

## **RESIGNED PRIESTS: CASTE, TABOO AND POWER**

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**Catholic culture has included a priest taboo for many generations. This taboo has directly forbidden the priest to live freely outside the clerical caste, and has punished him with slander and discrimination for doing so. The unspoken but real purpose of the taboo has been to defend the power of the hierarchy to control clerical life.**

### **PRIESTHOOD DISTINCT FROM CLERICAL CASTE**

**An important distinction, not frequently drawn, must be made between clerical caste and priesthood, namely; the clerical caste is not priesthood and vice versa. Very few resigned priests intended to leave the priesthood. The fact that tens of thousands of them would like to do priesthood is evidence that they believe the church needs some who are chosen to preach the Gospel and lead worship. Resigned priests were rejecting a clerical lifestyle, not the priesthood. They sought freedom to live as adults outside the manifold restraints of the clerical caste. My generation, for example, was ordained (1957) into a system of twenty-one canonical laws, plus local regulations, that clamped a suffocating degree of control over every aspect of a priest's personal life. These laws and regulations controlled his title, clothing, housing, work assignments, public utterances, prayer life, economic status, and sexuality. The rules imposed many of the constraints of monastic life on secular clergy and many priests found this system insufferable. And some young priests felt entombed by rectory life with an elderly pastor and his housekeeper of thirty years. It was their house, his table, her kitchen, the latter often out of bounds to the associate pastors.**

**Moreover, the clerical state was by definition superior to the lay state. Some priests expressed a profound distaste for the misogyny and exclusivity of an all-male system. Because they felt alien within the clerical caste, they decided to leave it for the world of the laity. Resigned priests were seeking autonomy, independence, the right to govern their own lives.**

### **RESIGNING NOT SINFUL, BUT A HUMAN RIGHT**

**Do priests commit sin when they resign the ministry? If a sin exists, it receives no treatment as such in traditional Catholic ethics. Defined as sinners, their sin is undefined. If, indeed, they have sinned, why do bishops and priests not extend to resigned priests the Sacrament of Reconciliation? One must conclude that there is no sin to forgive. And yet it is assumed by most Catholics that some major grievance has been committed. Furthermore, according to church teachings, priests, as**

human beings, have a right to resign and the right to marry. Church leadership has never denied that ordained priests possess the human rights outlined in John XXIII's Peace on Earth. John taught that "Human beings have the right to choose freely the state of life they prefer, and therefore the right to set up a family." The Pope taught that these rights flow from man's very nature, his dignity as a person and are "universal, inviolable, and inalienable and cannot in any way be surrendered." (nn. 9, 15, 145).

Just what is the grievance committed here? I submit that resigned priests intended to leave the clerical caste, not the priesthood, and this choice was both not sinful and their right as human beings. Nevertheless, this act on their part violated a powerful prohibition within Catholic culture. I submit that resigning violated a deeply held taboo.

### **TABOO FORBIDS THE DESIRABLE--PUNISHMENT CONSIDERED SELF-INFLICTED**

Taboos always forbid something desired because there is no need to forbid the undesirable. Margaret Mead defines taboo as a "negative sanction, a prohibition whose infringement results in an automatic penalty without human or superhuman mediation." For example, the incest taboo is one of the oldest and prohibits one of the most pervasive desires; touching the chief violates taboo among many tribes; and followers of Judaism and Islam may not eat pork. In many cultures, it is taboo for two men to show affection in public. Strict customs enshrine these taboos, and harsh punishments penalize their violators. Punishment is immediate and, although enforced by the culture, is considered self-inflicted. The violator is held solely responsible for the consequences. Taboo violators are ostracized, shunned, subject to boycott, in some cases killed.

Taboos regulate behavior not covered by religion or human law and they enforce prohibitions more powerful than any divine or human ordinances. Although they are unwritten and their origin unknown, they hold power and elicit fear. Members of a culture usually accept them without question.

### **DEFAMATION AND DISCRIMINATION PUNISHMENT FOR TABOO VIOLATION**

Mary Douglas writes "that some ultimate justification for the rule (of taboo) needs to be found." Usually it is traced to weakness in the violators. For instance, women are labeled too weak or too emotional; other people are mentally inferior; the poor are slothful; gays in the military hurt morale and unit cohesion. The language used to justify the taboo against resigned priests labels them as morally defective, and tries to destroy what is most precious to every human being: his reputation and good name.

Within Catholic culture, a resigned priest is punished more severely than a priest pedophile or a bishop who fathers a child. For resigned priests do something worse: they violate a taboo. As a result, they are punished with defaming language. All have had their reputations sullied by Church authorities. Church leaders, by their prejudicial language and practice of discrimination, have effectively taught that discrimination against resigned priests has their moral approval. For example, in March, 1969, in downtown Minneapolis, a man who had just resigned from the priesthood met by chance a priest who had been one of his professors at the major seminary. When the status of his former student became clear to him, the older priest said, "Even Jesus had a Judas." The older priest was echoing Pope Paul VI, who a year earlier, had castigated departed priests as "Judases." The analogy is the zenith of the Pope's campaign to reinforce the taboo. It began with his 1967 encyclical on celibacy which is laced with language that resigning is an act of moral turpitude and "results from crises in faith or moral weakness"; departed priests are "lost sheep, a source of scandal"; their resigning is caused by "their spiritual and moral collapse." Clergy high and low have mimicked his language, producing a multitude of inflammatory statements. A nun told a departed priest, "You have betrayed the Church." A priest wrote that nothing is a greater "obstacle, a stumbling block to the faith." Others have called them apostates, derelicts, defectors, and traitors.

If resigned priests can be successfully labeled as morally inferior, then discrimination against them usually follows. For example, the day before a married priest and his wife were to receive an adopted child, a Minnesota diocesan official stopped the adoption. The couple were judged unfit because he had not been dispensed. In another instance, a principal of a Minnesota Catholic high school explained to a highly qualified dispensed priest why he could not hire him, "If I hire you, Father X will pull all kids from his parish out of the school." Catholic institutions are either forbidden by Rome or on their own initiative refuse to hire resigned priests. Exempt from most statutes governing fair employment, the church can freely discriminate against resigned priests, and in doing so, violate its own teachings that "every type of discrimination...is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent." (Church in the Modern World, n. 29)

Violence has also beset some resigned priests. On one occasion, in Dublin, a priest announced his decision to resign. "A few nights later the priest was set upon outside his presbytery and beaten up most viciously by members of his own family". (Rice, Shattered Vows, 1990). Further, a few years ago, a bishop in Italy instructed church and civic leaders not to hire resigned priests. Unable to find employment, one priest, in his despair, committed suicide. (The 1929 Concordat between the Vatican and Italy justifies this discrimination). In 1968, Archbishop Byrne of St. Paul

told a resigning priest, "I'll see to it you don't find a job around here."  
Wives of resigned priests have been fired or refused Church related posts.  
Sabotaging employment is a form of violence denying the means to livelihood.

## **AVOIDANCE AND CONTAGION**

Prior to 1983, a priest who married without a dispensation was automatically excommunicated, which constitutes shunning mandated by institutional decree. The LaCrosse (WI) diocese goes a step further: it deletes the names of resigned priests from the ordination lists. They are literally 'disappeared'. Since 1977, some of my priest classmates from Nebraska have refused to attend seminary class reunions if resigned priests are invited. Some Peoria priests also refuse to attend their reunions for the same reason. Allport calls this behavior "avoidance," the mildest of four levels of discrimination, and it reveals a prejudice held. Why do some classmates find it necessary to avoid social contact with friends who have resigned? I submit that one reason is that a reunion involves fellowship and commensality, symbols of social equality. I also submit it is because they are under the power of taboo.

Sigmund Freud's essay, "Taboo" is most helpful here. Freud defines taboo as a "prohibition forcibly imposed (by some authority) from outside, and directed against the most powerful longings to which human beings are subject. The basis of taboo is a prohibited action, for performing which a strong inclination exists in the unconscious." I believe that some priests desire what is forbidden to all, namely; freedom from the restraints of the clerical caste. In explaining avoidance behavior, Freud wrote that a taboo violator "is truly contagious in that every example encourages imitation, and for that reason he himself must be shunned." Violators possess dangerous power, the "quality of arousing forbidden desires." The following story illustrates an archbishop's fear that the infection might spread. In 1971, a dispensed priest and his Catholic fiancée, both in good standing with the church, invited more than 700 guests to their wedding scheduled at their neighborhood parish. Objecting, Archbishop Byrne of St. Paul intervened and forbade the pastor to allow the couple to have their wedding in his parish. They were married in the basement crypt of the Cathedral with only 60 guests present. He explained, "If I let you have a big wedding, other priests will think it's so wonderful, they'll all want to do the same thing."

## **SEMINARY DROPOUTS ALSO INCLUDED**

Seminarians were not formally members of the clerical caste until they were tonsured three years before ordination. Students as young as ninth grade were expected to live as clerics or "little priests". Strict rules

governed their behavior in seminary and their employment and social life during vacation. They were labeled future priests, set apart from other young men in the community. Those who resigned (fully 85%) were treated as spoiled priests who had failed to cooperate with God's grace. Many seminaries had a policy that dropouts were unwelcome back on campus to visit their seminarian friends. Former students were shunned because they too were contagious. It is fair to conclude that dropouts also violated the taboo.

### **TRANSITORY, DANGEROUS, AND RISK TO SYSTEM**

From the point of view of the church as an institution, resigned priests are in a permanent, transitory state. Douglas says that transitory figures are considered dangerous. They are marginal figures, helpless to cure their "abnormal situation." Clergy in many religions can return their license or have it revoked for misbehavior. According to the classical theological tradition, a Catholic priest is marked forever. He cannot do what should be relatively simple: make a career change from the clerical caste and enter fully into a lower caste, that of the laity. The resigned priest is permanently transitory because he has one foot in the priestly caste, the other, in the caste of the laity.

Sometimes punishment for a taboo violation can be temporary. However, for the priest it is permanent. According to Freud, there is, however, one cure. Since obedience to a taboo is itself a renunciation of something desired, the only remedy is an act of "renunciation of some possession or some freedom" gained by the violation. So, if the resigned priest repudiates his freedom, he will cease to be taboo. On Holy Thursday, 1995, John Paul II invited back all resigned priests including married priests, "who, precisely because of a woman, have abandoned the ministry." The invitation to return implies his willingness to lift the taboo if the priest reenters the clerical caste, and only if the violator renounces wife and children.

Taboo violators place the social system at risk. Mary Douglas says the "taboo system upholds a cultural system...the taboo always part of the whole system of rules." If someone can successfully challenge a taboo, "the social system, in which a great investment has been made, appears to be tottering." This explains why a female religious could say to a resigning priest, "If all the priests do what you're doing, the whole thing will collapse."

### **A THREAT TO POWER**

Taboos are interesting and difficult to understand because what they defend is usually something other than what is forbidden. The priest taboo

forbids freedom outside the clerical caste. However, its obscure, indirect, but real purpose is to defend the power of the hierarchy to control clerical life. It is clear that the taboo was not self-imposed by Catholic clergy themselves. Only the papacy and bishops would have a self-interest in sustaining control of clerical life. Resigning rejects hierarchical power, in particular papal power, to control areas of clerical life that the resigned priests found unnecessary, intrusive, and demeaning. Douglas would describe the hierarchy as those who have "consciously controlled powers." As taboo violators, resigned priests have "unconscious, uncontrollable powers, menacing those in better defined positions." Resigned priests have been punished because in violating the taboo against leaving the clerical caste, they have become a permanent threat to ecclesiastical power.

A personal anecdote illustrates that this taboo both protects the power of the hierarchy and that the resigning priest threatens their power. On Feb. 3, 1972, I wrote to Archbishop Cody of Chicago, where I was then employed, and informed him that I planned to marry "a Roman Catholic woman in good standing." On Feb. 7, we had a difficult conversation during which I expressed my reluctance to follow several of his orders. Finally, after a testy exchange, in his frustration, John Cardinal Cody, concluded our conversation with these words. "Well, Father, I guess I no longer have power over you." I was about to violate the taboo and challenge his power.

## **PRIEST TABOO CONTINUES**

It is incorrect to associate taboos only with primitive cultures. New ones are created regularly within both small social units, such as the family or village, and large social systems such as country or world-wide church to control behavior not covered by existing rules and regulations. The priest taboo continues to this day to affect the behavior of the Vatican in its delaying dispensations for resigned priests and to affect the language and behavior of some bishops, priests, and lay people around the world. No law or biblical injunction has the power of the priest taboo.

Roman Catholic priests have been living under the taboo for hundreds of years, and this taboo prohibits freedom to live outside the many restrictions imposed on clerical life. The language of calumny punishes resigned priests and warns active priests not to follow their example. The taboo defends papal and episcopal power to regulate the life of priests within the clerical state. The priest who leaves the clerical caste\* violates this taboo.

\*Note: Caste seems more accurate than class, state or system. Authors of caste articles in three encyclopedias support preference for its usage.

**"Caste members are extremely intolerant of deviant behavior on the part of fellow caste members and excommunicate anyone not living up to the standards of the group." (Collier's). "Between castes any kind of interaction which defies or jeopardizes the rules of hierarchy is taboo." There are "restrictions on marriage, on sex relations, on living together, on eating together, on sitting together, and on a variety of other forms of interaction symbolic of social equality." (Social Sciences). "Caste revolves around the concept of the struggle for power. (Americana).**

**Addendum: The address on Jan. 1, 1999 of John Paul II, "Respect for Human Rights," commemorating the 50th anniversary of the General Assembly's "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," was not available to the author when this article first appeared. John Paul II's address is an unambiguous, unqualified endorsement of the Universal Declaration. Particularly relevant to this article is John Paul II's forthright statement, "Religious freedom therefore constitutes the very heart of human rights. Its inviolability is such that individuals must be recognized as having the right even to change their religion if their conscience so demands. People are obliged to follow their conscience in all circumstances and cannot be forced to act against it." (n. 5).**

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