

Why Priests Leave—A Further Analysis

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Several years ago while I was still studying theology in the seminary, I wrote an article for *Tripod* magazine setting forth my understanding of this phenomenon: why priests leave the ministry. Now, as an ordained priest, I look back on this previous article. I would like to go deeper into my personal understanding of this same phenomenon. I am grateful to the kindness of the English editor of *Tripod*, Sr. Betty Ann Maheu, for inviting me to take up my pen to write again on this subject.

I have divided this article into the following four parts: (1) An independent Church without autonomy; (2) A heartrending discernment: who is loyal and who is a traitor; (3) On the edge of the knife: how Catholics judge; (4) Interior emptiness; burnt out commitment.

An Independent Church without Autonomy

When the new China was established in 1949, based on the concept of full sovereignty—one must understand the historical background of this event—the Nanjing Diocese was the first in the coming tidal wave of churches proclaiming “independence and autonomy to manage their own affairs.” In the whirlwind of events that shook all of China, most of the foreign missionaries, by the end of 1952, had already left China. Chinese Catholics enthusiastically set about establishing their own Church at the same time as the young People's Republic of China was setting up its national territory.

Actually, the policy of “independence and autonomy in managing the Church's own affairs” was not the creation of the '50s. In the early 20th century, Ying Lianzhi and Ma Xiangbo, outstanding personages in the Catholic Church, had proposed that Chinese should be in charge of their own Church. Despite the “French Protectorate” of that time, the Papal Nuncio to China, Archbishop Celso Costantini, made this statement, “The Chinese

clergy should be in charge of their own Church, and Chinese priests should be consecrated bishops.” Consequently in 1924 after the First Assembly of the Church in China had taken place in Shanghai, Costantini, with the support of Pope Pius XI, made preparations to establish several Chinese dioceses. In 1926 six Chinese priests were chosen to go to Rome to be consecrated as bishops by Pope Pius himself. They were to be in charge of six Chinese dioceses. These bishops were: Cheng Hede of Puqi Diocese, Sun Dezhen of Anguo Diocese, Zhu Kaimin of Haimen Diocese, Hu Ruoshan of Taizhou Diocese, Zhao Huaiyi of Xuanhua Diocese, and Chen Guodi of Fenyang Diocese. Simultaneously, the call was made to establish major seminaries for training Chinese priests throughout China. Within a short time, Church affairs were thriving despite the troubled times the whole country was then facing, such as the Sino-Japanese War. In 1946 the Holy See established the Chinese hierarchy. This hastened the process of indigenization that was then taking place in the Chinese Church.

Once the new China was established and had attained complete autonomy, and foreign missionaries had left the country, the Church gained its full independence despite the fact that this situation was happening very suddenly, catching many unprepared. Yet the Church in China began to walk the new road of standing on its own feet and controlling its own affairs. It worked together with all Chinese citizens showing tremendous enthusiasm to build their own glorious homeland.

In 1962 the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association held its second national congress in Beijing, but it came to an abrupt end and it was followed by an acute crisis. As all know, the distinctive mindset on religion held at that time resulted in excessive government interference in the right of the Church to conduct its own affairs. Some bishops, priests, Sisters and lay people were accused of being “counter-revolutionaries.” Some of these died a violent death, while others were imprisoned. This also led to the bitter experience of the Chinese Church having to discern the direction in which it was to go. In this discernment lay a snare that foreshadowed the future division of the Church in China.

In 1978, after the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee, the surviving Catholic Church along with other religious bodies set about once again to reestablish their existence.

After experiencing the great catastrophe, the extreme leftist "Cultural Revolution," the new generation of Party and government leaders began once again to investigate the "Religious Question." Several documents appeared. There was State Document #188 issued in 1980 entitled "The State Council Approves and Forwards to the Religious Affairs Bureau, State Commission of Development and other departments the report dealing with the Property of Religious Bodies." This was the first step enabling the Catholic Church and other religious communities to reestablish themselves.

There was Document 19 issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1982 entitled "Some Basic Concepts on the Basic Policy Our Nation Adopts on Religion during this Period of Socialism." This clarified the Communist Party's policy on religion during the period of Socialism. Then in 1991 the "National Conference on Religious Work" was held in Beijing. This conference reflected the Party's qualitative leap in its understanding of religion.

We truly think that the Communist government has already reached a very clear and objective understanding on the religious question. However this understanding is not shared by all cadres dealing with the religious question throughout the country. This is because religious belief, especially the Catholic belief, is still not part of the main stream of Chinese society. Too many cadres do not have a clear concept of religion. There is a common saying that describes this situation very well: "Policy may be made on high but there are counter policies down below." Aside from these difficulties, there are other specific problems existing on the local level. Some cadres who deal with religion do not have a clear understanding of the documents, such as State Document #188 issued in 1980 and Document #19 issued by the Central Committee in 1982. Some even claim that they do not wish to understand these documents. Too many cadres are still living in the ultra-leftist '50s and '60s and see religion as nothing but superstition and Catholicism as no different. Some make no effort to return Church properties, while others openly say that religion should be wiped out as soon as possible. Hence some cadres even appropriate Church properties for their own benefit while others under the aegis of the "Patriotic Association" try to control the Church making use

of immoral priests and lay people weak in faith to effect this control.

I remember an incident from the early '90s. A foreign friend sent a slide projector to our parish priest. The Religious Affairs Bureau in some way got wind of it, and ordered the priest to give them the machine and the slides for censorship. They kept the machine and slides for a year without any further information being given on what happened to the projector. After repeated attempts to find out what happened to this machine, it was finally returned to the church. On another occasion the pastor wanted to go to another place to minister the Sacrament of the sick to a parishioner but met with the opposition of the Religious Affairs Bureau. The reason given was the pastor could not go outside of his own defined territory. The result was most regrettable for the sick person was unable to receive the Sacraments. Despite the fact that the *National Congress on Religious Work* had already been held, incidents similar to these are not only repeated, but as a matter of fact make the way difficult for the Church. Priests must use all the wits at their command just to make some headway in their ministry.

It is because the Church is not free that some priests at the end of the '90s have left their ministry. They struggled to make the Church "free and able to go its own way," but they paid a heavy price for their struggle. Choosing to leave the priesthood no doubt shows up the limitations of the times, but it also can reflect the belief and hope that people have in God's providence. For no one can escape the influence of the times in which he lives, for it is the time that molds and shows a person's real worth.

History shows that our country has made some progress in its knowledge of religion. The process has been from extreme leftism to suppression to openness and mollification and eventually to the respect of religion. We can see the plan of God's providence in all this process, though it brings much suffering to priests who are caught up in it. Yet God meets us through this process. He tests, disciplines and chooses his faithful servants.

A Heartrending Discernment: Who is Loyal and Who is a Traitor

In the '80s a different view of the faith and experience of suffering divided the Church in China into two different streams. Loyalty or disloyalty to the Pope has become at the present time a criterion distinguishing which church is the true or false one. What the Church outside China artlessly calls the "Official Church or Open Church" has essentially also undergone some obvious modern developments in its process of recognizing the Holy See. Nevertheless the "criterion of loyalty" has continually shown itself to be a persistent way of thinking for the Church in China. The older generation of priests underwent a severe testing along with the young Republic itself. The '80s created different situations for those who experienced these bitter sufferings. They were present to and affected by the many historical and political campaigns, emotional sufferings, endless wrangling and differences of opinion with no way to reach a common understanding. However there is one very important point: the Church has continued to exist through all these vicissitudes, and the person of faith has had to learn that salvation comes through perseverance under trial and by trust in God. During all this troubled time the Pope, the head of the Church on earth, has never passed any judgment, negative or positive, on the Church in China. In his many addresses he rather keeps insisting on the need of the Church in China to "dialogue" so that united as one body it can proclaim the good news of God's love for all people.

The courageous stance that the unofficial Church takes towards dialogue with the government expresses in a clear-cut and unequivocal way the Church's strong aspect. Therefore the Church outside China calls it the "loyal Church." But who calls to mind the sufferings of the official Church? On the one hand, it must discern what the government says about religion at different times, while at the same time facing the many complicated situations occurring within the Church itself where a moment's carelessness can cause a great deal of harm. Evidently this requires painstaking care and concern. In addition if one has to meet attacks both in word and deed from one's own brothers, then this is nothing else than an unmitigated tragedy.

I remember one occasion when I met a Catholic from the unofficial Church. He said to me: "You rely on the government to do your religious work. We can see from this outlook that the opinion of people is quietly undergoing a change. What was said in the past 'You do not recognize the Pope' has now changed to another saying altogether."

To speak in all fairness, no one has the right to choose his birthplace. It is impossible for a priest acting on his own to choose the milieu in which his faith is nurtured. Born into the milieu that is the "unofficial Church" he will naturally grow up to be a priest in the "loyal Church." Likewise, for those born into the milieu that is the "official Church," most likely will not have many opportunities to grow up and become a priest in the "unofficial Church."

As long as people do not take history into account, but only see things from an individual point of view and surface values, then one can dispassionately yet forcefully claim to be loyal while completely overlooking historical reality as well any development in dialogue. This discerning between loyalty and disloyalty totally disregards history, or better say, it presents an extremely static viewpoint of history. Unfortunately some of the people who live under this static view of history consider themselves to be prophets speaking in the name of God, while others are compelled to shrug their shoulders and keep quiet.

On the Edge of the Knife: How Catholics Judge

The supplanting of the "old with the new" has been a major problem for the Church in China during the '80s. For example, the older generation of priests is being supplanted by the newer generation, beliefs of the older generation of Catholics by those of the younger generation, the Latin liturgy by the vernacular, etc. In addition, the implementing of the spirit of Vatican II bringing in new ideas and developing new methods for spreading the gospel has been applauded by many Catholics but has also hurt the religious sensibilities of others.

This year on Holy Thursday evening the ceremony of the "washing of the feet" was performed in many churches. Some Catholics were moved to tears, but others questioned the priests

whether the church was purposely beclouding the issues, because this particular rite was never used in China before 1950.

Catholics do not readily want to do away with their revered customs and traditions because the stripping away of their beloved customs and traditions held for a lifetime would leave them with no adequate support. They would suffer a deep sense of loss making them feel "old" and "useless." Therefore they cling tightly to a mindset that safeguards those traditions that give confidence and meaning to their lives. Even if they recognize in their hearts the values of the renewal favored by the young priests, they will insist on protecting their own spiritual turf rather than accept any form of renewal. Now if the young priests overlook or undervalue these inner feelings of older Catholics, the result will be "hardening of positions," each party takes towards his/her religion that will act as a stumbling block separating the two generations. It might be better to say that it creates tension between the Church that encourages traditions and the Church that implements development. Those most susceptible of being hurt by this affair are young priests who, isolated and without authority, but with a high degree of fervor for serving the Catholic community, find their ambitions thwarted and ideas impossible to implement. This causes some to think of walking away from the priesthood all the while rationalizing their feelings on the matter.

Another harm that is done to priests by the Catholic community is factional in-fighting among Catholic groups. St. Paul himself had to suffer from this problem. These factions push themselves forward and make their recommendations for the Church insisting that these clearly were traditional practices. Some Catholics perhaps favor Father A while other Catholics prefer to deal with Father B. Some take enthusiastic part in Church activities while others prefer to look on with jaundiced eye. One can form various opinions of the Church depending from which angle one sees things. Various small groups can form their own peculiar outlook on the faith, on the Church, on priests, and on moral standards, etc. They even have their own ways of judging things. Their actual concern for the Church and joining its activities depend on what priest is in charge at the moment and their feelings towards that particular priest. Those with congenial tastes and interests naturally can organize and carry out projects, but this does not

mean that faith is the sole motive force behind these projects. Each one thinks that he/she is carrying out God's will, but instead they may be only giving a hard time to young priests. In the meantime the work of the parish is left undone; some things being attended to and others neglected. Faults are at times imputed to others, while in the end many things are overlooked. A cloud of uncertainty covers everything with nobody taking responsibility. Those who just wish to get on with the work of the Church soon come to realize that both good and malicious criticism of the priest wears him out in the long run. Where criticism takes the place of affirmation, the one most affected is without doubt the young priest.

Interior Emptiness; Burnt out Commitment

The work of a priest is like that of Jesus: it is summed up in one word: "giving." However the prerequisite for "giving" is first of all to be "full" oneself. If one sticks blindly to work neglecting prayer, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, Examens, etc. then sooner or later the faith life will become empty and a formality. Perhaps one can take dedication to work, and make it a pretext for loyal and sincere service rendered to God. Or one can also consider the total efforts exerted on pastoral work of spreading the gospel to be the sole purpose and interest of a priest's life. But in the long run one will only neglect the basis for faith and commitment, relying on the self to be the sole support of one's role in the world.

I have my own thoughts on this matter. Every Sunday early in the morning the church is ablaze with lights. There are as many people in the church courtyard as there are in a market day. The priest and the Catholics gathered there have much to share with and say to each other. This goes on all day but by evening the reverse is true. Outside the lights are dimming but life is still bustling with activity. Inside the priest is sitting alone looking at an empty room, perhaps raising a cup to the moon, or acting as a companion to the television.

In fact for one who lives on the edge of loneliness it is possible to meet God. If one wishes to enter into the Lord's heart, one must first savor silence to hear the Lord's word. If one can by the light of a candle kneel alone before a small niche in his room, then with fervent will and perseverance he will enter into the depths

of stillness. Through silent emptiness and utter sincerity he can plumb the depths of reality. The whole of silent creation can lead him into the final emptiness of the nothing. Thus, by being alone in one's little room will in the end enable one to finally reach the state of calm and contentment.

Then as the next day arrives the priest can face the complicated tasks of the parish and meet the needs of the Catholics with a "resurrected" frame of mind. He will finally be able to "give" and not become empty, to humbly wait on the Lord, and in all sincerity become a support for others. In a word, we must say that the priest's chief task is to follow the Way and not just to perform a task.

Therefore, one's interior emptiness can only be faced by entering into oneself to discover the final meaning to life. God is in the innermost solitude of our heart and it is there that we shall find him. A priest who neglects his prayer shows that he still prefers to live in the outer world in order to avoid solitude of the heart. This interior emptiness along with the attempt to find easement in the world outside determines that the priest's life will of necessity be barren and empty. He will either leave his post, or face an inevitable struggle. This is the type of priest who must always maintain a frenetic activity in all that he does.

Conclusion: The Need of Mature Priests in a Church that is in Constant Need of Purification

Concerning the phenomenon of priests leaving their ministry, I have studied the above four aspects that challenge priestly ministry and tried to understand them from my own experience in the ministry for over a year. Basically we can divide these four aspects into two parts: the first is external challenges which include the first three aspects, namely, (1) An independent Church without power; (2) A heartrending discernment: who is loyal and who is disloyal; and (3) On the edge of the knife: how Catholics judge. The second part is an interior challenge, which is (4) Interior emptiness, burnt out commitment. In fact, no matter from which of these four sources one's "unfreedoms" stem, they challenge us to a decision: reliance on God or on oneself when one meets problems in life and in priestly ministry.

In the Old Testament (Book of Judges) the way the Israelites came to maturity in their relation with God was through the following experiences: trust in God→rebellion against God→subsequent disaster→calling upon God→trust in God. In today's situation we, too, must in the same way constantly "call upon God" to come and heal the "internal and external fear of difficulties" that we face as well as the problem of "relying upon our own desires." Historians tell us "any period of history is also one's own history." The people of God face their own history in each age. The problems of each era have their similarities, though unique to each time. In our present time, some priests choose to leave the ministry to show their "rebellion" against God. However, just as we have stated in our "Reflections on the Phenomenon of Why Priests in Mainland China Leave Their Ministry," we should further reflect on this phenomenon and hold in high regard those priests who possess the special quality of interiority. The Church must discern the "signs of the times" means that the Church must continually purify herself. In this matter priests, as important persons within the Church, have a responsibility that they cannot shirk. God will rely on those priests who remain loyal to Him, today as He has done in the past, to renew the Church in her ever present and growing vitality.

