NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Lessons learned from dealing with clerical bullies

Isabella R. Moyer | Oct. 10, 2013 NCR Today

Bloggers muse and ponder on the issues of the day. We rant and rave. We dream and vision. The challenge comes when someone asks us, "So? What should we do about it?"

My last *NCR* blog post was titled, "Pope Francis asks us to be the reform we want to see [1]." As I was writing, I was increasingly aware that I was speaking in generalities. Paragraphs were filled with nice-sounding words that painted a utopian picture and with platitudes that pointed to some ephemeral "what could be" if we only tried to "be the reform we want to see."

A kind reader sent me an email asking for more. He liked the tone of the post but wondered about the practicalities of reform. How do we make it come about? For example, what if we are the unlucky ones stuck with a mediocre or dysfunctional parish or pastor? Pope Francis is challenging mediocrity and clericalism from the top. How do we do challenge the same on the local level?

John Allen writes [2] that we cannot expect rapid change and reform to come from the ranks of bishops. It will take many years for a new breed of men to take over the episcopal reins of the church. This is true.

Change needs to come from the bottom as well as from the top. Recent fresh breezes of hope are providing a graced time for laity in our church and a serious challenge for us all. God may have given us a modern-day Francis to rebuild the church, but it is up to us to put his inspiration to work. We finally have a pope who is adamant about pulling down the pedestals of clericalism. I, for one, will be happy to help!

How do we do this? I don't have a magic answer. I wish I did. All I have is my personal experience and the lessons I learned from it.

Many years ago, my parish lived through the dark ages of an authoritarian priest. He happened to be the sidekick to an even more authoritarian bishop. It was a sadly dysfunctional time in the diocese as a whole. Heads were rolling. Priests and laity were being dismissed without explanation. Lines were being drawn in the sand. Folks sucked it up, grumbled and stayed, or they spoke out and quickly found themselves on the other side of the church door. I was in the latter group.

I learned several lessons about church politics from this experience. My priest friends, who were skittishly looking over their own shoulders at the time, were not willing to stand up for me. They offered a shoulder to cry on and affirmed the injustice that had been done, but that was the extent of their help. I was left alone. But when two of their own were unceremoniously removed from the diocese, we lay folks were expected to raise our voices in loud protest and support.

When power and authority are abused, they must not be supported. For my husband and me, this meant withdrawing our time, talent and treasure, and we had given generously in all. Eventually, it meant walking out the door.

This was our response to an abusive form of clericalism in our parish. I wish I could say our action changed things. It didn't. I also learned that each parish has a small flock of obedient sheep that will continue to do the pastor's bidding regardless of the extent of his nastiness. They will commiserate and grumble loudly about the injustices being committed, but never directly to the priest. Their silent acquiescence is interpreted as support. They remain faithful minions to the clerical bully, and the bullying goes on.

Yes, we need to go beyond talking of reform at the vision level. We need to talk practicalities. We need to share our own experiences and share the lessons learned. I learned that clericalism can only survive if supported and enabled by those in the pews. To this day, I'm saddened by how much support and enabling actually takes place. I'm also saddened by how little support is given to those who have suffered at the hands of dysfunctional clericalism.

What lessons have you learned?

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