

The Origins, Manifestations And Resolution of Conflicts In Priestly Relationships

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Loving, supportive and mutually encouraging relationships among priests are essential to the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of priests and to their ministry. This ministry is becoming increasingly demanding. Factors contributing to this pressure are a society which is becoming less Christian and more hostile toward the faith, the present culture of relativism and narcissism, a declining number of men entering studies for the priesthood, the exodus from active ministry of ordained priests, and a laity which is often unaware of the increased stress priests experience and which is too often overly influenced by the moral relativism of the culture.

The most significant way in which stress is reduced in married men, after the daily activity of work, is through loving family relationships. Such love helps to renew these men, in addition to the Lord's love in the sacrament of marriage, enabling them to go forth daily to face their responsibilities.

It is equally important that during an active day of ministry, priests be renewed both in divine love and in the unique love that is present in priestly relationships. Some experience a difficulty in being open to loving relationships. Often this arises from childhood and adolescent hurts within the family or with peers or in priestly ministry that has damaged trust.

Significant Consequences

When daily renewal in love is absent, the consequences can be significant. The result may be depression, anger, alcoholism, sexual acting - out, burnout, withdrawal from relationships, physical illness or abandonment of a personal prayer life. Unless positive steps are taken, such symptoms can result serious difficulties in a priest and in his ministry.

Emotional obstacles that interfere with self-giving in priestly relationships are often unconscious and are the result of a number of disappointments in relationships with parents, siblings, and peers early in life and, later, with priests, pastors, those in authority, women Religious and laity, particularly those who are selfish, angry and controlling.

Most men enter adult life with a degree of insecurity because they did not receive the praise, affection and male acceptance needed to develop a positive male identity

from their fathers and other male authority figures and in some men from their brothers or their male peers.

Other causes of insecurity include a negative view of one's body, lack of affirmation in childhood or in priestly ministry and the absence in childhood of athletic abilities and subsequent loneliness with male peers in a culture that places excessive importance on athletic success as a measure of masculinity.

Since it is common for children to idealize parents, their marital relationship and family life, many priests who seek growth in self-knowledge are surprised by the degree of sadness and loneliness they had unconsciously struggled with from childhood and adolescence. The most common cause of this sadness, in my clinical experience, is the absence of a warm, loving, affectionate relationship with the father. In some priests the primary source of childhood loneliness was due the absence of close male friendships or a supportive relationship with a brother. In addition, some priests enter adult life with a loneliness with mothers who were overly controlling, angry, emotionally distant or selfish. Finally, a loneliness caused by the absence of dating experiences can influence later conflicts with loneliness.

Unfortunately, in the contraceptive-divorce era not a small number of seminarians and young priests struggle with the sadness of divorce trauma that has deprived them of a stable family life and the experience of flow of love between a father and mother that is so beneficial and essential to the healthy psychological development.

Emotional wounds of loneliness and sadness from childhood and adolescence produce an effect that is similar to that occurring in rheumatic heart disease when heart damage occurs early in life. The full effect of that damage may not limit a person's life until decades later. This pain can emerge later in priestly ministry, as it does in married life, and create unhappiness and confusion. In each vocation the individual can then incorrectly believe that their emotional pain is completely the result of their vocation. Major mistakes can then be made of abandoning or rejecting one's vocation in an attempt to escape from emotional pain that regularly re-emerges later.

A common source of sadness in the active ministry is the pastor/ associate pastor relationship. Many pastors have difficulty in praising and affirming their associates and many associates are not sensitive to the pastor's problems. Many priests do not realize how important self-giving is to one's brother priests and how vital it is to create a sense of home and loving fellowship in the rectory. The problem of emotional self-giving often arises from modeling after a father who had difficulty in communicating his love and praise and who may have had more confidence in his work than in his ability to develop close relationships in the home.

Other frequently related sources of sadness are the absence of close priest friendships, serious family conflicts or the absence of closeness with family, the loss of friends through multiple moves and religious indifference in the laity.

Anger , Mistrust, Insecurity and Loneliness

Anger most often originates from hurts at different life stages and from selfishness. The failure to resolve anger by engaging in the daily hard work of forgiving 7 times 70 can lead to conflicts with anger that may damage the spiritual life, interfere with priestly friendships and harm the effectiveness of priestly ministry. The priest who cannot master his anger is weakened in his ability to become a bridge for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of Humanity. Instead, his anger can become an obstacle for others in their attempts to know and love Jesus.

Some young men enter seminaries with a limited ability to trust in loving relationships and are unable to allow others to become close to them because of hurts with their parents, siblings, or peers. This is particularly the case in those who experienced the trauma of divorce or who were bullied. Seminary experiences that interfered with the development of trust, which is essential to loving and to communicating, include the failure to forgive seminarians or seminary faculty for hurts occurring during those years.

Later events that can interfere with the ability to maintain trust and to feel safe in priestly relationships include: the loss of priest friends through failing to maintain friendships after ordination, through a friend's leaving the active ministry, through a friend's becoming a workaholic, or through death; the failure to forgive priests for hurts in ministry; and disappointments with women Religious or the laity.

There are multiple ways in which the wound of insecurity is manifested in men. These include: workaholicism, a very critical attitude, inability to compliment or praise, excessive competitiveness, drinking, pornography conflicts, inability to be close to priests and difficulty in receiving human and divine love because of the false belief of being unlovable.

In every life-state men make an unconscious attempt to undo low self-esteem and the sadness associated with it. Common ways include sexual acting-out, either heterosexually or homosexually and the use of pornography. This is an unconscious attempt to experience oneself as being lovable and special.

Unresolved anger with one's father, brothers or peers is often misdirected unconsciously at brother-priests, pastors, other authority figures or at God through rebellious behavior, in either an active or passive-aggressive manner. This expression of anger can bring a certain pleasure and, for some, even a sense of exhilaration,

particularly in those priests who have never been resolved their anger with the first authority figure in their lives, their father. Such anger may have played a significant role in the rebellion over the past forty years against the fullness of the Church's teaching on sexual morality and, ultimately, in the crisis in the Church, primarily in regard to the homosexual abuse of adolescent males.

Those with wounds of mistrust from family life or adult life are often loners who socialize or vacation primarily with laity. They do not communicate easily with priests in the rectory. They often use anger, aggressiveness and criticism to keep others at a distance because of their fear of vulnerability. They may have a multitude of superficial relationships in an attempt to mask their fear of intimacy. They may need to be in control excessively in relationships and in ministry because of their fear of trusting.

As pastors, they may have difficulty delegating responsibilities, and as associates they may be very uncooperative and distant.

From early adolescence, the wounds of sadness from family life and peer relationships may produce homosexual or heterosexual acting-out or temptations, and in adult-life loneliness, alcoholism, masturbation, drug abuse and homosexual or heterosexual behavior. The latter actions are an unconscious attempt to obtain a good feeling and, thereby, alleviate for a period of time the strong denied sadness from childhood and adolescence.

The Resolution of Conflicts

Some are tempted to leave the priestly ministry because they mistakenly believe that their emotional pain and lack of happiness and joy arise solely from their present adult life situation. These priests may refuse to examine sadness or trauma in early family life and peer relationships because they are caught up in illicit sexual relationships or in substance abuse.

Another reason that prevents men from facing their denied emotional pain is a fear that disclosing personal vulnerability diminishes or threatens their masculine identity.

Conflicts in priestly relationships can be diminished significantly by daily growth in a number of areas including forgiveness, trust, a commitment to more self-giving to one's brother-priests, awareness of one's giftedness and to communicate in a positive, loving manner.

The emotion of anger is one of the major obstacles in loving relationships in every life state. Because of this, the recognition and the resolution of anger is necessary.

Daily openness to forgive those one lives and works with strengthens relationships with priests and laity. This can be done by reflecting on who has disappointed us in the morning, afternoon and evening, and by choosing to forgive those persons or asking the Lord for help with this process.

Dr. Bob Enright's research studies on forgiveness at the University of Wisconsin, that were published in the book we co-authored for American Psychological Association Books, *Helping Clients Forgive: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*, demonstrates that the process of forgiveness not only decreases anger but it also diminishes anxiety and sadness and enhances self-esteem.

We can forgive intellectually through a decision. We can forgive emotionally when we truly feel like forgiving through understanding the pain in those who inflicted the hurts or we can forgive in prayer through the graces in the sacrament of reconciliation when the other two methods of forgiveness seem to be impossible.

Forgiveness a Must

Forgiveness can be used anytime but it is particularly effective when employed at the end of the day because it prevents anger from being carried into the next day. Consequently, the sun does not go down on one's anger.

There is also value in reviewing one's family life and seminary years and forgiving those who may have caused disappointment in each of these life stages. An essential part of this process is identifying areas where forgiveness is needed with each parent.

The nature of anger is such that without forgiveness, this anger will be misdirected years or even decades later.

Finally, as in marital relationships, it is helpful to bring forgiveness into each year of one's vowed commitment. In this process, many priests are surprised that they had denied anger with their brother-priests and later misdirected this anger at priests or others who did not deserve it.

Forgiveness is essential today for the conflicts that exist among priests because of the issue of loyalty and fidelity to the Church's teaching on sexual morality and the liturgy. Unfortunately, for many years not a small number of priests have taken great personal liberties with the liturgy and have failed to communicate the liberating truth on chastity that had the potential to prevent or diminish the severe medical, psychological, marital and spiritual damage that has occurred in the contraceptive era.

Younger priests who are faithful to Magisterium on issues of sexual morality and contraception, the liturgy and marriage can experience criticism, anger and rejection from older priests, parish staff or parishoners who may even accuse them of being pastorally insensitive, rigid and not pastorally sensitive. Such anger is also expressed in passive-aggressive ways in which the pastor enables the director of religious education, the music director, school principal and others on the parish staff to mistreat, attempt to control and, even, limit the ministry of the faithful priest. Such mistreatment, especially early in a priest's ministry, can have seriously harmful effects upon the emotional and the spiritual lives of these priests who can experience isolation and severe loneliness in such rectories and religious communities. Fortunately, strong priestly friendships strengthen such priests, as well as the knowledge that the Lord is using them in the much needed purification process in the Church.

Dr. Paul Vitz's article on narcissism in the liturgy, published in *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* in the November 2007, <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/civilization/cc0254.htm>, is helpful in understanding the influence of this character weakness and its associated anger in the priesthood.

The trust in priestly relationships has been damaged by conflicts over the celebration of the Eucharist. Pastors who take liberties with the liturgy are often angry toward younger priests who do not engage in such liturgical irregularities. Some pastors have even pressured associate priests to leave parishes because in the pastor's opinion their "liturgical style" did not fit in with the pastor's vision for the parish.

Teaching on Contraception

On the fortieth anniversary of the release of *Humanae Vitae*, July 25, 2008, Cardinal James Francis Stafford wrote that dissenters to this important papal document involved a level of infidelity that divided the ranks of clergy to such an extent that they have still not recovered. He wrote, "In 1968 something terrible happened in the Church. Within the ministerial priesthood ruptures developed everywhere among friends which never healed. And the wounds continue to affect the whole Church. The dissent, together with the leaders' manipulation of the anger they fomented, became a supreme test. It changed fundamental relationships within the Church."

He wrote, "Conversations among the clergy where they existed, became contaminated with fear. Suspicions among priests were chronic. ...The Archdiocesan priesthood lost something of the fraternal whole which these priests had known for generations." In regard to his own personal struggles Cardinal Stafford wrote that at as an auxiliary Bishop in 1968 at a priestly meeting to discuss *Humane Vitae* in August 1968 he was verbally abused and his integrity was derided for being the only priest at the meeting to support the Papal document. Furthermore, he was warned that he was

risking his ecclesiastical future by his support of *Humanae Vitae*,
www.catholicnewsagency.com/resource.php?n=675.

Fortunately, healing of divisions can occur within the priesthood in many ways including embracing anew fidelity to the fullness of the Church's teaching on sexual morality. On April 23, 2002 the Blessed John Paul II told American Cardinals and Bishops who met with him on the crisis in the Church, "We must be confident that this time of trial will bring a purification of the entire Catholic community, a purification that is urgently needed if the Church is to preach more effectively the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all its liberating force. Now you must ensure that where sin increased, grace will all the more abound (Romans 5: 20). So much pain, so much sorrow must lead to a holier priesthood, a holier episcopate, and a holier Church."

Trusting and Loving

Conflicts in rectories can also be diminished by making a daily commitment to create a fellowship of love in the rectory and in priestly friendships in a diocese or a religious community. Priestly ministry is limited if it is not based in loving priestly friendships within a rectory or diocese. Thus, it is the responsibility of each priest to try to make a daily commitment to trust and love those with whom he lives even though or ministers with in a diocese or religious community.

Love and commitment between priests depend on a basic ability to trust. A daily commitment to trust the priests one lives with or minister with is as essential to priesthood as the commitment to trust that the married man should make to the Lord and to his wife.

Equally important is the decision to trust daily in the love of the Trinity and Mary and to set aside time daily to receive this love. If one doesn't trust in human priestly love, however, problems develop and it is very hard to trust in God's love. If one rejects genuine human priestly love, there will be difficulty in experiencing the warmth of God's love.

Some priests have been hurt so deeply by family members, priests, sisters or laity that the movement toward trust requires daily prayer for the gift of feeling protected in relationships. The fear of becoming vulnerable and the risk of being hurt again are very strong.

Commitment to priestly brotherhood should include complimenting and praising, encouraging, helping one's brother-priests grow in confidence, maintaining an open door and ear, giving one's time, and recognizing the tremendous power of love within each priest to help others grow.

These steps can be challenging for many men because emotionally self-giving is more challenging than for females who find expressing love and compliments as being more natural. This difference relates to what Pope Benedict has described as the male and the female “genius,” but it also relates psychologically to the reality the role model of women, their mothers, tend to be more emotionally self-giving and than the role models of men, their fathers. In addition, women are gifted biologically with the hormone oxytocin that plays a role in facilitating close bonding with babies and others.

Many married men and priests have grown in their self-giving and in their confidence by daily meditating upon St. Joseph as their other father and role model. Also, self-giving to brother-priests is facilitated by a deeper appreciation and regular expression of gratitude for being gifted as a son of God with a special vocation and for the reality of being lovable. It is much easier to be affirming and complimentary if a priest is aware of his own special and powerful gifts and is able to receive love.

The obstacles between priests can also be diminished by a decision to let go of excessive competitiveness, aggressiveness, jealousy and the tendency to criticize that often is present in male relationships. Priests who are workaholics could be more cognizant of the importance of loving friendships with priests and could consider that the call to self-giving to brother priests may be as important as the call to ministry to laity.

Specifically, this means keeping in touch with classmates and priest-friends, relaxing together regularly, and maintaining communication with one’s priest brothers.

Sharing God’s Love

Finally, stress in rectory living and in priestly friendships can be diminished by an openness among priests which allows sharing more freely and without fear personal experiences of the insights into scripture, the Lord’s love and personal experiences in prayer. Unfortunately, it is often awkward for priests to share the power of the Lord’s love and the ways His love has touched them and His people. It is often more acceptable to talk about parish burdens, conflicts, politics, and sports.

This difficulty has its roots in developmental experiences in the male world where discussing loving experiences is viewed as unmasculine or even feminine, but this problem can be overcome. Discussion among priests of the Lord’s love for them and His people brings hope, joy, strength, confidence and conflict resolution.

Friendships

St. Augustine's words to his priests about the importance of priestly friendships

are relevant today. He wrote: "Preserve, my sons, that friendship which you have begun with your brethren, for nothing in the world is more beautiful than that. It is a comfort to have a faithful man by your side." As in the sacrament of marriage, healthy friendships require a daily commitment to grow in numerous virtues, particularly patience, forgiveness, forbearance and trust.

Understanding the dynamics and importance of loving priestly friendships is essential. Regardless of the length of time a particular woundedness may have been present, healing can occur.

Loving and supportive relationships among priests are vital to the well-being of the individual priest and, subsequently, to his priestly ministry.

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