

The priestly life: Crisis and opportunity in the Catholic Church

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The scandal of sexual abuse among priests and its institutional cover-up presents the Catholic Church with a staggering crisis. It is a crisis of leadership, of moral credibility, and of trust between parishioners, priests and bishops. It is also a crisis of money, for the church will spend millions of dollars settling liability cases (the estimate of settling past, pending and future cases in just the Boston Archdiocese exceeds \$100 million), and the faithful may decide to register their outrage by withholding donations.

A crisis is, as the saying goes, also a moment of opportunity. How will the church use this opportunity? All parties agree that the church must establish rigorous policies for rooting out sexually abusive priests and show itself concerned more with the welfare of children and youth than with the reputation of the church.

Beyond that, Catholic leaders could use the occasion for a broad-ranging discussion of the priesthood, especially the conditions in which diocesan priests work and the manner in which they are formed. The culture of clergy life has changed greatly in the past generation. Donald Cozzens explored some of these changes two years ago in his book *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*. Raising issues that many would prefer to ignore, Cozzens talked about priests' loneliness, their often unresolved struggles with sexuality, their search for intimacy, and the power clashes within the clergy. He also considered the causes of sexual abuse and noted the disproportionate number of seminarians and priests who are gay (to the point that heterosexuals sometimes feel out of place).

Looming over all these topics is the issue of priestly celibacy. Why, exactly, is celibacy necessary for being a diocesan priest? If it is to remain a requirement, then how can the church better help its priests adhere to it honestly, and find it a source of spiritual vitality?

Perhaps the most poignant and telling sign of change within Catholic culture is the survey data showing that most Catholic parents do not want their sons to become priests. That is not good news for a church that has a shortage of priests and a dwindling number of seminarians.

Catholics are not the only ones confronting issues of priestly formation amid cultural change. Mainline Protestants have recently noticed that they have very few clergy in their ranks under the age of 35. Young Protestants apparently do not see the minister's life as a rich and rewarding one. Partly as a result of such developments, Protestant pastors and educators now talk a great deal about the task of formation—both the formation of Christians and the formation of ministers as spiritual leaders.

Formation is a relatively new term for Protestants—who learned it from the Catholics, with their rich traditions of spiritual direction. With the help of Catholic examples, Protestants have increasingly recognized the need to move beyond the heart warmed by faith toward growth in grace through conscious disciplines of prayer, worship and service. All the more reason for Catholics to renew their own traditions by rethinking the priestly vocation. The discussion would serve the Catholic Church and invigorate the church catholic.