

U.S. Bishops Discuss Priests' Problems

The U.S. Bishops meeting in Detroit this week are discussing problems of the priesthood. In preparation for their assembly they sponsored two comprehensive studies made over the past three years. One was a sociological survey which required questionnaires and some interviews with nearly 6,000 priests, former priests and bishops. The other was a psychological study of in-depth interviews with 271 priests.

Following are excerpts from summary chapters of these reports described as "the most comprehensive survey of the priesthood in any country."

Sociological Study

There is no evidence in our research that Catholic priests are any more or less deficient in emotional maturity than other groups in American society.

Priests maintain a high degree of personal morale, higher in fact than college-educated males in the same age categories.

Priests work moderately long hours, evaluate themselves quite favorably in comparison with other professionals, enjoy an adequate (though not spectacular) level of job satisfaction, are inclined to pursue a good deal of professional reading, and are committed to the need for more professional training.

A large majority of the clergy say that if they had the choice to make again, they would enter the priesthood.

On the other hand, there are serious problems facing the Priesthood.

Large numbers of priests are dissatisfied with the way the ecclesiastical structure is shaped and the way decision-making power is distributed; but the leadership of the church does not share this dissatisfaction. Furthermore it would appear that differences between younger and older priests on the distribution of power and authority are rooted in ideological differences about the nature of the church and religion.

There are systematic and substantial differences between bishops and priests on almost every matter we studied. In most cases, the bishops hold different points of view and

Former Bishop To Work for State Official

Minneapolis — (RNS) — Dr. James P. Shannon, who resigned as auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis, will spend the Summer working as an assistant to New Mexico's attorney general.

A law school freshman at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, he will commute 60 miles to the state capitol in Santa Fe.

Dr. Shannon said he is prepared to do whatever Atty. Gen. David Norvell asks him to do. It is possible his duties will be in the area of consumer law and protection.

Dr. Shannon said he plans to take the full three years of law school. He is often asked by friends whether he plans to go into politics, but says he "honestly doesn't know."

Dr. Shannon came here to speak three times at a program sponsored by the Colonial Church of Edina (Congregational).

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positions than even the priests in their own age group.

Given, the disagreements over power and over appropriate reforms in the church, these systematic differences of conviction indicate a serious and potentially dangerous "gap" between the priests and the hierarchy.

A number of summary comments may also be made about the resignees.

There is no evidence that the resignees regret their decision or are unhappy in their present state. On the contrary, there is considerable evidence that they are in a state of emotional euphoria.

About two-fifths of the resignees still consider themselves to be Catholics and part of the official church, another two-fifths are on the margins of the church, and the remaining one-fifth are no longer affiliated with the church.

Apparently, these proportions exist at the time of resignation and do not change much over time. Thus, one can tentatively conclude that the "faith" problem is overriding only in about one-fifth of the resignations — though there may be "faith confusion" among many of those on the margins of the official church.

To attempt one final summary of our findings, we have discovered no evidence that the Catholic priesthood is in a state of collapse or even near collapse. There are many strong and positive forces at work in the priesthood, and it would be an unwise man who would conclude on the basis of our data that it will disappear.

On the other hand, the priesthood has very serious problems, most of them centering around the highly volatile subjects of power and sex, which indicate trouble and conflict in the years ahead.

Psychological Study

The intensive depth interviews which were conducted with a cross-sectional sample of American priests reveal them as neither sick nor mysterious. They are instead ordinary men who reflect, through their own personal experiences, situational challenges, and professional problems, the common difficulties of the American male population from which they largely come.

RELIGIOUS FAITH: Many priests experience difficulty in defining and discussing the nature of their religious commitment and the underlying philosophy or theology by which they lead their lives. This incompletely developed faith seems related to incomplete personal development and a formation in and life by a religion that stresses the extrinsic aspects of belief.

AUTHORITY: Surprisingly, authority, despite the widespread publicity about it as a problem within the priesthood, did not emerge as a problem quite in the way that the popular impression would have suggested. In depth interviews, few priests complained about authority as their most serious problem.

Authority is more of a problem, it would seem, because of the unresolved and ambivalent attitude toward it among

priests. This may be partly a function of the manner in which authority is exercised, but it is also related to the fact that many of these men have not worked through their own attitudes toward authority. Frequently, priests do not take the dictates or attitudes of authority very seriously; many of them devise means to get around rather than come into direct confrontation with authority.

CELIBACY: There is no doubt that celibacy is a well-realized value in the lives of some priests. It does, however, demand a level of personal integration and dedication that is relatively rare. For most priests, and certainly for the underdeveloped, celibacy remains an ideal which is neither vital nor dynamic.

There is little breach of the regulations of celibacy; American priests are neither impulsive nor uncontrolled. Celibacy as a personally developing and freeing condition of life just does not exist in the ideal manner in which it is described.

American priests, as a group, are not eagerly waiting to get married, nor do they believe that optional celibacy will solve their problems. Instead, they seem to favor the option of marriage because of the freedom which is involved in the issue. Many would not, in fact, immediately marry if the ecclesiastical regulation were modified.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS: The heart of the psychological recommendations centers on the question of whether those with responsibility for the priesthood wish to assist American priests to achieve greater maturity and, therefore, greater effectiveness in their work.

This is so because the chief problem described by this study is one of incomplete growth in the lives of many priests. They are not sick; they are not fully grown.

It is suggested that an increase of practical freedom as well as an increase of personal accountability for their work of ministry are essential elements in dealing with this problem. American priests need a more genuine experience of freedom in all those areas of life which are recognized as significant to the process of personal development.

These include freedom concerning celibacy, self-support, place of residence, life-style and mode of Gospel service. What seems more important is not one or the other of these issues but the reality of the practical freedom which the priests would experience with enlarged choices in these areas.

It is also suggested that much greater accountability for the professional work of the priest is needed as a test and expression of their mature exercise of freedom.

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