

Towards a Sacramental Brotherhood Lifestyle of Filipino Diocesan Priests

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The topic assigned to me for this morning session is “Towards a Sacramental Brotherhood Lifestyle of Filipino Diocesan Priests.” Behind the topic, I would like to read an unspoken desire of our diocesan priests to move from their present lifestyle to one that is more in keeping with their sacramental brotherhood. I therefore thought of developing my talk into three parts:

- A. Present Lifestyle of Diocesan Priests
- B. Sacramental Brotherhood
- C. An Experience: An Attempt to Live the Sacramental Brotherhood

A. The Present Lifestyle of Diocesan Priests

Even to this day, we are still smarting from the scathing remarks of the presumptive President about the Catholic Church, particularly when he refers to it as the most hypocritical institution in the world. We know that when he talks of the Church, he primarily refers to its leaders, namely, us bishops and priests. This perception is unfortunately also shared by not a few.

People judge us by the way we live, by our lifestyle. What they see is what they get. How do people perceive their priests? That would certainly be an interesting study to make.

How about us? How we perceive ourselves as priests? In the preparation for the First National Congress of the Clergy, which was held on 5-9 July 2004, the Episcopal Commission on the Clergy, in collaboration with the Social Research Center of the University of Sto. Tomas, conducted a nationwide survey among priests in all 86 dioceses on the present situation of the Filipino Diocesan Clergy.

The results were presented during the Congress, and workshops were conducted for the participants to reflect on and validate the valuable data gathered from the survey. On Day 4 of the Congress, the focus of the workshop was “Spirituality and Lifestyle of Filipino Clergy.”

Allow me to quote in toto the outcome of the workshop on the National Profile of the Lifestyle of Filipino Priests.

1. *The indecent lifestyles that the clergy have identified are as follows:*
 - *46.8% of the respondents identify “material attachment and extravagance” as the number one lifestyle that mars the image of the Filipino clergy today. Such materialism breeds “arrogance” and “inconsiderateness, with “no sense of sacrifice” and “discipline”.*

- 25.9% regard “sexual relations with women/homo sexual liaisons and activities” as the second lifestyle that destroys the image of priests. Economic advancement puts priests in a position where “sex” can be bought, and “relations” maintained and access to “temptations of the flesh” via modern technology is readily available.
 - 10.6% look to the “habitual recourse to worldly good time, drinking” and other vices as the third disturbing image of a clergy’s lifestyle.
 - 9.1% consider the “closeness to the rich and powerful” leading to their siding with and “identification with the ruling elite” as the fourth image that scandalize the people, the poor in particular.
 - 7.4% see the clergy’s “air of superiority, bossiness” and catering to their “circles of families to the point of exclusivity” as a stumbling block to the effectivity and relevance of their work with the people. This trait makes them “strict, arrogant and inconsiderate” and, in the long run, renders them ineffective servant leaders of the community.
2. There are three factors that the clergy perceive as weakening the Institutional Church.
 - The top of the line is the lack of transparency and honesty in the management of Church resources. 52.2% of the delegates, close to half the Congress participants, have admitted that this situation weakens the Church all the more because the problem is from within.
 - 33.3% consider “clerical intrigues and politics” that destroy their presbyteral unity as a factor that corrodes the Church. This situation creates a demoralization process that, sooner or later, becomes a fertile ground for mistrust, manipulation, and disillusionment among the leaders of the Church themselves.
 - 13.9% consider the “arrogance and abuse of power” among the clergy as contributory to the weakening of the institutional Church.... It could be deeply rooted in a church subculture where clerics manage to “get away with crime” because of their social influence, where their words are regarded Gospel truths because of their position of authority, where they are put on the high pedestal because of their social status.
 3. The Clergy in Congress have come up with the 5 “Most Appropriate Qualities of Earthen Vessels”, namely:
 - “openness and sensitivity to the ways of God in one’s life”
 - “pastoral charity among members of the Presbyterium”
 - “humility and courage to reach out” to brother priests in difficulty
 - “love for truth and truthfulness”
 - openness to be helped from outside, seeking the “proper intervention and assistance from others”

B. Sacramental Brotherhood

The rite of the priestly ordination never fails to move those who attend in the liturgy and even those who are mere observers. The ordaining bishop silently lays his hands on the candidate

and is followed by the concelebrating priests who likewise lay their hands on the ordinand. All this takes place in an atmosphere of prayerful silence and awe-inspiring solemnity. In contrast, when the bishop gives the newly ordained the kiss of peace and is followed by all the other priests giving the same brotherly embrace, the whole congregation breaks into a spontaneous outburst of joyous celebration.

This ceremony, which dates back to the ancient times of the Church, eloquently explains what sacramental brotherhood means.

“Priests by virtue of their ordination to the priesthood are united among themselves in an intimate sacramental brotherhood. In individual dioceses, priests form one priesthood under their own bishop. Even though priests are assigned to different duties, nevertheless they carry on one priestly ministry for men. All priests are sent as co-workers in the same apostolate, whether they engage in parochial or extra-parochial ministry... All, indeed, are united in the building up of the Body of Christ which, especially in our times, requires manifold duties and new methods.” (Presbyterorum Ordinis, 8)

Sacramental brotherhood unites priests not only by virtue of their common mission. It touches their very relationship with each other because of their common identity and bond in the One Priest, Jesus Christ.

“In virtue of their common ordination and mission, all priests are bound together in intimate brotherhood, which naturally and freely manifests itself in mutual aid, spiritual as well as material, pastoral as well as personal, in their meetings and in communion of life, of labour and charity.” (Lumen Gentium, 28)

“In practice, [sacramental brotherhood] means helping one another and sharing our own blessings. It means trying to know and understand each other, to accept each other’s individuality. It is important to find practical ways of standing in for each other and showing our mutual concern. We are dependent on one another because we have been entrusted with Christ’s own ministerial concern for human salvation.” (George Augustin, *Called to Joy: Celebrating Priesthood*)

C. An Experience: An Attempt to Live the Sacramental Brotherhood

In this third part of my talk, I would like to present our experience in the diocese of Kabankalan on our attempt to live the sacramental brotherhood. Far from presenting ourselves as a model for a sacramental brotherhood lifestyle, I simply want to share our journey as a presbyterium in our effort to live our sacramental brotherhood.

Looking back, I now realize that the direction we took in our journey was influenced and dictated by many events and development in our life as a diocese. The more significant among these were:

1. Our Second Diocesan Pastoral Assembly (DPA2)
2. Our Annual Planning
3. Our Cluster System
4. The Spirituality of Stewardship
5. Our “All-In Policy”

The Second Diocesan Pastoral Assembly

When I began my assignment as the new bishop of Kabankalan in 2003, I was fortunate to find the diocese well established both structurally and pastorally. In 1997, the diocese held its First Diocesan Synod. Four years after, the First Diocesan Pastoral Assembly (DPA1) followed. Through these two important events, the diocese was able to articulate its Vision-Mission Statement and put in place its basic administrative and pastoral structures and programs. The Synodal Decrees, as well as the Diocesan Pastoral Resolutions, provided clear guidelines for the implementation of the decisions taken in both diocesan gatherings.

One of the synodal decrees (art. 950) stipulates that a diocesan pastoral assembly be held every three years in order to assess the current pastoral situation and address it with an appropriate plan. When I took over, the time was just ripe for the diocese to hold its Second Diocesan Pastoral Assembly. It was certainly a fortuitous and providential opportunity for me to start my ministry in the diocese planning with our priests and our people the steps we would take together in the years ahead.

Our Second Diocesan Pastoral Assembly was held on 25-27 February 2005. It was participated by our 50 priests and some 200 of our lay leaders. The three-day assembly was but the culmination of a yearlong preparation for a strategic planning. The significant outputs of our Assembly were our revised Vision-Mission Statement and our Three-Year Diocesan Pastoral Plan. Among the priority objectives we took for our diocese was the renewal of the clergy.

Our Annual Planning

Since then we would gather as a presbyterium each summer for our yearly planning. It lasts for three days during which we monitor, evaluate and re-adjust our diocesan pastoral plan. We also take this time as an opportunity for bonding and recreation.

The first time we held such gathering, I told our priests that before assessing our diocesan pastoral plan, it would be helpful if we first assess our own life as a presbyterium. After all, our pastoral ministry can only be as good as our priestly life. We know from philosophy that action flows from being (*agere sequitur esse*). Besides, our priority objective on the renewal of the clergy requires us to undergo a lifestyle check, a strategy that was proposed by our lay people.

How would we conduct our lifestyle check, I asked. I then proposed that we commission a qualified group to prepare an instrument for the purpose and distribute it to our people for their feedback on our lifestyle. Our priests were not comfortable with the proposal and suggested that we do the lifestyle check ourselves.

Seeing that they were not ready for an objective assessment, I agreed and volunteered to start our own self-check by giving my own feedback. I asked them to allow me to open my heart as a father and speak of real concerns I deeply felt we needed to confront if we were determined to be effective in our ministry, like, celibacy, gambling (particularly, cockfight) and anomalous financial practices. I spent time to tell them of the situation of our diocese in these areas and how our infidelities greatly undermined our credibility and hampered our ministry. Then I suggested that for the first year we focused our review on our life of celibacy. After the talk, they went into group sharing. Some of them finished at 2 o'clock in the morning. Many admitted that it was the first time they could talk of such matters, things everyone knew but no one ever talked about in the presbyterium.

That was the start of the process of regularization among our clergy. We have already lost seven priests since then. Some have decided to take their responsibility with their kids and family. Others realized that they did not have the capacity to live a celibate life. Though this has caused painful losses to our diocese, those who had left, expressed gratitude for making it possible for them to live a more honest life.

Our Cluster System

Because of the sad experience we had of brother-priests leaving the diocese, our priests came to realize the need for support from each other. We have left our families (both our nuclear family and the family we could have as our own) to dedicate our life completely for the kingdom. It is true our parishioners welcome us into their homes and proudly consider us members of their family, but we know it is not exactly so. On Sunday night, when each one goes to his family, we are left alone in our convent. We know we have no other family we can call our own except our brother priests. No wonder Sunday nights can be very lonely. One priest confessed that it is on Sunday nights that he becomes most vulnerable.

To address this reality, our priests have grouped themselves according to age and regularly meet for life/faith sharing or simply for fellowship/bonding. Since then they have learned to be more open and transparent. What was taboo in the past can now be confronted and openly discussed. This has greatly helped us in diffusing crisis situations and arresting potential problems. Their sharings do not only pertain to matters of intimacy or priestly celibacy but to anything that needs to be discussed and resolved.

I personally have been invited in some of these cluster meetings, particularly on occasions when they felt they needed to “level off” with their bishop. This climate of openness and

transparency has happily spilled over to our larger meetings in the vicariate and in the presbyterium.

Once I received a text message from one of our priests saying, “Bishop, I am angry with you. Today is Father’s Day, and since you’re my father, Happy Father’s Day, Bishop.” I called for him and asked how I have earned his anger. We had a good dialogue and ended deeper in our relationship and respect for each other.

The Spirituality of Stewardship

The First Diocesan Synod of 1997 mandated that the tithing system be implemented in all parishes and chaplaincies. Eventually, with the help of Bp. Nicolas Mondejar, the diocese adopted a modified tithing model whereby the arancel fees were no longer asked of the tithing practitioners, but only of non-practitioners. This had two significant results, namely: a substantial increase in income of the parishes and the implementation of the Standardized Living Allowance for the priests.

In the first years of the implementation of the modified tithing system, the overall response was positive and enthusiastic. In time, however, the initial commitment and fervor of the tithers started to wane which became evident in the diminishing income of the BEC’s and the parishes. In turn the priests felt the brunt in the corresponding decrease of their SLA.

This alarming situation prompted us to reevaluate our tithing program and its effectiveness. In our assessment we discovered that there was actually nothing wrong with the program in itself. What we realized was that our tithing program needed to be sustained by a spirituality if it were to last. Any system, like any structure, is bound to die without a soul.

It was about this time that the spirituality of stewardship was introduced in the country. It did not take long for us to see that this could well be the answer to our quest for a spirituality. Thus began a massive education and formation of the presbyterium and the lay faithful on the spirituality of stewardship. The priests attended an annual retreat facilitated by Fr. Daniel Mahan, an expert and writer on the spirituality of stewardship. Seminars and workshops were organized for the whole diocese at all levels. The Aguinaldo Masses were maximized with thematic homilies on stewardship.

The spirituality of stewardship was eventually adopted as a spirituality of the diocese. In the Third Diocesan Assembly (DPA3), the spirituality of stewardship was enshrined in our revised vision-mission statement as our way of living Christian discipleship.

It is a fact that with the introduction of the spirituality of stewardship, the financial condition of our parishes and BEC’s did improve. But more than the financial benefits, the spirituality of stewardship brought to our diocese greater spiritual benefits. The growing awareness that we

are not owners of anything we have but only stewards gradually created a culture of accountability, responsibility and transparency.

This new culture affected the personal life of our priests. Mindful that we are not owners but only stewards of our life, our priests have become more health conscious. There are now fewer who smoke, and drinking has been significantly minimized. I can say that vices in general have substantially diminished. The yearly medical check-up of priests is now routine. Thanks be to God, our health care program for priests is now in place.

All-In Policy

Perhaps, the biggest grace and fruit in our attempt to live a lifestyle shaped by our sacramental brotherhood is our All-in Policy. Although we call it an all-in policy, for want of a better term, we understand it as more than just a policy; it is a spirituality.

Inspired by the example of the first Christian community in Jerusalem, who not only gathered for prayer and the breaking of the bread but also shared their possessions with each other, our priests have decided to surrender all the fruits of their ministry (stipends, Mass intentions, salaries, honoraria...) to the chancery and divide them equally for all. That means that at the end of each month every priest receives the same amount, whether he is a parish priest or an assistant, a seminary formator or a school chaplain, a newly ordained priest or a senior. This policy includes also the bishop.

This policy is founded on our communion as brother priests and is lived as an expression of the spirituality of stewardship. Like the labourers in the parable of the vineyard, we too are stewards working for the same Master in the same field. Though we may have different tasks (in accordance with our different gifts and capacities), the work we all do is for the same diocese and the same Lord. And so at the end of the work, we are happy to receive the same full day's wage.

It is more than three years now since we started implementing this policy, but it took us more than eight years to arrive at this stage. This policy has helped us become more focused on the mission and less concerned about financial matters. General parish re-shufflings and change of assignments are now easier to accept. Most of all, it has helped us become more credible and effective in our work of evangelization.

An After-Thought:

Beyond the All-In Policy, Beyond Sacramental Brotherhood

In a gathering of all our parish pastoral councils, one participant asked, "Now that the priests are financially secure, thanks to the all-in policy, what about us?"

It was a disturbing question that awakened us to the larger reality of the diocese and our place in it. Indeed, we priests are now secure. But, how about our people, particularly, those who work closely with us, our fiscals, our office workers, our household...? We then realized that the all-in policy for all its worth is self-serving to us priests, who ironically are called to serve, not ourselves, but God's people.

This realization moved us to take a deeper and more serious look at the condition of our Church workers. We have been working on the standardization of the wages of all our parish workers since then. We look forward to our Fourth Diocesan Pastoral Assembly next year, and topping the agenda is the proposal for the total abolition of the arancel.

This realization has taught us that the all-in policy goes beyond us. It has taught us to think diocesan and to put the concern of the diocese above that of our parish. Think Diocesan, Act Parochial. This guideline has greatly helped us navigate through the many complex and sometimes conflicting demands of our people, as well as our own. Most of all this realization has helped promote a culture of communion and solidarity, which has happily spilled over to our parish communities and schools.

→ In Kabankalan Catholic College, our licensed teachers in the high school department receive the Teachers' Salary Subsidy (TSS) from FAPE, amounting to PhP1,500.00 a month per teacher (PhP18,000.00 per year). Last year, they decided to pool their subsidy together and divided it among all the teachers so as to include also those who are not board passers.

→ Last year, we started the construction of our new Cathedral. Besides the one-peso a day campaign, the different vicariates have organized the dagyao, a local version of the bayanihan. Every Saturday, each vicariate takes turn to send voluntary workers to help in the construction site.

Our all-in policy cannot stop with us. We are called to a sacramental brotherhood that embraces not just us 60 priests, but the whole diocese. We called to build and strengthen our sacramental brotherhood by virtue of our priestly ordination in order to be more effective in building and strengthening our sacramental brotherhood with the People of God by virtue of our common baptism. Paraphrasing the words of St. Augustine, we can truly say of ourselves to our people, "For you I am a priest, with you I am a Christian."

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