

Time to bury the clergy-centered Church

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Pope Francis arrives for the weekly general audience on June 5, 2019 at St. Peter's square in the Vatican. (Photo by EIDON/FABIO FRUSTACI/MaxPPP)

What's the greatest threat to the Roman Catholic Church today – a schism? Or the rise in power of fundamentalist clericalists?

José María Castillo, himself a priest, believes it's the latter.

The 90-year-old Spaniard was one of the most influential theologians in Latin America and elsewhere during the first couple of decades following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). His books, published in the dozens, were mandatory reading in many Spanish-speaking seminaries and universities immediately after the Council.

Then they weren't.

Not long after his election in 1978, John Paul II put the brakes on the push for further ecclesial reform (as theologians like Castillo were advocating) and began his restorationist project of carefully narrowing the interpretation and application of the Vatican II documents.

One way the Polish pope did this was by appointing compliant and doctrinally conservative (and unimaginative) bishops. They, in turn, with the support of the Vatican's doctrinal office, began silencing and marginalizing theologians like Castillo.

A return of the early post-Vatican II theologians

These theologians have found a new lease on their ecclesial lives since Jorge Mario Bergoglio SJ was elected Bishop of Rome in 2013.

The man we now call Pope Francis, even without any formal writ of rehabilitation, has allowed them to begin contributing again to the discussions, debates and process of discernment that his pontificate has re-introduced in the Church.

It is nothing short of amazing how much the atmosphere inside the Church has changed in just seven years.

Archbishop Piero Marini, the longtime Vatican official most identified with the post-conciliar liturgical reforms, said just after Francis' election that we had been "breathing the air of a swamp."

Unfortunately, the Argentine pope, who is famous even beyond Church circles for being one of the world's most outspoken defenders of the environment, has not been able to completely clean up the old, stifling atmosphere within centralized Catholicism.

There are priests, bishops and cardinals in places of influence and power – in Rome and abroad – who are doing everything they can to stop the 83-year-old pope from making any changes that might threaten their clericalist privileges.

The clericalists strike back

And one of the sinister methods they are using to try halt him in his tracks is to constantly raise the specter of a Church schism.

Some commentators believe this was at least a factor in the pope's decision not to mention, in his recent exhortation on the Amazon, the issue of married priests and women deacons.

"At the Vatican the ideas and interests of the cardinals, bishops and monsignors that represent the conservative clergy far outweigh the deprived needs of the hundreds of thousands of Catholics who live in the Amazon region," José María Castillo has observed.

In an article published Feb. 17 on the site *Religión Digital*, he said the threat posed by the continued, lopsided influence of such clericalists is much more serious than any possible schism.

And the reason is simple. The clericalists, just a miniscule part of the 1.2 billion-member Church, are seriously violating the rights of the Catholic faithful.

Castillo cited paragraph 37 of *Lumen gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

"The laity have the right, as do all Christians, to receive in abundance from their spiritual shepherds the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the assistance of the word of God and of the sacraments," that Vatican II text says.

The obligation to feed God's people

With every right there is an obligation. And here it is the obligation and responsibility of the Church's spiritual pastors (first and foremost its bishops) to provide the Catholic people with the sacraments.

But the bishops are not doing that in the Amazon. Nor are they doing it in many other places of the world where there are not enough ordained presbyters to lead Eucharistic celebrations – i.e. to validly consecrate the hosts.

"It is a pressing obligation of Church authority to adequately respond to this right of the faithful," Castillo wrote.

"It's a duty the pope must respond to despite the arguments and interests of the fundamentalist and conservative clergy," he continued.

"In the Church of the early centuries every community had the recognized right to elect its ministers. And even the right to remove them when the ministers' behavior was not in conformity with their mission," he noted.

He cited the acts from a synod held in Spain in the 3rd century to show that even Rome upheld this right. And, thus, the Church consisted in the community more than in the clergy.

Priorities upside down

But today, he said, the situation is totally reversed.

"That which is imposed is what's in the interest and convenience of the clergy, even when that leads to the religious and evangelical abandonment of hundreds of thousands of Catholics," he wrote.

"It's extremely important to underline very clearly that this situation will only be resolved when two, ever more pressing decisions are made: 1.) allow the presbyteral ordination of married men; 2.) establish equal rights for men and women in the Church," he said.

The bishops should not wait for the pope to do this. Nor should they expect him to do so, at least not on his own.

They can take action now to fulfill their responsibility to provide their people with the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The first step is to formally petition the pope to allow the ordination of married men.

The legal way forward

The bishops at the Synod assembly on the Amazon "proposed" this, but – technically – they did use the canonical language over which people like Cardinal Baldisseri love to split hairs.

In fact, there is a canonical process that a bishop or conference of bishops (or perhaps a Synod assembly) can follow to request the ordination of married men.

The Code of Canon Law actually foresees this possibility.

While it states that "a man who has a wife" is simply impeded from receiving holy orders (Can. 1042, no. 1), it also says – quite specifically – that the Holy See can dispense of this impediment (cf. Can. 1047 § 2, no. 3).

We often say it's easier to get what you want if you ask nicely.

In the Catholic Church – yes, also in the pontificate of Pope Francis – it's even better if you ask "canonically."