

3-7-08 - Book Review: CLERICALISM: THE DEATH OF PRIESTHOOD, by George B. Wilson SJ, Liturgical Press

By Tony Philpot, The Tablet (UK)

This book is not a comfortable read. But the author puts a name to convictions that have been growing inside me for some time. George Wilson, who has spent 34 years as a staff member in the US Management Design Institute and has been a priest for nearly 50 - roughly the same number of years as me - offers new ways of confronting what seems, *prima facie*, a bleak future for the Church.

His theme is clericalism, and the toxic effect this has had on the Church. Wilson defines his own terms. "Clergy" denotes a social, not religious, reality. It means any one of the in-groups that dwell at the heart of any society. We use it to mean "priests", but you could use it to describe "professors", or "lawyers" or "the media". Society colludes at the creation of these various "clergies". Putting it baldly, some people are good at things, so the rest of us stand back and let them practise their expertise, let them create a *corps d'élite* with its own standards; we let them devise their own methods of graduation and entry.

Become an academic, a lawyer, a reporter or a priest and you profit by membership, enjoy the prestige and credibility that the profession enjoys, and can rely on colleagues to cover up mistakes. Allegedly, membership of such a group is solely for the service of society as a whole - and at its best that's exactly what it is. But at its worst, it's the mask for claiming entitlements, assuming superiority, and, to put it crudely, coining it. John Paul II said: "Since culture is a human creation, it is therefore marked by sin."

Once ordained, Wilson believes, a priest becomes embedded in a clerical culture, he inherits its ways of thinking, speaking and judging. At ordination he is made a member of a class with special access to powers not available to others. He inherits, whether he deserves it or not, the knowledge and competence that goes with the class. Such a class will refuse criticism, and within it there is a corporate loyalty. Ordination even gives us priests a uniform, and a special vocabulary, and a title.

Priesthood, however, is something different. Here Wilson defines his terms again. In the New Testament, the only priesthood explicitly mentioned is that of all the baptised. All of us, by our union with Christ the High Priest, replace the priests of the Old Testament. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians lists the ministries in the infant church, but "priests" are not on the list.

So what is an authentic expression of New Testament priesthood? Well, it is action flowing from conversion, it's a soul alive with the Spirit, it is putting on the mind and heart of Jesus, it is adoration of the Father, it is living the Beatitudes and the parable of the sheep and the goats at the end of Matthew's gospel. (Presiding at the Eucharist, surprisingly, does not figure at this point in the order of priorities.)

"Priesting" simply means having that mind in you that was in Christ Jesus Our Lord. It means giving God the honour and glory that is his due, and having an awe and reverence for every human being who crosses your path, living in respectful relationship with them, never turning them into objects. In this sense, lay people are priests. Wilson doesn't attack the essential difference between ordained priesthood and that of the Christian people, nor is he belittling the Eucharist. But he is establishing priorities.

When a member of a Christian community is put forward by his fellows for ordination, this does not cause automatic holiness: sacraments are not magic. As Gandhi said: "Structure cannot create character." Nevertheless, we dignify this moment with triumphal ceremonies to go with the uniform, the title and the entitlements; concelebration, on this and other occasions, completes the impression of the closed group into which the newcomer has been admitted.

There is an ideology at play, but we are so immersed in the culture that we do not notice it. This is not a trick played by priests on lay folk - many of the people of our dioceses and parishes collude in it, and are comfortable with the feeling of a mysterious and empowered clergy, on whom they depend for direction and ideas. Any

attempt to "de-clericalise" the ordained would be disturbing, not only to the clergy, but to the faithful too. And yet ...

Wilson devotes the middle section of his book to child abuse in the dioceses of the United States and illustrates with drastic clarity the sinister part played by clerical culture. Notoriously, in the act of abuse, the abuser assumes and exploits power given to him by the culture. The culture also causes the child (and parents) to view him benignly and with trust. The bishops who shifted the abusing priests were engaged in protecting the Church's image and the good name of the ordained - another hallmark of an in-group.

When the bishops met at Dallas nearly six years ago, they made plans for the future - but to prevent future abuse, not to analyse the cultural patterns that had made the abuse possible. Again, a case of damage-limitation for the sake of the collective. Wilson looks for Christ-like honesty and transparency, and by and large does not find it: he does not find what he would call "priestly" behaviour, only clerical behaviour.

Defensive activity by the ordained clergy gets them a bad press. It is fascinating and alarming to see how much dislike the priestly class can provoke, simply by being there. In the Piazza Farnese and the Campo de' Fiori in Rome the Communists or the radicals broadcast their hatred of the Church, demanding that priests (and the Pope) stay out of Italian public life and set up stalls to encourage people to renounce their baptism and apostasise.

Almodóvar's recent film *La Mala Educación* depicts two priests, one of whom is a brooding abuser, the other a murderous thug. We can't object to the depiction of abuse - that's in the public domain - but the director's feeling about clergy is unmistakable. He is heir to the loathing of priests (and nuns) so manifest in the Spanish Civil War. Where did all that pent-up disgust come from? Or the bloodlust of the mob in the French Revolution, with its awful toll of professional religious people? Or Cromwell's conduct in Ireland? The priestly caste is a major irritant to many.

Wilson calls for a re-think of relationships in the Church: enhanced consultation with the laity and more shared responsibility, a dismantling of the *disciplina arcani* on the part of priests, with its assumptions of superiority, much more sharing of vulnerability, much more exploring of the Gospel together. He calls for Sunday liturgies where the priest makes the experience one of shared prayer, not duty done; and acknowledgement that lay people sometimes make good spiritual directors.

The pastor has to trust and respect others and stop being, or pretending to be, omniscient and omnipotent. The parishioner in the pew must also change, as much as the priest in the presbytery: expectations need to change. Put like this, it sounds like a blunderbuss full of grapeshot. But Wilson does it cogently and well, if provocatively: not hysterically but wisely. I enjoyed this book and I recommend it.