

A positive (and surprising) antidote to the disease of clericalism



Pope Francis has made it a personal mission to stamp out clericalism, the unconscious, twin temptations the clergy face to see themselves as superior to the laity and use their clerical status to pursue power and personal gain over Christian service.

The Holy Father has referred to clericalism as a “[perversion of the Church](#).” He notes that it affects the laity, too, especially when we assume priests should do everything for us. As he explained during an apostolic visit to Chile, “Clericalism forgets that the visibility and the sacramentality of the Church belong to all the faithful People of God, not only to the few chosen and enlightened.”

Clericalism is certainly a disease that calls for strong medicine, and Pope Francis has adopted an aggressive approach to treatment. He regularly scolds priests for being too rigid, fussy or superior. He calls clericalism [a new edition of the ancient evil where the priestly class oppresses the people they are supposed to serve](#).

But in our opening keynote for the Vatican’s World Meeting of Families in Rome, my wife and I observe that the most effective treatment for clericalism may be a more positive approach. One that promotes the [Liturgy of Domestic Church Life](#).

I’ve discussed the Liturgy of Domestic Church Life extensively in this column. It is a model of family spirituality that enables Catholic families to encounter Christ more meaningfully in their daily lives and experience their faith

as the source of the warmth in their homes. Readers can learn more at CatholicHOM.com, a new resource dedicated to helping families live the Liturgy of Domestic Church Life. But how could this possibly serve as an antidote to clericalism?

I have argued that the Liturgy of Domestic Church Life is an actual liturgy of the Church. A liturgy is a way to worship God, given to us by God (not invented by people), that seeks to heal the damage sin does to our relationships with God and others. For instance, people didn't make up the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Christ instituted it at the Last Supper as a way of healing the rift between God and humankind and making communion with others possible.

In a similar way, at the beginning of time, God created the human family. At that time, he wove certain practices into his design of the family to help them be healthy and holy. The social sciences show us that healthy families throughout history and across every culture use these practices. As Tolstoy famously observed in *Anna Karenina*, "All happy families are alike." When united to sacramental grace, these universal, divinely given family practices are not only a path to family well-being, they become a little way of holiness. A God-given way of worshiping him with our lives.

This brings us back to clericalism. What's the root of the temptation to see the ministerial priesthood as superior to the laity? I would suggest it is a twisting of the very real fact that they have an actual church to guide and a tangible liturgy over which they can preside to consecrate common things to make them holy. Superficially, it appears that the clergy has been given something laypeople do not have – a church and a liturgy; therefore, they must be "special" and "better" than the laity, who are merely second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God.

Of course, this is completely contrary to Church teaching. The Church calls families "domestic churches," which the Catechism

states are actual “ecclesial realities” (i.e., little churches in their own right). But there is no such thing as a church without a liturgy. God doesn’t establish a church without giving it a liturgy, a means of accomplishing its sacred work.

The same is true of the priesthood. A priesthood can’t exist without a liturgy that enables it to consecrate common things and make them holy. That’s why we celebrate the institution of holy orders and the Eucharist on the same day. One can’t exist without the other. But if that’s true, what’s the liturgy that the common priesthood of the laity (which is conferred on all the baptized) uses to consecrate the world to Christ? *Lumen Gentium* asserts that the lay priesthood and the ordained priesthood are both real priesthoods. Both represent distinct but important manifestations of the one priesthood of Christ. But without a liturgy, the lay priesthood is a priesthood in name only. Without a liturgy, calling a family a “domestic church” is the ecclesial equivalent of putting lipstick on a pig.

We suggest that the Liturgy of Domestic Church Life is the liturgy created by God at the beginning of time that enables families to function as real churches, outposts of grace in a hurting world. It is the primary liturgy over which the lay priesthood presides and by which it consecrates the world to Christ.

Acknowledging the Liturgy of Domestic Church Life as a real liturgy given to help families “become what they are” (i.e., real domestic churches) and to empower the lay priesthood to function as a real priesthood defeats clericalism by enabling the Church to see itself as a “kingdom of priests” (Ex 19:6), instead of a kingdom of clerics and also-rans.

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