



## **The Role of the Priest in Public Affairs**

*First Things Journal: the journal of religion, culture and public life*  
April 30, 2008

Catholic leadership in the secular world belongs to laypeople, not to clergy or religious. The visible role of the priest in public affairs-if by public affairs we mean political affairs-should normally be pretty small.

It's very dangerous for the Church to identify with one political party. It's not my business to tell people to vote for John McCain or Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama. And while I worked for Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign as a volunteer when I was a young, I don't think any Catholic should feel comfortable today in either major political party-Democrat or Republican.

But that doesn't really get us off the hook, does it? The problem is that the Church teaches moral truth, and truth has obligations for human behavior-including the social, economic, and political kind. The Church is never mainly a political organism, but her witness for justice always has political consequences. For example, killing unborn children is a form of homicide. It's a profound attack on human dignity, because all other rights depend on the right to life. It's not the only important issue facing our country. But it is the foundational one at this moment in our nation's history. We can't ignore it. Cooperating in abortion or quietly tolerating it is a grave evil. We can incrementally seek to restrict and eliminate abortion, but we can never accept it as a so-called right. And if that truth inconveniences one or another political candidate, well, that's their problem. It's not the fault of the Church.

It is the job of Catholic laypeople to change the thinking of their political party and their political leaders with the tools of their Catholic faith. But it is the job of priests to give people those tools-to form Catholic laypeople to think and act as disciples of Jesus Christ, in a manner guided by the teaching of the Church. Just as Catholic laypeople should be the leaven of Jesus Christ in the public square, so we priests need to be the leaven of Jesus Christ in lives of our people.

As priests we know that, during the Easter season, the Church invites us to reflect on the Acts of the Apostles in a special way. It's important to remember that the title of the book is the Acts of the Apostles-not the Good Intentions, or the Excellent Plans, or the Plausible Alibis of the Apostles, but their Acts. Words are important. Actions are more important. Christ said he loved us. Then he died to prove it. He said he would rise from the dead and give us new life. Then he really did it. And when the first Apostles said they believed in Jesus Christ, they acted like they meant it, because they did-and then they proved it by turning the world upside down with the gospel.

A handful of simple and imperfect men made the greatest revolution in history-a global revolution of God's love. And Christ, through his Church, ordained you and me to follow in their footsteps and do exactly the same thing. So a reading from Acts is always the first reading on each day of the Easter season-the season of new life.

The focus of these readings is typically the preaching of St. Peter, and Peter always preaches about the Resurrection. But the Resurrection isn't only the content of Peter's preaching; it's also the means or energy of his preaching and his whole ministry. Clarence Jordan, a Protestant minister, once said, "The crowning evidence that Jesus was alive was not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship; not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away Church."

Of course, we know that Jesus rose physically from the dead, and the grave really was empty. But Jordan was making an important point. What makes the Christian faith convincing today is a "carried-

away Church," and if this is true about the Church, it's also true about the priesthood-without which there is no Eucharist, and without the Eucharist there is no Church. The health of the Church depends directly on the spirit of her priests. So priests need to be more than simply honest or diligent or even faithful. We need to be carried away by our love for God, our love for the Church, and our love for the Catholic faith.

A feature of many priestly lives these days is an attitude toward the Church that could be called "pastoral despair." In one sense, it's a good thing to be tempted by despair about the Church, or at least by despondency, because that's a sign that our hearts are unsettled and longing for something more. If we aren't in some ways disappointed in ourselves and in the Church, disappointed in how our Catholic people live their faith, then it's probably a sign that we've made peace with the current situation. And that's never good.

Because of Easter, however, we're not permitted real despair. Just recently, I attended the ordination of Bishop Gerald Dino of the Byzantine Eparchy of Van Nuys. During his episcopal ordination ceremony, at many points the community sang, "Christ is risen from the dead! By death He trampled death; and to those in the tombs He granted life!" What a wonderful way to capture the Easter spirit. Yes, we should grieve for the Church; that's a sign of our love. But as St. Paul says, "We do not grieve as those who have no hope." We learn from the Resurrection accounts in Scripture that we should not look for the Risen Lord among the dead but among the living.

We have hope because it is the risen Christ who has willed that his Church be the principal form of his visible presence in the world. We know with confidence that in the Church, God-as in Christ-is reconciling the world to himself. We need to remember this because sometimes we priests become cynical. We know ourselves too well. We sometimes don't really believe that God can do anything new in us. We accommodate to sin and failure and death. But Easter reminds us that any despair or despondency we have should be turned away because "Jesus trampled death, and to those in the tombs He grants life."

We've been talking about the "new evangelization" for more than twenty years in the Church, as if it were some kind of magic platitude. Now we know what it means. And yes, the latest Pew Research Center data are very unsettling-but also very valuable. They show us exactly how fluid, weak, and unreliable "American Catholic identity" has become. The place of the Catholic Church in the United States is much more precarious than we like to think, and the large number of people that self-identify as Catholics nationally is seriously misleading. In fact, we-and by "we," I mean Catholic leaders in my generation especially-have done a bad job of forming and keeping our people. We've been deeply naive about the congeniality of American culture toward Catholic belief. In general, sacramental practice and Mass attendance are declining, and young people are not stepping up to take leadership in the Church in the way their parents and grandparents did. Plenty of exceptions do exist, but overall the picture is not good.

This national softening trend applies especially in places like Colorado and other western states, where the Church is young and the environment is very secular. But it's happening here in Rhode Island and everywhere else. There's more hostility to the Catholic Church in more state assemblies today than at any time in the past eighty years, and the clergy sex-abuse scandal is only one of the reasons why, and often not even the most important reason. Nor will the influx of Latinos into our country automatically renew or sustain the Church. The data show that Latinos in the United States abandon the Catholic Church at about the same rate as every other ethnic group. The secularizing fallout of American political and consumer culture, along with the cafeteria effect of so many religious choices, undermines the Catholic roots of Latinos.

That means we need to think of the Church in America as a missionary church, and each of us priests as a missionary priest. We've probably known this all along, but now it has an immediate, practical urgency. Catholic demography is changing. So is our political environment. Additionally, we can't count on the continued financial health of the Church in our country if our active Catholic base diminishes over the next generation-which is quite possible and already happening.

Of course, we need to balance these concerns with our strengths. Compared to the Church elsewhere in the world, our priests, parishes, diocesan programs, renewal communities, finances, and patterns of religious practice are quite strong. The Church here is healthier, with more energy and better leadership at many different levels, than nearly anywhere else in the world. So we have the freedom to do something about our problems. But we need to be realists. The conflicts facing the U.S. Church over the past decade, external and internal-from the abortion issue to immigration to war and peace to mar-

riage and family life-will probably continue for the foreseeable future. These struggles will require an example of leadership to sustain our people and draw others to the Church. And that example has to start with our priests.

We need to "do" the Church differently in the next twenty-five years. How will we build a truly integrated Latino-Anglo Catholic identity? How will we educate our people in the faith if we can't sustain our schools? How will we really cultivate more priestly vocations? How will we build new churches? Who will take the place of dying religious communities? These are huge strategic questions pressing in on us right now-today. And the people best equipped to think about these things and lead others to think and act on them are, again, our priests.

As a result, I think priests today need at least three things. First, they need help in understanding and developing the inherent leadership skills God gave them. One of the ironies of priesthood is that God calls us to be the leaders of our people-and then too often nobody in the Church actually teaches us how to do that. That's why, at least in our Colorado experience, the "Good Leaders, Good Shepherds" Catholic Leadership Institute is so important, and why I urge all our priests to pursue it in the Archdiocese of Denver. Our men who've been through the program give it very high marks. It's headquartered in Pennsylvania, and with Bishop Tobin's blessing, I'd encourage you to check it out or look for something similar.

Second, priests need real fraternity-a proper, intimate, brotherly spirit of friendship and mutual support, something like the best qualities of religious life but tailored to life in the world. In the years ahead, "loner" priests-the kind of men we all know, men who find a safe spot within the eccentric limits and habits they build around their priesthood like a fort-simply won't survive. The world will be too heavy on them. Of course, we all talk about supporting each other. We all pay that lip service to fraternity. But when we go home today, we should ask ourselves, what have we actually done this past month to prove it to our brothers?

Third, we need purification. Priesthood, like marriage, is a radical choice-all or nothing. But we all tend to accumulate the junk of a comfortable life, the habits and pleasures that dull the purpose to which we committed ourselves on the day of our ordination. If we want our people to live Jesus Christ vigorously and courageously, why would they do that if they don't see it, and admire it, in the Church's priests?

The most urgent need for the Church in our day is a rebirth of faith and missionary spirit in our people. But that will never happen, and it can't ever happen, until we ourselves have a renewal of priestly life. Priests need to be who Christ called them to be-his friends and disciples-and need to call those of us who are bishops to be the same. If we can accomplish that priestly renewal together, with the grace of Jesus Christ, then God can achieve anything through us. God already did it once. That's the reason we're here today.

I want to close with just a few words about the four pillars of priestly formation-the human, the spiritual, the intellectual, and the pastoral dimensions. While I was celebrating Mass the week after Easter, I noticed that these dimensions of our formation closely resemble the qualities of the early Church described in the Acts of the Apostles. Acts tells us that the early disciples "devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers."

The word devote means to give our hearts, our minds, and our whole selves. At ordination, we devoted our lives to the teaching of the apostles. The intellectual life of the Church is not the property of theologians alone, or even primarily. Catholic intellectual life should be a love that each priest shares. The communal life-this is how we receive our ongoing human formation-is for us our relationships with our brothers in the priesthood. We also experience these relationships with the people in our parishes and through these relationships we learn to become more human.

We find our pastoral formation in "the breaking of bread." The Eucharist is at the heart of our pastoral ministry and it's in our celebration of the Eucharist, as well in our reflections together, that we learn to be better pastors when we preach, when we celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation, when we anoint the sick, and when we prepare people for marriage and for baptism.

And finally, I can't stress this enough: We need a lifelong devotion to prayer. Our spiritual life is the engine that drives the whole of our life. If we don't pray, then we can't claim to have a real relationship with Jesus risen from the dead. Prayer is a sign of our faith, that Jesus has not left us but is with us still.

Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote about the various kinds of leadership in the Church. He spoke about intellectual leadership, devotional leadership, and political leadership. I long for these faithful Catholic leadership qualities in the priests of the United States. It's vital that we become intellectual leaders, knowing our faith and understanding our culture, and, through that, becoming guides for the intellectual growth of our fellow Christians. The saints embody the devotional life of the Church, but it's important for each of us to remember that we individually are also called to be saints. Holiness should shape our leadership in all we say and do. And priests are called to political leadership, too. We're responsible for the governance of the Church-in our parishes, but also in our dioceses. We need to govern as good shepherds and good fathers, loving our people, and giving them clear and courageous leadership when that's important, and even when it's unpopular.

I want to conclude on this last point of leadership because I was in Washington last week and was struck by the strength, simplicity, and goodness of Benedict XVI as a pastor. I've admired Joseph Ratzinger as a thinker for many years, but I really didn't expect to be so moved by his visit. He has a gift for what has been called affirmative orthodoxy. That sounds complicated-he's a theologian, after all-but it really isn't.

Benedict has the talent for being very frank about sin and calling people back to fidelity. And yet, at the same time, he illuminates that fidelity with warmth in a way that reveals its beauty and disarms the people who hear him. His warning about the "silent apostasy" of many Catholic laypeople and even some clergy has stayed with me because he said it in a spirit of love, not rebuke. Apostasy is an interesting word. It comes from the Greek verb *apostanai*-which means to revolt or desert, literally "to stand away from." For Benedict, our people and priests don't need to renounce publicly their Catholic faith to be apostates. They simply need to be silent when their baptism demands that they speak out, to be cowards when Jesus needs them and asks them to have courage.

Benedict beautifully described the American Catholic community as being large and influential-but, even more important, diverse in its origin, creative, generous, and full of religious fervor. He reminded us all that American Catholics need to use our numbers and influence and creativity and generosity and fervor to enter into the public square in an active, faithful, and life-giving way. He called us to bring Christian hope to the public debate, to be clear and united in our Catholic presence in society, and to be a leaven in our nation's public life. That work needs to begin here, today, right now.

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