

# SUPPORT OF THE CLERGY

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During an informal dialogue of assistants, the subject of priests' salary—inevitably—comes into the spotlight: a matter I plan to discuss in this paper under the general title of *Support of the Clergy*. To talk on this is surely our right, provided our remarks and criticism, if any, be geared towards a constructive action: to find a common solution to a common problem. Some amount of empathy, however, and a certain cool-headedness is needed for a wise and intelligent discussion on the matter. Hence, let us from the outset remember that we did not become priests for lucrative gains by profession but for a service to others by consecration. This does not mean a refusal of temporal things but some use for a certain purpose. Up to what degree? That is precisely the question.

## *I — What the Council Says<sup>1</sup>*

Vatican II does not specify the amount of recompense a priest should receive for the discharge of his duties. That's up to the bishop or for the Episcopal Conference to decide. What the Council rather does is to give general principles that would serve as a guidance in setting up norms by which a decent upkeep can be truly provided for. The first norm actually is a reminder to the faithful of their obligation to support their priests, for it is in their behalf that priests labour.

Then the Council squarely brings out the principle of income equality for priests working in the same circumstances considering their office. It

<sup>1</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbot, S.J., The America Press, New York, pp. 568-574.

seems this standardization of salaries would affect not only the clergy in the lowest rank but even the highest gamut of officialdom in a diocese.

From what the Church asks us to do with our money we could more or less guess the minimum wage for clerics: "Without prejudice to particular laws, priests and bishops should devote primarily to their decent livelihood and to the fulfillment of the duties of their proper state and benefice which they receive when they exercise some church office. What remains beyond that, they should devote to the goods of the Church or to works of charity... It should also allow them to make suitable to those who dedicate themselves to the service of the priests. It should also enable them to make some kind of personal assistance to the needy. Moreover this recompense should be such as to allow priests a requisite and sufficient vacation each year." This decent livelihood (the latin *honesta sustentatio*) refers to the means needed for a better discharge of our duties. It either enhances the personality as books do or enable us to do the maximum work as a car does. An *honesta sustentatio*, I believe, should include all these except when these technical aids to our ministry would be provided for from the funds of a parish or a diocese. In the latter case which would perhaps be a better policy to show that all these have a functional value, not just for luxury, the monthly salary of an average priest would then obviously be smaller.

It is further recommended by the Council that a common fund for the sustentation of priests be instituted in the diocese to be administered by the bishop with the help of priest-delegates and, when useful, of lay experts in finance. Also Episcopal Conferences are enjoined to see to it that under the vigilance of the hierarchy sufficient provision is made for an appropriate program of preventive medicine and so-called health benefits, and for the necessary support of priests burdened by infirmity, ill health or old age. But let us make an honest and sincere reappraisal of the actual situation.

## II — *What the Actual Situation Is*

I just wonder how many of our people realize their obligation to support the clergy. In most of the parishes though their income is

mainly due to the offerings of the faithful. Yet one wonders whether our own parishioners who come for baptism or marriage in our parish ever think of support of the priest when they pay the bill. Instead of support, they think in terms of *quid pro quo*. Then there is the patent riches of the Church! It is said that 60% of the total investment in Italy is owned by the Vatican. People know what hacienda belongs to the Church, how much stocks and shares we have at San Miguel. In such an enormity of wealth, how can they be convinced to help one who needs no help?

It is amazing how great is the inequity in priests' finances. In a recent survey<sup>2</sup> made in Washington Archdiocese, it has been found that over a two-month period a priest from a Suburban area gets a total of \$245.00 giving him a monthly average of \$122.50, while a priest in an inner-city area gets a total of \$39.00 giving him a monthly average of 19.50. The reason for this difference is simply because one benefice is better than the other. That is why the Council wishes that "henceforth the benefice system be abolished or at least it should be reformed in such a way that the beneficiary aspect, that is, the right to revenue accruing to an endowed office, will be treated as secondary and the main consideration in law will be accorded to the ecclesiastical office itself." The benefice system is a remnant of medieval feudalism and it is precisely in this feudal setting that temptation to favoritism and politicking is so common in the Church.

It is not so much the amount received as the method of paying priests that is quite dissatisfying. Under our system, an assistant is too much at the mercy of his parish priest's generosity as to his salary. A parish priest receives 2/3 of the monthly income that is fluctuating from month to month and from parish to parish. Aside from what they get as assistant or pastor, they still have other hidden income coming from other sources as stipends, stole fees, and tips. Not being a single flat sum, it is very difficult to compute what a priest earns monthly. This system creates a number of abuses such as the cafeteria high Masses

<sup>2</sup> *Priests' Equity Fund - An Experiment in Justice*, George F. Spellman, H. P. R., March 1967, pp. 507-508.

just to get ₱25.00 stipend and other on-the-side clerical promotion schemes like Father's Day Collection so that Father can take a vacation or fancy anniversary celebration so that Father can go abroad. (3)

One of the things our Archdiocese can boast of is our Mutual del Clero. Founded by His Eminence in 1957, it is surely one of the first of its kind and, for all intent and purpose, a very laudable project, no doubt in line with the thinking of the Council. However, I notice that more and more of the members are withdrawing from it or at least have ceased to pay their fees. One complaint I heard was that they don't receive enough for what they give. Against the critics of the *Mutual*, I think the privilege is better than none. Besides its very purpose is to give mutual assistance charity to brother-priests in time of sickness and charity in that situation never asks for equality but rather gives till it hurts. The *Mutual* is not a Life or an Accident Insurance but a help to needy priests.

### III Conclusion by way of some suggestions

We have reviewed the situation with the sincerity of a critic. Now let us build it up with the realism of a humble subject by the following suggestions:

1) The obligation for the faithful to support the clergy would be manifested in a much more evangelical way by voluntary offering than by fixed prices in the Arancel. Of course, this system without a spiritual orientation and a constant education of the faithful would no doubt lower the parish income especially at the beginning. But at least in this way the sacraments would cease to appear like merchandise and the Church would return to the pristine beauty of spiritual poverty. When the Apostles administered the sacraments, they asked for faith, not *fianza*.

2) Human nature, being what it is, comparative income does have a significant influence in creating unhealthy attitude towards the paro-

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<sup>3</sup> *The Priests' Salary*, C. Walter Weiss, H. P. R. (Nov. 1964, pp. 134-135.)

chial ministry. Good, plum, rural, and inner-city are adjective which indicate sizable income or just getting by, according to one's assignment. Since the mission of Christ is one, similar remuneration should be provided for similar ministries. It frequently happens that a priest working in an indigent area has unusual charitable demands placed on him. He should not be unnecessarily burdened or financially penalized because of his assignment. On the other hand, neither should the affluence of one's environment determine the extraordinary income some priests enjoy.

3) To achieve equality the income of all priests should be determined by a graduated salary scale based upon the number of years a priest has served the diocese. A newly ordained priest would receive a salary of say P3,600.00 a year regardless of his assignment. Annually he would receive an increase until a fixed maximum peak would be reached. This plan would negate the deceit now practiced by quoting as salary only P60.00 while saying nothing about fees and stipends. This would scuttle the question of our good people "How could Father live on so little?"

4) Another solution towards equity would be to put all the income of priests within a diocese in one common fund and divide it in some equitable way. The income to be handed should include all fees derived from ministrations common to priests, exempting only the special income derived from professional skill like teaching, writing, retreat, and lectures.

5) The plea has never been for "more money". In fact, equal distribution might sometimes amount to a lowering of what we used to receive. As a remedy we could perhaps accept the solution of a Sunday priest or a part-time minister, proposed by Msgr. Ivan Illich in an article that appeared in *The Critic*. With the emergence of a St. Paul type of priests, the Church will finally free itself from the restrictive system of benefices. More importantly, the Church will have abandoned the complex series of services which have resulted in the minister becoming an artificial appendix to established social functions. Today, a man supports himself by working a job in the world, not by performing a role in the hierarchy. It is certainly not contrary to the purposes

of Canon Law to consider professional ability or earned social security as a sufficient sign of independence for ordination and the ministry.<sup>4</sup>

6) Also with regards to social security for advancing age, the pleas should not be for more. As a matter of fact, church personnel in general enjoy remarkable privileges. Ecclesiastical employees live in comfortable church-owned housing, are assured preferential treatment in church-operated health services, are mostly trained in ecclesiastical educational institutions and are buried in hallowed grounds—after which they are prayed for. Every teen-ager who seeks employment among the clergy is almost automatically guaranteed a status which confers a variety of personal and social benefits. Yet it still remains true that retirement should be encouraged at a definite age (say 75 according to the *Motu Proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae* of Oct. 11, 1966). But probably nothing will elicit a stronger reaction from a priest in his early seventies than the idea of being put away in an old folks' home. A better solution might be to place them not in a diocesan institution but in a private home (like a residential hotel catering to a specialized clientele) with a substantial pension, a certain freedom of movement and a status symbol as a small compensation to those who may feel pushed out or otherwise unwanted.<sup>5</sup> This is a plea for just a little bit more in behalf of those who stick it out till the very end—for some to the point of heroism.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Vanishing Clergyman*, Msgr. Ivan Ilich, *The Critic*, June-July 1967, pp. 8-27.

<sup>5</sup> *Clerical Retirement*, John McCarthy, *H. P. R.* Dec. 1966, pp. 197-206.