

Keynote Address
National Federation of Priests' Councils 2007 Convention
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SAY “NO” TO “PRIVATE PRACTICE” SAY “NO” TO “TRIBALISM”
SAY “YES” TO “INTIMATE SACRAMENTAL BROTHERHOODS” FOR SERVICE

I am both honored and humbled to stand here. Let me begin by framing what I have to say inside what I consider to be the most significant quotes from church documents on the subject that I am about to address in this talk.

Before I get to those quotes, let me say clearly, from the outset, that when I talk about intimate sacramental brotherhoods,¹ I am not talking about “good old boys” clubs or “turned-in on themselves” grinning support groups. What I am talking about are teams of priests who “come together” so as to be strengthened for “going out,” offering unified, coherent and effective service to the People of God. Our brotherhoods are for service.

I was invited to share some thoughts with you about the love and care that we all have for our brother priests in the presbyterates we represent. In fact, you are at this convention because you care! In fact, because you come to meetings like these, you may be among those priests who care most.

What I share, I share not as an expert or a scholar, but as one who has been interested enough over these last few years to focus his attention, in a serious way, on the renewal of presbyteral unity. My interest was piqued initially when I was a vocation director and saw how our presbyterates received new members. I became convinced early on that unified presbyterates would encourage vocations, while neglected presbyterates would actually discourage them. That interest deepened when I started researching the idea of presbyterates, only to find out how little has been written about them.

Hopefully these thoughts will be helpful, but ultimately you will have to decide if any of these ideas might be useful to you. Some of these thoughts have been gathered from church documents and some from other sources. Some are original and some come from personal experience.

Basically, I would like to share some thoughts on three questions. The first question is “Where did we come from? No, I don’t mean “which dioceses are we representing?” I mean “how did we evolve into the presbyterates that we experience today?” A second question is, “Can we imagine ourselves being any different as presbyterates than we are now? A third and final question is “Assuming we can imagine a dynamic presbyterate led by a capable bishop, how do we get there?”

OUR PAST

Let me begin by saying a very few words about the history of presbyterates. Thanks to Vatican Council II, and especially Pope John Paul II, the theology of a presbyterate, often referred to as “an intimate sacramental brotherhood,” working as a team under a bishop, has been restored. This ancient theology was strong in the early days of the Church, but has been neglected for centuries, until our own time. From the New Testament and early Christian writings, we see that the ancient church did not think in terms of solitary priests but of a presbyterium. It was a college of priests who surrounded the bishop to help him carry out his ministry.

Why was this idea neglected?¹ (1) With the spread of the Church outside the original see cities, after the legalization of Christianity, there was a general breakdown of the early idea of collegiality and a trend toward an individual, rather than a collegiate, ministry. This physical separation from the city, where the

presbyterium would meet, limited priests' participation in it. (2) Another historical factor that encouraged individualism was the development of the benefice system and the resulting ministry to a particular church whose benefactor would guarantee a priests' economic sustenance. This contributed to a decline in the common life and collaboration among priests, as they would feel less of a bond to the bishop than they would to their benefactor. (3) Some see an affirmation of individualism coming from the Council of Trent with its emphasis on the character of the individual priest, with a special dignity and personal power to celebrate the Eucharist privately.

With the spread of the church, therefore, the concept of a presbyteral community, as well as the meaning of the word presbyterium itself, could be said to have been slowly lost through centuries of neglect. The word "neglect" needs to be emphasized. As was noted above, it was the collapse of a strong idea of collegial ministry that gave rise to the practice of individual ministry by priests. In our own time, it is worth noting that it is the bishops themselves who are most articulate in describing this neglect and its resulting problems. In the 2001 *Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests* the bishops state: "A bishop has many responsibilities, and many things claim his attention. Presbyteral unity may not seem to be as pressing, for example, as dealing with individual priests who are problematic, with the distribution and assignment of clergy, or with the recruitment of new candidates. Working for presbyteral unity can slip to a lower end of a list of priorities. In fact, its neglect favors divisions and ultimately, a number of attendant problems in a diocese." (pp. 96-97)²

Without the strong leadership of bishops, the heads of diocesan presbyterates, in presenting a unified vision and unleashing the power of the team, many diocesan priests have fallen into the habit of operating like "Lone Rangers." Because of continuing neglect and the lack of a shared vision, something new and maybe even more destructive, is happening. Priests are beginning to form "tribes" within their presbyterates. Without a shared vision, small groups of like-minded priests are left to battle it out over who has the right vision.

Both "priests in private practice" of our recent past, as well as today's growing "tribalism," fly in the face of solid Church teaching, "...the priest cannot act by himself; he acts with the presbyterate becoming a brother of all who constitute it."³ Priests will therefore make every effort to avoid living his own priesthood in an isolated and subjectivistic way, and must try to enhance fraternal communion...."⁴ "...priests are never to put themselves at the service of an ideology or human faction."⁵

Presbyteral unity has been neglected for so long that there is no clear map to go by. Again, it was the bishops themselves who described the situation and the lack of clear direction for the future. "The Church continues to deepen her understanding of priestly ministry and life that emerged in the Second Vatican Council; namely, priests are not priests simply one by one, but they are priests and serve the mission of the Church in a presbyterate in union with the bishop."⁶ The corporate sense of priestly identity and mission, although not fully developed even in official documents, is clearly emerging as an important direction for the future. They, quite wisely, noted the difference between the ongoing formation of individual priests and the ongoing formation of presbyterates. The ongoing formation of individual priests is important, but the ongoing formation of whole presbyterates may be needed even more. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, summarizes Vatican II teaching and offers this simple yet challenging statement: "The ordained ministry has a radical 'communitarian form' and can only be carried out as collective work."⁷

I would be remiss if I did not mention two more possible reasons for neglect besides those "other pressing problems" that bishops' have to face. At first I dismissed these two insights more as cynical accusations than truth, but they kept haunting me because I know in my guts that there may be more truth there than I wanted to admit. (1) In my listening to priests across the country these last few years, I am hearing from priests that they believe that "presbyteral unity skills" are not a priority in the selection of bishops, in the sense that leading presbyterates for them is a matter of not knowing "how." (2) One priest, at the end of one of my presentations on presbyteral unity, asked from the floor, "What makes you think bishops want presbyteral unity?" Could it be, God forbid, that some bishop's worst nightmare might be a unified presbyterate? I certainly hope not! Personally, I choose to operate out of the belief that bishops really do want presbyteral unity and that it will be a unity with the bishop, not against him.

I am hearing all over the country that priests want, no crave, good shepherds whose voices they can trust to lead them to unity of purpose, not barking sheep dogs snapping at their heels. Priests are waiting and hoping and praying for someone who can really lead them. They are ready and willing to follow good shepherding. To paraphrase the Scriptures: "Without shepherds with visions that attracts, presbyterates perish."

Three more important things stand out in the many presbyterates I have visited and worked with over these past few years. (1) Only two, out of hundreds and hundreds of these priests, when I have asked for a show of hands, could remember having any training in how to take their place in presbyterates. (2) Diocesan priests have had minimal or no training in our "other promise," the promise of obedience, the only thing in our arsenal that could most help us claim our unity. Again, almost all of the priests I have asked, say they never had any formation in a diocesan priest's "promise of obedience."

If bishops are not being chosen for, nor trained in, the skills of how to lead presbyterates, if priests are not being trained in how to be members of presbyterates and if priests get little or no training in the promise of obedience, a promise to be a team player with the bishop and with each other, then we need not be surprised by what all this neglect has produced in our presbyterates. In fact, we should be shocked that we are doing as well as we are!

OUR PRESENT

Challenge One

The conflict between liberal and conservatives wing has markedly politicized the Church. Both sides are tempted to subordinate an even-handed concern for truth to the demands of a party spirit in which every action and statement is evaluated according to whether it supports one cause or the other. The Church as a universal communion is severely wounded by such partisanship... The opposed parties seek to discredit their opponents, often by acrimonious attacks that are uncharitable and even unjust....In spite of the agitation from both extremes, the Catholic Church remains a communion of tradition and authority, open to dialogue and progress.⁸

Challenge Two

What has clearly changed is that the international priests today are more visible and more exotic. They stand out. Also what has changed is that the priests come from developing nations that are now experiencing rapid Catholic growth - nations poor economically but, from one perspective, rich spiritually. Americans today take pride in their national wealth and leadership, and as a result, wonder, often subconsciously, if Africans or Asians really have anything worthwhile to say to them. This is a subtle ethnocentricity that irritates priests from the developing world. The international priests, in turn, take pride in the Catholic growth in their homelands and subconsciously feel they have a deeper spirituality.⁹

American Catholics need to see Catholicism in world terms, and they need to learn about their own past. They need to discern what is old and what is new in the influx of priests to America, lest their uninformed views about the past make matters worse for everyone. Americans in the future will bring in more international priests, not fewer, since the pressures are strong. Catholic leadership needs to prepare. Orientation programs must be expanded.

One respected southwestern bishop said recently that, "the most important problem" he faces with priests is "their inability to work with one another." This, sadly, is not just a local problem for him, but a growing problem facing many presbyterates in this country. He not only described a weakness in us priests, but also a major weakness in our bishops, their inability and lack of skill in bringing out the best in our presbyterates.

How can presbyterates, commissioned to be "men of communion," lead a divided Church and divided parishes if they are divided among themselves? How can priests lead multi-cultural parishes in a multi-cultural world that is growing more and more multi-religious, when they cannot themselves work together?

Priests are called to be on the front line of healing divisions in our parishes, in our church and, yes, in our world.

When the hearts of priests are not able to include one group or another, they quickly splinter, not only parishes, but also their own sacramental brotherhood and its unified ministry. Instead of engaging in dialogue, they promote diatribe. Priests are not priests, one by one, but serve together in a presbyterate with a common mission. For that reason, presbyterates ought not turn a blind eye to the presence of divisive forces in their midst.

A lack of self-acceptance breeds an angry judgmental attitude toward others. Ironically, as noted by Father Stephen Rossetti of the Saint Luke Institute, when priests allow the rage in their own hearts to tear at the fiber of the community and split them into factions, they actually perpetuate the kind of dynamic that gave rise to the sexual abuse of children. In the psychological treatment of child abusers, one of the most common aspects of their pathology is an underlying anger, a kind of festering rage. It is hidden and eroticized, often splitting the psyche between the "good person" and the "bad person." It is common that priests who are having psychological difficulties to be imprisoned behind the bars of black-and-white thinking.

They are stuck in all or nothing faulty logic, excessively neat and unrealistic categories. It is precisely such black-and-white thinking that breeds factions and diatribes. They use their beliefs as weapons. Instead of engaging in dialogue, they promote diatribe; instead of promoting communion, they encourage factions to emerge. Their words are laced with anger and fear and their actions are unconsciously violent.

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Father David Couturier, OFM Cap. of St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, was quite articulate about what these divisions are all about in a Seminary Journal article just a few years ago. "There are many reasons why dedicated and well-motivated members of a group turn their frustrations on one another. Confusion about one's identity is only one of them. Besides this, organizational psychologists tell us that changes in work and service, especially if unforeseen and ill prepared for, will produce anxiety in the community which the group will try to manage by primitive processes of scapegoating and projection. Facing difficult changes, the group will psychologically split itself into the "good guys" and the "bad guys," those who are faithful and those who are not. These ideological splits take on a life of their own with participants truly believing that they are fighting a battle over beliefs and values. While members of the group actually agree more than they disagree, these skirmishes serve as containers for the group's anxiety. They become chronic defense mechanisms when group members fail to recognize the true source of their anxiety: how difficult work has become and how uneasy they feel when they are unsure about their effectiveness."¹¹

John C. Calhoun, Vice President under John Quincy Adams, described our situation today when he wrote back then, "The interval between the decay of the old and the formation and the establishment of the new constitute a period of transaction which must always necessarily be one of uncertainty, confusion, error, and wild and fierce fanaticism." Our job, then, is to make it through this time of upheaval without killing each other in the process. Our people deserve it from us.

As *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests* notes, these divisions have significant consequences. Priests have a vocation to be shepherds, pastors of souls to all, regardless of their theological or cultural makeup, orientation or age. If a priest cannot be in communion with his presbyterate, how can he hope to be a "man of communion" for the Church? These divisions lead to diminished effectiveness that undermines the utilization of valuable human resources needed to address pressing issues. When these divisions are public, and they usually are, they constitute an anti-sign for the community and discourage those who might feel called to the priesthood. (3) These divisions create loneliness especially for our newest priests, the biggest factor in so many leaving in their first five years. Those who leave, leave because of feelings of loneliness, isolation, being unappreciated and feelings of being disconnected. When their presbyterates are more like a "loose association of lone rangers, instead of an "intimate sacramental brotherhood," they are most especially vulnerable to seeking out a coupled relationships as a substitute. (4) Finally, divisions can shift the focus of priests from a wide-ranging

diocesan perspective to a narrow, localized emphasis on one's own parish with a resultant parochialism.¹²

When speaking of divisions in the Church, it has become commonplace to speak of the "left" and the "right." The problem is that these words come from political discourse. In fact, using the words "left" and "right" in this way dates back to the French National Constituent Assembly before the French Revolution when two parties sat on the right and the left of the assembly chamber. In using this language, the Church has taken on all the meanness of American politics, especially in the last several years.

This language makes priests enemies of each other. "Liberals" are accused of fabricating what they would like the Church to teach so that they can have the Church do what they already like to do. "Conservatives" are accused of trying to reinstate the past or perhaps a particular epoch that supposedly was a "golden age." The truth is somewhere in the center. A truly orthodox member of the Church uses his or her graced freedom to live the Tradition of the Church now. As Thomas Merton, a famous Kentucky monk, put it, Tradition is creative. Always original, it always opens out new horizons for an old journey. Those who are not humble hate their past and push it out of sight, just as they cut down the growing and green things that spring up inexhaustibly even in the present. Pope Benedict's recent words to the Orthodox may say it all, "multiplicity in unity, unity in multiplicity."

Maybe the problems facing presbyterates today could be summarized in the words, "They are forgetting who they are, what they are about, and where they are going."

THE FUTURE

The corporate sense of priestly identity and mission, although not fully developed even in official documents is clearly emerging as an important direction for the future. The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests¹³

Once we understand the importance of the ongoing formation of presbyterates, the teachings that highlight their essential nature and the divisions that militate against them, the next step is to identify practical strategies to support and nurture presbyteral unity. It is one thing to diagnose a problem, but it is another thing to know what to do to fix it.

Coherent and unified presbyterates will not happen by accident, but by intention. The word "intention" comes from the Latin word *intendere*, meaning "to stretch toward, to aim at." Intention is an act of the will by which that faculty efficaciously desires to reach an end by employing the means. It is a concentration of will to the point of resolve. We have to really want it before we can have it.

Like the original twelve apostles, Christ calls his priests to resist those things that threaten the unity of the group - especially working alone, working too much and working against each other.¹⁴

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUAL PRIESTS DO?

Intentional presbyterates, for the good of individual priests and for the sake of their common mission, is not just a matter of providing the right programs to priests. There are no magic programs. Only a group change of heart, one heart at a time, will lead to a true renewal of our presbyterates. The power of an "intentional presbyterate" cannot be created and unleashed by priests who have too a personal passion for it, nor by priests with the inability to visualize it, nor by priests who simply wish it would happen, but rather by priests who have a burning desire to see it happen, a bishop and leader-priests who have the ability to marshal the troops in unleashing the power of the team and the power to direct individual accomplishments toward a common goal -excellent priestly ministry to the People of God. A changed heart may be the only thing that could lead to new and creative behaviors by individual priests toward his brother priests.

Individual conversion is critical because factions and diatribes emerge from within the hearts of individual priests. If priests have any hope of having a shared sense of direction and purpose, they must accurately identify and honestly confront the personal attitudes which impede and imperil presbyteral unity: their

competition, their clashing ecclesiologies, their clerical envy, their lack of respect for the various backgrounds, languages, cultures and places of origin in their presbyterates that all lead to a priesthood of "private practice." Each and every individual priest must name and confront counter-unity forces within his own heart. Every member of the presbyterate has to change and the most needed change is a personal conversion toward the good of the group.

Healthy and unified presbyterates cannot happen when everyone in it is doing his own thing. Priests in a presbyterate are like an orchestra rather than a loose association of soloists. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, who spoke often of the presbyterate, said, "your presbytery, which is a credit to its name, is a credit to God; for it harmonizes with the bishop as completely as the strings with a harp."¹⁵ Without leaders to inspire priests and lead them with a common vision, the visions of little cliques will continue to battle each other over who has the "true" vision. A real leader inspires a shared vision and calls individual priests to greatness in translating that vision into reality.

Priests must begin by focusing, not on the forms of religion, but on its essence. As William Perm put it, we need to live like Christ, not argue about Christ. We will never agree on methods of delivering the Gospel, but we can and we must agree on the message of the Gospel. Priests must do something like the writer of the Matthew's Gospel did when he wrote his gospel. Like the "householder who took things new and old from his storeroom," the writer of Matthew took the best of the old and the best of the new and put them together in a new paradigm for those who missed their old religious ways, but wanted to embrace the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Priests might do something similar to what we did at the Cathedral of the Assumption in Louisville, Kentucky when I was pastor there. The leaders there had the job of renovating a renovation, undoing a violent and extreme "hysterectomy" of a former radical renovation. An overly ornate, dark and cluttered old landmark was totally stripped, painted white and carpeted. Its art treasures were given away, destroyed or relegated to a museum. Those in charge of leading the project were pulled by both extremes - those who wanted to put it back the way it was in bygone days and those who wanted further modernization. Instead of giving in to either extreme, they settled on a plan to bring back the best of the old and put it with the best of the new in such a way that it would take us into the future. It was not a compromise, where both lose something. It was a marriage, where both won something. They easily raised the money. There were no demonstrations. Everybody was pleased that they could find a home there.

Priests must clean up their own individual acts, as well. Acting in persona Christi can be a heavy burden. The words and deeds of priests have the power to do good or do damage to a degree that other people do not experience. As Bishop Richard Sklba put it, people can be deeply hurt for life by a casual flippant remark or inspired forever by a simple genuine gesture of compassion and kindness. Priests do not need to be reminded how the bad behaviors of a few priests have impacted their lives and the life of the church. Priests must become who we say they are. Transparency is required. Priests are entitled to private lives, but not secret lives. A private life energizes. A secret life takes too much energy to hide and protect. A secret life distracts. A secret life quickly erodes a priest spiritually and drains him of energy and focus.

Priests must stop the "downward spiraling talk." Downward spiraling talk creates an attitude of hopelessness and an atmosphere that leads them to believe that things are going from bad to worse and nothing can be done about it. Hopeless talk produces hopelessness situations. On the other hand, positive upward spiraling talk can create a different reality. The more attention you shine on hopelessness, the more evidence of it will grow. Shine attention on opportunities and possibilities, and they too will multiply lavishly.¹⁶ The biggest shortage in the Catholic Church is not money or priests or opportunities, but imagination.

When leaders fail to inspire and lead, priests must claim their personal power, instead of being, to paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, "feverish, selfish little clods of ailments and grievances complaining that the church will not devote itself to making them happy." As Pope John Paul II and the American Bishops put it, "all formation, including priestly formation, is ultimately self-formation." When no one

comes to their rescue, priests must develop the skills of self-rescue, especially when it comes to feelings of loneliness and feelings of being unappreciated. No presbyterate is strong when the members of it are weak.

Diocesan priests make two solemn promises: celibacy and obedience. (It is good to remember that vowed religious priests working under a diocesan bishop are full members of that presbyterate as long as they are working in that diocese.) Rather than negatives, the promises of celibacy and obedience are meant to free us up for ministry. Priests get extensive formation in celibacy, but not in obedience. Obedience is the neglected stepchild of the priestly promises. Once made, it is often forgotten. Of the two promises, the only one ever heard much about is celibacy, but “that other promise” may be even more important for unified ministry to the People of God.

The promise of obedience has implications beyond the relationship of each individual priest to his bishop. Priests often make that promise without a lot of insight into what it means. While today’s seminaries are almost obsessive about celibacy training, this promise is barely mentioned in comparison. Once made, this promise is seldom mentioned again, except in cases of intransigency. As a result, many priests understand it only in a simplistic “yes, boss” kind of way. The promise of obedience includes a promise to his fellow presbyteral members. Shoot me as a heretic, if you must, but because this promise is really a promise to be a “team player” with the bishop and the other members of his presbyterate for the sake of the common purpose they share, this promise, I believe, may be more important to the unity of their mission than celibacy. Being more conscious of, and informed about, their promise of obedience, priests are more likely to remember that they do not carry out their own ministry, but are fellow workers in helping the bishop carry out a common ministry. An expansive understanding of the promise of obedience is the only thing diocesan priests have in their arsenal that speaks directly to their unity as a group, because in it they promise each other to be “team players” with the bishop and with each other. This richer understanding of the promise of obedience will be essential in helping priests toward the renewal of their presbyterates.

WHAT CAN SEMINARIES DO?

Where do we begin to build intentional presbyterates, once individual members are converted to the challenge? We begin building our presbyteral unity in the seminary - by teaching the basic principles of presbyteral theology and by having the presbyterate treat them like “novices,” mentoring them into the group throughout their seminary experience. Canon 245,2 says that seminary students are to be formed in such a way that they are prepared for fraternal union with the diocesan presbyterate, whose partners they will be in the service of the Church. Even though Canon 245,2 was promulgated in 1983, it is just beginning to be implemented in seminaries like Saint Meinrad School of Theology. Many priests today will tell you that they never had one hour of formation on how to be a successful, contributing member of their presbyterates, nor have presbyterates had a coherent way of mentoring new members into the presbyterate once they come out of the seminary. Most of the time, it is a haphazard learn-as-you-go process. This neglect, as I said earlier, is one major reason why so many priests see their ministry from a personal, rather than from a collegial, perspective.

A renewal of presbyterates will require basic education on the theology of a presbyterate, starting during the initial formation of the seminary and continuing with ongoing remedial formation for priests already ordained.

Seminaries need to revitalize their pastoral formation programs to be sure that the initial formation of the seminary and the ongoing formation after the seminary flow one into the other in an unbroken and coherent way, as called for by *Pastores Dabo Vobis*¹⁷ This will require a cooperative effort between seminaries and the ongoing formation directors of the dioceses they serve. This may require the part-time use of more parish priests in the pastoral formation programs of the seminaries and the part-time use of seminary personnel in the ongoing formation programs of dioceses.

Pope John Paul II suggested in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* that it might be a good idea for neighboring dioceses to cooperate in offering ongoing formation programs, especially smaller dioceses.¹⁸ Saint

Meinrad School of Theology's Institute for Priests and Presbyterates is presently piloting such a cooperative effort in its attempts to offer interdiocesan support to priests in their first five years, as well as to whole presbyterates.

The regular presence of new priests and young pastors on campus is having a dramatic impact on getting the point across that ongoing formation after ordination is no longer an option. Besides the advantage of having the interaction between priests and priests-to-be, seminaries themselves may be the best places for these serious ongoing formation programs given the availability of their libraries, food services, chapels, recreation facilities, theology professors, confessors, health facilities, counselors and overnight lodging.

Many dioceses have one or two ordinations a year, making the collapse of the seminary support system somewhat traumatic for many of these new priests. Saint Meinrad School of Theology is piloting an interactive website as a way for young priests to stay in touch with each other, share their wisdom and experience, as well as a way to offer one other solutions to problems they experience - all across diocesan lines. It is a place for sharing such things as homilies, reading suggestions, sacramental policies and even travel-ideas. It offers an interdiocesan support system - a broader support system than what many individual dioceses can offer them. A new day requires a new way.

Many seminarians today are reacting to what they perceive to be a generation of priests before them who promoted the notion of "relativism." The generations before them, in return, tend to see young priests today as brash champions of a simplistic notion of "truth." These perceptions of each other are contributing seriously to the ideological battles in presbyterates. With their philosophy and theology departments, seminaries are uniquely placed to be able to teach the weaknesses of each perspective, to offer a richer understanding of "truth," as well as how to work creatively with various points of view. As Father David Couturier in an article already cited, wrote: "Priests and seminarians need to be able to identify their learning cultures and respectfully engage the needs and assumptions of others. This will require skills, language and methods needed to manage the increasing structural and organizational dynamics of Catholic life." The present name-calling helps no one. Seeking to understand, rather than to be understood, is the key.

WHAT CAN PRESBYTERATES DO?

Paying attention to the transition of young priests out of the seminary and into ministry is vitally important. Everyone is aware of the shortage of new priests, but what often goes unnoticed is the fact that we are also losing 10% to 15% of our new priests in their first five years. One new priest ordained in 2000, told me recently that 13 out of 19 of his ordination classmates have already left the priesthood.

The transition out of seminary into a presbyterate is a lot like being shoved off a cliff to fend for one self. One bishop compares newly ordained priests to patients emerging from a long-term intensive care unit. Just as patients are plugged into five or six "7Fs," so the seminarian is attached to an elaborate support system. Overnight, on ordination, that support system is removed. Seminaries may not be doing an adequate job of preparing new priests to take their places in diocesan presbyterates, but presbyterates may be doing a worse job of receiving and mentoring their newest members. Every priest, not just the bishop and vocation director, should see himself as sharing in the work of mentoring new priests into presbyterates. Bishops and priests must stop the practice of introducing new priests to the presbyterate on their ordination days. New priests need to be treated like "novices" for the diocesan priesthood, even while in the seminary, and be mentored by the whole presbyterate from the very beginning of their acceptance as seminarians.

One way to do that is to make sure seminarians are invited to as many presbyteral gatherings as possible, from the beginning of their theological training seminarians should not only be invited to attend, but to participate. They need to hear from their fellow priests, yes, but their fellow priests also need to hear from them. They will need, not only individual mentoring, but also mentoring by the group.

The fact that more than twenty-eight percent of all American priests now are foreign-born makes having a

plan for mentoring new members into the presbyterate even more critical. The Catholic Church in the United States has always depended on international priests to serve its parishes, and during most of its history has depended on them. In 1791, at the first church synod held in Baltimore, eight percent of the clergy present were foreign born. At the second plenary council in Baltimore in 1866, thirty of the forty-seven bishops were foreign born. It was not until the 1940s and 1950s that the chronic American priest shortage ceased. This period, contrary to what many Catholics think, was an exception to the rule. The longer term American picture is one of a shortage of American seminarians and an endless effort to recruit priests from overseas.¹⁹

Failure to mentor seminarians into the presbyterate causes problems for the presbyterate, but failure to mentor foreign-born priests into the presbyterate is set-up for disaster. Foreign-born priests are not the problem. We need them. The problem is there are so few good programs to assimilate them into the American Church and its presbyterates. Orientation to American life and culture, language proficiency, personal support systems, the education of the entire presbyterate on their country of origin and regular visits home are only a few of their needs. Failure to have a well-organized program in place when these priests are accepted is bad for the priests and the people they serve. It is not fair, it is counter-productive and it borders on abuse.

A healthy and effective presbyterate is probably the one best way to replicate itself. All the studies tell us that healthy contact with priests is the reason most young adults make the move toward answering their call to ordained priesthood. One happy and effective priest can do more to promote vocations to diocesan priesthood than a hundred eye-catching billboards. A team of happy and effective priests can do more to promote vocations to diocesan priesthood than a million dollars' worth of clever TV spots. The Second Vatican Council got it right when it said, "Let him attract the hearts of young people to the priesthood by his own humble and energetic life, joyfully pursued, and by love for his fellow priests and brotherly collaboration with them."²⁰

Like it or not, this generation of young people will not be attracted to a loose association of "lone ranger" priests doing their own thing. What will be attractive to them will be a religiously saturated environment that will bestow a special sense of sacred identity that a unified presbyterate will offer. If this sense of identity and a clearly defined common mission is not offered to them, they will seek that identity and sense of mission in small ideological groups. Young priests have a strong need for belonging. Maybe this is one reason why tensions caused by ideological struggles was rated "strong" among 40% of young diocesan priests, while only 20% among religious priests, according to a recent Dean Hoge study, *Experiences of Priests Ordained Five to Nine Years*.²¹

WHAT CAN BISHOPS DO?

The responsibility for building presbyteral unity falls squarely on the shoulders of the bishop. As noted earlier, the bishops themselves are aware of the fact that this valuable work can often slip to the lower end of a list of priorities, causing a number of attendant problems.

Obvious to anybody who has been around hundreds of priests in this country on a regular basis, is the need for new bishops to receive some formation on how to lead a presbyterate so as to be able to unleash the power of the team. Practical suggestions for the ongoing formation of his presbyterate should be a major part of his orientation as a bishop. Priests need effective leadership. There is a growing appetite for presbyteral unity among priests. In many ways, this appetite is waiting to be satisfied by skillful shepherds.

If bishops are not clear about what they expect from their priests, they should not be surprised by the muddled, and sometimes sloppy, responses they get from their priests. A bishop would be wise, in consultation with his presbyterate, to develop a carefully developed list of "talking points" to be used at least when seminarians go off to the seminary, when seminarians are about to be ordained and before priests receive their assignments, especially pastorates. It is especially at these times that formation could be done to insure a common vision.

In many dioceses, there are several offices that deal with the ministry and lives of priests, but more often than not, there is no formal and regular collaboration among the vocation director, the priest council president, the priest personnel director, the ongoing formation director, the priest health panel and the vicar for retired priests. This compartmentalization of priesthood tends to divide priests from each other, priests from the priests-to-be and active priests from retired priests. When this happens, priests conclude that it is the job of the vocation director to promote vocations, the job of the Vicar for Clergy to deal with retired priests and the job of the health panel to deal with sick priests. Would it not benefit presbyterates for bishops to gather all these leaders into a "priestly life and ministry cluster" to look at priests holistically and to unleash the imagination of a larger group in addressing the needs of priests in all stages - from cradle to grave?

Bishops certainly need to see that ongoing formation is offered so that individual priests may grow spiritually and be able to hone their skills, but bishops also need to have at least one team-building event each year for their presbyterates. A presbyteral assembly on the theology of presbyterates is a good beginning. One of the things the business world can teach us here is the difference between task maintenance and group maintenance. The bishop must see to it that individual priests are delivering ministry, but he also needs to pay attention to the cohesiveness of the group delivering the ministry. As the American bishops pointed out so well at the end of *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests*, "The ongoing formation of individual priests is one thing, but the ongoing formation of presbyterates in their unity is another."

The main task of annual team-building events that focus on group maintenance or team building should initially involve priests writing, adopting and holding each other to a common vision statement. This process might have to start with a few very simple goals and then move gradually toward more complex matters at future team-building events. Without a common vision, small tribes within the presbyterate are left to write their own, sometimes competing, visions. This leads to disunity, infighting and parochialism. In learning how to dialogue with each other, priests could benefit from Pope Paul VI's four points of what he calls the "asceticism of dialogue."²²

CONCLUSION

This is only a partial list of the personal and structural changes that priests and bishops must welcome, as well as some of the ideas for implementation they can adopt, to have strong, life-giving and unified presbyterates. In short, priests are facing, at the root of things, a spiritual crisis. The crisis facing presbyterates will be resolved by a spiritual response, not merely a programmatic response. In the end, it is not just a matter of providing the right programs. Only a group change of heart, one priest at a time, will lead to a true renewal of presbyterates. Priests need to take responsibility for their individual spiritual and personal growth, as well as take responsibility for the health of their presbyterates. They must constantly remind themselves and remind each other why they do what they do. When they forget that, their strength is sapped and they soon degenerate into a loose association of "Lone Rangers," leaving them isolated and demoralized.

The success of renewing presbyterates and their common sense of purpose rests primarily on enough bishops and priests wanting this unity. Priests need an honest dialogue that will help them recognize what to preserve from the past and what to embrace in the present and into the future. This honest dialogue could lead to developing a new paradigm with workable structures to enable them to offer better service to God's people and be better witnesses to the Gospel. The few essentials are, of course, non-negotiable, but the many accidents are negotiable. All priests must be able to move from their individual points of view to a common viewing point. From there, they can appreciate not only their own points of view, but also the points of view of others. The Church simply cannot afford to have infighting among its priests. Priests owe it to each other, to the next generation of priests and to their people they serve to become what the Church says they are: "intimate sacramental brotherhoods" for a common ministry.

Translating this dream into reality will take great courage. Doubt and laziness are constant enemies. When doubt and laziness reign, there is a strong temptation to let go of part of the dream as a way of resolving inevitable tensions. Success depends on the ability to remain enthusiastic, focused and

purposeful to the end. Likewise, the dream of unified presbyterates cannot be accomplished without the graced personal conversion of each and every priest toward his fellow priests. After all, as I cited above, The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests says quite clearly, "The formation of the presbyterate in its unity is the responsibility of all its members." When it comes to presbyterates, it's way past time to move from neglect to intentionality.

For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late. Habakkuk 2: 2-3

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