

Catholic Courier

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Letters Policy

The Catholic Courier wishes to provide space for readers throughout the diocese to express opinions on all sides of the issues. We welcome original, signed letters about current issues affecting church life.

Although we cannot publish every letter we receive, we seek, insofar as possible, to provide a balanced representation of expressed opinions and a variety of reflections on life in the church. We will choose letters for publication based on likely reader interest, timeliness and a sense of fair play. Our discerning readers may determine whether to agree or disagree with the opinions of the letter writers.

We reserve the right to edit all letters for length as well as legal concerns. With respect to errors in submitted text, we will correct spelling only. Anonymous letters and the use of pseudonyms are unacceptable.

Mail letters to: Catholic Courier, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624. Please include your full name, phone number and complete address for verification purposes.

Why are priests viewed differently?

By Father Edward L. Palumbo
Guest contributor

A few weeks ago, as I stood at the rear of church greeting folks leaving after Sunday Mass, someone came up to me and said, "Wow, you look just like one of us today!" We smiled and wished each other a good week, but the greeting continued to roll around inside me for several days.

I wondered what it meant. Yes, I was wearing sports clothes. It was a hot, sticky day and, frankly, I didn't feel like getting dressed up. But why did wearing sports clothes make me "just like one of us?" Alternately, why would wearing clerical garb have the opposite effect?

Likewise, people sometimes come up to me when I am in a supermarket and ask, "What are you doing here?" It gives me great delight to say, "The same thing you're doing here — buying food."

These two greetings resonate in me the need to understand what priesthood is all about. What is it about priesthood that makes people see priests as different from other human beings?

Scripture does speak about certain people being set apart for service. But this setting apart is in no way intended to be a setting apart from human experience. If Jesus humbled himself to become human in every way but sin, doesn't it seem odd that priesthood might be seen as separate from and superior to human experience? I don't think that's what Jesus intended.

Our church's recent history is probably the source of notions that priesthood is different from ordinary life. In previous decades, we priests may have acted as if we were different from "ordinary" people — and some may even do so today. But our 2,000-year tradition helps us to appreciate the fact that those who are called to ordained leadership do not leave their human experience behind.

No, priests are very human. We all

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have our strengths and weaknesses. In fact, our humanity is our best and most prized tool for ministry; it helps us help others.

Today, as priests are becoming more and more scarce, it is all the more important to me that I not permit myself to be separated from my human experience — from my real, human needs to live a normal and healthy life. And so it's very important to have time off from "the job."

More and more priests today are realizing that the demands and expectations placed upon them are superhuman and unreal. Many people somehow believe that "Father is always available" in the way he may have been in the past. Some seem to think that after Masses on Sunday priests sit next to the rectory telephone waiting for parishioners to call. I remember frequently being asked in the early days of my priesthood, "Father, after you say Mass, what do you do with the rest of the day?"

I suppose that's a legitimate question for someone who does not realize pastoral leadership's responsibilities or the ways in which priests function as the community's teachers and administrators. And if the way priests lived in the

past created the impression that they had nothing to do after Mass, that certainly is not true today nor will it be in the future. I assure you that each of us priests has a very full day of activities and interactions with sometimes hundreds of people.

But all of this takes time and energy. One of the critical issues we priests struggle with today is carving out time for prayer, reflection and study. Recently, I was bemoaning to a fellow priest the fact that — even though I consider the homily one of the most important priorities of my priestly activity — I hadn't been able to spend enough time to prepare one thoroughly.

My priest friend replied, "Well, what are you telling yourself?" That unsettling comment has stayed with me, and I have come to appreciate its meaning.

Priests need time to study and keep current — to reflect on our experience as priests — if we are to serve God's people well. How many people would entrust their health to a doctor who had not read a book or an article in years, had not shared his experience with his peers, or had not taken the time to improve his skills as a physician?

The same is true for us as priests, yet reading and reflection time is precious and often very slim. I often wonder what the reaction would be if someone called the rectory and was told that Father is busy praying or studying and cannot be disturbed.

I offer these thoughts for you to ponder as we face the very real challenge that our understanding of priesthood must change. The number of priests is declining very rapidly, as you know. My parish, St. Charles Borromeo in Greece, is blessed for the moment with four ordained leaders, but that situation will not continue much longer.

Thus, we need to change our expectations about what priests are called to do and be; to recognize that priests' humanity is their most precious gift to us.

God's law
supercedes
conscience

To the editors:

The letter of Richard J. McGorry in the July 13, 1995, issue of the *Courier* attempts to rebut a criticism of scholar (Sister Patricia) Schoelles by making conscience superior to the teaching authority of the Church. In phrasing the issue in this manner McGorry attempts to avoid the real issue which is the requirement that conscience must be conformed with God's law. This duet of guides appear to have an agenda which is to make morality subjective and relative.

God's law is eternal, unchanging and universally binding. The authority of God is binding on conscience. Conscience is not God. It is true that "in his conscience man is alone with God." But the spin placed on the importance of conscience by this duet appears to be a Trojan horse being used to undermine the legitimate teaching authority of Christ's Church, and to place the conscience of the creature above God's law.

The psalmist tells us "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." St. Paul said that we must seek God with "fear and trembling." These guides and scholars may rationalize, a seductive and self-indulgent morality, but on the day of judgment neither their sophistry nor their footnotes will be of any avail.

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Church began requiring celibacy
of priests long before 12th century

To the editors:

The question of priestly celibacy appears to have been an ongoing matter in the Catholic Church and is not confined to our times.

In reference to Ms. Dunn's communication in the 29th June issue of the *Courier* she states: "I won't write paragraphs on its political roots in the 12th Century...."

Perhaps she and the Rev. McBrien are unaware that this was a vexing question in 597 A.D. when St. Augustine of Canterbury was trying to bring some order to the re-converted Catholic Church in England.

St. Bede the Venerable of Yarrow, one of the earliest and most revered church historians, recorded in the 8th century A.D. that St. Augustine had requested

clarification on certain matters from Pope St. Gregory the Great — whom the Rev. McBrien, in the same issue, concedes as one of the Church's finest popes.

The response on celibacy — taken from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English people* — was thus:

"If there are any clerics who have not received Sacred Orders and who cannot accept a life of continence, let them marry and receive their stipends outside the common fund;...."

We must therefore conclude from this statement that priestly celibacy was considered the norm even at that very early age in the Church.

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