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Opinion



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by Peter Daly

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James Carroll argues in a recent issue of The Atlantic that the priesthood needs to be abolished before the church can be reformed. Garry Wills, in his 2013 book *Why Priests?*, says that priests are a self-perpetuating clique and a medieval power grab, contrary to the equality of all believers.

These writers join a chorus of voices, stretching back to the Reformation, arguing that we should do away with priests.

I wouldn't go that far. But after nearly four decades as first a seminarian and then a priest, I do think the priesthood needs reform — fundamental reform. We don't need window dressing. We don't need just some changes in policy and procedure. We need to change the whole culture of the priesthood and episcopacy. If we don't, we will continue to decline and ultimately collapse in our own irrelevance and scandal.

I don't think that our bishops get it. They think that a few changes in procedure and policy are enough. Then it's back to business as usual. Their recently concluded meeting in Baltimore showed their lack of urgency. Basically, they did nothing. There will be no real external accountability and no answering to laypeople. They will supervise themselves and be accountable only to each other, which ultimately means not accountable at all.

They don't realize that the NCR editorial, published just before the bishops' November 2018 meeting, is even more true today: "It's over."

Intellectuals like Wills and Carroll take the trouble to write books reflecting their anger, but most people, especially young people, are just walking away. Ask your adult children and grandchildren. Pew Research Center statistics tell us that for every adult who comes into the church through the RCIA each year, five or six leave. The Catholic Church in the developed world is becoming a geriatric center and a cultural museum piece.

The church and the priesthood need real reform.

We need to tackle the issues that prevent priests from speaking honestly to people, the scandals that stand in the way of the Gospel. We need to reopen the windows first opened at Vatican II and let in sunlight and fresh air on the priesthood and tackle issues like misogyny, careerism, ambition, love of wealth and power, homophobia and the "old boys' club" mentality of clericalism.

I don't hold out much hope. Clericalism is deeply entrenched in the priesthood. Our seminary system inculcates clericalism in our seminarians who by their separate and special training learn that priests are meant more to judge and rule than heal and serve.

On the other hand, hope springs eternal and where sin abounds, grace abounds even more. The whole message of Jesus is one of hope that sin and death can be overcome and the surprising can happen by God's power.

Over the next few months, I plan to write several columns on the priesthood.

They are based on my experience of over the last four decades as a seminarian and as a parish priest. It is not a scientific study. It is, rather, a personal reflection. People are free to agree or disagree. But I think that I also should be free to speak.

My columns will touch on celibacy, homosexuality, careerism, ambition, corruption of wealth, and misogyny. Much of what I will have to say will be negative.

However, I don't want to give the impression that my experience of priesthood is unhappy or negative. I love being a priest. I loved my time in the seminary. I loved my time in the parish. The priesthood has been the greatest blessing of my life. Gratitude should be the starting point for my reflection on the priesthood.

What have I loved about being a priest?

First, I have loved the sense that my life is a vocation and a mission, not just a job.

I have also loved the people whom I have met along the way. They struggle with living holiness in the most difficult of circumstances — overcoming addictions, abuses, isolation, sickness and despair with the gift of faith.

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I have loved the community of the church and my companions on the journey of faith, including brother priests and wonderful parishioners. St. Thomas Aquinas said the deepest desire of the human person, after survival, is friendship. Priest have many friends.

I have loved the chance to help people with practical problems. I loved listening to their troubles. The church gives us the resources and the permission to pay people's rent, find them shelter, build them houses and get them whatever help they need. It gives us time to welcome immigrants and assist victims of disasters, help people overcome addictions, transition out of jail, or find a job. I find all that enormously satisfying. It is what Jesus wanted all of us to do, to care for the least of his brothers and sisters.

Being a priest means that I get to think about the big questions. I get to ask the transcendent questions about goodness, truth, suffering and salvation. Priests can focus on the big human questions if they want to. The church may not have all the answers, but we certainly have the right questions.

Most of all, I have loved celebrating the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. I think I have celebrated Mass more than 11,000 times in the last 33 years. Often after Communion, when we sit down for a minute of silence, I think to myself, "What a privilege this is!"

The priesthood can be creative. In my time as a priest, I have been a part of starting a preschool, opening a crisis pregnancy center, building a church and community center, designing stained glass windows, and writing a novel and writing a dramatic play. Who else gets to try their hand at so many varied projects?

Priesthood is not a boring life. It has taken me everywhere. I have visited sister parishes in Mexico and Nicaragua. I have worked at missions in Malawi and Ethiopia. I have done hurricane relief in Mississippi and North Carolina. I have led pilgrimages to Israel, Italy, Turkey, Greece, Ireland and France. I have prayed with people in deserts and on mountaintops, in monasteries and on city streets. All of it is in a pursuit of an experience of the presence of God.

The priesthood definitely needs radical reform. It is beset with scandals and burdened by fundamental problems. But it is also a life full of blessings. My next columns will reflect on what I think should change. But I first want to say that it has been blessing to be a Catholic priest.

[Fr. Peter Daly is a retired priest of the Washington Archdiocese and a lawyer. After 31 years of parish service, he now works with Catholic Charities.]

Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Fr. Peter Daly's column, Priestly Diary (formerly called Parish Diary), is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this*

page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.

A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 9-22, 2019** print issue under the headline: Before I take on clericalism, I will say: I love being a priest.