

We Have Created Our Clergy and They Are Us. Why All the Commotion?

Monseigneur E. Robert Arthur...put his fingers in the stiff, white collar around his neck and said, "As long as I'm wearing this collar, people will listen to what I say, but without it in two weeks I'm just another guy."¹

Clergy are walking, talking, living symbols of the best in humankind. Coming to us not with graduate degrees but with ordination by a higher power, though "only" human, each is a Symbolic Exemplar. Vertically, clergy are Symbolic Exemplars of God and are expected to emulate and "stand in" for God. Horizontally, clergy are Symbolic Exemplars of their faith community, enjoined to love and care for every last one. Each is the embodiment of what people ought to do, but have no intention of doing. They are expected to be more moral, loving and faithful, superior as a spouse and parent (where applicable). Clergy must fully believe and truly care, or at least must be perceived and experienced as having those attributes. It does no good for them or us to repeatedly proclaim that they are only human, with human needs, desires, and limitations. If we were to treat clergy as simply human, there would be no need to have clergy.

This vital symbol is created by the interaction of laity and clergy. We need exemplars of what most of us don't dare to be--God fearing, moral, loving people. A few of us dare to volunteer to be exemplars of what we might be, if we got this "created in the image of God" thing right.

It is Symbolic Exemplarhood that enables clergy to be taken seriously and to make a difference. It is Symbolic Exemplarhood which distinguishes clergy from the social worker, psychological counselor, or the devoutly committed layperson dedicated to and selflessly serving his/her religious institution.

While making possible the multiple satisfactions that come from being clergy, Symbolic Exemplarhood is a double-edged sword, for it also engenders the isolation, alienation, and loneliness that is endemic in the field, the criticism that comes from all sides, and the experience of living behind a glass wall. Clergy of all denominations know that this is so.

Who the clergyperson is, is more important than what the clergyperson does. Others are hired or fired and valued in terms of what they do, the technical skills they have and the measurable outcomes they achieve. Though the preceding are

not unimportant, clergy are valued first and foremost by others' perception of their inner life, and how that jibes with what they present to the world.

Symbolic Exemplarhood, which accompanies clergy everywhere, makes functioning as a clergy-technician very hazardous. It leaves little room for behavior that blemishes the exemplarhood. An uncaring doctor may be noted for surgical proficiency, a teacher having an affair can be an inspiring classroom presence, an executive may be a tiger on the job and a pussycat at home, but a clergyperson is expected to be the same person on and off the job, inside and outside. How else can one measure truly believing and really caring? Visiting the hospital, clergy can say and do the right thing. But if people discovered that at heart, they did not really care but were just doing their job, their symbolic Exemplarhood would be tarnished, if not broken. Breaking the symbol means losing efficacy and provokes the anger of laity who, by how they act with clergy, participate in creating and sustaining their symbolhood.

Clergy are not the only walking, talking symbols. There are celebrities and royalty and presidents. Yet as her memoirs reveal, Hillary Clinton, despite her anger and rage at his marital infidelity, writes that "even if Bill had made mistakes in his personal life, his transgressions hadn't interfered with his ability to carry out his presidential responsibilities." That separation of morality and work competence would never be allowed a clergyperson.

Clergy are expected to be Symbolic Exemplars, unique and moral persons without physical distance and the buffers that most celebrities are afforded. This makes their private life extremely vulnerable. They struggle to keep the private, private. They are circumspect and struggle to keep some distance. Many, recognizing their exemplarhood, strive to be consistent, fair, sensitive, pious, caring, moral and religious models. Among the most public of figures, almost always "on", they relish anonymity--times when they are not "on". Prudence, politeness, restraint and judicious editing of speech and behavior help maintain the symbolic image. Each knows that the symbol has limits and acts so as not to break those limits.

When those limits are broken, all hell breaks loose. When clergy are involved in sexual abuse, or hire hit men to kill a spouse, or embezzle church funds or display other traits with which we struggle in our own inner being, when Symbolic Exemplarhood is shattered beyond repair, our anger and prurient interest seems to have no limits. Reams of newsprint and TV time are devoted to the event.

We all struggle to overcome our negative “selves”: lust, anger, greed, envy, hate, and those bothersome "selves": anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, insecurity and fear. We hope that religious faith and living will rid us of them. We have asked our clergy to shoulder the awesome burden of exemplifying humanity at its best, yet when their exemplarhood collapses, we get furious. How could he or she have done it? They're God's anointed!!

We and they struggle to climb the Everest of religious and moral excellence. That we both will fail again and again is inevitable. We do well to be gentler and kinder with both them and us. We shall keep trying. We are up to something big.

¹The Rev. Thomas J. Fleming, “Confrontation in Washington—The Cardinal versus the Dissenters”, New York Times Magazine, November 24, 1968, copyright 1968 by The New York Times Company.