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Opinion
The faces of monks illustrate deadly sins in this detail from a circa 1300 sculpture. (Wikimedia

The faces of monks illustrate deadly sins in this detail from a circa 1300 sculpture. (Wikimedia Commons/Simon Burchell)



by Peter Daly

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Reforming the priesthood will mean reducing the effects of clericalism. Clericalism is a real thing, not a myth or mirage. It is a sense of elitism and superiority among the clergy that sets them apart from and above the rest of the people in the church. It affects the way clerical people — clergy and laity — behave. To tackle clericalism, the church must first figure out where it comes from. Then we must figure out how to combat it.

I think that clericalism comes from four things: our fallen nature, institutional dynamics, a corrupted tradition, and seminary training.

Our "fallen nature" is an article of our faith. Through the sin of the first people, Adam and Eve or whoever they were, our nature has been corrupted by "concupiscence." This means we have a tendency toward or attraction to sin. This is not just about lust. The foundational sin, according to most theologians, is pride. Our fallen nature is inclined to all the seven deadly sins: pride, anger, lust, envy, gluttony, avarice and

sloth. ("PALE GAS" is a good way to remember them.) Clericalism is rooted in the sin of pride, but also involves lust, envy and avarice.

We are not going to eradicate the effects of original sin until the eschaton. However, we can by training, grace and prayer reduce our sinning. In other words, clerics and clerical laity need to be aware that this attitude of superiority and elitism is not of God. It is not good. It must be restrained. It requires discipline, just like living a chaste life requires discipline.

There will always be ambitious people in the priesthood, who see the clerical life as a powerful career, rather than a call to service.

There will always be avaricious people in the priesthood, who use the wealth and resources of the church for their own pleasure, luxury and enrichment.

There will always be lustful people in the priesthood who use their position of power and authority to gratify themselves sexually.

There will always be envious people in the priesthood. Envy is "sorrow at another's success." Envious priests see the priesthood as a competition to get the "rich parish," the "chancery position" or the episcopal appointment.

The first step to tackling the clericalism born of our fallen nature is talking about it. Taking it head on in seminary training, priests' retreats, clergy conferences, bishops' letters to their flock, and papal documents. If we don't talk about it, we cannot treat the problem.

The second cause of clericalism is "institutional dynamic." We can do more about this than our fallen nature. Institutional dynamics are the ways in which any big organization functions. It is part of life.

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People want face time with the boss, because that is how they get known and promoted. People want the staff jobs at headquarters, because those jobs have power and give them leverage. People want to control the finances, the decisions, the plans, the promotion schedule, because they can get ahead that way. These dynamics are pretty much the same whether it is in the military, corporate

bureaucracies, academia or the church. Any big bureaucracy will have people who are "climbers" and "kiss-asses" and "suck-ups" and "kick-downs." Again, human nature.

But there is something we can do about institutional dynamics. We can change the criteria for who gets promoted. We can reduce the sinecures that create the elite. We can be what Pope Francis has said he wants, a "poorer church for the poor."

For instance, we could make it an absolute requirement that no one be consecrated a bishop who has not had at least a decade of ordinary parish experience as a priest.

I have had four archbishops. All of them were "on the fast track." Cardinal James Hickey had only about nine months in a parish before he became a bishop's secretary, then seminary rector, then bishop. He often referred to those few months in the parish as his frame of reference for priestly life.

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick served not one single day as an ordinary parish priest. He started priestly life as dean of students at the Catholic University of America. Then he went onward and upward to be president of a university in Puerto Rico, secretary to the cardinal in New York, auxiliary bishop and then bishop.

Most recently, Cardinal Donald Wuerl served only a few months in a parish before he was taken into the chancery, then on to Rome to be secretary to a curial cardinal, John Wright. Wuerl never again was in a parish. He went on to be auxiliary bishop, bishop and archbishop.

Nobody should be made a bishop who has not had substantial experience in the trenches as an ordinary parish priest. In the Navy, no officer would ever be made an admiral if he had not had at least some "line experience," doing the basic work of an officer. It is shocking how few of our bishops really have experience in parish life.

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Parish experience makes a difference. It makes people more empathetic to the struggles of the ordinary believer. It makes the church and its many "rules" come up against real life and its many permutations. It builds compassion, flexibility, understanding and even a sense of humility. I always said that in the parish "everyone, including the pastor, cleans toilets."

Priests who think that their stuff does not stink can not be expected to understand how everyone else struggles with the human condition.

Every bishop should have at least a decade of parish service. Period. That might eliminate half the bishops in the church. Good. They are not the ones we want anyway. Just look at Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. For him, priesthood is an academic head trip. Even for Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, it was not until he got off the fast track in the Jesuits and became an ordinary priest and auxiliary bishop that he developed a pastor's heart.

Institutional dynamics tends to promote the "bright boys" and the ones who have a lot of "face time" with the boss, the bishop. That is why so many bishops' secretaries and vicar generals become bishops.

Very few St. John Vianneys or St. Vincent de Pauls become bishops. Why? Because we are looking for institutional loyalty more than holiness, compassion, justice or a sense of empathy for the poor. The clerical mindset chooses bishops because they are good administrators, fundraisers, glad-handers. It does not have to be that way. We can change that by changing the criteria for who gets promoted. We can adjust to deal with institutional dynamics.

There is a lot more to say about institutional dynamics. But you get the idea. Change the dynamics and we change the outcome.

Whole theses have been written about our corrupted tradition and the problems of seminary training. Those two will have to wait for the next column. Stay tuned.

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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. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.*

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