

The Origins, Manifestations And Resolution of Conflicts In Priestly Relationships

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Loving, supportive and mutually encouraging relationships among priests are essential to the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of priests and to their ministry. This ministry is becoming increasingly demanding. Factors contributing to this pressure are a society which is becoming less Christian, a declining number of men entering studies for the priesthood, the exodus from active ministry of ordained priests, and a laity which is unaware of the increased stress priests experience because of the above factors.

The most significant way in which stress is reduced in married men, after the daily activity of work, is through loving family relationships. Such love renews these men, enabling them to go forth daily to face their responsibilities.

It is equally important that during an active day of ministry, priests be renewed both in divine love and in the unique love that is present in priestly relationships. Some experience an inability to be open to loving relationships. Often this arises from childhood and adolescent experiences within the family and with peers.

Significant Consequences

When daily renewal in love is absent, the consequences can be significant. The result may be depression, anger, alcoholism, sexual acting - out, burnout, withdrawal from relationships, physical illness or abandonment of a personal prayer life. Unless positive steps are taken, such symptoms can result in resignation from the active priesthood.

Emotional obstacles in priestly relationships are usually unconscious and are the result of a number of disappointments in relationships with parents, siblings, and peers early in life and, later, with priests, pastors, those in authority, women Religious and laity.

Most men enter adult life with a degree of insecurity because they did not receive the praise, affection and male acceptance needed to develop a positive male identity from their fathers and other male authority figures.

Other causes of insecurity include a negative view of one's body, lack of praise for and acknowledgment of priestly ministry by pastors, those in authority and the laity, and the absence of athletic giftedness and subsequent rejection of ridicule by peers in a culture which places excessive importance on athletic prowess.

Since it is common for children to idealize parents, their marital relationship and family life, many priests who seek growth in self-knowledge are surprised by the degree of sadness and loneliness they had unconsciously struggled with from childhood and adolescence. The most common cause of this sadness, in my clinical experience with priests, is the absence of a warm, loving, physically affectionate relationship with the father and, to a lesser extent, with the mother.

Emotional wounds of loneliness and sadness from early life produce an effect which is similar to that occurring in rheumatic heart disease when heart damage occurs early in life but often is not diagnosed. The full effect of that damage may not limit a person's life until decades later.

The most common source of sadness in the active ministry is the pastor/associate pastor relationship. Many pastors have difficulty in praising and affirming their associates and many associates are not sensitive to the pastor's problems. Many priests do not realize how important it is to create a sense of home and loving fellowship in the rectory. This problem stems from modeling after a father or a pastor who had difficulty in communicating his love and who had more confidence in his work than in his ability to develop close relationships.

Other frequently related sources of sadness are the absence of close priest friendships, serious family conflicts or the absence of closeness with family, the loss of friends through multiple moves and religious indifference in the laity.

Trust Limited

Anger arises out of disappointments at different life stages, and a failure to forgive leads to misdirected anger which may block the flow of love in rectories and interfere with ministry.

Some young men enter seminaries with a limited ability to trust in loving relationships and are unable to allow others to become close to them because of hurts with their parents, siblings, and peers. Seminary experiences which interfered with the development of trust, which is essential to loving and to communicating, include the particular friendship taboo, difficult peer evaluations, lack of encouragement and failure to forgive seminarians or seminary faculty for hurts occurring during those years.

Later events which limit trust include: the loss of priest friends through failing to maintain friendships after ordination, through a friend's leaving the active ministry, through a friend's becoming a workaholic, or through death; the failure to forgive priests for hurts in ministry; and disappointments with women Religious or the laity.

There are multiple ways in which the wound of insecurity is manifested in men. These include: workaholism, a very critical attitude, inability to compliment or praise, excessive competitiveness, drinking, inability to be close to priests and difficulty in receiving human and divine love because of the false belief of being unlovable.

In every life-state men make an unconscious attempt to undo low self-esteem and the sadness associated with it. The most common way is through sexual acting-out, either heterosexually or homosexually. This is an unconscious attempt to experience oneself as being lovable and special.

Unresolved anger with one's father, brothers or peers is often misdirected unconsciously at brother-priests, pastors, other authority figures or at God through rebellious behavior, in either an active or passive-aggressive manner. This expression of anger regularly brings pleasure and, for some, even a sense of exhilaration, particularly in those priests who have never resolved their anger with the first authority figure in their lives, their father.

Those with wounds of mistrust from family life or adult life are often loners who socialize or vacation primarily with laity. They do not communicate easily with priests in the rectory. They often use anger, aggressiveness and criticism to keep others at a distance because of their fear of vulnerability. They may have a multitude of superficial relationships in an attempt to mask their fear of intimacy. They may need to be in control excessively in relationships and in ministry because of their fear of trusting.

As pastors, they may have difficulty delegating responsibilities, and as associates they may be very uncooperative and distant.

From early adolescence, the wounds of sadness from family life and peer relationships may produce homosexual or heterosexual acting-out or temptations, and in adult-life loneliness, alcoholism, masturbation, drug abuse and homosexual or heterosexual behavior. The latter actions are an unconscious attempt to obtain a good feeling and, thereby, alleviate for a period of time the strong denied sadness from childhood and adolescence.

Resolution of Conflict

Some are tempted to leave the priestly ministry because they mistakenly believe that their emotional pain and lack of happiness and joy arise solely from their present adult life situation. These priests may refuse to examine sadness or trauma in early family life and peer relationships because they are caught up in illicit sexual relationships or in substance abuse.

Another reason which prevents men from facing their denied emotional pain is a fear that disclosing personal vulnerability diminishes or threatens their masculine identity.

Conflicts in priestly relationships can be diminished significantly by daily growth in a number of areas including forgiveness, trust, a commitment to create a fellowship of love with one's brother-priests, awareness of one's giftedness and the freedom to share loving experiences.

The emotion of anger is one of the major obstacles in loving relationships in every life state. Because of this, removal of anger is necessary. Daily openness to forgive those one lives and works with facilitates the development and continuance of loving relationships. This can be done by reflecting on who has disappointed us in the morning, afternoon and evening, and by choosing to forgive those persons.

We can forgive intellectually through a decision. We can forgive emotionally when we truly feel like forgiving through understanding the pain in those who inflicted the hurts. We can forgive in prayer when the other two are impossible.

Forgiveness a Must

Forgiveness can be used anytime but it is particularly effective when employed at the end of the day because it prevents anger from being carried into the next day. Consequently, the sun does not go down on one's anger.

There is also value in reviewing one's family life and seminary years and forgiving those who may have caused disappointment in each of these life stages. An essential part of this process is identifying areas where forgiveness is needed with each parent.

The nature of anger is such that without forgiveness, this anger will be misdirected years or even decades later.

Finally, as in marital relationships, it is helpful to bring forgiveness into each year of one's vowed commitment. In this process, many priests are surprised that they had denied anger with their brother-priests and later misdirected this anger at priests or others who did not deserve it.

Conflicts in rectories can also be diminished by making a daily commitment to create a fellowship of love in the rectory. Priestly ministry is limited if it is not based in loving priestly friendships within a rectory. Thus, it is the responsibility of each priest to try to make a daily commitment to trust and love those with whom he lives even though he may not feel like doing so.

Love and commitment between priests depend on a basic ability to trust. A daily commitment to trust the priests one lives with is as essential to priesthood as the commitment to trust that the married man must make to his family.

Equally important is the decision to trust daily in the love of the Trinity and Mary and to set aside time daily to receive this love. If one doesn't trust in human priestly love, however, problems develop and it is very hard to trust in God's love. If one rejects genuine human priestly love, there will be difficulty in experiencing the warmth of God's love.

Some priests have been hurt so deeply by family members, priests, sisters or laity that the movement toward trust requires daily prayer for the gift of feeling protected in relationships. The fear of becoming vulnerable and the risk of being hurt again are very strong.

Commitment to priestly brotherhood should include complimenting and praising, encouraging, helping one's brother-priests grow in confidence, maintaining an open door and ear, giving one's time, and recognizing the tremendous power of love within each priest to help others grow.

These steps are very difficult for many men because the male world is primarily a non-affirming world as opposed to the female world where expressing love, being complimentary and relating on an emotional level are more acceptable.

Priests who are not emotionally vulnerable and are not committed to their own families have not committed to their own families have great difficulty committing themselves to their brother-priests until they have been reconciled with their own families or others who have hurt them.

Also, loving brother-priests is facilitated by a deeper appreciation and regular expression of thanksgiving for the reality of being lovable and for the multiple gifts each priest has. It is much easier to be affirming and complimentary if a priest is aware of his own special and powerful gifts and is able to receive love.

The obstacles between priests can also be diminished by a decision to let go of excessive competitiveness, aggressiveness, jealousy and criticism which often characterize male relationships. Priests who are workaholics could be more cognizant of the importance of loving friendships with priests and could consider that the call to create loving priestly fellowship may be as important as the call to ministry.

Specifically, this means keeping in touch with classmates and priest-friends, relaxing together regularly, and maintaining communication with one's priest brothers.

Sharing God's Love

Finally, stress in rectory living can be significantly diminished by an openness among priests which allows sharing more freely and without fear personal experiences of the Lord's love and personal experiences in prayer. Unfortunately, it is often awkward for priests to share the power of the Lord's love and the ways His love has touched them and His people. It is often more acceptable to talk about parish burdens, conflicts, politics, and sports.

This difficulty has its roots in developmental experiences in the male world where discussing loving experiences is viewed as unmasculine or even feminine, but this problem can be overcome. Discussion among priests of the Lord's love for them and His people brings hope, joy, strength, confidence and conflict resolution.

Understanding the dynamics and importance of loving priestly relationships can be very liberating. Regardless of the length of time a particular woundedness may have been present, healing can occur. Some priests may need professional help, particularly those who have had significant emotional pain from early family life or those who have been deeply hurt by their brother-priests.

Loving and supportive relationships among priests are vital to the well-being of the individual priest and, subsequently, to his priestly ministry.

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