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The secret lives of our noble priests

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

After a decade of revelations about sexual and financial scandals among priests, you would think that there is nothing more to learn about these men who were once revered in the Catholic culture and respected in the culture at large.

While it is undeniable that we know more than we care to about the once hidden lives of some priests, there is a far larger and deeper territory that might as well be the cave next to Bin Laden's -- even though it can be entered at any time in the rectory just down the street.

This is the largely unexplored setting of the secret lives of the good priests all around us. Sated with lurid reports about fallen priests, few people and no reporters have much interest, much less curiosity, about how faithful priests are living, what they are doing, or how they are feeling.

Goodness never gets into the newspapers. Check the headlines on any day's paper for the common denominator of a negative word -- fraud, investigation, death, fire, failure -- and we understand why priests who have kept their promises and stayed at their posts are literally too good for words.

Despite the withering fire of the sex abuse wars, these priests have not deserted and they don't complain much either. The reason for that may be that their people have troubles enough of their own and they don't want to hear any of Father's.

No matter what they have been through, we want our priests to be the same as they have always been: on duty, on time, and on the ball.

I experienced a revelation about their secret lives in a letter from one of the finest priests I know. He wrote that:

My soul has turned into a cinder, hard dry and burned out. I'd been running on empty for quite awhile, and I prayed but there was no warmth or juice in the communication from the Great Generous Comedian?. My job means I (work) with people whose jobs occur in a very intense arena of good vs. evil, life and death?. I felt saturated with exposure to human evil, suffering and degradation.

In two weeks I was exposed to human sex trafficking of children, a newborn infant thrown in the trash by the mother, an unclaimed body of a policeman who died in a nursing home estranged from his family, and ministering to 5 terminally ill people. I'm not complaining, I'm simply saying that I was running on fumes for a long time. The phone would ring and I'd get irritated instantly, "What do they want from me now??"

I love my job, I love my people, and my work is meaningful to my soul but even though I pray I get worn out....All the exposure to human degradation, accumulates and goes unresolved?. I have not set limits to protect myself from absorbing the pain?we are taught just the opposite: Feel it, roll in it, absorb it?.

It's an astonishing sea change among priests of my generation that we cannot wait to retire. We're fed up with apologizing for the Church and trying to explain the profound unending nuttiness (e.g., a seminar on exorcism) that just never stops?. We agree that something of God is rumbling among the people of the Church, the Holy Spirit of God seems to be at work, and it will not stop or be defeated.

The secret lives of our best priests are not dissimilar but it is hard to get to their stories, if they are printed at all, when the front page still streams with variations on clergy sex abuse from all corners of the world.

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This priest's letter made me think that we really don't know much about the secret, that is, inner life, of Jesus either. From what we read in the gospels, Jesus would understand from his own experience what today's hardworking priests are enduring.

Jesus preached in an era of institutional religious hypocrisy and was followed by crowds of people who had been struck by His words. Each of them wanted something from him: a cleansing of their leprosy, a cure of their illness, the raising to life of a beloved daughter or friend.

Like today's priests, Jesus emptied himself in order to fill those around Him. He went into the desert -- as good priests now do "to rest awhile?" -- but Jesus returned to the city of man, to respond less to sin than to human suffering. And -- reflecting the way many priests now feel stranded -- the Lord said that the Son of Man had no place to lay his head.

What did Jesus feel and was it really any different from what our best priests feel? What did He mean by that mysterious phrase "Power went out of me,?" if not that, as the suffering touched His garments, He experienced the same drain on His energy that our priests feel every day when wounded people crowd around our priests seeking relief for their sorrows?

Power goes out of our priests as the human price for emptying themselves for the sake of others. We discover the inner life of the Lord in the inner lives of our hardworking priests.

There is no secret about this. It is just that we do not read between the lines of the scriptures to see that Jesus' mission was to identify with our suffering more than to condemn our sins.

That is the essence of the overlooked lives of our good priests, the ones who never get their names in the paper but who are emptying themselves on our behalf every day.

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