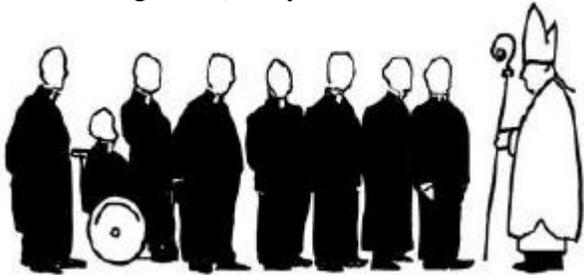


Improving the bishop-priest relationship

Tom Gallagher | May. 6, 2009



Mission Management

The rapport between a bishop and his priests is the single most important factor contributing to the health of a diocese. So says Bishop Blase Cupich, who is in a position to know. The 60-year-old Nebraska native and former chair of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Vocations heads the Rapid City, S.D., diocese.

"It is clear to me after more than a decade of serving as a diocesan bishop that the one nonnegotiable for the growth of a local church is a sound and vibrant relationship between a bishop and the members of the presbyterate [the body of priests within a diocese]," said Cupich.

On one level, the priest-bishop relationship is fraught with the sort of supervisor-staff tensions that arise daily in the secular workplace. The bishop is the one person who oversees priest appointments, their aspirations and their futures. But, of course, bishops are not typical bosses and priests are not average employees. Diocesan priests, for example, promise obedience to their bishop on ordination day.

Theologically, the Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the "brotherhood" among priests and their bishop: "All priests are bound together by an intimate sacramental brotherhood, but in a special way they form one priestly body in the diocese to which they are attached under their own bishop."

Pope John Paul II summarizes the teaching from Vatican II: "The ordained ministry has a radical 'communitarian form' and can only be carried out as 'a collective work' " (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*).

Still, a healthy relationship is a two-way street, said Cupich. "It is a relationship forged by ongoing communication and consultation, respecting the fact that priests have a deep reservoir of pastoral experience that can only benefit the bishop as he works for the building up of the church entrusted to his care."

Such "openness" and "regular consultation," said Cupich, "creates a sense of trust with priests and conveys that the bishop has respect for them. This kind of approach cannot help but generate a favorable climate for the bishop to challenge his priests when they need challenging, and motivate them to take ownership for the needs of the entire diocese and not just the parish or community they serve."

The good news is that according to "Priests in the United States: Satisfaction, Work Load, and Support Structures," a 2002 study by Paul M. Perl and Bryan T. Froehle of the Center for Applied Research in the

Apostolate at Georgetown University, "most priests view their bishop as supportive and understanding toward priests and describe their own relationship with their bishop as good."

The study also found, however, that "priests who perceive a lack of encouragement or support from fellow priests, who have relatively few close friends who are priests, and who view their bishop as unsupportive are more likely than others to express dissatisfaction [with their priesthood]." In fact, 10 percent of priests say they have "seriously thought about leaving the priesthood in the past five years."

Yet, the 2002 eruption of the sexual-abuse crisis inserted pain, trauma and mistrust into the bishop-priest relationship. At last summer's meeting of the U.S. bishops, several bishops and priests began talks about how bishops can repair relations with priests after six years of scandal.

Jim Alphen is executive director of the National Organization for Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy, whose mission is promoting presbyterate unity. Alphen's organization, in conjunction with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, offers dioceses a unique program called "Cultivating Unity." This program is a transformational process engaging the entire diocesan presbyterate with its bishop in frank and faith-centered dialogue leading to a common rededication to priestly ministry.

Cultivating Unity is a two-part program. One part includes research -- listening sessions, an interview with the bishop, and a survey of priests. The second part is a carefully structured, facilitated convocation with bishop and priests, centered in common prayer and faith sharing.

Alphen's group also provides resources to assist dioceses in following up on action items arising from the Cultivating Unity process.

Perl, the researcher and Alphen collaborator, identifies one easy fix: "If a priest is hospitalized, every effort should be made by the bishop to visit that priest, as this issue comes up frequently in focus groups."

"It takes a courageous bishop to want to undertake Cultivating Unity," said Alphen.

Tom Gallagher is a regular contributor to NCR. Ideas for a "Mission Management" story? Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.

Online resources

To read the full 2002 study, visit cara.georgetown.edu/pdfs/priest_paper5.pdf.

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