

Clearly, the Lord wants prayers, not judgment for his priests. Alas, how sad that some are far more ready to judge (and criticize) priests than they are to pray for them! Imagine how much better off the Church would be if all the energy given to criticizing priests and bishops here devoted to prayer and penance for these men; and how much better off those who prayed and fasted would be!

As a seminarian I once was visiting my sister, and we proceeded to tear apart all the dissenting theologians in the Church. It seemed like such fun. But, then we caught ourselves, and I said, "You know, we probably should not take such delight in criticizing the theologians. It can be a pride thing." She agreed, "Yes, by saying how wrong they are, we are proclaiming how right we are."

It's an easy trap to fall into. We call it the "Isn't it awful syndrome."

As a priest, I don't believe I am exempt from the warning from the Lord to St. Catherine about judging other priests. I don't have any more right than a layperson to criticize my brother priests. Sometimes this involves biting my tongue when the subject is a less-than-perfect priest.

As I mentioned earlier, it is not wrong to acknowledge the errors of priests or bishops, or gently point them out. But, when it becomes a zealous sport to pontificate about such errors, and to verbally attack these clerics personally, it goes too far.

Love the Bishops

People have a rather rose-colored idea of the life of a bishop. It's not so pleasant. About 15% of his work is making decisions. The other 85% is dealing with headaches.

I remember well the quip of my pre-ordination retreat director: "Isn't it interesting that in this age when we have so few vocations to the priesthood, we have so many vocations to the episcopacy." And, we might add, to the papacy!

When people publicly criticize a bishop, or any man, for that matter, the one criticized will often dig in his heels for his position even he may not care that much about it. He does that to show that he won't be manipulated by those who try to strong-arm him, even if the criticism is well-intended or well-placed.

On the other hand, people such as St. Catherine of Siena and St. Bernard of Clairvaux had tremendous influence over bishops by their letters. It is not hard to see why: their letters were humble and respectful, and full of love. "But they were saints," one might argue. They became saints, but if you examine their lives you will find that many did not recognize their sanctity when they were alive. Furthermore, it was their sanctity that inspired them

to urge reform with love, and so it will be with our sanctity, if we strive for it.

The priests and bishops are probably no worse than they were in the time of St. Catherine of Siena, or St. Francis of Assisi. In fact, they are much better, in general, despite the shameful scandals of a few, in recent years. We have a choice to make: to give in to our sadness and become a "priest-basher" or "bishop-basher," always ready to lament with great energy the faults of our clergy; or, while acknowledging the errors of the clergy, we can become morale-builders in the Church, always emphasizing the positive, always ready to build up, not tear down. And, if we look closely, we'll see a lot of positives in the Church today, and in every age.

St. Paul said it well: "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves" (1 Thess. 5:11-13). This is the way to true holiness, and the joy which always accompanies it. And, this Christian joy, unlike sullenness, is infectious.

NOTES:

1. *Catherine of Siena; The Dialogue*, translated by Suzanne Noffke, O.P., New York: Paulist Press, 1980, pp. 229-231.

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The Danger of Criticizing Bishops and Priests

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In the thirteenth century many priests were involved in seeking wealth and having a pleasant life. They hardly preached at all, virtually never studied, and paid for important positions so that they could get even more money. A number of priests openly lived with women, causing great scandal. Some of the bishops lived in unbelievable wealth, and would sell Church positions to keep their rich life style. Many of the people were just as bad as their leaders.

As a result, many so-called prophets had appeared, some good, some not-so-good, who promised terrible punishments if people did not reform. Peter Waldo was one of the reformers who had a great beginning. He gave up his riches to live in poverty and spread the faith. He had many followers who also lived as poor men, and did penance. However, when they began to preach without permission against the lazy and sinful priests, the Archbishop of Lyons, France, excommunicated them.

The group, called the Waldensians, took their case to the pope, and he encouraged them. He praised Peter for living in poverty and gave him and his followers permission to urge the people to live moral and holy lives wherever the bishops allowed them to do so. But since they had not studied theology they were not permitted to explain the Bible or to instruct people in the faith. Unfortunately, they began to do both.

In time they got into all sorts of errors, such as placing their interpretation of the Bible over the authority of the pope, denying both purgatory, and veneration of the saints. They also refused to go to confession to immoral priests, preferring to confess to good people who were not priests. As a result, the Waldensians were excommunicated by the pope in 1184.

However, there were still a number of them going all over, spreading their errors. And, there were also the Albigensians or Cathari, as they were called in Italy, who condemned the material world as evil. As a result they denied the sacraments, and marriage in particular. Many people listened to both the leftover Waldensians and Cathari because they lived Gospel poverty, unlike the priests.

Despite their sincerity, and their living radical Gospel poverty, they all fell astray. They lost the faith. But, their contemporary, Francis of Assisi did not. Why not? Because

he never went anywhere to preach the Gospel without permission of the priests. Furthermore, he would never criticize the priests and bishops—even the most lazy and immoral ones—nor would he allow his friars to do so. (As a result, the Franciscans were always welcome just about everywhere they went.)

Once a Waldensian challenged Francis on his unshakeable reverence for priests, by pointing out the local pastor who was living in sin. “Must we believe in his teaching and respect the sacraments he performs?”

In response, Francis went to the priest’s home and knelt before him saying, “I don’t know whether these hands are stained as the other man says they are. [But] I do know that even if they are, that in no way lessens the power and effectiveness of the sacraments of God... That is why I kiss these hands out of respect for what they perform and out of respect for Him who gave His authority to them.” His challenger left in silence.

The Franciscan Order revolutionized the faith in Europe during the 19 years from Francis’s conversion at age 25 to his death. There were thousands of Franciscans by the time he died, spreading the true faith, not by pointing out the sins of the priests and bishops (of which there were certainly many), but by living the gospel so simply and so joyfully that people found it irresistible.

Today there are many priests and even bishops who seem to invite criticism by what they say and do, but most are far less culpable than the priests and bishops of St. Francis’ time. The recent scandals in the U.S. priesthood are much uglier but they have been dealt with far more strongly than those lesser but more widespread faults of the thirteenth century.

Rejecting Doctrines

And, I believe the people who will bring about a new springtime in the Church will be more like Francis of Assisi than today’s harsh critics of priests and bishops. Perhaps the example of the Waldensians and Albigensians gives us an insight into what happens when people focus on the sins of priests and bishops.

I believe such criticism can feed our own pride, and make us feel superior to our Church leaders. From that point it is not a great leap to begin to lump their teaching in with their behavior, and to begin to reject the doctrines of the Church. The danger is real.

Jesus warned his followers not to reject the doctrines of the scribes and Pharisees despite their shameful behavior:

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice. They bind heavy burdens,

hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by men. (Matt. 23:1-7)

A few verses later he proclaims, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites,” and calls them “blind guides,” and “brood of vipers.” Nonetheless, people are to “practice and observe whatever they tell you,” because they are, in effect, descendants of Moses.

I would venture to say that most of our bishops are far better than the scribes and Pharisees, and they are the descendants of the apostles. How important it is that we listen to them, especially in light of the fact that Jesus told them, “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16).

Liturgical Tampering

Another problem that emerges sometimes among those who would rather criticize than pray for bishops is deciding for themselves the form the liturgy should take. Some take on themselves the prerogative to make little changes in their responses at Mass, thereby causing division in precisely the place where we should be most unified. Whether it be rejecting a certain memorial acclamation, or responding in Latin when the congregation is responding in English, or substituting the word “God” for “he” or “him” for feminist purposes, any of these can be a distraction for others trying to lift their hearts and minds to God.

It is not up to us to decide what is apt in the Mass, but the bishops. Surely, we should avoid doing something immoral, but besides that unlikely case, we should obediently follow the liturgy given to us by those chosen to do so. Whether we like a translation or not (and some seem to be lacking at times), we should accept and use what our superiors have given us. Far better to write a humble letter to the bishops than to change things on our own authority. And far better to pray for better translations.

Losing Joy

There is a further danger of being so ready to criticize bishops or priests: we can become very dour Catholics. The more we criticize and complain, the more we bring down the morale of the Church and the more gloomy we become. (St. Teresa of Avila said once, “God deliver me from gloomy saints!”) Many sincere, orthodox Catholics have become sour people because they continued to dwell on the faults of the clergy, so sour that they have been unable to

contribute something positive to the Church, despite their many talents.

This is not to say we may not acknowledge the wrongs of priests and bishops, but we should do so reluctantly and with understatement. And then, we should move on to the positive, the things that will build up the Church and her morale. We should never *dwell* on the negative elements of priests and bishops—or anyone else, for that matter—because it will make us melancholy people, always ready to point out the negative aspect of any situation.

The devil is most clever in bringing down those who sincerely love God and the Church. He gets them to dwell on the negative elements of the Church and thereby destroys their joy. We mustn’t fall for this ruse. If we want to be holy, we must focus on the positive, and let nothing destroy our joy.

God the Father spoke to St. Catherine of Siena about his “ministers,” the priests. She recorded it in her *Dialogue*:

...[It] is my intention that they be held in due reverence, not for what they are in themselves, but for my sake, because of the authority I have given them. Therefore the virtuous must not lessen their reverence, even should these ministers fall short in virtue. And, as far as the virtues of my ministers are concerned, I have described them for you by setting them before you as stewards of... my Son’s body and blood and of the other sacraments. This dignity belongs to all who are appointed as such stewards, to the bad as well as to the good.

...[Because] of their virtue and because of their sacramental dignity you ought to love them. And you ought to hate the sins of those who live evil lives. But you may not for all that set ourselves up as their judges; this is not my will because they are my Christs, and you ought to love and reverence the authority I have given them.

You know well enough that if someone filthy or poorly dressed were to offer you a great treasure that would give you life, you would not disdain the bearer for love of the treasure, and the lord who had sent it, even though the bearer was ragged and filthy... You ought to despise and hate the ministers’ sins and try to dress them in the clothes of charity and holy prayer and wash away their filth with your tears.

Indeed, I have appointed them and given them to you to be angels on earth and sons, as I have told you. When they are less than that you ought to pray for them. But you are not to judge them. Leave the judging to me, and I, because of your prayers and my own desire, will be merciful to them.

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Is judging the same as criticizing? It’s close. The Random House American College Dictionary defines the word “criticize” as “1. To make judgments as to merits and faults. 2. To find fault.”