



# What is clericalism?

**D**ear Father Kerper: I recently read a homily Pope Francis gave in Italy last August. He used very strong words: “Clericalism, which is not just clerics, is an attitude that offends all of us: clericalism is a perversion of the Church.” How so? Is it a necessary aspect of the Church?

Clericalism has a double meaning. First, it refers to dividing the Church into two sectors: clergy and laity. When this happens, some clergymen may exercise power without accountability, expect and even demand privileged treatment and live within a closed world of religious functionaries.

Second, clericalism is the unhealthy habit among ordinary believers of deferring completely to clergymen and, in some cases, of attaching themselves to ordained men, hoping to share somehow in “Father’s power” or to manipulate clerics for political or economic reasons. Most parishes have some “lay” clerics whose Christian identity becomes deeply entwined with their priests. As a result, lay people may overlook bad behavior in order to retain their own influence over priests.

While the distinction between clergy and laity has deep roots within the sacramental order established by Christ, clericalism distorts Church life by raising the clergy above the people and

reducing the laity to silent spectators.

Pope Francis has rightly called clericalism a “perversion” because it disrupts the proper relationship between men in holy orders and the baptized faithful. Clericalism, then, is not part of the Lord’s plan. Rather it flows from human sinfulness, which even touched the apostles.

This “perversion” undergirds many scandals within the Church, whether sexual abuse of innocent people or other abuses of power, such as theft of funds, favoritism and so on.

How so?

Clericalism, which inflates the prestige and power of ordained man, enables — and encourages — sinful behavior through quiet toleration and concealment. Clericalism also spawns silence based on fear or excessive adulation of the “holy ones.” Eventually defense of the Church’s reputation, rather than faithfully living out the Gospels, becomes paramount.

Clericalism, always a distortion of God’s plan, has ancient roots.

The English word “cleric,” comes from Greek word “*kleros*,” which means a *portion of an inheritance*. A “cleric,” then, is a man who has inherited goods from a superior person along with their legal title and associated rights and privileges.

These original “clerics” appear in the Old Testament, beginning with the establishment of the Levitical priesthood in Israel.

In Exodus, God said to Moses: “From among the Israelites, summon your brother Aaron and his sons to be priests in my service.” (*Ex 28:10*) Exodus 29 and 30 then describe in much detail the priestly vestments, duties and “ordination” rituals.

God consecrated and forever set apart *all the male descendants* of Levi as priests whose principal tasks were offering sacrifice to God, leading sacred worship and, in much later times, maintaining the Temple.

Israel’s priesthood was completely male and hereditary, rooted solely in the bloodline of Levi, an ancestor of Moses and Aaron. This hereditary system guaranteed the priest’s status as “chosen and holy” because no one could enter or exit the priesthood by choice.

As Israel’s worship became highly ritualized, the distinction between priests and common folk became

stronger. Since priests alone could perform essential sacred duties, God's law exempted them from profane work. To save them from starving, the law mandated the 11 non-priestly tribes to transfer 10 percent — the tithes — of all agricultural produce into their hands. Israel, then, was perpetually divided into two sectors: a small permanent priestly elite and thousands of “lay” working people who supported them.

As the theology of Christian priesthood unfolded, the Church imitated some elements of Israel's priesthood, eventually creating the “clerical state,” a group of men “set apart” for sacred worship, especially the celebration of the Eucharist.

For several centuries, the “clerical state” also included non-ordained men who managed church lands, money and political relations with states. St. Thomas Becket, for example, was a cleric for many years before being appointed Archbishop of Canterbury by King Henry II.

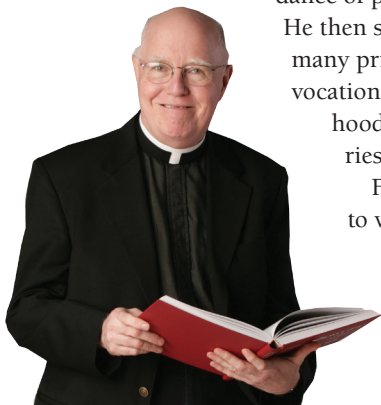
Without doubt, the clerical system provided order and stability to the Church, but at great spiritual cost.

First, the strict division between clergy and laity undermined and obscured the essential unity of Christians based on baptism, not holy orders.

As clerics, including non-ordained ones, assumed all liturgical and administrative duties, from unlocking church doors to negotiating treaties with kings, many Catholics saw themselves as passive second-class subjects.

Clerical domination of almost everything in pre-modern Western society happened because the clergy tended to be the most — or only! — educated men around. Education, from the lowest to highest forms, flowed from monasteries and schools linked to them. Even the black cassock, the distinctive clerical garb for daily use, primarily marked its wearer as highly educated, but not necessarily holy. Second, the “clerical state” in many places and times degenerated into a closed caste. Clerics dressed differently, used Latin as their common language and enjoyed a lifestyle well beyond ordinary people. Such a closed and unaccountable system inevitably breeds trouble.

Father William Tallon, a wise and noble old priest I knew in Philadelphia years ago, summed up the essence of clericalism. He faintly sighed, recalling the super-abundance of priests in the 1950s and 1960s. He then said softly: “Oh, Father, we had many priests back then, but not many vocations. And many who left the priesthood never moved out of the rectories.” What honesty and wisdom. Father Tallon was telling me not to worry because clericalism, which is sinful, cannot prevail. But the Church, along with her priesthood, will always endure because the Church emerges from the wounded side of Christ who lives forever. ■



Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Nashua.

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