

‘We are a target for the devil’: A traditional superior offers a survival guide for priests

The attacks on priests from every conceivable angle have never been fiercer. One traditional priest has weighed in on how others can help protect themselves mentally and spiritually.



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Fri Feb 7, 2025

([LifeSiteNews](#)) — How bad are the spiritual, psychological and physical attacks on our priests today?

The renowned, late Father John Hardon (1914-2000) gives a hint:

Having taught priests over 30 years, having lived with priests, and having labored for them, loving them and suffering with them — no words I can use would be too strong to state that **the Catholic priesthood needs prayer and sacrifice as never before since Calvary. One saint after another has declared that the devil’s principal target on earth is the Catholic priest. Priests need — Lord how they need — special graces from God.**

Since Fr. Hardon has passed, I would venture to say that some forms of attack have dramatically worsened, including the canceled priest crisis. My personal observations alone of priests I’ve known over the past few years have been disturbing.

I have seen one of the most faithful priests of my diocese forced out after a complaint by a Mass-goer over “unsettling” remarks about COVID. I have seen another priest pushed out because he refused to consent to forcing the masking of children during Mass, and he now must find another means to support himself. Another of the best priests of the diocese appears to have abandoned his vocation a few years ago for unknown reasons.

The list goes on. The best priests are being canceled throughout the nation; illness and exhaustion are wearing down even young priests; and some priests are emotionally suffering greatly. These are all grievous facts on their own, but they have the added weight of priming priests for spiritual attack. What we have seen lately is proof of one thing: **The devil targets priests with an especially vicious ferocity.**

Traditional priest and superior Father Marc Vernoy, who has served as a prior all over the world, affirmed to LifeSiteNews, **“We are a target for the devil. A target for the world. And we can be our own target.”**

Amid these attacks from all sides, **both priests and the laity must be mindful that clerics need to be properly armed, spiritually and psychologically, to persevere well in their vocations.** The very spiritual welfare of society depends on it. St. Alphonsus said that **“The good morals and salvation of the people depend on good pastors ... hence the proverb: like pastor like parish.”**

This is in part because of the sway of the prayer, preaching, and example of the priest but also because the presence — or lack thereof — of a good spiritual father decisively impacts whether men, including fathers, will practice the faith themselves. This in turn has profound effects on their families, both spiritually and psychologically, with ripple effects for generations.

Fathers are by far the biggest determinant of whether their children will actively practice their religion. A 1994 Swiss survey [found](#) that if a father irregularly attends religious service and the mother attends regularly, only 3 percent of the children will go on to attend regularly, while 59 percent will attend irregularly, and 38 percent will cease attendance entirely.

By contrast, if the father regularly attends religious service and the mother attends irregularly, 38 percent of children will attend regularly. And if the father attends regularly but the mother is entirely non-practicing, 44 percent of the children become regular churchgoers, “as if loyalty to father’s commitment grows in proportion to mother’s laxity, indifference, or hostility.”

Children instinctively see their father as an authority figure, a role not granted to the mother. So we can better see what is at stake in the quality of our priests, our spiritual fathers, when we also understand that men generally are not interested in attending a church led by a counterfeit spiritual father, including especially one who is effeminate, a quality that goes hand-in-hand with spiritual laxity.

Tragically, such priests have inundated the mainstream church for decades, as witnessed by pervasive watered-down and even heterodox preaching and catechesis; stories of homosexual predation in seminaries; and the abuse crisis. When we understand the importance of a father figure, we can appreciate how this has contributed to the present-day crisis of Catholicism.

The lack of true spiritual fathers not only discourages men from religious practice. It deprives men and women alike of an icon of God the Father, and as Robbie Low has put it, “disfigures the icon of the First Person of the Trinity.” The tragedy of this cannot be understated. It is perhaps the greatest stumbling block to faith in and love for God, as the family stories of many atheists show.

This is at the root of why Fr. Vernoy goes so far as to say that **“the absence of fatherhood is the cause of all of our crises today,” including both “the crisis in the family and the crisis in the Church.”**

“Because the priests and even the bishops, and I’m sorry to say the pope — they don’t really act as we expect from a loving authority, which is fatherhood. A caring authority,” Fr. Vernoy told LifeSiteNews.

Our Lady of Good Success, who appeared in Quito, Ecuador, [lamented](#) in 1611 that there would come a time when, **“Lacking a Prelate and Father to guide them with paternal love, gentleness, strength, wisdom and prudence, many priests will lose their spirit, placing their souls in great danger.”** It seems clear we have reached that time.

Fr. Vernoy affirmed the importance of a spiritual father to the priest, noting that such **a father gives “identity,” “a sense of duty,” and “responsibility.”**

“If you know who you are, you know what you have to do,” he said, adding, “If you have a clear idea of your identity, you are extremely strong. You love yourself for good reasons.”

In our day and age, a priest may have to make special efforts to find a spiritual father he can trust, but this would be worthwhile in the estimation of Fr. Vernoy, who advised that priests keep a spiritual father their whole life. He would ideally be a spiritual director to whom the priest reports to once a month and confesses with frequently.

It also helps the priest to unload his burdens to a spiritual father, something especially needed because “a priest has to carry not only his own sins, but all of the sins he hears in the confessional,” which can weigh “extremely heavy” on him, Fr. Vernoy revealed.

At the core of a priest’s apostolate, without which he cannot be effective, is his spiritual life, the neglect of which is the priest’s ultimate pitfall. Contemplation, a form of mental prayer, is an indispensable part of this spiritual life, which Fr. Vernoy elaborated on:

When you’re in contemplation you’re one with Christ, you’re one with God. There’s no division, because it’s all about love. Contemplation is just leading to love. Even if you spend one hour without thinking about anything but just giving your love. What is contemplation? You’re giving your presence to Our Lord who is always giving His presence to you. This is pure love. If we miss that, we miss everything.

He stressed that **the spiritual life is the most important safeguard for a priest: “Just staying close to Christ and receiving His presence,”** Fr. Vernoy said. “To be one with Christ who is one” is also “the key to mental balance.”

In addition to keeping his spiritual life, having a spiritual father, and living in community, the priest “must be very careful” to say the Breviary every day, to maintain his study and intellectual life — “all directed to Christ” — and to “keep distance with the world.”

This includes being careful with “tech, news, and social media,” which run the risk of becoming an addiction.

“You lose a lot of time and all your energy,” Fr. Vernoy cautioned. “We lose our identity with all of these things. And this is a big risk for mental health.”

Regarding safeguards for priests, he also mentioned that wearing the cassock is “a very big protection and is a constant reminder of who we are. A reminder to keep the spirit of poverty, the spirit of humility.”

Fr. Vernoy stressed **the importance of humility for a priest, “because it gives room for the presence of Christ,” and allows the priest to depend on Christ in his apostolate, as opposed to taking everything upon his own shoulders.**

“And if there is room for Christ there is love, and this is what the priest must be, a token of love. If he is loving then he is merciful, he is meek ... this is the only way to be successful in the apostolate. It’s not us, it’s the Sacred Heart.”

The priest’s very apostolate, if lived well, sustains him. “It’s our duty, our love, to give Christ to the faithful, and this is the most beautiful thing we can do ... love can fix everything. It can fix a lot of natural wounds, difficulties. And to me this is the question of the Sacred Heart,” Fr. Vernoy said.

“Our presence is a sacrifice, but our presence is love, which is the same. But it’s a great reward. We see the most beautiful things that no other human being can see.”

For priests who are really struggling with issues that cannot be addressed purely spiritually, Fr. Vernoy says good therapists can be very helpful, since they have the formation to deal with natural issues that priests lack.

“A priest should not wait if he sees that something is not balanced in his life, that he is no more the same, that he doesn’t have the same regularity, he is losing patience, he is losing hope. He should see a therapist. Yes, we need help,” Fr. Vernoy acknowledged.

At least two U.S. [priest suicides](#) in recent years drive home the importance of seeking help, whatever the cause of distress. Dr. Christina Lynch, former director of psychological services at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver, has said that in this regard support from a bishop is very important, especially since priests tend to feel shame otherwise about seeking out help.

Asked what the laity can do to help priests, Fr. Vernoy advised that they “help the priest in any material or worldly task, so he can focus on his spiritual life and his apostolate, purely,” adding, “I think what is a great help is when you have volunteers.”

Dr. Lynch has advised that the laity “need to be praying for them, be friends with them. A lot of times laity are afraid to be really friends with their priests ... They need to be attentive to their priests and make sure they’re supporting them. The more support a priest is going to get from everybody instead of criticism, the better it is going to be for them.”

And not least of all, the laity must pray fervently for priests. “This is what priests need more than anything,” Fr. Vernoy acknowledged.

The SSPX, for example, dedicates a Holy Hour to priests on the first Thursday of the month, joined or held by the laity. The laity should dedicate daily prayers to priests in general and especially those of their parish and even make their morning offering [on behalf](#) of priests. There are various apostolates of prayer for priests one can participate in, including [St. Michael’s Apostolate of Prayer for Priests](#), the [Seven Sisters Apostolate](#), and the SSPX [Prayer Crusade for Priests](#).

Ultimately, the priest must follow in the footsteps of his Exemplar, Christ, the Supreme Priest and Victim, and for this reason, need our prayers all the more.

“The priest is victim as our Lord is priest and victim. We are a mystery,” said Fr. Vernoy, echoing another priest, Fr. Patrick Summers, who has testified:

“(With) any priest you know, if he is a good priest, he is a victim. Internally he suffers, internally. Maybe he goes around with a smile, maybe he is very well loved by these people ... (It is) that internal suffering where he says ‘today I have to deal with those people, or this person, or this situation. Have to do these mindless tasks, these annoying things I have to do each day, that my duty never ends. I wake up on Monday, it’s the same duties all over again all the way to next Sunday. I must persevere in climbing back up on that Cross, and be a victim each day externally and internally. I need to lay down my life in whatever way He asks of me.’”



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