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Catholics Divided On Role Of Laity

U.S. Church Faces Shortage of Priests

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The election of a new pope is high drama, full of history and mystery. But to understand what's ahead for the Catholic Church in the United States, you also need to look at a far less momentous transition here in Washington not long ago.

Georgetown University, run for more than two centuries by Jesuit priests, chose a layman as its president in 2001, the first in its history. John J. DeGioia joined thousands of lay Catholics around the country who occupy top positions at church-sponsored colleges, hospitals, clinics, newspapers, orphanages and schools.

The ranks of priests and nuns in the United States have been shrinking for a generation. Today, there simply aren't enough ordained leaders to run the vast Catholic Church in America -- a network of worship, education and social services that makes up the largest non-governmental organization in the country.

One result: the shift of responsibility, from the pews to the colleges, to lay leaders such as DeGioia. This change cuts across many of the toughest issues facing the American church, according to interviews with a range of clergy and lay leaders in recent days.

It shoves forward questions about who makes decisions, and how; where the church places its priorities, and why; whether the trend toward fewer priests can be reversed and what steps that might require. Most of all, does more responsibility in lay hands mean less power for the clergy -- from priests to bishops to the pope himself?

Questions like these will confront American Catholics no matter who is picked for the throne of St. Peter.

Pope John Paul II, who died April 2 after one of history's longest papacies, strengthened the traditional arrangements of power -- to the satisfaction of some Catholics and the frustration of others. The next pope can also take sides, if he chooses, in the coming power struggle. Or he can try to mediate, through the signals he sends and the principles he underlines.

But the church is too big for every battle to be waged from Rome, said Wilton D. Gregory, the archbishop of Atlanta, who recently completed a term as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"The Holy Father coordinates," Gregory explained. "He points us in a direction. But it is the bishops who have to solve the problems in their own communities. What Rome does is say, 'Go for it.' "

Or, perhaps, go *at it*.

"A peculiar part of the American culture is that we don't express our love by being silent -- we express it by arguing over it," said Patricia A. McGuire, president of Trinity College in Washington -- like DeGioia, a lay person leading a prominent Catholic institution. "We're a big, sprawling nation with a huge cultural divide."

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The math is not in dispute. The number of priests is down 28 percent over the past generation, and the number of Catholics is up 33 percent. The average priest is more than 60 years old, and far more priests die each year than are ordained. About 1 in 6 parishes have no priest, compared with 1 in 26 in 1975. The decline among monks and nuns is even more dramatic.

Nor do most Catholics dispute the idea that these trends are important. The dwindling corps of priests ranks just behind the clergy sex-abuse scandal as the top concern of American Catholics, according to an in-depth poll by sociologists at the Catholic University of America in 2003.

"If you were to ask most people what they think of when it comes to issues for the Catholic Church, you'd probably hear about sexual ethics -- contraception, abortion, homosexuality," said David Yamane, a Wake Forest sociologist who studies American Catholicism. "But in the trenches, the biggest problem is the priest shortage."

But what to do about it? That's a great big wedge issue.

On one side are the Catholics who seek a less top-down church, more open to innovation and dissent on issues from priestly celibacy to contraception to where the money goes. For them, the fact that lay leaders have more responsibility raises hopes that lay people will soon have more influence to go along with it -- influence over the church's priorities, its management, its tone, even its doctrines.

The Rev. Thomas P. Sweetser, director of the Parish Evaluation Project based in Milwaukee, believes greater power sharing is the key to energizing the moribund churches he visits across the country. At the parish level, the dwindling supply of priests can mean depleted, dispirited congregations, he said; these churches in turn fail to produce priests, thus deepening the problem.

"The priests need a spark," Sweetser said. "They're feeling worn thin and spread out. Meanwhile, the congregations are wanting a priest who connects with them, not just one that talks *at* them. It's an energy thing. The priests need the help and support of the community."

"So how do we include lay people in leadership and decision making? We have to take the lid off," he said.

It's not a question of diluting the faith; lay leaders "are just as spiritual as clergy," said the Rev. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, a sprawling network of church-sponsored agencies. It spends nearly \$3 billion and employs 50,000 people to serve about 7 million needy individuals in all 50 states.

"Twenty years ago, the leadership of our organizations was probably 90 percent clergy," Snyder continued, "and now it's probably 90 percent laity." He said lay people are just as likely as priests, if not more so, to ask, "Aren't we going to start this meeting with a prayer?"

What is different is the way lay people are trained and taught to operate -- with more consultation, more transparency and less obedience to authority than most priests and nuns. In the words of Trinity's McGuire, the traditional church has been "hierarchical, top-down and lockstep," whereas lay leaders in today's America come from a culture "where nothing works that way anymore, not even the military."

But the prospect of significant change is also galvanizing traditionalists, including some who would rather see the church split in two than change its structures. To them, innovation and dissent are the *cause* of the priest shortage -- and more of it will only deepen the problem.

They point to such places as Alexandria, and Lincoln, Neb., and Peoria, Ill. -- places where very conservative bishops, enforcing church orthodoxy, are filling their parishes with energetic young priests. Men appear to be flocking from around the country to be trained and ordained in traditionalist dioceses.

Michael S. Rose, in his widely read book "Goodbye, Good Men," took the argument one step further. He charged that church modernists in the 1970s and 1980s deliberately dissuaded orthodox young men from entering the priesthood -- and thus created the very priest shortage they now use to justify their calls for change.

One Alabama priest, writing on an Internet bulletin board for his like-minded brothers, declared that there will be plenty of priests to minister to "faithful Roman Catholics" as soon as dissenters in the church "finally realize that they are NEVER going to get their way and . . . finally go their own way -- the way of all the other protest-ants."

Many Catholics -- perhaps the largest share of the 67 million American Catholics -- find themselves between these two battle lines. They may favor more lay decision making *and* hold solidly orthodox views. Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that lay Catholics are any more likely than priests to want change; it's just that a conversation of millions is harder to steer than the deliberations of a single priest or council of bishops.

The Catholic University poll suggested that one-quarter to one-third of American Catholics line up on each side of this debate: about 25 to 30 percent strongly in favor of significant changes and a similar percentage committed to traditional structures of authority. That leaves a substantial center.

These are people who don't see the priest shortage as a conspiracy, instead attributing it to the pressures of a consumer culture and the mainstreaming of American Catholics. The Irish housekeepers and Italian tunnel builders of a century ago begat lawyers and doctors and entrepreneurs. They have smaller families and better prospects, generally speaking, and no longer view the priesthood as a step up in material terms.

For them, the foreseeable future of the church in America rests on a combination of incremental steps -- neither large changes nor radical breakup. More attention to developing young priests. More openness and dependence on priests from the booming churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America, where seminary enrollment is rising sharply.

And a mutual respect for the different roles to be filled by priests and lay people.

Carl A. Anderson, the chief executive of the Knights of Columbus, a lay organization of 1.6 million Catholic men worldwide, said the future of the church rests equally on lay people and on priests. To priests falls the sacramental life of the church -- the Mass and other liturgies. But supporting and serving and promoting the faith -- "evangelization" -- is the job of the laity.

"I really do believe that authority is not weakened or lessened. It's enhanced by greater participation by the laity," said Bishop Joseph A. Galante of Camden, N.J. "It is a catalyst to enable people to . . . take their share of the responsibility for the life of the church."

What they do with that responsibility is a question for the future.

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