

The answer to clericalism: Jesus Christ

In numerous editorials over the last year, this editorial board has warned, in the wake of the latest round of revelations regarding clergy sexual abuse, that clericalism, both real and perceived, is leading people away from the Church. Any lasting solution to this crisis will require the Church to address the root causes of clericalism and to bring the laity into the fullness of our own mission, as expressed in the vision of the Second Vatican Council.

How that can and should happen, though, is a matter that's open for debate. Two recent views present radically different solutions. One of them would destroy the Church; the other could lead to its renewal.

The first was presented in the cover story of the June 2019 issue of *The Atlantic*. The article was written by James Carroll, a priest who was dispensed of his vows 45 years ago after five years of service at the altar. While Carroll's name often has been attached to dissenting positions, he has remained a member of the Catholic Church. For the past few months, though, he has considered himself to be a nonpracticing one: "I embarked on an unwilling version of the Catholic tradition of 'fast and abstinence' – in this case, fasting from the Eucharist and abstaining from the overt practice of my faith."

The ostensible reason that Carroll "simply stopped going to Mass" is clericalism. But Carroll defines clericalism in a very different way, speaking of its "twin pillars": "the Church's misogynist exclusion of women from the priesthood and its requirement of celibacy for priests."

His solution? "Abolish the priesthood." But clericalism is a

problem attached to the priesthood, not one inherent in it. It's a failure both of particular priests and of human structures that the Church shares with other institutions in society at large. Abolishing the priesthood in order to end clericalism would be like getting rid of food in order to end gluttony. Indeed, that would be literally true: Without the priesthood, the Eucharist would be a mere symbol, rather than "true food" and "true drink."

Carroll doesn't address these concerns in his article, but another prominent Catholic has. In late May, Boston College professor of theology and religious education Hosffman Ospino addressed the crowd assembled at Convocation 2019, the annual meeting of the National Conference of Catechetical Leadership. His concern was the same as Carroll's ostensible one: How does a Church wounded by the sexual abuse crisis and the institutional failure to address it move forward? His answer, though, could not have been more different.

The first step, Ospino noted, should be obvious: We must start with Christ. There are no merely human answers to the problems that the Church faces. Lay involvement is essential – not as a replacement for the priesthood, but because each of us, priest or layperson, builds up the Body of Christ through our personal relationship with Jesus and the gift of discernment that we received from the Holy Spirit at baptism.

We need, as Ospino said, a "renewed" – not "new" – "ecclesiology for a wounded community," accompanied by a "catechesis of healing and reconciliation," grounded in the Word and rooted in science.

We need, in other words, not only greater involvement by the laity, but a renewed priesthood, and the source of renewal for both is the same: Jesus himself.

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