

Pension crisis is another body blow to priests

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In the aftermath of the worst crisis to hit the Roman Catholic church since the Reformation, one might have hoped that priests would enjoy something of a respite from all the horrible publicity and the acute demoralization that it produced. But not so.

The latest negative development -- radical reductions in pension benefits for diocesan priests -- has occurred in the very same place where the sexual abuse scandal first broke in all its shocking intensity back in January 2002. Just like the sexual abuse crisis, however, this latest problem will not ultimately be confined to Boston. It is sure to manifest itself in other dioceses and in other countries.

This newest crisis concerns the financial security of priests in old age. A few decades ago, diocesan priests did not retire. Pastors remained in office until death. Some lived into their 90s. In larger archdioceses, like Boston, the senior curate (ordained as many as 25 or even 30 years) was, in effect, the pastor. He made all the assignments for the other curates (in some parishes there were as many as four or five) and almost all of the important decisions.

But then enforced retirement became the rule. Pope Paul VI decreed that bishops were to retire at 75. Retirement of diocesan priests was on a sliding scale. In some dioceses, they were allowed to request retirement at 65 and in others at 70. The upper limit was 75, but the Vatican ruled that bishops did not have to accept a priest's request for retirement even then.

The clergy pension fund in the Boston archdiocese is in dire financial straits because of various factors, including bad decisions made during Cardinal Bernard Law's regime. The archdiocese failed to contribute to the fund between 1986 and 2002, when investment returns were high. During that period, the archdiocese used regular Christmas and Easter collections earmarked for clergy pensions for other needs, including the medical care of active as well as retired priests.

If the proposed plan is implemented in Boston, many retired priests will have to move back into rectories because the archdiocese will drastically reduce its support for current assisted-living arrangements. Relatively few priests would be able to make up for the shortfall.

There is even talk of having priests submit copies of their IRS returns to establish their financial status -- an obvious invasion of privacy, which wiser heads are likely to remove from the table.

Archbishop Sean O'Malley, himself a sandaled Franciscan friar with a vow of poverty, made what is perhaps the least helpful comment in this whole unpleasant affair. According to The Boston Globe, the archbishop said that the changes would "offer a significant adjustment from what priests are accustomed to," but that the positive results would include that "these policies encourage a simpler lifestyle grounded in Gospel values."

When this crisis was first discussed in the archdiocesan Presbyteral Council some months ago, the archbishop floated his suggestion that priests from neighboring parishes might live together in a central rectory. One of the senior priests, a canon lawyer, cautioned against such an approach.

Diocesan priests, he correctly pointed out, do not have the same vocation and charisms as religious priests, like the archbishop himself. Diocesan priests are not called to communal life, nor do diocesan priests take a vow of poverty. They pay all their own expenses and, since the pontificate of Paul VI, must provide for their retirement years, over and above whatever their diocese might offer them in terms of pensions, insurance, and reduced rates in various living accommodations.

Given this new pension crisis (which is also affecting major corporations like United Airlines), at least two reforms are called for.

First, lay people with financial expertise need to be more directly involved in decisions affecting the use and investment of diocesan resources. But this involvement cannot be subject to the summary judgment of the local ordinary. Cardinal Law was known to have rejected the advice of some of Boston's leading corporate minds.

Second, the trend that the late Pope John Paul II put into high gear, namely, of appointing religious priests as diocesan bishops, needs to be reversed. Religious priests have a different vocation and different charisms from diocesan priests. Bishops need to be drawn once again almost exclusively from the diocesan clergy.

And when bishops are appointed, by exception, from the ranks of religious communities, they need to see themselves thereafter as diocesan priests and should dress and act accordingly. Otherwise, diocesan priests will reject their proposed reforms as unreasonable and impractical.

If priests cannot be secure even in old age, is there any wonder why there is a vocations crisis today?

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