

The church's wage gap

Nicole Sotelo | May. 19, 2014 Young Voices

Meet Trish Vanni, a Catholic mother of three from Minnesota. She has worked for the church, holds a doctorate in theology, and carries nearly \$100,000 in educational debt. She recently began [an online campaign](#) [1] through GoFundMe to heighten awareness about Catholic women's ministerial debt and to raise funds to help pay her loans. When I heard her story, I made a contribution toward her campaign then began to investigate.

Why do so many lay ministers struggle financially? I know there is a wage gap in society, but is there a wage gap in the church? Is there a gap between lay ministers who are predominantly women and the clergy, who are solely men? Here is what I discovered.

Approximately 38,000 Catholics, the majority of whom are women, currently serve as parish lay ministers, [according to a 2012 CARA study](#) [2]. Their median ministerial salary is \$31,000 per year.

For lay workers like Trish who hold a doctorate, the median salary rises to only \$40,000, clearly not enough to pay off educational loan debt, let alone raise a family.

To further complicate the wage gap, less than four out of 10 parish workers receive health insurance through their workplace. Among paid church workers, one in five has a second job outside the parish.

If you compare this to priest compensation, a very different picture emerges. According to the [National Federation of Priest Councils](#) [3], the median base salary for priests in the U.S. Catholic church is an estimated \$23,000 to \$26,000 but rises to \$39,000 of taxable income when the additional privileges of priesthood are included, such as housing, food, mass stipends, and auto allowances.

[In the Boston archdiocese](#) [4], a newly ordained priest in 2013 would earn \$33,730 while a priest ordained 50 years ago would receive \$37,630. Boston priests also receive free room and board, full health insurance, and up to \$750 for their annual retreat. Around 2007, the [San Jose, Calif., diocese](#) [5] gave priests a basic stipend of \$32,616 with a grant of \$600 for a "study week," \$500 for a spiritual retreat, and a contribution of \$11,718 for their retirement fund. The wage gap also grows if you consider that some parish priests also receive free Internet service, basic cable television, housekeeping, snow removal, landscaping, and other services with bills paid by the parish.

Priests also are not burdened by academic debt. Most priests receive full tuition and free room and board during their studies, graduating debt-free with a bachelor's or master's degree. One-third of lay ministers hold or are working toward a master's degree in their field, as well. However, fewer than half of these lay ministers report receiving financial assistance from their parish for formation or educational study.

In my own Chicago archdiocese, the average newly ordained associate priest receives \$23,938 with no educational debt to pay, no housing or food expenses, and no family to support. New pastors are paid \$28,029, on average. A new lay pastoral minister's salary begins at \$21,401 or a lay pastoral associate begins at \$27,867, but they must pay their own educational debt, their own housing costs, and potentially support a family. In fact,

the new lay pastoral minister's salary is below the poverty line for a family of four ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2012](#) [6]).

Catholic social teaching declares: "The worker must be paid a wage sufficient to support him and his family" ([Quadragesimo Anno](#) [7] 71). It is clear that we preach better than we pay.

Let me be clear that I recognize every diocese is different -- some help priests pay for Social Security taxes and others don't. Some diocesan priests barely get by while others can afford to buy their own homes apart from a rectory.

Let me also be clear that I rejoice in the fact that many of our clergy are well compensated for their labor. I only wish lay workers were equally compensated for their particular state in life.

This compensation gap affects more than just church workers. It affects people like you and me. We need our local parishes to be able to recruit and sustain educated and experienced lay ministers. When we enroll our children in religious education, we want them to have the best teachers. When we need pastoral care at life's vulnerable moments, we want someone who has the experience to care for us well.

Heroic diocesan managers, well-meaning priests, and courageous church employees do their best to address the inequalities individually, but the solution must eventually be addressed systemically. The crux of the problem is the fact that our parishes struggle to live out a post-Vatican II paradigm while the structures of the church -- including clerical privilege -- are still embedded in a pre-Vatican II context. Increasing lay workers' pay is a complicated task that will require both emotional and economic will on the part of us all.

Until we address the vestiges of pre-Vatican II clerical privilege and how our parishes are structured, we will continue to experience a clerical-lay divide. This divide was once only considered a vocational gap, but it must also be recognized today as a wage gap, a gap that affects us all.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates [WomenHealing.com](#) [8]. She is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School.]

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[1] <http://www.gofundme.com/8qri0g>

[2] <http://emergingmodels.org/perspectives-from-parish-leaders-u-s-parish-life-and-ministry-2/>

[3] <http://nfpcc.org/product/the-laborer-is-worthy-of-his-hire-2013-edition/>

[4]

http://www.bostoncatholic.org/uploadedFiles/BostonCatholicorg/Offices_And_Services/Offices/Sub_Pages/Parish_Fina

[5] <http://www.catholicdigest.com/articles/faith/knowledge/2007/10-01/how-much-money-does-a-parish-priest-make>

[6] <http://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p60-248.pdf>

[7] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno_en.html

[8] <http://www.WomenHealing.com>

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