

Change of Perspective in the Consideration of the Topic

Reflections of a Former Visitor and a Former Judicial Vicar

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1. Impressions about my years of study: 1950-1961

About 1950, as a young seminarian I saw in Panningen the French movie, “Le Défroqué” – “The Defrocked.” The film made a deep impression everywhere and initiated a big theological problem.

A man who had resigned from priesthood was challenged in a pub by tipplers to say the consecration words over a big glass of wine. Being defrocked could he still validly say the consecration words so that wine would change into holy blood? Was he not actually “sacerdos in aeternum,” “a priest forever”? The men kept challenging him until he yielded to their mockery.

He took the full cup of wine and said the consecration words. No sooner had he pronounced those words than his challengers began to challenge him again: “You believe that this is Holy Blood to be sure? You have got to drink this, you defrocked priest.”

That was what happened. The poor man had said the words, he drank and drank and got dead drunk.

A violent theological discussion began among the then important theologians: is such a consecration formula indeed valid? Protagonists and antagonists joined in from everywhere. On one thing they all agreed: a defrocked priest is — remains — a priest forever, even if he is surely a sinner.

There is no doubt about him being, as a defrocked priest, a bad sinner. If he did not convert, he would “go to hell for ever.” As a defrocked priest, an apostate, a sinner, there was no way he could still take part in ordinary ecclesial life. If he died without converting, he would be refused a church burial. He was expelled. Then people thought in that way. Thinking was not all, in most cases all official contacts with the ex-priest were cut.

I remember very well that this was the general opinion. During my seminary years in Panningen you could hear this every time a confrere left; he was a wretched sinner. This meant also: he is lost

forever. If the news made its way into the seminary that a confrere, who had left, now had died, you heard at the same time: May God take pity on this poor sinner.

Books about priests and religious who had left were published and became worldwide sensations in literature. The phenomenon was known the world over. A solution was difficult to be found.

I think that it was only at the end of 1960 — while studying canon law — that I heard that the Pope sometimes laicized priests and allowed them to have a Church marriage. A factor was certainly the tragic leaving by priests who had fought for years during the war. No publications appeared about the subject. That had to wait until Vatican II, when several bishops asked to find a definitive solution for those who had left and cohabited with a woman.¹

2. The years that I myself worked as a formator: 1961-1969

After my canon law study here in Rome, I was assigned to our major seminary in Panningen. The Vatican Council began. A huge change took place. In the midst of all those ecclesial changes a lot of priests left. Among them, priests who, in the past years, had become well known in our country.

In 1965 the Vincentians, Holy Ghost Fathers, Assumptionists, Norbertinians and Augustinians set up a theological faculty. There were 250 students. After four years there remained 50 students for the five congregations; no new students presented themselves. Some colleagues, teachers, declared that they did not believe in formation. Five colleagues left.

In 1967, now 40 years ago, the last group of students was ordained. Afterwards our province had one more candidate for ordination. This was the situation for us Vincentians, but also for almost all the congregations and dioceses in the Netherlands.

At the same time a new attitude developed toward the priests who left. The bishops had asked emphatically during the Council to arrange measures for the pastoral care of those who were leaving. They were not able or not willing to function anymore as priests, but quite a group remained heart and soul linked to the Church and wanted completely to stay part of it.

The procedures of asking for laicization brought to light that there may be many reasons for a person to leave. It was not only,

¹ E. LOHSE, "The Origin and Nature of the Suspension *Ad Cautelam* of Article 4 of the 1980 *Normae Procedurales* for Dispensations from Celibacy," in: *Periodica* 94, 2005, pages 647-680; 95, 2006, pages 69-107.

as was said in former days, because someone was a public sinner, unfaithful to his vocation and ideal, unfaithful to his vows. It became clear that completely different factors played a big part, not just sin.

3. The years I was at the diocesan tribunal: 1974-2007

During these years, little by little, I discovered a clear parallel ecclesial thinking about those who broke their marriage promise and divorced and those who left the priesthood. During my study, divorced people and priests who had left were all public sinners.

It was forbidden to divorce. If people, notwithstanding that prohibition, still divorced, then they would incur heavy ecclesial punishments. They were not allowed to receive Holy Communion. If they did not repent, Church burial was not allowed either. An ecclesial annulment of a marriage was very rarely possible. At the utmost they could be permitted to be “separated from bed and board.”²

For centuries the Church declared that a marriage impediment can block bringing about a marriage. Otherwise little was done with it except the announcement before the marriage that every member of the faithful was obliged to notify the presbytery of marriage impediments, if any. After CIC 1917, the jurisprudence developed more and more under the influence of psychological and psychiatric expertise and large-scale research in the field of the sexual life.

When a new definition of marriage was given by Vatican II, it became still more evident that many candidates for marriage cannot marry validly.

“The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring.”³

There are those who are incapable of contracting this. Thence the number of marriage annulments drastically increased worldwide. At the same time, the thoughts about divorced people changed. It was recognized that many divorced people have the right to get an annulment of their marriage. It was recognized that many among them are entitled to a full place in the Church community.

² CIC/1983 De separatione manente vinculo cc. 1151-1155.

³ Canon 1055 § 1.

It was recognized that there are divorced people too, who, because of the experience of their purified life and of the growth of their faith, are members of great value in the Church community, and therefore can be admitted in a religious community and even to ordination.

4. Conclusion

There are parallels between the two groups: the religious/priests who left and the persons who divorced.

I want to point out two basic parallels:

1. In judicial procedures we cannot raise the question of guilt;
2. Knowledge about the psychological and psychiatric backgrounds is of essential importance to reach a decision that gives the people concerned their due.

There is still another similarity between both groups.

I have the very strong impression that the people who left and the people who divorced have been approached, for centuries, as: "Them, the sinners." The bystanders — the faithful, the confreres, the sisters in community, the superiors — judged them and passed back to the order of the day, if they did not keep on throwing stones.⁴

These last 50 years, the awareness grew that the ecclesial community itself can be responsible too for a marriage to fail, for religious and priests to leave. I myself, with my colleagues on the diocesan tribunal, have quite often said that we, in our judicial work, do not do anything else than clean up what others (parents, educators, priests and so on) have omitted when these two persons contracted marriage. The matrimonial lawsuits show these omissions and mistakes very clearly.

CIC/1983. Canon 1063 does not say for nothing:

Pastors of souls are obliged to see to it that their own ecclesial community furnishes the Christian faithful assistance so that the matrimonial state is maintained in a Christian spirit and makes progress toward perfection. This assistance is especially to be furnished through: 1° preaching, catechesis...; 2° personal preparation for entering marriage...; 3° a fruitful liturgical celebration of marriage...; 4° assistance furnished to those already married....

⁴ John 8:1-11.

C. 1064:

It is up to the local ordinary to make provisions that such assistance is duly organised, even after consulting men and women of proven experience and skill...

These same words can be heard louder and louder these last years about guiding people to vows and ordinations.

We faithful, we religious, we priests and superiors have become aware that we ourselves did not measure up to our task during the years of formation and even afterwards.

The matrimonial lawsuits and the laicization requests show us our shortcomings.

I think this has been said in a masterly way in "A Moment of Reflection," which the then Procurator General, Modesto López, delivered at the Meeting of the Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission in Salamanca 5- 15 June 1996.⁵

⁵ *Vincentiana* (4-5) 1996, pages 360-361:

1. There are individuals who never should have been ordained which, if it can be proven, is the best argument in favor of the dispensation. But how did they go to profession and ordination?

a) Let us remember the formation *en masse* that many received. They could not be known individually. They easily were lost, without committing grave faults, which freed them from expulsion or advice to leave the seminary.

b) Cover-ups on their part, not revealing to their confessors or spiritual directors or other formators, because these never gained their confidence, at times because of fear that if they were honest they would be advised not to continue, and this they could not do, at times because of family pressure or that of people who have helped them to continue their studies in the seminary.

c) Cover-ups on the part of formators themselves. Like that deacon who had an adventure with a young woman who was as a consequence pregnant. He confided the following to a formator, his close friend; if a boy is born, I will become a priest; if it is a girl, I will leave the seminary and ask dispensation from the diaconate. The boy child came and our deacon was ordained a priest. A short time thereafter natural paternity weighed in heavier than spiritual paternity and he left the priesthood. The formator, his good friend, then said: "This is not strange because as a deacon he acted this same way." That was the first time he said what he ought to have revealed previously. An irresponsible companion helping one who never should have been ordained. And this is not a fantasy. Although fewer, there are cases in which at times a bishop or a provincial, against the opinion of the formators, approves a candidate for Holy Orders. Sometimes it is the confessor or the spiritual director who gives little importance to the real problems of a candidate for Holy Orders, and advises him to continue.

d) A lack of stability of formators in their position. On the one hand, some of these do not get enthused for the work confided to them, thinking rather about moving on to dedicate themselves to another ministry perhaps better rewarded in other ways. On the other hand, seminarians do not trust

On the basis of this double-sided life experience in procedures of laicization lawsuits and marriage lawsuits, I want to ask from all of us:

- to speak and judge with gentleness and clemency about those who left our Community;
- to learn to act with great clarity and strict justice when it is necessary;
- with courageous self-criticism ask ourselves if we need not review our life so that this mishap can be prevented; or, as Modest López told us in Salamanca:

*Let us make the cases of reduction to the lay state and expulsions less difficult by reducing as far as possible their number, first of all through a desirable formation, and afterwards a life of community lived in true companionship of prayer, fraternity and work.*⁶

May God in these days inspire and assist us through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

their formators, moving on from order to order to the point where, in the middle of grave doubts, they decide to take that step which never should have been taken: that of receiving (p. 361) priestly ordination. The Sacred Congregation in its letter, *Dilata et compleantur acta*, calls us to make every effort to find a solution, above all in the admission and formation stage, to the formation and selection of both candidates to orders and of their formators.

2. There is another group, probably the majority, of priests who received a formation, perhaps not totally solid but good, who received ordination freely and enthusiastically, who worked ten, 15, even more years with total dedication and with much fruit, but the day comes when they begin to ask themselves questions. Irregularity in the common life of prayer, excessive activism outside, withdrawing within, a critical spirit, bitterness grows. The Community notices all of this but it looks away, it tolerates it at first, it begins to criticize, later to complain, but in the absence or when he is already outside. It is much too late! What could have been done that was not done? A big question, but a confrere has been lost.

Superiors ought to have the necessary courage to remove from formation a subject who evidently causes more damage than good. We need to have a critical judgement about our life as community. Why do a large number of confreres pass to the secular clergy? What do they hope to find away from us that we do not give or that we perhaps deny them? If they seek a better social position, if they seek greater liberty, more independence, this can be a fault in formation, for not having discovered in time that such individuals are not apt for life in community, or certain demands of our community life were not well explained to them. Would that with the new *Instruction on the Vows*, our young men can discover in time what the vow of stability means, which I think has already been spoken about in this meeting.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 362.