



STATEMENT OF CONCERN ON CLERICALISM
FROM APPALACHIAN CATHOLICS
IN THE SMOKY MOUNTAIN REGION

January 6, 2017

To evoke the Holy Faithful People of God is to evoke the objective we are invited to look towards and reflect upon... A father cannot conceive of himself without his children... A pastor cannot conceive of himself without a flock, whom he is called upon to serve. The pastor is the pastor of a people, and the people need him within....¹

Pope Francis tells us that in order to meet the spiritual needs of the community, the people need their pastor “within” that community. While many priests are wonderful shepherds for their people, our experience reveals that this is not always the case, and our connection with other Catholics in the Appalachian region indicates that our experience points to a much larger problem.

Many Catholics in the central and southern Appalachian region feel they are talking to the wind. Their priests, especially the younger ones, do not listen to them. Their bishops do not listen to some of the priests or the people, and many of them seem not to be listening to Pope Francis. We realize the pressures on our clergy caused by the shortage of priests and the increasing spiritual needs of the people, but we feel there are pressing issues that need to be addressed in the short term.

There are flagrant examples of some of the clergy failing to care for their people and failing to see the suffering imposed on them, not only in the liturgy, but in the wider sacramental life of the church and in outreach to the community. A lack of responsibility is evident, even with regard to pastoral care of the dying. In one parish in our region, this happened at least four times in less than two years and two parishioners died without the sacraments. Likewise, funerals have not been scheduled in a timely manner, not allowing adequate input from the family of the deceased in the funeral arrangements. To date there has been no apology or acknowledgement, or even a response from the bishop in the diocese where this occurred.

Many of our younger priests insist upon imposing a uniform Roman culture while ignoring the rich diversity of Appalachian, Latino/a, and Cherokee cultures. We feel this is contrary to the examples of Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis. One bishop with a sizable Native American population in his diocese has failed to respond to the concerns of parishioners about actions of the priest which have offended Native people and their friends.

Again, many of the younger priests, particularly those fresh out of seminary, have an arrogant, self-righteous and condescending attitude. These “restorationists” seem to be more intent on taking the church back to the days before the Second Vatican Council rather than minister to the people. They seem to be steeped in doctrine and theology, but are unwilling to participate in ecumenical activities, and are lacking in compassion, love and mercy. They are doing the job of the theologian, but not the job of the pastor. This is directly opposed to what Pope Francis and Vatican II are teaching us. Many seem to have the attitude that Vatican II never happened,

¹ Pope Francis, “Letter to Pontifical Commission for Latin America” (March 19, 2016), available at <https://zenit.org/articles/text-of-popes-letter-to-pontifical-commission-for-latin-america/>.

taking the church back in time while ignoring the teachings of Pope Francis that have brought a vibrant new energy to the church, reviving the Church's relevancy for many Catholics.

Many longtime Catholics who recall the days before Vatican II, and who have been faithful to the church over the years, feel they are being treated like children by priests in their thirties. As a result, they are leaving their parishes in search of meaningful liturgies. In rural areas, this is hard to do, given the distances involved in travelling to other parishes. Some Catholics are going to Protestant churches, some seeking alternative intentional communities, and others not attending church at all. This has caused a great sadness on the part of many people who, for many years, were part of parish communities now fractured by clerical ambivalence.

We recognize that we are blessed with some very good priests who give a lot to the people and who minister in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. It is not our intention to vilify the clergy as a whole, but to raise a prophetic voice in the spirit of love for the church in order to address some of the problems we encounter. Better communication and acknowledgement of issues raised by the people would go a long way in addressing the feeling of alienation that many parishioners experience. Addressing structural issues like the priest shortage necessarily take a long time, but some long-standing problems are able to be addressed more immediately, and it is past time to deal with them. Some of these problems, especially those related to the pastoral care, could be addressed creatively, for example, by an expansion of the ordained diaconate, particularly among women, or by empowering the laity to anoint the sick. As Catholic writer Matthew Kelly has stated, "God never goes back; he always moves forward. Adam and Eve were banished from the garden. God could have redeemed them and sent them back to the garden, but he didn't, for two reasons: God always wants our future to be bigger than our past, and God always moves forward."²

We pray for our priests and bishops here in North Carolina, throughout Appalachia, and indeed throughout the world, as the issue of clericalism affects the church globally. We pray for a change of hearts, minds, and pastoral practice among our clergy, that they would imitate more strongly the example of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve.

Catholic Committee of Appalachia
North Carolina Chapter

As a network of Catholics committed to practicing the reforms of Vatican II in the region, the Catholic Committee of Appalachia has nurtured region-wide relationships of engaged laity working to create a church of the people. These relationships help us to see that the local concerns expressed by our North Carolina State Chapter are in fact shared by Catholics in many dioceses throughout the Appalachian region. The Catholic Committee of Appalachia Board of Directors endorses this statement and joins our NC State Chapter in asking bishops throughout the region to respond in a pastoral manner to address the concerns raised herein.

² Matthew Kelly, *Rediscover Catholicism: A Spiritual Guide to Living with Passion & Purpose* (Beacon Publishing), 23.