

October Book Summary

Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood

George B. Wilson, S.J., Liturgical Press, 2008, 158 pp., \$19.95

By Dan Brent

The book was prompted by the pedophile scandal within the Church. Wilson brings his expertise in group functioning to examine the causes and suggest solutions for the future. He begins the book by exploring some important concept-definitions.

A “culture” (as in clerical culture) is the “concrete patterns of behavior and ways of thinking that give shape to a particular body of people.” (p.3) Culture happens subtly and is not reflected on. It just happens. It’s like water to fish. It’s a product of the behaviors of all the participants.

“Clergy” are not just ordained people. They are any group of professionals that have special skills, training, or certification. So, for example, there are the medical clergy (doctors) and the military clergy (soldiers). The book talks about the roles in the scandal taken by the legal clergy (lawyers) and the media clergy (reporters) as well as by the ordained clergy. And each “clergy” group has its corresponding “laity” – the non-experts in that field.

“Priests” are all of the baptized Christians. Mistake? No; “priests” are *all* baptized Christians. There are, of course, ordained priests among that number but, by virtue of their baptism, all Christians share in the priesthood of Jesus. (Yea, I too found this confusing but it gets used consistently throughout the book.)

“Clericalism” is the negative effect that happens when the power of a clergy (any clergy) is abused. For example, the day “Father” is ordained he inherits the aura of deference and respect that has been earned by those who have preceded him. He has not earned it himself but the people, his “laity”, have learned to bestow it on him. And he gets the title and the uniform and the perks. The result: the ordained is tempted to feel entitled.

Now “Every clergy body develops defenses to protect the benefits.” (p.21) There emerges a group loyalty, a reluctance to accept critical feedback (even from each other), and a sense that they are above the rules that apply to their laity. This is sociology. It isn’t picking on the ordained; it’s true of any clergy.

To get to his later suggestions for abating the risks of scandalous abuse, the author spends a chapter reinforcing the reality that all baptized Christians are priests. “Baptism is the threshold across which one passes into the priesthood made up of the body of the faithful.” (p.38) In the Vatican II document, *Lumen gentium*, the council fathers teach that all members of the Church are called to the fullness of holiness (Ch. V).

Priestly ordination adds a new role of leadership to the responsibilities of the man ordained. The immediate risk is that his new “clergyhood” will descend into “clericalization”. In the ordination ceremony, the man prostrates himself humbly on the sanctuary floor. But, after that, “the rest of the elements of the ceremony are all but shouting at him that he must be pretty hot stuff.” (p.57)

All of that said, Wilson now turns to the sexual abuse scandal. In what he calls “Act One:” the incidents of abuse happened. Ordained men used their clergy status to impose evil on children who had been taught (through the culture) that “Father” is a good man and can be trusted. In “Act Two,” the incidents get to the bishop. Some bishops acted responsibly but others just scolded and reassigned the ordained man. Virtually no one thought to go to civil authorities. The negative “clericalism” was driving the response. The victims’ needs were rarely addressed. This was the cover-up stage.

In “Act Three” the victims and their parents went to lawyers. So the bishops called in their lawyers. Now the opposing legal clergy groups took over the whole disaster and any chance of humane Christian interaction was seriously diminished. The competing interests were defined now almost exclusively in monetary terms. That brought ambulance-chasing lawyers and lying “victims” into the picture to muddy the situation. (The false charges leveled at Cardinal Bernardin were handled by him in a remarkably generous and Christian way.) At this stage the media clergy also entered the drama.

In “Act Four,” the bishops, meeting in Dallas, adopted a “one-strike-and-you’re-out” policy which left no room under any circumstances for reconciliation. In “Act Five,” the implementation phase, debates arose (and continue) about access to Church personnel records and statutes of limitation.

Wilson names some things already being done and some things that need to be done to prevent recurrence of the problem in the future. Most bishops (Bishop Bruskewitz in Lincoln, NA is the exception) have accepted and implemented the Dallas agreements. The Church is more carefully screening candidates for ordination and volunteer youth workers in parishes. But also, the structures need to provide for more dialogue between the ordained and the laity. And we need to find effective ways of recasting the roles that have created the current clerical culture. This is a “we” charge. Remember that cultures are subtly created by all the players, not just by the clergy players. The changes are helped along by the deliberately chosen new behaviors initiated by the “early adopters” and all must be resigned to its taking a long time. It will take prayer, homilies that don’t use the word “you,” and ordained men who humbly listen and relate to their people.

On the sides of both ordained and laity, it will take the nourishment of love. “Love is never something that can be demanded. One day its presence is simply discovered.” (p.132) Lay people need to take learning their faith more seriously. We need to be willing to confront their ordained leader when fraternal correction is called for. we need to persevere – “stay at the table” no matter what. And we need to learn that we are priests, equally responsible with the ordained for proactively creating Church!