

## LAYMAN'S VIEW

### PASTORAL ROLE EXPECTATIONS

- Roberto Lazaro

*"The priest has a role to play and people expect him to play that role."*

In every organization, there are role expectations which the individual playing the role must live up to or suffer the loss of image. If this individual is a leader, his failure to fulfill his role expectations will cost him not only a loss of image but also the loss of subordinate acceptance.

The priest is the pastoral leader of his people. There is a leadership role he must fulfill according to a definite behavioral pattern his Catholic constituents expect. His effectiveness as a pastoral leader will depend on how well or how poorly he fulfills this role.

In the mind of the layman, the term *pastoral* does not only mean *spiritual*. The priest is the leader of the community called the parish, leading not only in prayers or in the celebration of the Mass. He is looked up to as a leader who sets the example in practical day to day life. What he does, and not what he preaches is what people observe. How he behaves, and not how fluently he expounds the Teachings and the Commandments, is what influences the thinking attitude and behavior of his parishioners.

It is an unfortunate fact and an unpleasant truth to face, that in the Philippines today Catholicism is not as soundly founded as it may perhaps be presumed. There is a need for a frank and open minded assessment of the situation and of the factors responsible for the general apathy behind the appearances of capacity church attendances and the overwhelming majority of Catholic membership in this country. For

certainly, it is one thing to have a big membership and quite another thing to have quality members. Church services may be well attended and processions may be overcrowded, but the big crowd can mean something else and not necessarily fervent catholicism. Tradition, social pressures and even superstitious fanaticism are factors one cannot overlook in Catholic behaviorism in the Philippines. The role of the church as a church is not necessarily well appreciated and this is felt in poor Sunday collections, the lack of interest in church affairs *per se*, and the general attitude towards the priest and the priesthood. Ridicules and depective jokes center on priest, made even by regular church goers.

We have a good number of practicing, God-fearing, priest-respecting Catholics. But the rest are nominal who either take the priest for granted or harbor reservations towards him.

When we hear unfavorable comments, innocently or ill-intently given, regarding the priest, say, his mahjong sessions or other table games, his luxurious living, his celibacy, etc., we have a typical picture of a Catholic searching for something ideal which he cannot find and whose disappointment is manifested in such criticisms.

People are people, constituting a human society in the parish and subject to human expectations. When the priest does not live up to their expectations, the pulpit (or the ambo) loses its pristine apostolic appeal as the tribunal of the world of God, and the oratorical fluency of the preacher fails to achieve his effectiveness as a change agent in the life of his flock.

Spiritual incentives and sanctions have their limits in directing human behavior and way of thinking. Environmental context and frustrating human experience can misdirect the human conscience and lead to the consequent behavior one notices among many Catholics of the present day. It thus becomes imperative for the priest to assert his role as the model of an environment, a reassurance in the waverings of human experience, an objectifying factor in the development of the subjective conscience of his people. He has to make his presence felt as a human being capable of rising above his human weaknesses and possessed of the strength to share the needs of his community, a leader whose authority rings with a human voice echoing the voice of God in terms under-

standable in practical language. People want to see him not as a fault-finder, but rather as a guiltless leader capable of hearing the guilt of others.

Such is the layman's expectations of the priestly role. He is a man above other men in virtues, but a man among his people in leadership. He does not stand between God and men. Rather, he stands among men to lead them in the service of God. As such, his place is not the ivory tower of his rectory where he presumes that the Spirit of God will operate for him among his people. He is the image of that Spirit, and it is his life that must dwell in his people if he expects the Spirit of God to operate effectively in them.

Nothing can substitute for the personal leadership of the priest. After all, our God is a personal God. So why can the priest not be a personal priest, a personal leader who belongs to the people.

This is where, to the layman's mind, many priest fail to achieve the full purpose of their priestly goal, a goal which the last Vatican Council seems to have taken cognizance of in instituting reforms to make liturgy pastorally effective and to enable the people to participate in it not only with devotion *but with action*. In other words, the church, through the pastoral work of the priest, must be a truly effective agent of change in the practical life of her people.

An agent of change cannot act among the elements he is destined to change if it remains apart from those elements. And as it is for the agent to act, not to be acted upon, the priest who is the agent in this case, is expected to initiate, positively and actively, the changes desired within his community.

Yet, how often has it been lamented that priests expect the people to come to them, rather than they exerting efforts to go to the people!

In these days when people's time and attention are divided and inclined more towards the search for material needs, the priest cannot remain passive and unresponsive without sacrificing the spiritual and moral health of his flock. The people's spiritual plight is a silent one, better manifested in the form of indifference rather than in vocal clamours for the things they want and need. The priest must be able to

feel this inner plight, concretize the problem and impose his personal presence as a leader and as a pastor. Everytime he fails to provide his personal influence, other influences will fill in the vacuum. And when this happens, as it is in fact happening, the priest cannot shift the responsibility away from himself.

A legionary who was working eight hours a day in a government office and devoting his free time after office hours to legion work by conducting house to house campaigns in a notorious urban district up to late in the evening once complained that when he brought several civilly married couples to the parish rectory for married validation one Saturday afternoon, the priest was sleeping and could not be disturbed. Here was a case of a layman sacrificing his own time and convenience for the sake of the service of the Church, only to meet with an uncooperative attitude of the priest whose function it was that the layman took upon himself to perform, while the priest was still at his nap at 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon.

In many remote areas of the country, it is a well known fact that after saying the morning mass and spending, if at all, an hour or so in giving catechetical instructions to parish children, the priest spends the rest of the day to himself. There is a widespread scandal in the public mind on the "relaxing moments" some priest spend in affairs which the Catholic laymen commonly talk about in hushes and blushes in embarrassment when mentioned in ridicule by those who attack the church. These are indications that there are idle hours misspent, which otherwise are better devoted to constructive leadership activities.

Makeshift public libraries with even delayed or old issues of newspapers and magazines, improvised health centers with donated medicines from the more flourishing areas, visits to the sick, or simple social calls to pep up morale, community meetings for adult education or farming methods — these or other activities may be launched by the priest to complement the spiritual guidance he gives to his rural parishioners. In the urban or more populated parishes, the priest can affectively lead in community activities of sports, civic action work and instructional programs.

Too much, perhaps, to expect of a priest who after all is only human and whose capacities and endurance are limited. True!

But is it not also true and with very good reasons that a priest who is only as human as anybody else, is expected to rise above human vices more than anybody else? It is all a matter of role expectations. People expect the priest to be a leader, a model, a pastor, with all the virtues and traits attached, by role expectations, to his height in the leadership rung of the organizational hierarchy. So does God expect the priest, as pastor, representative, *alter-Christus*, to be above other men to see, the salt that has not lost its savor to perk up the dull monotony of a materialistic world and to keep the fallen nature of men from total putrefaction.

In the same vein, the priest is expected, as the leader of his people, to surpass the limits of human endurance, not by a superhuman physical strength or prowess, but by the proper harnessing of his intellectual creativeness, his ingenuity to utilize all possible resources, human and material, within the parish to advantage.

After all, the priest has been trained in the theodical principles of cause and effect, of the moved and the mover. Translating these principles in practical terms in pastoral work, he can create a spread effect of chain reactions among his people both by his moral example and his active apostolate, training men to train others, developing apostles to develop other apostles, instituting centers to spread all over, planting trees to bear fruits and seeds and other trees — all the work of one man, the priest, but not as a man as an individual apart from the rest; rather, a man as a driving part of the whole, coordinating the parts towards a definite goal and inspired by a definite motive: God.

When we see around us non-Catholic denominations sprouting and spreading, we know that there is something wrong with our own system. Every individual who joins a non-Catholic sect is a hole in our wall which must be plugged. Every Catholic who fails to live upright as a Catholic is a weak strand in our fence which must be mended. How many such holes do we have in the wall and how many such weak strands do we have in our fence. And how efficiently does the yard keeper go about its upkeep?