

May 4, 2007-"Our priests" - An appreciation
Tom Roberts, ed., National Catholic Reporter

I take the opportunity this week, in this little corner of the Catholic universe, to speak some words of appreciation for our priests, who struggle (see story) to find a new equilibrium in the wake of decades of awful press.

"Our priests." Yes, I know it sounds possessive, even presumptuous. It comes out, though, somewhat naturally, as in a familial way.

And just as in our families, there are curmudgeons and ne'er-do-wells, even criminals among them. Perhaps the divine moment amid the ache of the past two decades, amid the drip, drip of bad news that merged into torrents that nearly overwhelmed us, was the inevitable realization that there really is little difference between them (clergy) and us. Just maybe we have come to realize, finally, that we had built fantasies upon the theology of indelible marks and in persona Christi, fantasies that placed them apart and above and beyond. We bought it all and in doing so helped, inadvertently, to set them up for the fall.

(I know there are new reservoirs, small ones yet, of the old fantasies. There is a new breed enamored of the robes, jewels, costumes and attitudes that are as misfit a medieval concept as limbo. Jesus as a worldly royal. But we've been there once and know it ends in no good. One can only presume they'll learn, that their parishioners will eventually be able to teach them.)

If saying "our priests" is no more than a habit, it at least binds us to all of them, good and bad, and that is enough to dispel the old illusions and to convince us, moving forward, that even the worst we could imagine hasn't destroyed the community.

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It is unlikely that any generation of U.S. Catholics will ever again experience life in a church as "priest rich" as was the case during the clerical glut of the middle part of the 20th century. Not until, perhaps, we begin ordaining women and married men, but that's a discussion for another time. An almost universal understanding exists that the institution (and, no, I don't think that a bad word, not as long as we're still humans and not angels and need real stuff and real organizations) is changing, and in unprecedented ways, even if as undetectable at the moment as the spin of the earth.

The evidence might be in the numbers and the declining "infrastructure." The number of priests and nuns keeps falling. Or the signs might be evident in the corruption of the hierarchical culture. Can a culture that has kept such horrible secrets as it has and rationalized behavior so fundamentally at odds with its mission avoid changing? Or is it a matter, as with limbo or Galileo or slavery, of waiting until what is held onto becomes so glaringly useless and wrong that it is no longer threatening to give it up?

The bottom line is that while it may be apparent we are living amid change, no one knows what shape that change ultimately will take.

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In the meantime, in real time, perhaps no one in the community understands more deeply than priests the powerful forces of change that are afoot. I don't care how many polls come out saying they are a blissfully happy lot, my heart aches for them.

I talk to a lot of priests -- parish priests, order priests, academics -- and the ones I know best, the ones with whom I have the deepest conversations, often are those who have worked hard at finding the way to stay in, to stay faithful and to stay healthy.

Happy as they might be in their ministries, they grieve deeply over what was done to children, they worry over the disconnects they see between bishops and priests and, in some cases, between priests and people. And they all have to deal with the pall of scandal and the damage, undeserved as it might be, they feel has been done to their reputations.

It is an easy claim to make that many priests have little understanding of the lives of the people they are charged with overseeing, no idea, really, what is required to be married, to be parents, to worry about job security and finances and sick infants and hormonally jolted teenagers. But I think post-scandal -- we are at least beyond the initial shocks -- I must say I have no idea, really, what everyday heroism it must take to be a priest in the church of today.

My life has been marked by my association with men and women of the church, and the priests among them have most often deeply enriched my life. I have known them as teachers and preachers, as powerful witnesses, even prophets, and as dear friends.

The best of those who have stayed -- and it's amazing how many they are -- have stayed for ideas and convictions larger than a bit of authority or some symbols of office. In attempting to hold power accountable as this paper has over the years, one risks losing perspective on other truths. One of those truths is that many good men have dedicated their lives to service of the Gospel and God's people. I am deeply grateful they took that difficult path.