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Clergy's power should be inspired by Pope Francis

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NCR Today

It is no secret that I think Pope Francis is challenging clergy to step up their game. It's also no secret I have pretty high expectations of anyone who gets the honor of wearing a Roman collar. Just ask any of the priests I know. Which is why, when I hear what I did Tuesday night about a priest being super awesome, I want to do the happy dance.

Here's the report from the pews: A friend spent last weekend in pain and confusion over a family issue. She didn't feel comfortable reaching out to friends, and she has been struggling for quite some time with issues of faith because of this very issue. After 48 hours of wrestling alone and weeping more than she ever wanted to, she went looking for what is sometimes called "God with skin on." Naturally, she looked on Facebook.

She recently friended one of the many members of the local clergy on social media, and she sent him a private message asking for an appointment. She was honest, saying she and her husband had attended his parish in the past but were now going somewhere else. The priest responded and -- pay attention -- he did not say, as I've heard from Catholics so frequently it makes me want to poke pencils in my eyes, "Why don't you call the priest at your parish?"

Instead, he said, "Yes."

It seems so simple. And yet, so often, this simple thing doesn't happen. There are barriers thrown up, and when a person is in a vulnerable state (as people are when they reach out to clergy), those barriers appear too high to climb over. When you're referred away from the priest you've had the guts to reach out to, you rarely call somewhere else. Instead, you start questioning your need. Maybe your crisis isn't a crisis after all. Maybe you can handle it alone. Maybe you should stop being so weak. Maybe you should just go to a movie, buy a new car, eat a pint of ice cream or, in the case of a young woman I was called to help 20

years ago, pick up a bottle of pills and take a few too many.

Such is the power of the clergy, a power too few priests understand they wield in the mind of average Catholics. Perhaps it shouldn't be so, but it is. And the key to much of what Pope Francis has expressed in his pontificate is that we have to deal with what is. Clergy need to meet people where they are, not tell them where they want them to be.

The average Catholic -- and by this, I mean folks who don't write about religion for a living or work for the church or have advanced degrees in theology -- this person thinks ordination equals certain things. Sacraments, yes, but more: being available, welcoming, open and respectful, not scary or arrogant. When priests don't meet these bare minimum expectations on a consistent basis with everyone they meet, they inadvertently injure people and drive them from the practice of the faith. Maybe it shouldn't be this way, but it is.

Which is why it is exceedingly important for clergy not to erect barriers. Especially now. As I wrote at Bus Stop Jesus:

This Pope Francis moment, this clear-as-a-bell call from Rome, is a moment of truth. There is a chance that next Sunday, or the next or perhaps more likely at Christmas or Easter, people who had given up on the Catholic Church and the faith are going to walk through your parish doors. They are going to be looking for what Pope Francis has talked about. They want to see if you're offering it.

This week, a particular priest in the Southwest offered just that. I can't be certain, but I think maybe he was inspired by the Holy Father. What I can be certain of is that my friend said her discussion with him was both faith- and life-changing, and it gave her hope for the first time in seven years. That's a pretty big deal. And it came about because a priest said a word that, when translated, means "giving up my time." Let the church say amen.

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