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Why Priests Are Happy

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 29, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Next Wednesday, Catholic University is hosting an all day symposium on the priesthood to commemorate the publication of a new book by Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, *Why Priests are Happy: A Study of the Psychological and Spiritual Health of Priests*. Professor Joseph White will give an historical analysis of the priesthood., Archbishop Wilton Gregory will discuss the findings in the new book from the perspective of a diocesan bishop, and Msgr. Robert Panke will discuss the work?s implications for seminary discernment and formation. That is quite a line-up but it is appropriate because of the importance of the subject matter.

Let me be honest: I am not a statistician and a book with this many graphs and statistical notes (p

Rossetti combines several studies, including the John Jay Report on the sources of the sex abuse crisis, but most of the data comes from two studies, conducted in 2004 and 2009 by Rossetti, to examine the issues. The 2004 study involved 1,242 priests and the 2009 study had an even larger sample of 2,482 priests. The surveys covered a wide range of issues, for example, the extent to which priests take care of themselves physically: Rossetti found that, like most American males, too many priests suffer from obesity and need more time on the treadmill.

The heart of the book, however, looks at the psychological well-being of the clergy and how this does or does not relate to their spiritual well-being and other issues. Rossetti found that on the four measures of psychological health, ?the mean scores of the sample of priests are modestly lower than the norm sample of males. Thus the results suggest that priests, as a group, are slightly healthier and a bit less psychologically distressed than the general population of males.? If the mean score of all males is rendered at 50, priests earned scores ranging from 47.48 to 49.11 on the four indices, which tested somatization, depression, anxiety and ?global severity.? This last is a summary of the three previous scales.

Rossetti does not get buried in data or words like ?somatization.? He has a knack for putting his research into an appropriate context. For example, while his data shows that priests have fewer sexual problems than the population at large, he recognizes the unique role of priests in the life of the Church. He writes: ?Nevertheless it must be added that even one highly visible person, like a priest, with considerable authority and responsibility with a sexual problem, while statistically unimportant, is hugely important to many people.? Indeed, this pastoral concern for the significance of his data, and the limits of data, runs through the book. But, as he states, ?We cannot solve a problem if we do not know its pathogenesis.?

One of the reasons Rossetti cites for the relatively better mental health of the clergy than the ambient male population is that his survey indicates priests are more likely to seek assistance for mental health problems. The 2009 survey specifically asked whether or not priests had voluntarily sought counseling and 46.3% answered yes. As Rossetti points out, ?[i]t is well documented, for example, that mental health services can successfully lower levels of depression and anxiety, as well as successfully treat other disorders.? Of course, in the mainstream culture, mental illness still enjoys something of a stigma, and many health insurance plans do not adequately address mental health needs. But, there is something deeper here. Rossetti writes: ?They [priests who have come to him for counseling] bring a level of faith and trust to therapy, which is important. Their faith

opens them up to a deep level of divine healing. Plus the presence of their Christian spirituality brings a depth of healing to which the science of psychology has only begun to be aware.?

One of the most interesting sections of the books dives into the sources of priest?s happiness and morale. There is a fascinating, and blessedly easy to discern, table that rates the factors that increase priests? happiness and morale. At the top of the chart is ?Inner peace,? followed by ?Relationship to God,? ?View of Celibacy,? ?Not Feeling Lonely and Unappreciated? and ?Relationship to Bishop.? At the bottom of the scale, priests with narcissistic traits and those who ?work out problems alone? do not register as happy or high in morale.

?Inner peace? is an amorphous term, but we can say about it what Justice Stewart said about pornography: We know it when we see it. Rossetti thinks that happy people make happy priests which strikes some as a tautology but really speaks to something deeper. He states, ?The most powerful predictor of our own happiness is womthing that we, eventually, have some control over. Rather than ceding our happiness to an external factor, we have some personal control over how happy we will be.? Rossetti also provides a charming, if anecdotal, incident that gives some human flesh to the survey. ?A short time ago, I recall chatting with an elderly priest who has reflecting on his over fifty years of service. He candidly told me that he was happy with all of his assignments. He said, ?Whenever I went into a place, I made up my mind to make the best of the assignment and enjoy it. And I did.? He was a happy old priest.? I discern in this tale a specific, Christian wisdom, one that our culture with its emphasis on protean, self-made success ignores, a willingness to see Providence at work in one?s life.

There are other fascinating topics considered in this book. The relationship between happiness and obedience to religious authority is compelling. The critical importance of nurturing a healthy spiritual life for being happy in one?s priestly vocation is demonstrated amply, and how certain devotional practices are especially helpful in this regard. Personal piety only goes so far: Priests have to enjoy celebrating the sacraments for the People of God. The Chapter comparing generations of priests is fascinating but, hey, if I give away all the good stuff, you will not feel the need to go buy the book!
This book should be bought and read. It is a ?must read? for all bishops, seminary staff, vocation directors and religion reporters. But, anyone who cares to know about the state of the Church in the United States should read this book which offers such an interesting window into the life of the Church?s clergy. And, not just interesting, but authoritative. I have often reflected on the fact that many, if not most, of my dearest friends on the planet are priests, those whose wisdom and learning make life more interesting and whose pastoral solicitude makes it more bearable during the tough times. I have wondered if I was just lucky. This book demonstrates that more than luck was involved.

For more information on the conference, and to register, click here [1], or call 202.319.5683. To purchase the book, contact your local independent bookstore (preferably) or find it on Amazon here [2].

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