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Parish priests should take Pope Francis' challenge to heart

Renée Schafer Horton | Oct. 3, 2013 NCR Today

Editor's note: This blog previously appeared on Renee Schafer Horton's blog,Bus Stop Jesus[1], on Sept. 24. It has been edited for style and clarity.

Many moons ago, when I was a young (sigh) correspondent for the *Texas Catholic* in Dallas, I had to cover a keynote speech at a weekend retreat for catechists. I remember three things: the speaker was a priest; most of the participants were women (naturally, since the majority of volunteers in any Catholic diocese are women); and there was a Q-and-A after the speech. It was during that last part that things got interesting, and I can still see the scene clearly.

A religious sister stood up to pose a question, using her cane for balance. She was ever so tiny; her face, a relief map of life lines. Because she appeared ancient to my 30-year-old eyes, I expected her comment to be, "Teach the children the rosary." Instead, in a slightly shaky but firm voice, she asked the priest if he ever thought the church would allow women to be ordained. All heads turned her direction, an oscillating fan stuck on "left," and I remember a man at my table stopping mid-sip with his coffee. It felt like no one was breathing.

The priest stammered for a minute, obviously caught off-guard, before he finally said, "Well, Sister, I'm not the pope, so I can't say. Remember this, though. We're a pilgrim church and change often comes slowly. We must be faithful and patient."

The little spitfire sister banged her cane on the floor. "I'm 82 years old," she said. "I've been patient long enough."

I've been thinking about this story a lot since author and Catholic columnist Mary DeTurris Poust had the temerity Sept. 22 to blog that lackluster liturgy was making her want to leave the church. [2]She called for a revolt from the pews, and her blog has been passed around like a hot -- but darn interesting -- potato from one Catholic blog to the next, with some writers saying they agree but for X, Y or Z, others saying she's dangerous and reckless [3], and others trying to explain away her frustration with all manner of advice and/or condemnation.

Mary's call for better liturgy isn't impossible or selfish. It is the cry of a Catholic who doesn't want to lose her religion but fears she is. It is the prophet calling out in the wilderness that she sees people leaving the faith and thinks there might be a way to get them back through better liturgy. It is someone pointing out the obvious, giving voice to people like my friend Judy, who said she doesn't think she's losing her religion, but that her religion is losing her.

For a devoted Catholic (Mary wrote for Our Sunday Visitor, for goodness sake) to get to where Mary is means something is dreadfully wrong. And hard as this may be to understand, what is wrong is not Mary. She's just simply where the elderly nun was 30 years ago: tired, so very tired, of waiting for something to change. And I think if Pope Francis read her words, he'd be calling her priest, saying, "Dude! Where are you in this?"

Which brings me back to what I wrote Sept. 22 [4] about the pope's rock-the-boat interview the week before: Clergy really need to do better. I am not, as one commenter said, a "priest hater." I think most priests who know me would back me up on that assertion. I am, however (and they'd concur with this as well), a priest-challenger. My feeling is this: You get to wear the little white collar? You need to understand the job requirements, the ones Pope Francis has illuminated so well of late and not the one the church spies keep pushing forward.

Now before anyone does to me what they did to Mary and condemn me for my ignorance of the "average priest's life," let me say: *Au contraire, mon cheri.* Not only have I covered the church as a reporter for more than two decades, I saw clergy workload up close and personal during 25 years of parish service in four different states, spent three days shadowing a priest-now-bishop for a novel I'm working on, and was the administrative assistant to a pastor for nine months.

I learned a lot about priestly life in all those situations, including how draining it is to be in a "helper" profession, how the Saturday mid-afternoon through Sunday evening routine is pretty nonstop, and how you have to be open to listening even when you'd rather stick needles in your eyes. But the biggest thing I learned was this: The priests who thrived -- and thus the parishes that were most alive and welcoming -- knew how to let the People of God have ownership. When people feel the parish is theirs, it is amazing what they'll do for it. No struggle for volunteers, for one thing.

But when the man in charge will not let go, it doesn't bode well for anyone. When he will not listen to the needs of his parishioners or brushes those needs or desires off as not part of his parish's mission or his personal charism, it turns people off. If everyone knows that no matter what you say in a listening session, your ideas will not come to fruition, you just give up. When he's such a micromanager that he can't see the forest for the trees, he'll never have what this priest in this rural parish does [5].

We belonged to that kind of parish once. Huge -- 2,000 families -- and one priest. One. So laity had to do a lot. But we wanted to do a lot because of the way that priest led and his willingness to listen to us. Our family was only in that city nine months, but it was the best Catholic family we've ever been part of. The day we walked in the door, the priest let us know that every person belonged to a neighborhood group, and every Sunday, different groups were responsible for coffee, doughnuts and conversation after Mass. These were also the groups you joined during Advent and Lent for faith sharing. He signed us up on the spot and introduced us to our neighborhood leader, all the while chatting us up about our jobs, our kids, our interests in liturgy and which football team we followed.

At each Mass every Sunday, you had to meet a new person. The priest wouldn't start Mass without this. He blocked off back pews so people had to sit close together. "We're family," he was constantly saying, "so we sit together." He gave a children's five-minute sermon every Sunday at every Mass, then addressed the adults. He insisted on parish picnics and ran a softball team for the adults. He had a parish council that was -- shock! -- elected by the people, and he wasn't threatened by any of it. He actually solicited comments on his homilies. And like the parish from the post above, everyone was happy and things ran more smoothly than at any parish I've been to since. We felt close to each other, and close to God. And worship, by the way, was respectful, prayerful, joyful and sincere. It was an outgrowth of what we experienced in the community.

If priests would let go -- accept the gifts of their parishioners and stop trying to control everything -- they would have more time to get out and find the lost, as the pope is asking. More time to work on killer homilies (and accept the expertise of writers in their congregation to help craft a message that isn't too long or wandering); more time to counsel people who show up unannounced; more time for apologies and amends and every other outreach that they, in their priestly heart of hearts, know is needed.

Pope Francis has single-handedly (without revoking any church teaching, I might add) changed the public

perception of the institutional church. As a young professor said to me at work, "I'm not even Catholic and I like this guy." She said he made her pay attention. Read that again. He made her pay attention, not by lecturing on sin (except his own) or drawing up a list of don'ts or issuing a bunch of demands. Instead, he simply acts like Jesus, and in so doing, draws people to himself.

Most people aren't ever going to meet the pope. But they might just try Mass again because of what they've read about the pope. They're hoping to find a priest like the pope in that parish. This is an amazing moment, a rare opportunity, a difficult but necessary challenge. And much of it hinges upon what the clergy do with it. I pray they can do justice, love mercifully and, as Francis has so beautifully demonstrated, walk humbly with their God as they reach out to listen to those who've left, are thinking of leaving, or think they would never be welcome [6].

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