

## Revisiting the theology of clericalism

Theology tends to ramp up the status and certainty of its models and theories so that what starts off as a theory morphs into unquestionable truth

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Clericalism is on everyone's lips. The pope decries it. Australia's Royal Commission judged it a major factor contributing to child sex abuse by priests. Some bishops have joined the chorus denouncing it, even though other bishops resentfully bite their tongues.

**Le cléricalisme est sur toutes les lèvres...des évêques le dénoncent mais d'autres se mordent les lèvres...**

But, as the saying goes, you tell me what you do, and I will tell you what you believe. Follow that line and we find clericalism alive and well.

**Le cléricalisme est bien vivant**

The factional divide in the Catholic Church is becoming ever more political and militant. It parallels the identity politics which is currently enveloping many of the world's democracies.

**Une ligne de fracture divise l'Eglise. Elle est politique et similaire à celle qui existe dans beaucoup de démocraties.**

One faction places its focus on the church as institution — with its system, doctrine, law and clerical control. The other stresses the Christian vision, and sees system, doctrine, law and clergy as its servants.

**Un bord pointe l'Eglise institution, son système, sa doctrine, ses lois, basée sur le cléricat, l'autre affirme la vision chrétienne d'un système, d'une doctrine, de lois et de clergé serviteurs.**

The 50 years since Vatican II have seen the pendulum first move from dominance of the clerical system as the Church embraced the new social order, followed by 25 years of restoration of clerical centralization and control.

**Le pendule est allé durant ces 50 ans d'après concile d'une Eglise nouvelle à une restauration de son ancien état.**

Seminary training followed the same pattern. Priests ordained between 1960 and 1975 were pastorally minded and well educated in theology, history and scripture. Since then ordination numbers have been minimal and the products more clerical, less interested in intellectual pursuits and jealous of their clerical rank. Sacristy priests rather than pastoral leaders.

**Il en a été de même quant à la formation des prêtres...devenus jaloux de leur rang de clerics, prêtres de sacristie plutôt que pasteurs.**

There is infighting in clerical ranks over in-house issues which are irrelevant to the laity. Meanwhile, formerly devoted Catholics, liberated from clerical control, have gone their own way – many leaving altogether.

As ever, knowing the history helps to work out a solution. Theology follows practice and is an attempt to provide a rational explanation of that practice.

**Comme toujours l'histoire aide à trouver une solution.**

The theology of the Constantinian church was formulated in an intellectual climate of the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle and in the Greek language. Much of it does not speak to today's world.

**La théologie de l'Église constantinienne a été construite dans l'environnement intellectuel grec de la philosophie de Platon et d'Aristote. Ça ne parle plus beaucoup au monde d'aujourd'hui.**

How did clericalism become entrenched in the Catholic Church? The answer lies largely with the theology of early Christianity after Emperor Constantine made it central to the structure of his empire in the 4th century. Imperial patronage brought that great temptation – power. Bishops got status and power.

**Le cléricalisme apparaît avec la théologie du christianisme constantinien : la tentation du pouvoir touche les évêques.**

A key pastoral question of the newly endorsed Constantinian church was how you deal with people who had become Christians, been baptized and then abandoned the faith under persecution. What do you do with them if they want readmission?

**Une question clé de pastorale fut alors de résoudre le problème de ceux qui devenus chrétiens, avait été baptisés mais avait rejeté la foi sous la persécution.**

The pastoral practice that emerged was to allow them back after doing penance, but not to baptize them again. How explain this policy? Here the tail wagged the dog.

**La pratique fut de les réintégrer après pénitence mais sans nouveau baptême.**

The answer the theologians came up with was that baptism causes an irreversible change in the essence of the person – like a seal on their soul. It caused an ontological change.

**Les théologiens répondirent que le baptême cause un changement irréversible dans l'essence de la personne, comme un sceau sur l'âme ; il amène un changement ontologique.**

This theory fitted the scene even better once clergy got power and ruled the community rather than led it. The sacrament had created a sacred person.

**Cette approche "colle" d'autant mieux que le clergé est en situation de pouvoir et dirige la communauté plutôt qu'il la conduit. Le sacrement a créé une personne sacrée.**

Theology tends to ramp up the status and certainty of its models and theories so that what starts off as a theory morphs into unquestionable truth.

As Christianity grew it became more organized. St Paul lists various ways members helped each other in his letter to the Corinthians. Different members had different talents which they used to serve the community.

**Dans sa lettre aux Corinthiens St Paul décrit comment les membres d'une communauté peuvent s'aider les uns les autres par leurs talents différents.**

Quite early, these were formalized as ministries. The Latin word for to designate or direct is “ordinare.” The problem with translating this into English as “ordain” is that it carries sacral overtones not in the Latin original.

Très tôt ce fut formalisé sous le terme de ministères. Le mot latin est « ordinare ». Le problème de traduction est que le mot « ordre » est connoté par le sens sacré, ce que le latin ne contient pas.

The elders (presbyters) of the early Christian community emerged as leaders along similar lines to the synagogue. Presiding over the Eucharist became reserved to them. Over time that role became sacralised ; and their routine designation (or ordination) became a consecration. The priest was not only the elder. He was a sacred person.

Les anciens (presbytes) devinrent à la manière juive les leaders; présider l'eucharistie leur fut réservé. Leur rôle devint sacré, l'ordination devenant une consécration...

The price paid by the clergy was pride and arrogance and a presumption of entitlement, which made them a caste which dominated rather than served — that enforced rather than led. It created two ranks of Christians.

Le prix à payer fut la fierté, l'arrogance et le droit qui fit d'eux une caste dominante plus que servante. Deux classes de chrétiens étaient ainsi créées.

Clergy ranks have been breaking down for a long time. Priests have left in large numbers. Others have been dismissed due to scandal. Clerical sex abuse has de-authorized priests and, more so, bishops. Yet other former priests are working formally and informally in church ministries. The “priest forever” tag just doesn't hold any more.

Les rangs de clercs se sont effondrés...des prêtres sont partis...les scandales d'abus sexuels touchent prêtres et évêques. L'étiquette « prêtre pour toujours » ne peut plus tenir.

There are plenty of suggestions as to how to eliminate clericalism: A conversion of heart in the clergy from power to service. Changing the lifestyle and curriculum of seminaries so that they cease to be academies of clericalism. Selecting only proved pastors as bishops. But none of these will work without re-visiting the underpinning theology of the seal.

Il y a beaucoup de propositions pour changer...mais aucune ne tiendra si on ne revient pas sur la théologie du sceau.

The theology of the seal has passed its use by date. A priest is no more sacred than any other baptized Christian. His or her designation to lead the Eucharist should arise from a calling by the Church; and any rite of designation a true ordination – not a consecration – by the community. His retaining of that ministry should be at the pleasure of the community.

Un prêtre n'est pas plus sacré qu'un autre baptisé. Sa désignation pour présider l'eucharistie est un appel pas une consécration...

Leadership of the community should be a quite separate ministry filled by someone competent and willing to do it. As the seal fractures, a more varied and adaptable community can be born.