

Synodality: Catholics demand a reform of the clericalist priesthood

A Catholic scholar speaks openly and honestly about tensions between clergy and the laity



By [Cecilia A. Hatt](#) | [United Kingdom](#)

I am a woman brought up in the practice of the Catholic faith, which to the best of my ability I have all my life tried to serve and proclaim and pass on to my children and grandchildren.

During that life I have encountered all sorts of churchmen and women, some filled with the love of Christ, others less obviously so.

However, I always believed that, in spite of the temperamental oddities and outward severity of many Catholic clergy, they could be trusted at least to maintain a basic honesty and justice in their dealings with the laity whom it is their calling to serve.

The events of the past few years have shown that this pious belief was unfounded, a discovery which has, obviously, deeply shamed the Catholic clergy and, it is not an exaggeration to say, broken the hearts of the laity. Worst of all, it has brought the Catholic faith itself into disrepute.

The Lord Yahweh says this...I am going to display the holiness of my great name, which you have profaned among the nations (Ezk.36:23).

How is the holiness of the Lord's name to be displayed, if the laity is not allowed to speak the truth to the hierarchy?

Need for complete honesty

If the proposed Synod is not to be an empty gesture, there must be a clear commitment to justice and truth on the part of the clergy and religious orders.

We readily understand that Pope Francis is trying to establish fresh relationships within the Church and an increased openness between laity and clergy.

This is very desirable, but, as with all relationships, it cannot progress if there is not, at the outset, complete honesty between the partners.

We all know to our sorrow that, over a long period of time, some members of the clergy have taken advantage of their position of trust and authority to abuse children, both in direct sexual acts and in physical violence which often seems to have had a sexual motivation.

No-one is attempting to deny the horrible nature of this crime and we acknowledge that the vast majority of priests would recoil from the very idea of it.

However, in the public imagination it has become attached to the Catholic clergy to the extent that your reputation is now in shreds. For this, it has to be said, you, the clergy, have only yourselves to blame.

The process of disbelieving, then concealing, the complaints of the laity, the refusal to suspend accused priests and instead to move them to other parishes, and the consistent attempt to cover up the nature and extent of the crime, however much it was at first the response of panic and subsequently of shame, was in fact, if not in intention, wicked.

Clergy over laity

The extraordinary and shocking symmetry with which this wickedness was repeated in Catholic dioceses *throughout the world*, brought into sudden focus, for the Catholic laity, the nature of the priestly training which over the centuries has wrought an ultimately corrupting effect.

This effect was to promulgate a two-part model of the Church, of clergy and laity, in which the former has precedence.

The original instruction laid on the apostles was to tell people about the love of God as articulated in the life, death and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ and by precept and example to show the way to follow him in humility and love.

Christ's earthly ministry has been recollected temporally in seasons and ceremonies, with the gradual development over time of formal teachings, about the Eucharist, for example, or the reflection of the events of our human life in the seven sacraments.

Such ecclesial developments have happened more or less inevitably and reasonably, bearing in mind the traditional structures of our lives.

However, other things have been introduced which are not necessary or inevitable features of the Good News.

One basic one is the practice of calling a priest *Father*, which, innocent as it may at first appear, carries with it an assumption of close relationship, trust and the habit of obedience.

You...must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers (Mt 23, 8).

Jesus said these words to make clear to his followers how different their practice should be from that of the scribes and Pharisees, who placed burdens on the people that they would not lift.

It is noticeable in the gospels how Jesus was moved to anger only by two things, the hypocrisy of the priesthood and the using of the temple as a marketplace, a "den of thieves".

In challenging the Pharisees, Jesus was showing how the over-formulation of rules and an excessive insistence on outward observances can turn into a tyranny by one section of the people over another.

Priests distrustful of the baptized faithful

This was not just an observation on Christ's part about the contemporary structure of the Jewish community: it was also a warning about the future dangers and temptations, inherent in teaching of any sort, of making laws where there should have been only exhortations, of turning instruction into commandment. Jesus himself urged only the two great commandments, of the love of God and the love of neighbor.

Just as the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees became fossilized into an unbending set of codes that oppressed the people, so within the Church has the ascendancy of clergy over laity hardened into a separation of roles which has too often manifested itself as a tyranny.

How is it that there has grown up among many priests a perceptible distrust of the laity, as if we are suspected of trying to steal a treasure that they have in their keeping?

Baptism, Holy Communion, Marriage.

These sacraments that celebrate the ordinary decent details of our human lives are too often kept as hostages to ensure particular behaviors on our part, acceptable acts of submission to regulations that our Lord did not suggest.

They are the Lord's gifts, not adjuncts to the power of the clergy, yet the clergy has learned to use the sacraments and the Mass as means of control.

It is not a question any more of education. The laity are, for the most part, as well -- or even better -- educated than many of today's clergy.

Priests have taken to issuing directives rather than explaining the Gospel. Instead of reminding us that the commandment tells us to keep the Sabbath holy for the love of God, today's bishops talk of *obligations* and *dispensations*, matters of discipline, not of doctrine.

Entitled men set apart

The sad truth is that priests have gradually been trained to see themselves as men set apart, who, by virtue of the inestimable privilege they have received, are *entitled* to make up rules and entitled to have them obeyed. Yet there is no such entitlement.

A priest will be -- as other people are -- respected, trusted, maybe loved, because of how he behaves towards others, not because of the fact of ordination.

The fact that there are very many priests who are so respected and trusted is a cheering sign that they are good Christian men, but it does not bestow on the entire institution of the priesthood an automatic *nihil obstat*.

Here the unwillingness of the English laity to make a fuss has brought its own problems.

Over the centuries we have mildly accepted the golden calf that we were given to venerate: a fantasy of men and women in holy orders and religious vows whose calling was "higher" than our own vocation to be mothers and fathers, writers, farmers, doctors or bus drivers.

In Britain especially we have been a docile laity, still cherishing as badges of pride the old injuries of the Reformation and keeping alive folk memories of a bigoted populace that shunned "Romans".

The bugbear of this hostile populace was fostered by our priests, as I remember, and consequently we were taught to regard even mild Anglican churchgoers with suspicion and look instead for safety towards our fellow Catholics and our clergy.

It was a dangerous development and helped to encourage the clergy-wide conception of priestly dignity which at all costs must not be tarnished by any breath of scandal.

The evil of clericalism and the sex abuse scandal

Pope Francis rightly calls this the evil of **clericalism**, yet there is not much sign that the clergy and hierarchy have taken this to heart. But that wider world, to which we Catholics are supposed to feel superior, understands it very well and judges the Church accordingly as rigorous and hypocritical.

Here you will protest: it was only a few priests at fault, not all of us!

But you closed ranks in your thousands. You turned to your priestly brethren and not to us, nor to the laws and justice of the societies that housed you. You left the wounded sheep and clung to the hirelings.

Recently, the British police force that suppressed evidence of its own criminality in order to protect its reputation has been found guilty of "institutional corruption". If the priesthood does the same thing, shall we not call that institutional corruption also?

Many bishops and clergy have spoken, feelingly, about the past and the future, but none seems to appreciate the fact that this is not a matter of a bad thing that happened in the past and is now over.

Sexual abuse does not leave its victims alone. A person whose first sexual encounter is shameful may never, throughout that long secrecy of shame, manage to get rid of the consciousness of degradation.

What child, brought up by devout Catholic parents to respect and obey a priest, would know how to reject the man's overtures? What words could he find to describe his experience to a parent, when he had no idea what the priest wanted or why?

For many of these abused children, their first realization of what had been going on would have come only when they began to learn the facts of life.

Modern children are probably more knowledgeable about sex, but these clerical crimes were committed, many of them, years ago.

Ignorant of the people being served

Perhaps some of these abusers imagined that the child wouldn't mind or would forget. If the hierarchy had ever thought to seek help from professional laypeople they would have been told that children don't forget such things.

A priesthood better educated in psychology and the pathology of sexual deviance would have known that the child abuser does not reform. He may repent, over and over again, but he does not stop what he is doing.

A priesthood that had any respect for lay expertise and the secular law would not have sought refuge in secrecy for the offenders rather than succor for the offended.

Setting aside the evil of what was done to all those children and young people, and putting it as mildly as one can, the clergy was stubbornly and culpably ignorant of the people for whose service they were ordained.

Even now, when one would think that the hierarchy had begun to understand the enormity of the damage over which it has presided, we hear that the complaints of abuse victims are not being heard by bishops because the complainants are judged to be troublesome or needy or confrontational.

Like blind Bartimaeus, "many of them scolded him and told him to keep quiet" (Mk.10:48). Or like the Canaanite woman, who, the disciples complained, "keeps shouting after us" (Mt.15:24), people who make a fuss about the wrongs they have suffered are an embarrassment.

"Mistakes were made and structures will be put in place" does not begin to address the situation. Not leaving a child in a room alone with a priest is not a remedy and certainly not an apology.

Until you confess to us, the laity, that you have in the pride of your calling collectively sinned against us, how is there to be forgiveness?

Falling on the people of the Church like a bereavement

Thousands of women in Ireland spent years in virtual enslavement while the "fruits of their shame", -- in the hateful idiom of that rancid and hysterical loathing of sex masquerading as a

love of purity, -- their innocent babies in other words, were either given away to childless friends of the clergy or died of neglect. This is more than a mistake and it is difficult to see what sort of structure can make it all right.

We need you to say sorry and to express a firm purpose of amendment.

Some of the clergy in other countries have already understood this need and begun to address the situation with joint tribunals and their own commissions of truth and justice. Nothing comparable has been attempted in this country and until it is, there can be no meaning in this synod.

One community of the Church cannot walk alongside another which refuses to look us in the eye.

As St Paul says, "Nor is the body to be identified with any one of its many parts" (1 Cor.12:14). In the same way, there can be no more clerical talk of the laity "bringing" anything to the Church: the Church *is* laity and clergy together.

God has arranged the body so that more dignity is given to the parts which are without it, and that there may not be disagreements inside the body, but that each part may be equally concerned for all the others. If one part is hurt, all parts are hurt with it. (I Cor 12: 24-6).

Our children have been abused to a criminal extent, but all of us have been abused in so many ways, by the centuries-old disparagement of women, the many occasions when we have been refused a sacrament on the grounds of non-attendance at non-necessary preliminary meetings, when young people who have every right to be married in church have been denied it because of idle reasons, a procedural irregularity or sometimes simply the whim of an autocratic priest (these are not fanciful instances: many Catholic families have such experiences to relate, to my personal knowledge).

The revelation of widespread child abuse is simply the most recent affront, and the pain of it has fallen on the lay people of the Church like a bereavement.

Dismantling hierarchical structures and learning from the laity

The recent trouble-free marriage of our prime minister in Westminster Cathedral, in personal circumstances which have for years presented insurmountable obstacles to the church marriages of thousands of sincere and practising Catholics, has caused deep embarrassment to the laity and presented the general public with a source of derision and confirmation that

the Catholic Church can always find a way around its own rules to please the rich and powerful.

Given such circumstances, it is difficult for a lay Catholic not to feel insulted. Are all those decent people now to be welcomed back to the sacraments? It would be a good start.

If the clergy has a firm purpose of amendment, the clergy needs to think seriously about dismantling many of your hierarchical structures. It would be wise not to accept people to the priesthood until they had spent several years doing a job.

At a time when people are homeless, it is not decent that many priests live alone, or in pairs, in houses that could accommodate a large family.

Of course there is no reason why a priest should not marry. It would give him much more credibility with the rest of the parish and very possibly teach him a lot about patience and humility.

So much needs to be changed, but the first thing is that you, priests, monsignors, bishops, cardinals, should acknowledge the need to learn from the laity. As it is, we are not leaving the Church, but a sizeable part of the Church seems bent on leaving us.

Walking together, listening to each other

If we are to walk together and proclaim the Good News, our listening must work both ways and our manner of walking must genuinely follow the paths of loving-kindness, instead of threading a careful -- and care-strewn -- track through condemnations, regulations and dispensations that have nothing to do with the Word of God.

Jesus asks us to come to him because he will give us rest, a rest that we desperately need because we have labored for too long under the heavy burdens that the clergy have laid upon us.

In 1508 , Bishop John Fisher, commenting on the fifth penitential psalm, *Domine Exaudi* , wrote the following:

All fear of God/ also the contempt of God cometh and is grounded of the clergy / for if the clergy be well and rightfully ordered giving good example to other of virtuous living/ without doubt the people by that shall have more fear of almighty God. But contrary wise if the clergy live desolately in manner as they should give no count of their life past and done before/ will not the lay people do the same? ... Therefore by us of the clergy dependeth both the fear of God and also the contempt of God.

(John Fisher's Court Sermons, ed. C.A.Hatt (OUP 2021) p.219.)

John Fisher is now deservedly venerated as a Catholic martyr, but before there was any question of martyrdom he was a humble, wise and hardworking bishop, who could very clearly see the faults of his own brethren and how, if unrecognized and uncorrected, they would bring about a schism in the Church and the contempt of God.

Whether we are doomed to repeat that sad history largely rests now with the Catholic clergy.

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