

The Other Health Crisis - Why Priests Are Coping Poorly

Paul Stanosz

It's been a rough year in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, where I have been a priest since 1984. Recently the archdiocese announced the closing of the academic program at its 151-year-old seminary. Its central offices-on forty-four acres of prime real estate-are for sale to pay clergy sexual-abuse claims, and bankruptcy looms because a Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling in July opened the possibility that the statute of limitations on abuse cases may be extended.

Among priests, meanwhile, there is much talk of high stress, poor health, and low morale. More and more are battling burnout and depression as well as suffering heart attacks and dying prematurely. Two have committed suicide in recent years. At the archdiocese's spring assembly of priests last May, I heard a lot of talk about how the limitations of canon law and parish structures add to the administrative burden and stress experienced by priests. There was a keen sense of the many pitfalls and the growing personnel crisis within the priesthood, and of the polarization that exists between recently ordained and long-time priests-what some call JP II priests and Vatican II priests, respectively.

After attending a number of meetings of the Milwaukee Archdiocese Priests Alliance, I talked with my archbishop, Timothy Dolan, about the low morale of priests. He subsequently asked me to join the archdiocese's Wellness Committee, which seeks to promote the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of priests. (More than 60 percent of all large- and medium-size U.S. employers have wellness programs, and dioceses are getting on the bandwagon too.) The committee meetings made clear that while there are no easy solutions to the malaise afflicting priests today-as a group we struggled even to name the problem and its causes-certain facts must be acknowledged if progress is to be made.

First, our bishops must be honest about the crisis of health, morale, and collegiality among priests. At a recent Milwaukee Council of Priests meeting, the vicar for clergy announced that "the wheels are falling off the wagons," and that he was overwhelmed with the problems of priests under fifty years of age. Such bluntness is rare. Many people are afraid that speaking about the problem will affect vocational recruitment.

In any case, simply ordaining more priests will not resolve the malaise. Bishops in recent years have been too quick to fill seminaries with fervent men who may or may not have genuine vocations. As a result, our seminaries now house a new breed of unsuitable candidates, men with poor relational and leadership skills. Ordained into a U.S. church that is losing its vitality, these men often seek to turn back the clock by

embracing disciplines and devotional practices that flourished in the middle of the last century.

In my research as a sociologist I have interviewed many who see the priesthood as a refuge from a depraved secular world, a place where their personal limitations and modest abilities are no obstacle to advancement (see "More on the Seminaries: Let's Be Candid about the Candidates," *Commonweal*, December 1, 2006). All too frequently these men are filled with a sense of their own sacred status, and are prone to conflict with the laity and fellow priests. Such men, my research suggests, are more likely to become unhappy and disgruntled when their sense of chosenness and elevated status no longer sustains them through the more prosaic ups and downs of the priesthood. (According to a study by Dean Hoge, one in seven priests ordained since the 1990s resigned in his first five years of ministry—a very steep attrition rate). Worse still, their unhappiness often leads priests to break their vows of celibacy or fall into addictive behaviors.

Another problem lies in the haste with which bishops appoint the recently ordained to pastorates. Priestly formation after ordination used to begin with many years spent learning the ropes as an associate pastor or parochial vicar under the tutelage of a pastor. Increasingly, however, ordained priests with only two or three years of experience are being thrust into pastorates. They have little opportunity to learn about administration. Studies by Katarina Schuth and Hoge found that most priests felt unprepared for financial administration and personnel management. Fortunately, some men who come to the priesthood after another career bring these skills with them, but many do not. And seminaries, which have already increased the time candidates must spend studying philosophy, see little chance to expand already bulging curricula.

The morale of priests would be improved, and stress and polarization reduced, if dioceses invested more in postordination training. Presbyters and church officials should accept that life-long formation and training are essential. Most dioceses require continuing education of their priests. In Milwaukee, priests receive \$1,000 a year for this purpose, and though that is more than what many dioceses provide, it is dwarfed by what U.S. corporations spend on continuing education for their employees. In addition, where corporations are highly directive in determining what continued schooling, conferences, and conventions employees attend, there is little direction given or accountability for priests regarding continuing formation. Unfortunately, some priests also believe the ontological change and sacramental faculties conferred by ordination render any further ministerial training unnecessary.

Yet even if these institutional problems are addressed, the morale of priests will improve only if we understand more fully the larger sources of the current crisis in the church. Churches are inevitably shaped by external economic, social, and cultural conditions, and many factors have contributed to the general weakening of Catholic practice. No longer a shunned, ghettoized, immigrant minority, Catholics today are largely a suburban population, better educated and more affluent than their grandparents. They have succeeded in joining the cultural mainstream, sending their children to public schools, and abandoning Sunday Mass in favor of soccer, TV, or shopping. These competing influences are not easily overcome by the latest chancery or central-office program for increasing Mass attendance, evangelization, vocations, and stewardship. In

Milwaukee, archdiocesan officials often mandate well-intentioned programs to slow the drift away from the church. Parish priests, pushed by diocesan officials to implement these new programs, feel frustrated when the end result is the same: the people aren't filling up the pews or supporting the church financially.

The steep decline in religiosity among Catholic youth is also evidence of an acute crisis. Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith's analysis of the recent National Study of Youth and Religion is sobering. The massive study ranked U.S. Catholic teenagers well behind their Protestant peers in adherence to their religious tradition's beliefs, norms, practices, and commitments. Smith attributes this trend to a decline in practice among parents, a paucity of full-time youth ministers, the demise of Catholic schools and their replacement with weak CCD programs, and to the upward mobility and acculturation of a once largely working-class immigrant population. According to this account, the financial success, social mobility, and cultural mainstreaming of American Catholics have led to the end of the urban parish-school-neighborhood enclaves that formed and cemented the communities and the faith of immigrant Catholics.

In other words, large social, cultural, and economic forces-and not simply internal forces such as the alleged dilution of Catholicism by Vatican II reforms-have contributed to Catholicism's decline. And that decline is not about to reverse itself. It seems unlikely that young people who have only the foggiest understanding of the Catholic tradition will suddenly return to the church as adults. Furthermore, the rate at which Catholics marry outside the church is skyrocketing. As a result, Roman Catholicism in the next two decades will almost certainly face the sort of enormous decline that mainline Protestant denominations suffered in the 1960s. Even Hispanic Catholics are drifting away at a rate of about 1 percent a year, largely to Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations.

There are no simple answers to these problems. Catholics will not be returning to their cultural ghettos, of course. And while I doubt that a return to preconciliar practices would reenergize the church and halt its decline, neither am I convinced that the progressives' agenda-women's ordination, married clergy, same-sex unions, the easing of divorce restrictions, and the acceptance of abortion under certain circumstances-would revive moribund parishes and bring a return to Sunday Mass. One widely shared perception is that it is precisely those mainline Protestant denominations that have embraced such positions that face the steepest declines in membership, while strict groups such as Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and Mormons continue to grow rapidly. Sociologists such as Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, Christian Smith, and others have advanced the theory that stricter religions, the ones that maintain a higher level of tension with the surrounding culture, are more likely to flourish. When newly arrived Catholics were seen as foreigners and dangerously different from the Protestant mainstream in the first half of the twentieth century, Catholic practice was high, and so was conformity to church teaching. As Charles Morris shrewdly observed in *American Catholic*, "The old-line bishops instinctively understood that strength lay in a prickly apartness from America's great leveling engine, a proud declaration of difference." Not surprisingly, as Catholics have succeeded, and embraced the mores of their surrounding culture, many have ceased to attend Mass or embrace the church's teaching.

An aging presbyterate should not exhaust itself in implementing new programs that are at best only Band-Aids. Instead, we must acknowledge the magnitude and the complexity of the forces that lie behind American Catholicism's loss of vigor, and stop blaming Vatican II or the bumbling bishops who shielded pedophiles and failed to protect children. We should avoid blithely scapegoating "the culture of death" and the evil of the secular world. After all, there are currents of sin and grace in both the church and the world. An eagerness to blame "the world" may keep us from seeing our own failure to embody the compassion and virtue of Jesus Christ.

Catholicism will evolve; it always has. In the past, missionary efforts, charismatic figures like Francis of Assisi or Ignatius of Loyola, dynamic leadership, global population shifts, new discoveries, and even catastrophes have led to renewed religious vitality. What will eventually stem the current decline cannot be known yet. In the meantime, we must learn to be a different kind of church. We've made progress in overcoming our pretensions to being a triumphal, all-knowing, sinless church. But more progress remains to be made; and paradoxically, it begins with acknowledging-and in a certain sense accepting-the decline of U.S. Catholicism.

My archbishop likes to say that we are in the hope business, but we must not be in the false-hope business. For me personally, acknowledging that the church and priesthood are in decline will lower my expectations of my bishops, brother priests, and my parishioners. So, I'll be pleasantly surprised and moved by the faithfulness of the Catholics who remain-and ecstatic when bishops do things right. I'll learn to say "no" when diocesan officials ask me to take a third, fourth, or fifth parish. I'm not advocating apathy in the face of decline; I'm merely recognizing that the decline began before me and will continue after me. Even Pope John Paul II, with all his vision, courage, and tenacity, was unable to return the masses to the church. The new evangelization he called for remains to be undertaken.

And so I anticipate ministering to a shrinking Catholic flock as I grow old. This does not mean that the work and mission of the presbyterate will be increasingly irrelevant. On the contrary, it will be all the more pressing and challenging. Embracing this reality decreases my anxiety, sharpens my vision, makes my expectations more realistic, and makes my spirit less likely to burn out; it leads me to care for my health, so that I will be able to care for those entrusted to me. To restore health to our pastoral function, we priests first need to admit our own pain and disorientation in a foundering church.

Though much will change in the U.S. church and its priesthood in coming decades, these changes need not bring additional stress, depression, overwork, heart attacks, early death, or intergenerational conflict for priests. As I see it, the greatest threat to priests' well-being is denial. We priests know we are in trouble, even if bishops are reluctant to admit it. The problems are embodied in the worn, torn, aging, and overweight colleagues I observed at my diocese's recent assembly of priests. The crisis is right there in front of us, and the forced optimism of those afraid of appearing insufficiently orthodox-or disloyal to Rome-strikes me as a failure of perception, honesty, and faith. Overcoming such denial will be the beginning of a renewal in the church and in the morale of its priests.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Paul Stanosz

Rev. Paul Stanosz is a priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and the author of *The Struggle for Celibacy* (Herder and Herder/Crossroad).

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