-ed in public school. They reap the social benefits of not being “one of those mean**

bishops” and leave the pain and suffering to others.

It is a stunning paradox, then, that they promote themselves as allies of those on the peripheries, for their true friends are the elites. This is obvious from their argumentation, which often bears a condescending tone toward the laity. For example, a priest-theologian recently suggested that, contrary to the Council of Trent, Pius XII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, we should jettison the term “transubstantiation” from the Church’s understanding of the Eucharist. His reasoning? Nobody grasps Aristotelianism today. In other words, **lay people aren’t smart enough to get it.**

Another example is a cleric who recently published an article stating that the Church’s tradition of Eucharistic coherence is ensconced within judgmentalism and exclusion. First, he speaks of mortal sin with the same fluidity as a first-year seminarian. Then, with strange analogies that seem to come from a convergence of a Salvador Dali painting and a UNESCO flyer, he speaks of the Church as a tent that grows magically larger and larger with doors that grow wider and wider.

Finally, he concludes that we must reevaluate the constant teaching of the Church going all the way back to St. Paul that those conscious of grave sin must exclude themselves from Holy Communion. His reasoning? Lay people cannot accept the distinction between persons and act; they cannot understand the difference between

committing sins and having the disposition to commit certain sins. **Again: lay people are not smart enough.**

When the priesthood becomes a place for hidden vice, an unreliable source of guidance, or the sounding board for yet another pet project of Columbia University, it is degraded into a merely sociological institution in the eyes of the faithful and the world. Those who believe that it is a sacred order with a divine mission are left, then, without a paddle. **Clericalism is an elitism that is willing to throw anybody under the bus, especially other clerics, in order to maintain the power and positions of social honor.**

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The fortunate news, however, is that in my experience most priests do not fit into any of these categories. The vast majority of priests work long hours and pour their life into their ministry, receiving little in return for their labor. **Most priests are good men, if flawed in their own way, who love the Lord and suffer the consequences of clericalism just as much as the laity. They are the ones who tend to the wounds left by the clericalist elite. The**

clericalism of the few make the majority's ministry that much harder.

As long as the priesthood has existed, there have been men that abused it. When that priest berated me about my cassock-wearing, something for which I am not unique, it had nothing to do with my clerical garb and **everything to do with his power.**

Karl Barth popularized the phrase, “Ecclesia semper reformanda est.” The Church must always be reformed. But I think the Second Vatican Council put it better when she said, “the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal.” **As long as we priests forget that penance for our sins and the sins of our people is at the center of our ministry, the desire for renewal will continue to transform itself into the will for power, and new clericalisms will be born in every generation.**



- [Fr. Nicholas Ashmore](#)

Fr. Nicholas Ashmore is a priest of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas, ordained in 2019 and now the pastor of two parishes, one rural and one Spanish speaking. He received a Bachelors in Philosophy from Conception Seminary College, and an S.T.B, M. Div, and Ma.Th from Kenrick School of Theology.