

Priest and Parishioner: Walking Side by Side

By Jane Harriman



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Bishop Michael A. Saltarelli
Diocese of Wilmington



After reading the profile of his new parish and meeting some of its leadership, the pastor went to dinner with a brother priest who inquired, “So, how do you think it will go?”

“Not well,” the pastor replied, feigning dismay. “Who can walk on water? The Lord Jesus Christ Himself couldn’t meet their expectations.”

Priests may joke among themselves of the impossible relationship a parish expects to have with its new pastor, but in most cases, they are just joking.

“When I commission or assign a newly ordained priest for the first time, I tell him that to be successful two things are required: to be present and to be pleasant. The people are not really looking for much more than that – someone to follow them from cradle to grave, to be with them on their journey,” says Bishop Michael A. Saltarelli of the Diocese of Wilmington, Delaware.

In other words, Bishop Saltarelli believes, as do other church officials, that the relationship between pastor and parishioners remains at heart as close as it always has been. Despite the sex abuse scandal of recent years, despite a society that seems focused on Hollywood and Wall Street, not Rome, despite fewer priests and more Catholics in more parishes.

Not all agree. Post sex abuse crisis, the relationship between youth and pastor may be suffering, notes Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, psychologist and president of the St. Luke Institute, an education and research center in Silver Spring, Maryland, that treats priests and religious with mental or emotional problems or addictions.

“I think priests are more reticent about dealing with minors. I know I certainly am and I think my brother priests are,” Msgr. Rossetti says. “If I were taking a whole group of boys camping and I couldn’t get another adult to go with me, I wouldn’t take them by myself. Can we get around that? Not in the current generation of priests. I think it will take a while.”

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Certainly with children, Bishop Saltarelli says, one always exercises prudence and reaches out to them “always in the company of their parents. But children naturally want to hug their priest. When that happens, I don’t walk away.”

Modern relationships have other challenges too. The pastor of a parish today may not have time to attend committee meetings, or every home basketball game or visit shut-ins on First Friday, but if he has a healthy relationship with parishioners, he has encouraged the development of lay ministers, and his people understand his time constraints.

Father Clete Kiley describes the role of a pastor as multi-layered and subject to misunderstanding even among those of the Catholic tradition. “He is a teacher and probably best known to his people through the Eucharist and other sacraments. He is a spiritual bridge, a father. In some ways he is the icon of Jesus himself. That’s something priests are mindful of.”

Father Kiley, formerly a pastor in the Archdiocese of Chicago and a seminary dean, is now president of The Faith & Politics Institute in Washington, DC, an interfaith, bipartisan agency that helps members of Congress approach their work spiritually. Before that, he was executive director of the Secretariat for Priestly Life and Ministry for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, where he served on the sexual crisis management team and helped create the National Review Board and Office for Child and Youth Protection.

In administering the sacraments of the church, Father Kiley says, a priest stands “in persona Christi,” in the place of Christ, saying in reconciliation, for example, “I absolve you,” when it is God who gives absolution.

“If we are transparent enough, what the people see is Christ. I think that is the essential bond between the pastor and the people.” A priest, Father Kiley says, is human and has human faults and failings: “Part of me is sinful and broken,” and that part he steps around in administering the sacraments. In celebrating the Eucharist, Father Kiley said, after the consecration, “when the priest kneels, that gesture shows that I was acting in God’s person but I am not Him.”

In addition to the sacraments, “the priest is administering the goods of the church,” Father Kiley said. “People give us their money. You hear priests say, ‘What do I know about roofs?’ But we are entrusted with those things. We are stewards of the church’s community goods.”