

COMMONWEAL

May 23, 2008

Why We're Different Bridging the Priesthood's Generation Gap

by Rev. Damian J. Ference

On the first Friday of every month, I join a dozen or so other priests for vespers, drinks, dinner, and fellowship. Two things make the group unusual. The first is that five decades of ordination classes are represented at our gatherings. The second is that each of us is expected to have read an article that was assigned in advance and be ready to discuss it after dinner. At our Christmas gathering we unpacked "The Other Health Crisis" by Paul Stanosz, which appeared in the November 23, 2007, *Commonweal*. Because of our discussion that night, it occurred to me that the way a generation of priests defines itself is often closely linked to how it suffers.

Before the abuse crisis exploded in 2001-2002, there was an earlier round of revelations about sexual abuse in the late 1980s; and even if it didn't manage to gather as much media attention as the most recent round, its impact must not be forgotten. Most Catholics of my generation find it difficult to remember a time when pedophilia wasn't widely associated with the priesthood. A dark cloud of suspicion has been hovering over priests for the past twenty years, and it has only grown more ominous with time. So, although much has been made about the distinction between the "servant-leader" model and the "cultic" model of priesthood, this is not, I think, the most important difference between generations of priests. In fact, the healthiest priests-of whatever age-seem to embody both the "servant-leader" and "cultic" models.

I decided to enter a college seminary in late July of 1994. I had earned my high-school diploma a few months earlier and chose to abandon my previous plans in order to follow what seemed to be God's plan. My parents were shocked but supportive. My older brother asked me if I was gay. An old friend made a remark about little boys.

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I have been told that there was a time when priests were put on a pedestal; when the priest was usually the most educated person in the parish; when a live-in housekeeper prepared three meals a day, did the laundry, and cleaned the rectory, which was usually filled to capacity. That was supposed to have been the golden age of the priesthood, when priestly vocations were abundant and encouraged, and the priesthood itself was thought to be a glorious vocation that would make mom, dad, and the whole parish proud. Not only was a vocation to the priesthood supported by the Catholic community, it was also considered a good thing by the culture at large. A life of service was to be commended. This is not to say that priests of that generation were without suffering. There was a dark side to this bright scene. Horror stories are still told about the days of rigid seminary formation, tyrant pastors, Forty Hours gatherings where priests could drink pirates under the table, and small-scale scandals of all sorts. For the most part, though, the reputation of the priesthood was in good shape, even if some individual priests were not.

The following generation, the one before mine, was also dealing with a world very different from the one in which we live today. It came of age during or just after Vatican II. Vietnam was a war zone, and the sexual revolution was underway. A new age had dawned. For my first parish assignment, which lasted from 2003 to 2007, I was blessed to be placed with a pastor who was ordained in 1968. He entered the seminary before the council, was formed as the council was meeting, and ordained in one of the most turbulent years of the last century. His ordination class had thirty-three other men, only ten of whom remain in active ministry. I had some initial prejudices about living and working with a baby-boomer priest. After all, I was what people now call, in praise or disdain, a John Paul II priest. On paper we really were not supposed to get along. But we were both sons of Vatican II, and we were genuinely interested in learning about each other's experiences of seminary formation. We also wanted to talk about our different understandings of the church, and about the direction in which we thought the church was heading. We

also liked being priests, and since we were going to be housemates for the next four years, we made it work.

Our best conversations took place at the dinner table. My pastor recalled memorizing the Baltimore Catechism in grade school. I told him that I made collages about my feelings in religious-ed class. When he complained that his seminary formation had been too militaristic, I told him of my frustrations with a seminary formation that seemed too lax. When he spoke of the years he spent studying Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, I expressed embarrassment at not knowing how to chant the Pater Noster as I concelebrated Mass with Benedict XVI at World Youth Day a few years ago in Cologne. When my pastor expressed gratitude that the clerical dress code had been relaxed over the years, I said I thought it was important that the priest be a visible sign of the church, to remind the world that God is not dead. But when it came to the abuse scandals, we were on the same page-or at least in the same book. The scandals hit us both hard, though in different ways.

The generation before mine remembers a time of general stability and respectability within the priesthood. When my pastor's generation entered the seminary, family members did not ask him or his classmates if they were gay or attracted to little boys (though I am told there have always been people who thought there was something sexually suspect about priests). Priests of my pastor's generation didn't have protesters at their ordinations. Their suffering was different. They battled with pastors over implementing the teaching of Vatican II, watched classmates leave the ministry in droves, and struggled to find a balance between the ordained priesthood and baptismal priesthood.

The priests hit hardest by the abuse revelations of 2001-2002 were those ordained before the scandals. The men accused of abuse had been their classmates and friends, men with whom they had studied and served for many years. My older priest friends have a difficult time believing that, as a church, we are going to recover from the abuse crisis anytime soon, and of course they are right. The presbyterate that was once regarded as a community of good shepherds is now perceived by many as a pack of vicious wolves. Theoretically, and even functionally, the priesthood may be the same, but the experience and perception of it is now radically different. Many members of the older generation see no reason to invest hope in the future of the priesthood unless the church undergoes major structural change. This is where generations part ways.

When my generation entered the seminary, the reputation of the priesthood had already been tarnished. Sure, there was still support in parish communities and youth groups for a vocation to the priesthood, but it was nothing like what the previous generation had experienced. As seminarians, we knew that the days of full rectories were a distant memory and that we might be made pastors right after our first assignment-even pastors of more than one parish. We understood that the communal meals of the seminary were a kind of luxury, that we would likely be eating most of our meals alone once we were ordained. We also knew that the days of "Father knows best" were gone, and that the laity had a vital role in the health and growth of the parish. (Most of us knew this firsthand because we came from families that were key players in the life of our home parishes.) We knew that the stakes were high. We also knew that we were maybe not the most qualified. But then neither were the apostles, and we took comfort in that: God qualifies those he calls.

The generation just after mine has it even worse. If people missed the news of the abuse cases in the late '80s, they couldn't ignore the barrage of news stories in 2002. The enrollment at our college seminary in Cleveland dropped to an all-time low of nineteen students that school year. Many thought that another round of seminary closings was inevitable. But then something happened.

Just when the situation seemed to be at its worst, signs of hope were beginning to spring up. In my diocese, the enrollment at our college seminary began to increase, and so did the quality of the seminarians. The seminary began this academic year with forty-nine students, and an uncommonly high number of our seminarians continue to make the dean's list. Most of them are from the area, and most are studying for our diocese. Not every seminary is doing as well, of course, but a few are; and these few suggest that the situation is better than it was just a few years ago.

What makes this phenomenon so fascinating is that these young men are actually drawn to the challenge and the sacrifice of the priesthood—to the fact that they may be persecuted, or at least despised, because of their vocation. They are eager to give themselves away, to lay down their lives in service of God and his church. I am afraid that this aspect of the priesthood has sometimes been obscured or soft-peddled, but no longer. Vocation directors have stopped talking about the priesthood as a duty or as a way up in the world and have instead begun talking about it mainly as sacrifice and adventure. The church has always depended on the idealism of young people to stand strong in the face of danger, persecution, and despair, and the faith of this new generation has been a great blessing that is only beginning to be recognized.

Those who have entered the seminary since the scandal are sitting ducks, and they know it. They know that one accusation, whether true or false, may destroy their reputation. They realize that—even in the eyes of many in the church—they will be considered guilty until proven innocent. They are fully aware that many parents will now watch them suspiciously at parishes and schools. And if somehow they didn't know all this before entering the seminary, the years of workshops on boundary issues, intimacy, celibacy, human formation, and protecting God's children will soon teach them.

Over the past few years, *Commonweal* has published a number of articles, editorials, and letters to the editor that comment on the new generation of priests and seminarians. Unfortunately, most of the comments have not been very encouraging. My generation has been described as intellectually second-rate, theologically deficient, arrogant, blindly loyal to Rome, authoritarian, and out of touch with the laity. If these descriptions are accurate, the future of the priesthood looks bleak indeed. On the other side of the ideological fence, conservative journals and blogs praise the same generation of priests and seminarians for their orthodoxy, courage, fidelity, zeal, and pastoral charity. These observers joyfully predict that the new generation of priests and seminarians will restore what has been lost since the Second Vatican Council and reinvigorate the church through strong and determined leadership.

So which is it? Are we part of the problem or part of the solution? That all depends on what one expects us to be.

I think it is discouraging to many older priests that we aren't more like them, but we have more in common with them than one might think. It is true that we often read different authors, pray in different styles, have different heroes, and emphasize different doctrines, but we celebrate the same sacraments, preach the same gospel, and share the same priesthood. It is also true that both my generation and theirs rebelled against a previous generation. Perhaps "rebelled" is too strong a word, but both generations did want to improve, by reformation and restoration, the weaknesses we inherited in order to serve better the people of God.

It is very easy to get defensive about this last point, but we shouldn't. To compare the generations of the priesthood to the generations of a family, it is clear that the older generation is responsible for instilling in the younger a strong sense of faith, identity, custom, and mission. The younger generation is expected to adapt these values to its own particular situation while remaining faithful to the tradition. But this practice of handing down a tradition only works when the different generations stay in touch. The older generation needs the idealism and enthusiasm of the younger generation, and the younger generation needs the wisdom, experience, and guidance of the older generation. This is true for families, and it is equally true for priests. Sadly, in the past forty years, the communication between older and younger priests has broken down and, as a church, we are poorer for it.

When I was a seminarian-intern I lived in a rectory with three priests, one of whom was a retired monsignor who was ordained in 1938. He often told me how he felt rejected by the generation of priests that came after him. It pained him that members of the younger generation had little interest in his preconciliar priesthood, which they found antiquated. He longed to be a mentor and guide for the next generation of priests, but few had taken him up on his offer.

Somehow this dynamic has repeated itself. It seems to me that priests my age have attempted, knowingly or not, to distance themselves from the generation that came just before them. Paradoxically, for a

generation often accused of being too traditional, we seem to want to move ahead without really knowing where the church has just been. And although most of us have a few older priests we look up to, we often assume that we have everything figured out, dismissing our elders as out-of-touch has-beens. This frustrates older priests who long to play the role of mentor and guide. Then again, when we do go to older priests for direction and guidance, we sometimes discover that they take little interest in our concerns and priorities. For many of them, we seem to be no more than a source of annoyance.

It doesn't have to be this way, and it shouldn't. The different generations of priests need each other for support, wisdom, experience, enthusiasm, inspiration, accountability, and fraternity. Priests cannot expect to be bridge-builders in the church if they are divided among themselves. There is an urgent need for reconciliation, and it starts with us. My generation needs to hear the stories of priests from our parents' and grandparents' generations. We need to learn from the men who grew up during the Depression, fought in the Second World War, and were ordained before Vatican II-and we need to realize that there isn't much time left to hear their stories. We need to listen to our baby-boomer predecessors tell their stories about seminary life and priesthood at a moment when the church was in major transition. Their generation has its own hopes and joys, triumphs and sufferings, and we need to hear about them. Too often we fail to appreciate their perseverance and faith through a very turbulent period of church history.

Finally, priests of my own generation need to tell their own story, and tell it well. We need to let the older generations know what it's like to come of age in today's America without a strong Catholic subculture. We need to explain what attracted us to the priesthood, and why we're so cautious about "the spirit of Vatican II." Older priests should not be too quick to dismiss our concerns as fearful, ignorant, or reactionary.

Reading an article about generational differences among priests may be helpful, but for me, the real learning and reconciliation takes place when I meet with a diverse group of priests for vespers, drinks, dinner, and discussion. This kind of gathering is still too rare. For the sake of the generation of seminarians currently in formation and for the general good of the church, priests of different generations must learn to talk to one another about their differences instead of nursing mutual suspicions.

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