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Editorial: Cardinal's 'letter' stocked with more of what we don?t need

NCR Editorial Staff | Jan. 17, 2013

Cardinal Mauro Piacenza's recent "letter" to mothers of priests and seminarians was clearly intended as a warm recognition, tied in with the feast of the Solemnity of Mary, of women who are life's primary teachers and examples of faith. If he had stopped with his statement of gratitude, the message would warrant little further notice. But Piacenza, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy, went on at length, weaving a top-heavy construct of speculative theology about priesthood overlaid with treacly pieties and strange contortions of gender and familial relations.

The speech stands in contrast to the words of Benedictine Abbot Peter von Sury of Switzerland, who in a recent interview urges deep changes in church structures, led by the way in which bishops are selected. (**See Story [1]** .) Von Sury advocates returning the voices of "faithful, the local clergy and the neighboring bishops" to the selection process.

Taken together, Piacenza and von Sury represent two of the poles between which the tensions within the contemporary church are played out.

Piacenza begins by comparing women whose sons become priests with the Virgin Mary, adding, "The entire church looks with admiration and deep gratitude upon all mothers of priests and of those who, having received this lofty vocation, have embarked upon the path of formation."

With no intent to diminish the significance of priestly vocation, it is nonetheless distressing to hear once again from a Vatican official the kind of thinking that echoes from past centuries and, in this case, reinforces what is so very wrong with the clerical culture. While abusive behavior, including sexual abuse of children, occurs everywhere, the unique character of such abuse within Catholic clerical circles owes more than a little to such high notions of ordination. The teaching that priests somehow stood outside of ordinary human experience was a contributing factor to the peculiar manifestation of abuse within the church and the fact that so many in authority hid the abuse for so long.

Piacenza, in his breathless attempt to elevate priesthood and the mothers of priests to some preternatural level, actually disfigures what is holiest, and thus most deeply human, about men and women called to a special level of service to the Catholic Christian community. Piacenza's idea of priesthood seems far removed from the early church's understanding of ordination. (**See Story [2]**.)

Mothers of priests, he asserts, enjoy "unique and special ... spiritual consolations" and "rejoice in seeing the life of her son not only fulfilled but also clothed with a most exceptional divine favor which embraces and transforms it for all eternity."

Piacenza continues to work his weave, incorporating ever stranger conclusions about the consequences of ordination. Experience, he writes, shows that "when a man is ordained a priest, his mother 'receives' him in a completely new and unexpected way," seeing "in the fruit of her own womb a 'father' who by God's will is

called to generate and accompany a multitude of brothers and sisters to eternal life." Consequently, "Every mother of a priest mysteriously becomes a 'daughter of her son.' "

And what of her daughters, or other sons, or perhaps a husband? Are mother and priest son swept up, mysteriously of course, in some strange association of the otherworldly? What Piacenza sows more resembles division than sanctity. His tightly constructed little universe leads to a culture of men alone, talking only to each other.

As head of the Congregation for the Clergy, Piacenza might do better to speak to those mothers who say, "If you won't have my daughter, you can't have my son," or others who simply will not encourage their sons to become part of a culture that parents increasingly feel is unhealthy and imbalanced.

Von Sury gets quickly to the nub of the issue that lies beneath the froth of Piacenza's view of ordination. The church today, he says, is suffering the effects of a "closed system" in which the overwhelming majority of those who rise to episcopacy will not challenge the status quo. "A closed system," he said, "is not capable of accepting criticism or correction from outside. Perhaps it will have to break down one day or disintegrate before something happens. Or it will run out of money and then it will automatically come to a standstill."

In the meantime, the path to ordination keeps filling with those who understand the rules of the culture as they now exist. And those rules are designed to give us more of what we don't need: an enhancement of clerical privilege and an increase of clerical distance from the people.

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