

Merciful Discipline 5: Hopeful, We Fight for the Dignity and Integrity of Our Priests

This is the fifth post of six in the *Merciful Discipline Series*. A complete list of available posts will be at the end of each article as they are made available.

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The fine work and selfless dedication of the great majority of priests should not be obscured by the transgressions of some. - Pope Benedict

I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest who will do what is in My heart and mind, and his house will be firmly established. (1 Samuel 2:15)

As a new Catholic, I have a fresh appreciation for the honorable, difficult office of the priest. I rely upon three priests in my parish for daily Mass and confession; each has exemplified Jesus in a way that puts me to shame. Decades of involvement in the evangelical church have not prepared me for the spirit of sacrifice and humility that I see in these three men. I have grown in virtue through their service to Jesus. As I seek to honor Christ, I am committed to honor them, His priests.

The essential role of the Roman Catholic priest plays in the life of each congregant grants us a powerful opportunity. We who benefit from his offering can fight for his dignity, his renewal and his integrity. How? We can prayerfully encourage him and verbally champion him amid the scorn now associated with his office due to the perversion of a few.

We must not mimic the world and bite the hand that feeds us. We uphold him in gratitude and ask for eyes to see the phantom hand that slaps him with each new exposure of priestly abuse. Well over 96% of priests have clean hearts and hands. Might our honor of them be their balm?

Out of these scandals, the entire Church, beginning with her priests, can avoid the pitfalls that made a handful of priests deadly to their sheep. And we the sheep have a role to play in understanding these vulnerabilities and prayerfully empowering our priests to avoid them.

The John Jay Report ('The Causes and Context of the Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the USA from 1950-2010') cites the sexual revolution—the moral and socio-cultural quake that occurred in the sixties and seventies, as the driving influence that multiplied the number of sexual abuses by priests in that time period. A moral ozone layer burned off and all of us, including priests, experienced a new nakedness. That 'unveiling' was not adequately countered by Catholic seminaries in their choice of candidates and in the sexual formation needed to prepare priests for the moral challenges ahead.

Especially hard hit were priests who suffered from poor social adjustment and who lacked the capacity to form adequate bonds with colleagues. Already isolated, these priests would tend to pursue teenagers—targets who were sexually 'mature' but emotionally undemanding.

Add to this the easy access to virtual pornography that an isolated priest might employ to stoke unattended, unacknowledged desires with any false image he chooses.

Cowardly, evil, worthy of the indignation Cardinal Ratzinger expressed in his pre-papal meditation for Good Friday 2005 when he lamented: 'How much filth there is in the Church, and even those in the priesthood who ought to belong entirely to Him!'

We also must seek to understand these vulnerabilities. Priests who abuse are essentially disintegrated, having never done the hard work of being reconciled to their sexual selves. That requires hard work for a celibate, and for those mentoring him. To know one's desires and needs and to work them out fruitfully with others while remaining pure: that is chastity. And it is an expression of integrity that we must insist on for our priests.

We must pray and prod for priestly training in self-awareness, mutual confession, and healthy, transparent friendship. That lines up with Benedict's commitment. In 2008, addressing the US Church in light of the abuse crisis, he said: 'We [the Vatican] will do all that is possible in the education of seminarians for a deep spiritual, human, and intellectual formation for the students. Only solid persons can be admitted to the priesthood and only persons with a deep personal life in Christ...'

Out of such training, in an increasingly disintegrated world, let us pray that St. Paul's words may be exemplified by our priests as they stand "blameless and pure, children of God in a crooked and perverse generation, in which they shine like stars in the universe as they hold out the Word of life." (Phil. 2: 15, 16)

O my Jesus, I beg You on behalf of the whole Church, give us holy priests. You Yourself,

maintain them in holiness. O Divine and Great High Priest, may the power of Your Mercy accompany them everywhere and protect them from the devil's traps and snares which are continuously set for the souls of priests. May the power of Your Mercy, O Lord, shatter and bring to naught all that might tarnish the sanctity of priests, for You can do all things. (1052)
St. Faustina

It is more important to have good priests than to have many priests. - Pope Benedict

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