

## Restoring clerical authority

Richard McBrien | Mar. 9, 2009 Essays in Theology

One of the most tangible changes that has occurred in the Catholic church over the past several decades is the decline in the deference that Catholic laity display toward their clergy.

It is not that Catholics no longer like or respect priests. On the contrary, they are similar in mentality to U.S. voters who may have a generally low opinion of Congress, but who keep re-electing their own Representatives every two years.

Surveys have disclosed that, while Catholics may have lowered their opinion of priests and bishops as a group, largely because of the sexual-abuse scandal and the cover-ups that followed, parishioners continue to support and even cherish their own pastors.

At the same time, however, Catholic mothers no longer encourage their sons to become priests the way they used to 40 or 50 years ago.

Many recoil at the thought of their sons alone in old age, without a family to love and care for them. They are aware more than ever before that loneliness, not the curbing of one's sexuality, is the real cost of obligatory celibacy.

And they also want grandchildren. When families were larger, it was less of a concern. In a recent "60 Minutes" interview, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, a self-styled traditional Catholic, noted that he has five sons, one of whom is now a priest.

He told Leslie Stahl that when his son Paul announced that he wanted to study for the priesthood, his four other sons were relieved. Paul, he said, "was going to take one for the team."

But that day is over and so is the Catholic culture that supported it.

Another sign of change is the decline in confessions. Adults and children alike would line up in great numbers outside two or more confessional boxes on Saturday afternoons and evenings to have their sins forgiven and to perform whatever penance the priest might impose.

Nowadays, only a minority of parishes have more than one priest. Confessions in some places are by appointment. In many, if not most, churches they are held in Reconciliation rooms where the encounter between priest and penitent is face-to-face and where that encounter, if conducted properly, is far removed from the assembly-line experience of old.

A third sign of change is the general disappearance of the Latin Mass. It had been celebrated in a foreign language that only the priest could recite and understand, and at an altar that faced the back wall.

Whatever the priest was up to, with his back to the congregation, was mainly between God and himself. Not

even the altar boys could see and hear everything that the priest was saying and doing at Mass.

This lack of understanding, however, was coupled with an unshakeable faith in the priest's power to change bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. The "mysterious" aura which permeated the whole ritual strengthened the laity's conviction that something sacred and holy was taking place, thanks always to the priest who alone knew what to do and possessed the power to do it.

Some priests complained about the changes wrought by the Second Vatican Council because they felt that there was no longer any significant place for them in the life of the church.

The council had welcomed the laity into ministries formerly reserved exclusively to priests, even allowing them into the sanctuary, not only to read portions of the Scriptures assigned for the day's Mass but even to distribute Holy Communion.

Furthermore, most members of the congregation now received Communion without first going to confession -- a need which many had once felt even if not in the state of mortal sin.

Is there perhaps a thread that runs through three recent attempts to restore some of the elements of the pre-Vatican II church: indulgences, confession, and the Latin Mass?

The renewed attention to indulgences, sparked by a front-page story in *The New York Times* (2/10/09) on the bishop of Brooklyn's offer of plenary indulgences during this Year of Paul, is a case in point.

Indulgences are a spiritual benefit that only the pope or a diocesan bishop can grant. But one of the conditions for the reception of a plenary indulgence, or the full remission of punishment in Purgatory due to sins that have already been forgiven, is that the prospective recipient go the confession.

And the Latin Mass is something that only the priest can perform, without lay involvement.

Cynthia Jurisson of Chicago may have put her finger on it in a recent letter to *The New York Times*: "The salutary benefit [of these changes] may be to buttress waning clerical authority..." (2/17/09).

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