

This is excellent phenomenological analysis of the very real divide we priests are experiencing today between ourselves - and clearly the laity sense that divide and make choices based upon it.

Sometimes I say to myself - as very much a V II priest - well, we are supposed to be Catholic, aren't we? That should be inclusive and, as James Joyce said, that means "everybody." While in principle I can affirm that, in fact I find "them" to be destructive of the Church of Vatican II and all that I have given my 42 years to shape and create with the Spirit.

So there...

Pat, a retired Priest of the Diocese of

Here is Mike Byron's bulletin article from the Church of St. Cecilia in St. Paul, MN. Mike also teaches in our local seminary.

June 17, 2006

Dear Friends:

Doubtless you have often yearned to experience the climate of San Antonio, TX in the summer, as I have. As you are reading this, that's where I am, attending the annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America. It's an opportunity to see old friends, commiserate with colleagues, and hear stimulating theological conversations.

I know that I write here a lot about ministry, and priesthood in particular, but I hope you will indulge me and the topic for a couple of more weeks. Recently I was asked to offer a brief reflection for our seminary faculty in response to the question, "What do you see as the critical issues and trends affecting our understanding of priesthood today?" I responded with six points. They are just my (hopefully informed) opinion, but perhaps they will be of interest as conversation starters.

1. There is in the church today a relatively new, conscious promotion of a generation gap among priests, which distinguishes "Vatican II priests" from "John Paul II priests." Usually these descriptors are offered with at least the implicit suggestion that one or the other group is the more truly "Catholic." The so-called Vatican II priests (are we free to be something other than that?) tend to be 45 to 75 years old, while the so-called John Paul II priests tend to be older and younger than that. There is no disputing, statistically, the existence of this dichotomy nationwide; the question, so it seems, is which group to regard as relatively "better." The very existence of these two labels, juxtaposed to one another without remorse by people from both groups, strikes me as dangerous for the church's unity. One directly related spillover effect of this split is the now commonplace phenomenon of "parishes of choice," of which St. C's is certainly one. The fact that there are many priests locally who simply could not function in our parish without destroying it is, as one of my seminary students opined, a scandal. He's right. No less scandalous is that there are many parishes locally at which I would be the destroyer if I were sent to serve there. For the moment, there seems to be either incapacity or unwillingness among church leaders to speak across the divide, or even to publicly acknowledge its existence.

2. Another dichotomy concerns the priest's unique identity, and it corresponds directly to the distinction just mentioned. Few would contest the idea that ordination has the effect of distinguishing a priest from others in the church. The question is: what is that distinction exactly? Some (generally "JP2 priests") hold that it has to do with a permanent, individual character infused or impressed upon a person's soul. Others contend that the distinction has to do with functions or acts that a priest can do. (Both "Vatican II and JP2 priests" appeal to this one sometimes.) Still others (often "Vatican II priests") say that the distinction is about a particular place that a priest holds within the web of relationships in the church. All of these views come with problems, particularly at a time when it is well recognized that priests aren't necessarily holier, smarter, or more skilled than others, and that lots of things that used to be defined as "priests' work" now are accomplished by lay people.

3. As a consequence of all this, there is today a palpable anxiety among bishops that we be able to articulate a clear definition of "priestly identity" for the ordained. Pope John Paul was big on this, and many of his emphases to restore the idea of the priest as the "man set apart" (whether by his clothing, his sacramental powers, his lifestyle.), that some regard as antiquated, are really rooted in a quest for greater clarity. Say what you will, the pre-Vatican II priest held a position of unambiguous distinction in the community. My experience is that this lack of precise definition and distinction today is a problem more in theory than in practice. Catholics of all dispositions get that there's a legitimate distinction between ordained and lay people, even if it gets messy trying to articulate that very precisely in words.

4. This is, in part, anecdotal and speculative, but I believe that we are today ordaining relatively more priests who are of marginal aptitude for pastoral ministry, including more people with personal insecurities and issues. I believe that this is related to a diminishing supply of seminarians. Sometimes this results in their felt need to emphasize a distinctive status as clerics, over and against lay Catholics. This can be all the more tempting in contexts where lay people have some demonstrably greater gifts for ministry than do the priests. When priests see themselves to be in fundamental distinction from lay ministers because of status, rather than first seeing themselves to be in fundamental unity with them because of Baptism, then we do not merely have ministerial conflict; we have wrong theology at work.

5. There seems to me to be an almost complete lack, in practice, of a felt experience that ordination is fundamentally linked to a concrete Christian community of believers. In the earliest church, communities elected their bishops and validated their religious elders (priests). No cleric could be imposed upon a community against its will and without its consent. (Even today there's a vestige of this sentiment contained in the Rite of Ordination, when the bishop calls for the applause of the people before proceeding with the ceremony.) Today the structures of clerical ministerial decision-making are so far removed from the people of God that that vital link is nearly unrecognizable. Ordination is understood to be mostly something that happens to an individual man rather than to a whole community. Once that kind of thinking sets in, then it seems natural to make decisions about pastoral leadership based primarily upon the particularities of the one rather than upon the needs of the many.

Fr. Mike Byron