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**Eliminating clericalism: Reform the seminaries**

Clericalism is a virus in the Catholic Church that will be hard to eliminate. Its latest manifestation is the reported emergence from Catholic seminaries of a type of newly ordained priest who seems to be in love with the idea of being “special”. Their ideal of Catholicism stems from an unrealistically romantic view of the Church as it was in the 1950s and before. This is by no means true of all men being ordained to the priesthood. But the fact that the next generation of priests contains a significant number who are unhappy with the direction of change under Pope Francis means his vision of a synodal church, one that listens and learns, will struggle to be realised.

The latest report from the body in Rome monitoring progress of the synodal reform process indicates that some members of the laity are meeting resistance from some clergy. This fuels lay people’s belief that they will not be listened to, and discourages their participation. It suggests that even the many bishops who are fully signed up to the process have yet to develop a leadership style that addresses this issue. Indeed, direction “from the top down” may make things worse, as priests transfer the model of how their bishops treat them to how they treat their flocks. It poses the question, how well do bishops really listen to their own clergy? And what are the structural and institutional barriers to them doing so?

A thorough reform of seminary training will be a necessary as well as a sufficient condition for the creation of a truly synodal church, where the sacrament at the heart of the Christian calling is baptism rather than priestly ordination. The seminary system put in place by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century produced an educated and well-drilled clergy but sent a signal, not only to the lay faithful but to the clergy themselves, that they were in some sense superior beings. Their “formation” was designed to make them holy. But creating holiness by following a set of rules was always paradoxical, and by no means always successful. The clerical sex abuse scandal was proof enough of that.

The downside has been clericalism, not just when lay people put priests on a pedestal but when clergy mounted one of their own accord. The combination of Holy Orders and power over others can be a toxic mixture. The evidence that modern seminaries are producing men who are looking forward to taking their place on the pedestal is alarming. Too steep an authority gradient inhibits a person of lesser rank speaking openly to one more senior, even when lives may depend on it. The problems excessive deference can cause have been recognised and tackled among the military, in aviation, and in operating theatres and in medicine generally.

Changes in the language used and in the professional titles attached to different roles are often the key to this. Clericalism – love of status for its own sake – is not unique to the clergy.