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THE CHALLENGE OF LIBERATING LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY FROM CLERICALISM

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Abstract

Having made the essential distinctions between an authentic clerical culture and clericalism on the one hand, and between authentic ecclesial leadership (authority) and clericalism on the other hand, this article endeavours to point out how clericalism—which has diffused itself into all spheres of contemporary ecclesial life—has even distorted the indispensable ecclesial element of authority. Under five sub-titles, the article highlights five major contemporary contributing factors that invariably provide breeding grounds for clericalism in the Church. Thus, it concludes that ecclesial authority needs to be liberated from the clutches of ever-increasing trends of clericalism in the Church by returning to the ecclesiology of Vatican II.

Keywords: Clericalism; Ecclesial Authority; Ecclesiology of Vatican II; People of God; Pope Francis

Introduction

Authority in the Church is an indispensable tenet of Christian Tradition.¹ The New Testament (NT) is replete with references to this

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¹It should be noted that all the Christian denominations, in spite of their divisions and diverse ways of interpreting the Christian faith, accept the concept of authority

concept, and nowhere in it do we find any recommendation to get rid of it. However, the same NT clearly stipulates what this ecclesial understanding of authority ought to be. Jesus' teachings clearly point out to ecclesial authority exclusively as a service of the community rather than a privilege or a status conferred on the person/s who hold such authority (Mk 10:42-45; Jn 13:1-17). The same understanding continues during the Apostolic times of the Early Christian churches as is evident in the NT itself. However, with the passage of time, and especially with the Church and the State (the Empire) entering into a symbiotic relationship since the fourth century, this original sense of authority becomes gradually tarnished and identified with secular senses of authority, while in the process, the one and only justification Jesus himself attributed to its existence in ecclesial life slowly getting pushed to the background. In the long run, as Catholic Church history so clearly witnesses, this paved the way for clericalism (which is a grotesque distortion of the true significance of authority) in all its ramifications to get entrenched in all spheres of ecclesial life, so much so, that it was taken for granted as something legitimate and necessary for the Church's very existence. As is well-known, it was the recent explosion and flaring up of clerical sexual abuse scandals within the Church (thanks mainly to mass media) and the boomeranging of the efforts made by quite a number of those in ecclesial authority to sweep them under the carpet that opened the eyes of many to the reality of the immense negative influence which contemporary clericalism exerts within the Catholic Church. The valiant efforts of Pope Francis since his election to office in 2013 to highlight the menace of clericalism and the damage it causes to ecclesial life, have also contributed to it becoming one of the most-discussed themes within the Church in recent times. Whether we like it or not, "clericalism is an important and profoundly harmful reality dwelling within some if not many Catholics today, clergy and laity".²

In this article, our aim is to show how clericalism has distorted the indispensable ecclesial element of authority, and in the process, how it has also eaten into the Church's credibility. We will first define briefly what clericalism is, and then, we will make a couple of vital distinctions of terminology in order to highlight what clericalism really amounts to in contrast to what genuine ecclesial authority

in the Church as a given. Cf. Tamara Grdzeldze, ed., *Sources of Authority, Contemporary Churches*, Vol. II, Faith and Order Paper No. 218, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2017.

²R. Thomas Richard, "Clericalism: Betrayal of the Body of Christ," *Homiletics & Pastoral Review*, 28 March 2019, available at <https://www.hprweb.com/2019/03/clericalism/> (last accessed on 19 March 2021).

means, and finally, we will discuss five major contributing factors that serve as breeding grounds for clericalism in the Church today.

What is Clericalism?

Although there are various descriptions of clericalism available, for the purposes of this article, what Seasoltz gives fits in well: “The term designates a constellation of relationships, behavioural patterns, status symbols and ideas in which bishops and priests,... live and function as ministers in the Church. It is closely associated with a triumphal lifestyle.”³

Typically, clericalism, understood in this way, amounts to the identification of the Church exclusively with the hierarchy of the Church. The many polemics that ensued in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century and the Catholic triumphalism that prevailed ever since till Vatican II also reinforced such a close identification of the clergy with the Church, giving birth to a unique sense of triumphalism:

That triumphalism existed among both the bishops and priests who often saw themselves as accountable to no one but the pope and God. It flourished among many of the ordained but often supported by the passive acquiescence and encouragement of lay people who not only placed the clergy on a pedestal but also adulated their presence there. From their elevated status, the ordained were able to load on lay men and women heavy moral burdens which they themselves did not at times carry with integrity.⁴

Contemporary Clericalism, as it prevails in the contemporary Catholic ethos, is not a phenomenon to be detected only in some isolated or scattered areas of the Church. Rather, it has got diffused all over the Church structures today, so much so, it has become ‘a way of life,’ a culture, that is often taken for granted, by most of the clergy and the laity. The Jesuit sociologist and theologian, George Wilson in his classic study entitled “Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood” points out convincingly that such a culture of clericalism includes “very concrete patterns of behavior and ways of thinking” that precisely in their apparent ordinariness, operate at a largely unconscious or unexamined level.⁵ As Gaillardetz holds, many of those who live such a culture of clericalism “may be largely unaware particularly to the extent that they are surrounded by those who

³Kevin Seasoltz, “Clericalism: A Sickness in the Church,” *Furrow* 61, 3 (March 2010) 135.

⁴Seasoltz, “Clericalism...,” 135.

⁵George B. Wilson, *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood*, Collegeville (MN): Liturgical Press, 2018, 3.

share that culture.”⁶ At this stage, it is necessary that we highlight the crucial distinction between authentic priestly culture and the culture of clericalism.

The Distinction between an Authentic Clerical Culture and Clericalism

The lack of an authentic identity is surely one of the underlying causes for many a priestly problem today.⁷ According to the cherished Catholic belief, ordination certainly confers a unique role on the ordained for serving the common good of the given ecclesial community. The much-needed priestly identity is founded precisely around this concept of service. Accordingly, the ordained is expected to fulfil the healthy expectations of a certain way of life that is in harmony with the service he is expected to render the community. Hence there is no denying of the vital contemporary need for a genuine “clerical culture,” a genuine clerical way of life, either as a bishop, priest or a deacon.⁸ On 25th April 2021, as the Bishop of Rome, when he ordained nine deacons to priesthood at St Peter’s Basilica, Pope Francis referred to the main elements of such a culture of priesthood when he told them:

Priests are established co-workers of the Order of Bishops, with whom they are joined in the priestly office and with whom they are called to the service of the people of God... their task is to preach the Gospel, to shepherd God’s people, and to celebrate the sacred Liturgy, especially the Lord’s sacrifice.⁹

The Distinction between Authentic Ecclesial Leadership/Authority and Clericalism

Thus, clericalism is a confusion as well as a distortion of real leadership in the Church which the Holy Spirit exercises through the hierarchy. But even then, one needs to be very clear that the members of the hierarchy are only the instruments in the hands of the Holy Spirit, and so, they have the prime duty to always listen, discern and carefully put into exercise the promptings of the same Holy Spirit. In

⁶Cf. Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Challenging Clericalism,” <https://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2019/01/02/challenging-clericalism/> (last accessed on 10 April 2021).

⁷Cf. Stephen J. Rossetti, *The Joy of Priesthood*, Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2005; Stephen J. Rossetti, *Why Priests are Happy: A Study of the Psychological and Spiritual Health of Priests*, Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2011.

⁸Cf. Vimal Tirimanna, “Towards a Catholic Priestly Culture,” *Living Faith* 5, 2 (December 2004) 49-60.

⁹ Pope Francis. “Priestly Ordination: ‘a gift of service’”, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-04/pope-francis-ordains-9-priests-rome-mass.html> (last accessed on 26 April 2021).

this sense, an inevitable question that arises in one's mind is: Who exactly leads the Church? Is it the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus or the Church's hierarchy on their own? The Acts of the Apostles clearly and consistently demonstrates how the nascent Church leaders were guided by the Holy Spirit in everything they said and did (Acts 5:29-32; 13:1-3; 15:28). Thus, one notices how those early leaders made their decisions—not on their own but together with the Holy Spirit, under His guidance and inspiration. Unfortunately, this ecclesial ideal is pushed aside by clericalism, and as a result, one wonders whether those Church leaders who indulge in clericalism have left any space whatsoever for the Holy Spirit to act, so much so, the rhetorical but useful question is unavoidable: Has not clericalism tried to make the Holy Spirit to be under the guidance of the hierarchy rather than the former guiding the latter?

Of course, there is no denying the fact that Bishops as successors of Apostles¹⁰ wield legitimate authority in the Church as willed by Christ himself, but this authority is exclusively for the service of the Church. On their part, the priests share in the authority of the Bishop,¹¹ and are the leaders and guides who ought to lead the flock entrusted to them “in Christ, through the Spirit, to God, the Father.”¹²

Vatican II recovered the traditional Catholic belief that the Holy Spirit dwells in the entire People of God so much so with regard to matters of faith and morals the same Spirit guards the Church as a whole from falling into error:

The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when “from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful” they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth.¹³

As such, even in the exercise of its teaching authority, the hierarchy has a moral duty to listen to the sense of the faith of the believers (*sensus fidei fidelium*) because the Holy Spirit speaks also through them.

¹⁰ Cf. *Lumen Gentium* (1964), 18, 20, 22; *Christus Dominus* (1964), 2, 4, 6, 8; *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (1965), 2. Henceforth, these documents will be referred to as LG, CD and PO, respectively.

¹¹PO, 6.

¹²PO, 6; Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), No. 26.

¹³LG, 12. If one recalls how at the time of the Arian heresy in the fourth century almost all the bishops were victims of Arianism, and it was the *sensus fidei* of the laity that brought the Church to orthodox faith.

Some Major Contemporary Factors which Breed Clericalism

Today, clericalism has come to stay in a very ubiquitous manner in all the rungs of the ecclesial hierarchy in diverse degrees. But thanks to the charismatic leadership of Pope Francis (not only in his words but also in and through his gestures and actions), its negative consequences on both the ordained and the non-ordained have been clearly identified, highlighted and condemned. As such, the indispensable duty of the contemporary Church—both of the clergy and the laity—at this time of history is to address this plague of clericalism and thus, extricate the legitimate role of ecclesial authority. To achieve this goal, it is also important to identify and eliminate the contributing factors which serve as fertile breeding grounds for contemporary clericalism. Given below, under five subtitles is a brief enumeration of some of the main factors that cannot be ignored in the struggle to combat clericalism today.

Ignoring Vatican-II Ecclesiology

As is well-known, before Vatican II, the Catholic Church functioned mainly in the form of a pyramid, with the tiny minority of the ordained hierarchy at the top of the pyramid and the vast majority of the laity at the bottom. However, the Council clearly highlighted and taught the importance of all the baptized as members of the Church and the basic equality among Christians that flows from their baptism, thus shattering the pyramidal understanding of the Church. It “put an end to the obsessive concentration on the clergy.”¹⁴ This revolutionary Church teaching (which is nothing but a recovery of her traditional roots), unfortunately, has not seeped fully deep into the Catholic ecclesial ethos, even after some six decades of the Council. As a result, there are many bishops and priests (not only in the Roman Curia) who still happily promote and live the pre-conciliar pyramidal Church model. Many of them are still earnestly seeking to resurrect some old archaic, triumphalistic practices that ought to have died with Vatican II:

Many of those practices are closely related to the phenomenon of clericalism. Hence we witness the celebration of so-called Tridentine Masses in which the lay people are reduced to silent spectators, where there is a very limited proclamation of Scripture, where the Mass comes across simply as the priest’s Mass, and where women are denied all ministries in the celebration. We also witness cardinals wearing cappa magna with very long trains carried by young boys. Flamboyant

¹⁴Walter Kasper, *Leadership in the Church: How Traditional Roles can Serve the Christian Community Today*, translated by Brian McNeil, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003, 62.

vestments, elaborate thrones, and lace surplices and albs are all in evidence at papal ceremonies. To many in our Church, this comes across as triumphalism.¹⁵

Obviously, such clericalism could be overcome only by the ecclesiology which was proclaimed by Vatican-II “that managed to open a breach in *Lumen Gentium* in the Chapter on the People of God.”¹⁶ The contemporary tendency to conveniently forget how the Council spoke first on the People of God, by placing that discussion before its discussion on the hierarchy also paves the way for clericalism. This unhealthy and “heretical”¹⁷ tendency is the main cause not only of clericalism but also of many other disturbing issues in the contemporary Church.¹⁸ As Cosgrave so convincingly points out, “one’s ecclesiology or understanding of the Church itself has a very persuasive influence on one’s position on a whole range of issues.”¹⁹ And that surely includes the crucial issue of clericalism.

Forming both the clergy and the laity in the spirit of LG 12 is a sure way to overcome the ubiquitously present nefarious consequence of contemporary clericalism—namely, paternalism—as exercised by the clergy over the laity. If one really believes that all the baptized from the bishops to the last believer are endowed with the Holy Spirit as taught by LG 12, then, it is obvious that the laity too, are infused with the sense of authentic Christian faith (*sensus fidei*) by the same Spirit though the discernment of that faith obviously “is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority” of the ecclesial hierarchy.²⁰ In fact, as the Council taught, the clergy “must willingly listen to the laity, consider their wants in a fraternal spirit, recognize their experience and competence in the different areas of human activity, so that together with them they will be able to recognize the signs of the times.”²¹ As such, the common tendency of many a clergymen today to make decisions on their own (and impose them on the laity) on ecclesial matters—that ought to involve the whole believing community—is a clear betrayal and violation of the

¹⁵Seasoltz, “Clericalism...,” 136.

¹⁶H. Heimerl, “Clericalismo” in Karl Rahner, et al., ed., *Dizionario di Pastorale*, Brescia: Editrice Quareniana, 1979, 131.

¹⁷As traditionally held, the term “heresy” is used here to mean a clear and manifest deviation from the official Catholic Church teaching, namely, that of Vatican II.

¹⁸Cf. Bill Cosgrave, “Structures of Authority: The Issue behind the Issues Today,” in Sean Mac Réamoinn, ed., *Authority in the Church*, Dublin: The Columba Press, 1995, 26-47.

¹⁹Cosgrave, “Structures of Authority,” 46.

²⁰Cf. LG, 12; *Dei Verbum* (1965), 10.

²¹PO, 9.

Church's official teachings. However, in this regard, sometimes the laity also can be held responsible for promoting clericalism in the Church especially with their thinking that they have nothing to contribute to the Church life or in holding the view that "Father knows best"!²² In his EG, Francis says that a clear awareness of the lay responsibilities in the Church grounded on their baptism is lacking either because they have not been given the needed formation on this or because the needed space for the laity to talk and act had been not given, mainly due to clericalism.²³ As such, on the part of the laity, too, there is a crying need to be actively conscious of the role they are expected to play rather than blindly depending on the hierarchy for any and every matter to do with their lives, as already warned by Vatican II:

Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission. Rather, enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role.²⁴

Thus, there is a need to form the laity too, with a sense of co-responsibility with regard to ecclesial matters rather than letting them continue to live with a sense of over-dependence on the clergy (which automatically perpetuates clerical paternalism). As Pope Francis would say the role of the clergy is to form the consciences of the people, and not to replace them.²⁵

Cardinal Walter Kasper accurately identifies "a superficial and one-sided reception of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, which emphasized the 'people of God' and *communio*, and the associated doctrine of the common priesthood of all the baptized" as one important cause of the current crisis in Catholic priesthood.²⁶ He points out that "ultimately, the question is about the very essence of the church, or the obscuring and undermining of the image of the church that the last council derived from the Scripture and tradition."²⁷ As a matter of fact, the pre-Vatican II pyramidal model of the Church wherein the hierarchy usurps all the functions in the ecclesial community, especially those of decision-making so that the

²²Cf. Gaillardetz, "Challenging Clericalism."

²³Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), 102. Henceforth, this document will be referred to as EG.

²⁴*Gaudium et spes* (1965), 43.

²⁵Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (2015), 37.

²⁶Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 46.

²⁷Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 47.

non-hierarchical members are passive recipients is “significantly at odds with the New Testament account of Jesus’ exercise of authority, and with the structures and exercise of authority in the early Church.”²⁸

Widening the Gap between the Laity and the Clergy

As already mentioned, Vatican II was very clear in asserting the basic equality of all the baptized in the Church while at the same time highlighting the distinct roles performed by the clergy and the laity. This intrinsic relationship between the clergy and the laity was expressed by the Council Fathers, clearly and succinctly, as follows:

The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light...Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ (LG, 10).

Officially, Catholic liturgy is meant to be the fundamental ecclesial expression of the equality of all the baptized because it is at the liturgical celebrations that they all become children of one family. Of course, there are specific roles for the clergy and the laity in every liturgical celebration, but no such celebration is meant to divide the baptized into two classes, one more privileged (and venerated) in status than the other. As a matter of fact, Vatican II insisted on the need to ensure the participation of all the baptized in the Church’s official worship, of course, in and through their own specific calling:

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people (1 Pet 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.”²⁹

In other words, it is not just the clergy, but the entire People of God who ought to actively participate in divine worship, as one Body of Christ. Moreover, the Council was very clear about the prime duty of the pastors to ensure such active participation of the laity in the liturgy when it taught:

²⁸Cosgrave, “Structures of Authority,” 29.

²⁹*Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1964), 14. Henceforth, this document will be referred to as SC.

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit; and therefore pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the necessary instruction, in all their pastoral work (SC, 14).

Thus, the prime duty of pastors is to work towards the “active participation of the laity” while the latter have the right to be formed with the conciliar reforms for the official worship with all their implications. That is to say that the duty of genuine ecclesial authority is to lead all the baptized to walk continuously in their earthly pilgrimage by forming their consciences with what the official Church teaches rather than with their private beliefs:

The ordained are meant to promote and facilitate good order and unity through their teaching, sanctifying and governing roles. They are in that sense to be leaders of the community. Certainly in the early Church, it was men who showed that they had the gift of leadership who were ordained, and because they were leaders of the community, they presided at the community Eucharist. It is a major responsibility of the ordained members of the Church today to lead God’s people into the future, not simply into the past.³⁰

However, thanks to contemporary clericalism, in quite a number of places, during liturgies, the centre of attraction is not God but the celebrant himself. This is invariably the case if the celebrant happens to be an ecclesiastical dignitary or someone who is aspiring for the episcopate! Such a scenario worsens with those bishops and priests who are fanatically obsessed with liturgical rubrics which tend to focus the limelight on themselves and their rubrics rather than on the One to be truly worshipped. Of course, no one could deny that official liturgical rubrics are necessary and that they are an indispensable means to a worthy end, namely, for divine worship. But the *means* should never become the *end*! Although an exclusive cultic model of Catholic priesthood does not augur well in our contemporary society, “many seminarians and recently ordained priests favour cultic model of priesthood and have adopted the traditional clerical lifestyle.”³¹

They are often preoccupied with clerical dress—with cassocks, birettas, capes, French cuffs, lace surplices and clerical vests. They see themselves

³⁰Seasoltz, “Clericalism...,” 140. See also SC, 26.

³¹Seasoltz, “Clericalism...,” 141. This, indeed, has been the first-hand experience of the present writer, too, who had been teaching seminarians and young priests for nearly three decades, continuously, in Sri Lanka, Rome and elsewhere. Interestingly, nowhere in the NT are the apostles or the ministers in the Early Church referred to as a “priests.”

as part of a separate clerical caste and often resist the more collaborative approaches associated with the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. They generally espouse a very traditional classical theology, have scarcely any self doubts, and see themselves quite separated from older priests who are more attuned to the pluralism of contemporary theology.³²

Spiritual Worldliness

By definition and also in practice, clericalism is a contradiction of a Christian believer's supreme model—Jesus of Nazareth and his gospel. To begin with, Jesus had no place to be born or to be buried...not even to lay his head, during his lifetime here on earth. As the gospels so eloquently proclaim, Jesus was always among the least of the people, such as prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners and other rejects of society. His power was not of this world, and he warned his apostles not to seek places of honour and authority, as the world does (Mk 10:41-45). He always did not hesitate to speak out what was true and just even when such forthright speech disturbed both the political and religious leaders of that society. He entered Jerusalem for the redeeming passion sitting on a donkey—a clear mockery of contemporary clerics and their use of grandeur vehicles, at times with chauffeurs. Instead of expecting the disciples to wash his feet (a common oriental practice), Jesus himself washed the feet of his own disciples at the Last Supper, a powerful prophetic gesture for the benefit of those who exercise authority in the Church. In fact, his authority was most visible when he sat on “the throne” on the cross.³³ It was in powerlessness that the authority of Jesus was most obvious.

Whenever these basic and indispensable characteristics of Jesus and his gospel are ignored—as it is invariably the case with clericalism—then, the clerics tend to substitute them with worldly characteristics that are poles apart with those of Jesus. Thus, they prefer to have diplomatically superficial relationships, especially with the superiors and those who wield authority, to be ambitious to climb the hierarchical ladder by taking meticulous care to be politically correct, to be slavish to empty but flamboyant rituals, to be arrogant, to have highly secular worldly materialistic lifestyles, to be obsessed about glossy liturgical vestments and immaculately neat cassocks, ...etc. Pope Francis calls such practices by the generic name of “spiritual worldliness,” a phrase he has borrowed directly from the renowned theologian Henry de Lubac.³⁴ In his very second Christmas

³²Seasoltz, “Clericalism...,” 141.

³³ Cf. Hannah Brockhaus, “Christ’s Throne is the Cross, Pope Francis Says,” <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/39691/christs-throne-is-the-cross-pope-francis-says> (last accessed on 7 May 2021).

³⁴Cf. H. De Lubac, *Méditation sur l’Église*, Paris, 1968, 321.

message to the Roman Curia, the Pope dared to refer to the same evil realities prevalent among those of the Vatican Curia. Calling them “curial diseases” he went on to highlight and describe fifteen such “diseases” peculiar to the Roman Curia which then consisted exclusively of the clergy.³⁵

According to the Pope: “Spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, consists in seeking not the Lord’s glory but human glory and personal well-being. It is what the Lord reprimanded the Pharisees for.”³⁶ The Pope goes on to state: “It takes on many forms, depending on the kinds of persons and groups into which it seeps. Since it is based on carefully cultivated appearances, it is not always linked to outward sin; from without, everything appears as it should be.”³⁷ Pope Francis has not ceased to highlight and condemn this evil of “spiritual worldliness” whenever he got the opportunity to do so. For example, in his homily on Palm Sunday of 2019 at St Peter’s Square, the Pope condemned once again “spiritual worldliness” which he described as a form of “triumphalism” that threatens the Church. According to the Pope, “It lives off gestures and words that are not forged in the crucible of the cross; it grows by looking askance at others and constantly judging them inferior, wanting, failures.”³⁸ Then, on 16 May 2020, at the homily of his daily mass, the Pope once again recalled Lubac’s phrase “spiritual worldliness” by pointing out that it is “the worst of the evils that can happen to the Church.”³⁹ In EG, he referred also to the various concrete forms in which this spiritual worldliness manifests itself today:

This insidious worldliness is evident in a number of attitudes which appear opposed, yet all have the same pretence of “taking over the space of the Church.” In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God’s faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time. In this way, the life of the Church turns into a museum piece or something which is the property of a select few. In others, this spiritual worldliness lurks behind a fascination with

³⁵Cf. The Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2014, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco_20141222_curia-romana.html (last accessed on 22 April 2021).

³⁶EG, 93.

³⁷EG, 93.

³⁸Cf. *The Tablet*, 15 April 2019 at <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/11594/resist-temptation-of-spiritual-worldliness-says-pope> (last accessed on 22 April 2021).

³⁹Cf. Hannah Brockhaus, “Pope Francis: The Antidote to Worldliness is Christ,” <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/44550/pope-francis-the-antidote-to-worldliness-is-christ> (last accessed on 22 April 2021).

social and political gain, or pride in their ability to manage practical affairs, or an obsession with programmes of self-help and self-realization. It can also translate into a concern to be seen, into a social life full of appearances, meetings, dinners and receptions. It can also lead to a business mentality, caught up with management, statistics, plans and evaluations whose principal beneficiary is not God's people but the Church as an institution. The mark of Christ, incarnate, crucified and risen, is not present...⁴⁰

Needless to say that such attitudes which are common among quite a number of today's clergy inevitably leads to clericalism.

The "Exclusive Club Mentality" of the Hierarchy

Directly flowing out of "spiritual worldliness" is an exclusive "club mentality" wherein some members of the hierarchy, especially the influential ones, get into a sort of a ghetto or a club inside which they happily get cut off from others, especially from ordinary lay men and women. Thus, an unhealthy, artificial division of "we" and "they" are created among the People of God. Consequently, as Pope Francis has pointed out "closed and elite groups are formed, and no effort is made to go forth and seek out those who are distant or the immense multitudes who thirst for Christ. Evangelical fervour is replaced by the empty pleasure of complacency and self-indulgence."⁴¹ In fact, in the above-mentioned papal Christmas Message to the Roman Curia in 2014, this exclusive "club mentality" was also in the list of the Curial "diseases." However, today it is found even outside the Roman Curia, both among quite a number of bishops and priests, within their respective exclusive groups:

The disease of closed circles, where belonging to a clique becomes more powerful than belonging to the Body and, in some circumstances, to Christ himself. This disease too always begins with good intentions, but with the passing of time it enslaves its members and becomes a cancer which threatens the harmony of the Body and causes immense evil—scandals—especially to our weaker brothers and sisters.⁴²

As the Pope pointed out to the Chilean bishops in 2018, such closed clerical groups often tend to presume that the mission of evangelization depends exclusively on them:

A failure to realize that the mission belongs to the entire Church, and not to the individual priest or bishop, limits the horizon, and even worse, stifles all the initiatives that the Spirit may be awakening in our

⁴⁰EG, 95.

⁴¹EG, 95.

⁴²Cf. The Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2014, No. 14.

midst. Let us be clear about this. The laypersons are not our peons, or our employees. They don't have to parrot back whatever we say.⁴³

As is well-known, often, it is from such closed "clubs" that new members for the Episcopate are proposed and eventually appointed, so that the culture of clericalism is perpetuated. As Daly writes:

Very few St John Vianneys or St Vincent de Pauls become bishops. Why? Because we are looking for institutional loyalty more than holiness, compassion, justice or a sense of empathy for the poor. The clerical mindset chooses bishops because they are good administrators, fundraisers, glad-handers. It does not have to be that way.⁴⁴

In the Letter to the Ephesians, various forms of ecclesial services to be carried out by "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers" are mentioned. They are mainly "for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12). "Accordingly, the special task of ministerial service is to equip the other forms of service to serve; it serves the other services and helps thereby to build up the whole body of Christ."⁴⁵ But in all these activities, the ecclesial office-holders are simply the "servers" of the body of Christ or the ecclesial community, and nothing more.⁴⁶ In a way, they are instruments in the hands of the living Spirit of Christ who really is the head of the body, and from whom all the ecclesial charisms flow. For this to really happen, the clerics and laity have to be closely linked without any exclusive "club mentality" as such. After all, the baptized are diverse parts of the same Body of Christ.

The present writer still recalls nostalgically the oft-repeated assertion of his systematic theology professor in the seminary that priesthood does not have any meaning if there is no People of God. Accordingly, priests are ordained from the people and for the people. That is why a priest is called "a man of communion," and so, "in his

⁴³Cf. Discourse of Pope Francis to the Chilean Bishops at the Sacristy of the Cathedral of Santiago, 16 January 2018, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/january/documents/papa-francesco_20180116_cile-santiago-vescovi.html (last accessed on 23 April 2021).

⁴⁴Peter Daily, "Confronting Causes of Clericalism: Original Sin, Institutional Dynamics," *National Catholic Reporter*, 9th September 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/priestly-diary/confronting-causes-clericalism-original-sin-institutional> (last accessed on 23 April 2021).

⁴⁵Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 56.

⁴⁶That is how traditionally even the Pope has come to be referred to as "servant of the servants of God" (*servus servorum Dei*) which is a total contrast to the contemporary trend that prevails in some parts of the Church today to insist that the hierarchical members be addressed by such out-dated European feudal titles such as "My Lord," "Your Grace," ...etc., instead of addressing them with some respectable contemporary title which they certainly deserve as leaders of the Christian community.

relations with all people he must be a man of mission and dialogue.”⁴⁷ He is “a person who is called to be responsible for a community.”⁴⁸ This, especially in view of Vatican II ecclesiology, would imply a clear sense of accountability to the People of God. But the clergy who are saturated by clericalism won’t have any such qualms of conscience, as long as they have the backing from the influential clerics within the “club.” They live in their own worlds with an erroneous sense of moral superiority which necessarily and subtly implies that the members of the hierarchical “club” are not accountable to anybody else except (if at all) to their immediate superiors (i.e., priests to Bishops, and Bishops to the Pope). The renowned Canon Lawyer, John Biel illustrates this point well when he writes:

Since all lines of accountability point upward in canon law, only hierarchical superiors are competent to judge whether their subordinates have adequately fulfilled the obligations of their offices or abused their powers. Bishops, pastors, and other officeholders are accountable for their stewardship to those who appointed them, not to those they serve. The faithful may express disgruntlement about the shoddy performance, nonfeasance, and malfeasance of their pastors and even bishops to their hierarchical superiors, but superiors are free to give these complaints as much or as little weight as their discretion dictates when deciding whether to retain, remove, or discipline their subordinates.⁴⁹

Thus, rather than serving the people, such addicts of clericalism often feel that they are over and above the rest of the people. Consequently, they expect people to treat them as a special class and they love to be called by such archaic titles of feudal times as “My Lord,” “Your Grace,” ...etc. Obviously, this is a blatant negation of the exclusive meaning of service attributed to the concept of authority by the Lord Himself. In fact, this behaviour pattern fits well into Jesus’s caricature of the Pharisees:

They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries [vestments] broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts [church dinners] and the best seats in the synagogues [the Presidential Chair at the celebrations of Mass], and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi [Father] by men.⁵⁰

⁴⁷Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), 18.

⁴⁸*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 43.

⁴⁹John P. Beal, “Something there Is that Doesn’t Love a Law: Canon Law and Its Discontents,” in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 150.

⁵⁰Mt 23:5-7 as annotated by Richard, “Clericalism: Betrayal of the Body of Christ.”

The sense of moral superiority that ensues from such a “club mentality” invariably leads to paternalism which makes the laity to be mere passive recipients who have nothing to do or say in ecclesial life, except to be submissive and obedient to any and every command and demand of the hierarchy. It also is very allergic to any criticism of the clergy (even when such criticisms are constructive and fraternal) by the lay persons. This, in fact, is one of the main reasons for the crisis of the Church today. Often, one hears various laments and comments about the obvious shortage of priests in the universal Church, especially in the Western world. However, as Cardinal Kasper correctly points out, “the real problem is not a shortage of priests, but a shortage of faithful and of communities—and this in turn is one of the causes of the shortage of priests.”⁵¹ In other words, it is clericalism that causes a shortage of active communities of lay faithful. By usurping even the legitimate ecclesial roles and functions of the laity and by keeping them away from their own exclusive “clubs” the clergymen perpetuate the crisis of priestly vocations.

It is worth noting here that such an exclusive “club mentality” differs vastly from a healthy sense of priestly solidarity and fraternity that is legitimately and theologically warranted within a diocese or a region of a diocese.⁵² A healthy diocesan priestly brotherhood not only strengthens priestly fraternity, but it also energizes and invigorates priests to be more people-oriented within an enriching priestly culture. However, a club mentality aims at excluding not only those who are non-ordained, the laity, but also all those priests or bishops who do not follow the culture of clericalism.

Moreover, such a “club mentality” is closely associated with an unhealthy sense of secrecy that often prevails in many exclusive circles of the hierarchy.⁵³ Since the laity are considered as susceptible to scandals by those who belong to such “clubs,” the sense of secrecy becomes an absolute value for them. Consequently, as the Murphy Report on Child Abuse in Ireland so clearly stated, the clergymen develop an obsessive concern for secrecy and make strenuous efforts to avoid all that would appear to be “scandalous” in the eyes of the laity.⁵⁴ Commenting on the Murphy Report, Seasoltz writes:

⁵¹Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 48.

⁵²Cf. PO, 8.

⁵³A healthy sense of secrecy among the Church hierarchy is indispensable, such as the obligations for secrecy that emerge from the Pontifical Secret, the Seal of Confession and other important ecclesial matters of confidentiality.

⁵⁴The Report of the Commission of Investigation into Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, popularly known as the “Murphy Report” published on 29 November 2009

Above all the reputation of the Church and its ecclesiastics was scrupulously protected so that the bishops and episcopal Roman officials, though willing at times to admit the sins of individuals in the Church, were most reluctant to speak of a sinful Church. They feared that such a confession would scandalize the 'little ones' in the Church. They felt that any recognition that the Church itself is sinful could not be reconciled with the affirmation that the Church of Jesus Christ is indeed a holy Church. Clericalism concealed the fact that the Church as an institution has often acted in collusion with what can only be described as structural sinfulness.⁵⁵

Thus, yet another instance in which clericalism manifests itself is the sickening preoccupation of many a contemporary bishop to sweep under the carpet glaring immoral behaviour of some of their priests who are found guilty of sexual abuse. Many such offenders were transferred from one place to another just to avoid "scandalizing the laity"! But the high prize paid in the process—not only by those victims in the new place to which the errant priests were transferred but also by the offending clergy themselves—is more than evident today, as the whole Church is getting deeper and deeper in the muck of abuse crises.

Such an unduly exaggerated paternalistic attitude (which is an open negation of Vatican II ecclesiology) to get into an exclusive club mentality (that is often if not always enveloped in strict secrecy), and thus, to be cut off from the laity, is the very opposite of what God did because God through His Word became one of us (by pitching His tent among us, as the Evangelist John would imply), while those who indulge in clericalism prefer to keep away from them! God was incarnated among us, while clericalism makes the hierarchical members to be "excarnated" from the people.

Warped Seminary Training (Formation)

With his experience of some three decades of teaching in the seminaries in various parts of the world, the present writer cannot ignore the crucial role played by the warped seminary formation he had often witnessed in many a major seminary towards promoting a culture of clericalism. Vatican II was very clear that all the forms of training, spiritual, intellectual, disciplinary, are to be ordered with concerted effort towards the one single pastoral end of forming "true shepherds of souls after the model of our Lord Jesus Christ, teacher,

is available at http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Dublin_Archdiocese_Commission_of_Investigation (last accessed on 7 May 2021).

⁵⁵Seasoltz, "Clericalism...", 136-137.

priest and shepherd.”⁵⁶ However, the type of formation into which most of the contemporary young seminarians have been subjected to has been in a quite contrary direction. Of course, in seminary formation programs, a lot of lip-service is paid by formators to the need for priests to be at the service of the people, but most of the actions have been geared towards an opposite direction. Take for example the academic curriculum of most of the seminaries today: How many seminaries are still following the long out-dated Tridentine model of theological formation instead of following the clear-cut indications given by Vatican II? The comments of a researcher on the study programs of some of the seminaries and schools of theology in the USA are worth citing here:

More attention is given to an apologetic approach to studies, and a significant reassertion of the privileged place of the works of St Thomas Aquinas is evident in diocesan theologates. Descriptions of intellectual formation in some school catalogues highlight priestly identity, priestly ministry and priestly spirituality in contrast to presenting the broader ecclesiological context that includes all the faithful. In moral theology, more emphasis is placed on sexual morality and biomedical ethics dealing with reproductive technology than on the broader social teachings of the church.⁵⁷

Gaillardetz corroborates the same when he writes:

It is shocking to consider how little of the structure and context of priestly formation has changed since the establishment of our current seminary system at the sixteenth century Council of Trent. Discerning the needs of the church today and being cognizant of the ways in which our current seminary structure may be supporting today’s clerical culture, we should question many of the current formation practices that maintain a climate of clerical isolation. At minimum, seminarians should pursue their academic studies at universities and theological centers where they would be accompanied by lay men and women as students and where they would be taught by a diversity of professors, lay and ordained.⁵⁸

Unfortunately, the mass exodus of priests and religious in the aftermath of Vatican II has created an erroneous nostalgia for “the good old days,” and simultaneously, a phobia to introduce Vatican II’s theological renewal, especially its ecclesiology, in many seminaries. Consequently, they have continued to follow most of the pre-Vatican II models of theological formation which often serve as stepping stones for clericalism in our contemporary world.

⁵⁶*Optatam Totius* (1965), 4.

⁵⁷Katherina Schuth, “Assessing the Education of Priests and Lay Ministers,” in Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley, ed., *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 336-337.

⁵⁸Gaillardetz, “Challenging Clericalism.”

Add to all these “the role-models” that are available to the young seminarians in many a seminary today. With the contemporary trend of constantly appointing those lecturers in the seminary staff who had been “politically correct” to the Episcopal office, and with some other staff members emulating the same in order to climb the hierarchical ladder, the young seminarians are consciously or unconsciously given the clear-cut message to follow the intricacies of clericalism by being “politically correct” in the seminary, and thus, later in priesthood too, as against being prophetic as Jesus of Nazareth was. Moreover, the inculcating of a very narrow concept of obedience and loyalty, as is often done in many a contemporary seminary, automatically leads “to a repressive attitude in which all critical questions touching on Church authority”⁵⁹ are swept under the carpet. Consequently, young seminarians acquire the vice of pleasing formators and superiors at any cost, not only for their survival in the seminary but also for climbing the ladder of hierarchical status later. Such warped behaviour of seminarians could be just a stepping stone towards one of the “diseases” of the clergy referred to by Pope Francis:

The disease of idolizing superiors. This is the disease of those who court their superiors in the hope of gaining their favour. They are victims of careerism and opportunism; they honour persons and not God (cf. *Mt* 23:8-12). They serve thinking only of what they can get and not of what they should give. Small-minded persons, unhappy and inspired only by their own lethal selfishness (cf. *Gal* 5:16-25). Superiors themselves could be affected by this disease, when they court their collaborators in order to obtain their submission, loyalty and psychological dependency, but the end result is a real complicity.⁶⁰

Following some such so-called “role models” which are often readily available in quite a number of seminaries today, many seminarians rarely dare to be prophetic or to be constructively critical even with regard to minor matters of justice and truth in the seminary, and later in life. Having learnt the rule of the game to “play safe,” most of them are lured to be simply man-pleasing or appear to be extremely pious, so that they could reach their goal of somehow getting ordained and thus, entering straightaway into careerism in the Church. This is very true in developing countries where quite a number of seminarians join seminaries to acquire

⁵⁹Bernard Haering, *Priesthood Imperilled: A Critical Examination of Ministry in the Catholic Church*, Liguori, Missouri: Triumph Books, 1996, 92.

⁶⁰Cf. The Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2014, No. 10.

some kind of social status in life, among other motives. In this regard, what Mannath writes in the Indian context is valid for many Asian countries as well:

For the majority of young men (and women) coming into a major seminary or novitiate, the change of life style is towards affluence. Most of us are financially better off and live more comfortable lives than our married brothers and sisters. Add to this the fact that major seminaries (and a number of religious formation houses) in India are amply financed by Rome and other centres, so that, when their peers are struggling to go to college or find a job, the seminarian and religious enjoy a carefree life, in a setting that provides everything free of cost. This is not the case in many other countries of the world; but it is so in India at the moment.⁶¹

Moreover, the prevalent contemporary trend to follow the post-Tridentine model of formation that stresses priests as holier than the laity has also contributed to clericalism. Commenting about the reality of contemporary priesthood in the USA, Schuth writes:

Younger priests and seminarians are more likely to see themselves as separate and ontologically different from the laity...They are regarded as expressing the cultic model, which is identified with an earlier understanding of priesthood. This model has resurfaced since the 1980's and represents an approach supported by many in the hierarchy.⁶²

In giving birth to this type of priests, there obviously is a radical shift from Vatican II's ecclesiology as is demonstrated through recent works of research.⁶³ The trend to follow the pre-Vatican II archaic Western models that stress uniformity in the formation of seminarians even in the Third world countries, not only uproot the seminarians from their own socio-cultural contexts but also inculcate in them a desire to be more clerically-conscious than being socially-conscious. Thus, what the renowned moral theologian, Bernard Haering said a few decades ago is still valid:

At our present historical juncture, the idea of a completely "uni-formed" clergy with uniform rules determined by one geographical outlook on the globe (namely, a purely Western point of view with centralized powers and complete control) is, at the very worst, an ecclesial

⁶¹Joe Mannath, "Priestly Formation Today: The Rhetoric and the Reality," a talk given at the Association of Major Seminaries of India, Kengeri, Bangalore, India on 20 September 2002, 2, available at <http://donboscoindia.com> (accessed on 7 May 2021); see also Vimal Tirimanna, "La formaton des prêtres dans le context de l'Asie d'aujourd'hui. Forces, défis et questionnements," in Marc Pelchat, ed., *La Formation Presbytérale Aujourd'Hui*, Montréal, Québec: Novalis, 2014, 61-75.

⁶²Schuth, "Assessing the Education of Priests and Lay Ministers," 218.

⁶³See for example, Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Evolving Visions of Priesthood: Changes from Vatican II to the Turn of the New Century*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003, 47-59.

monstrosity. At the very best, it would make of the Church an interesting museum.⁶⁴

Thus, seminary training ought to highlight consistently the vast difference between a genuine priestly identity (that flows from a healthy priestly culture within one's own native culture) and clericalism, lest the seminaries become nurseries that breed clericalism. For this, the seminary courses, especially those on Ecclesiology, Holy Orders and Sacraments have to be based solidly on the teachings of Vatican II.

Conclusion

From what we highlighted above, it should be evident that clericalism is nothing but an outrageous abuse of legitimate authority conferred on the hierarchy of the Church by the Lord himself. True, it has emerged at certain periods of time in the history of the Church and anyone well attuned to his/her senses could easily perceive how it has engulfed almost all the spheres of contemporary ecclesial life. As we have seen above, when clericalism eats into the indispensable role of authority in the Church, the entire ecclesial life is turned upside down, and the one and only purpose which Jesus Christ himself expects from genuine Church authority becomes utterly distorted.

However, clericalism, as it has re-emerged today could reasonably be construed as a blessing in disguise if—as Pope Francis has been tirelessly seeking to highlight—clergymen (who currently wield authority in the Church) take it as an opportunity, or rather a *kairos* moment, for conversion. It could well be yet another “sign of the times” that challenges them to ask seriously “what it meant to be a priest; what it meant to be *one of the faithful* and their servant leader; what it meant to be a tender of the word.”⁶⁵ In giving a fitting response, the five breeding grounds of clericalism which we discussed in this article ought to be necessarily addressed. It is nothing but a clarion call to recover the teachings of Vatican II. If those responsible for wielding hierarchical authority in the Church continue to ignore this crucial challenge, that would well be what Wilson calls: “the death of priesthood”⁶⁶ in the Catholic Church, in the long run.

⁶⁴Haering, *Priesthood Imperilled*, 83.

⁶⁵Donald B. Cozzens, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood: A Reflection on the Priest's Crisis of Soul*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000, 131.

⁶⁶Cf. Wilson, *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood*.