

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 17, 2013 at 12:44pm

Prefect of clergy makes priests their own grandfathers

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, prefect for the Congregation for the Clergy, apparently wants to restore "Downton Abbey"-era Catholicism by bringing back the costumes, the set design, and especially its grand dame mothers and grandmothers as if the old church, with its plentiful vocations, unquestioning members and its crown jewel of a privileged clerical culture, could thereby magically be there again when we all wake up in the morning.

The cardinal is undoubtedly sincere in a letter, reported by Zenit, written not to priests but to their mothers, in which he says that "unique and special are the spiritual consolations which they derive from having carried in the womb one who has become Christ's minister." A priest's mother should "rejoice in seeing the life of the son not only fulfilled but also clothed with a most exceptional divine favor which embraces and transforms it for all eternity." Nothing to arrest your attention so far.

But most healthy priests will shake their heads -- as should we -- at the cardinal's assertion that "when a man is ordained a priest, his mother 'receives' him in a completely new and unexpected way; so much so that she is called to see in the fruit of her own womb a 'father' ... Every mother of a priest mysteriously becomes 'a daughter of her son.' "

Perhaps the cardinal signed this without reading it, as we doubt that he lets his mother refer to him as Papa or that he, following the style used by Ernest Hemingway with many women, refers to her as "Daughter." A reference to Hemingway is not amiss here, however, because few public figures have had such tortured relationships with women or displayed such unrelenting competition in his efforts to dominate -- humiliating, if needs be, his male friends. Hemingway's biographer tells us that his mother dressed this later great writer -- but seemingly far from happy man -- as a girl for a period of time.

At least Hemingway's prose was understated while the cardinal's seems overwrought in this proposition

that bends gender roles. It is certainly true that the parents of priests and nuns occupied the first pews in that now haze-filled era of grandeur and seeming good order that the so-called Reformers of the Reform -- a.k.a. Raise the Titanic of Vatican I -- see as a golden age for Catholicism. Even though most of these relationships were healthy, there were aspects of the relationships of priests and their mothers that bear careful reflection.

In the golden age, as the Reformers of the Reform see it, the relationship between a priest and his mother was sacrosanct. The consequences for the full development of the priest were, however, complicated by mothers who pressured their sons into becoming priests in the way that mothers from other swatches of culture pressured their sons to become doctors. I can still see the tears in the eyes of an 80-year-old priest who spoke of how he lost his chance for a life of his own when he capitulated to his mother's insistence that he remain in the seminary.

In the broad culture of the old church, the mother was the only woman acceptable in the life of the priest. The linen bands that bound his fingers were saved and placed on the mother's hands in her coffin. The mothers of priests had a saying: "You never lose the son who becomes a priest."

You never lose him "to another woman," was the unspoken completion of that sentence and that sentiment. Many men never had another relationship with a woman in which they had to grow in order to respond to it. In the psychological study of the American priesthood carried out after Vatican II, a large subset of psychosexually undeveloped priests was identified. These were men whose inner growth did not match their chronological growth. They often had great problems in their adjustments and their behavior in their ministry.

The old Catholic culture validated the priest and his mother as they fundamentally continued the emotional level of their relationship during the years after the son's ordination. He would spend his day off at home, and he would often take his vacations with his mother. All of this was approved, and none of its psychological impact was given much consideration.

However, some of the greatest and least identified suffering -- unidentified because nobody wanted to look at it and mother-dominated priests were not free enough to make any changes -- also occurred under the emotion-numbing dome of that supposedly golden age of Catholic life.

The cardinal would undoubtedly be astounded if anyone suggested to him that his ideas are emotionally dangerous to prospective priests, their mothers, or the church. Perhaps it is best to dismiss his thoughts with a smile and the perspective in which his notions should not be condemned but dealt with by humor. Consider the ending of an old song: "I'm my own grandpa, I'm my own grandpa. It sounds funny, I know, but it really is so: I'm my own grandpa."

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