

## Dangers of Clericalism

To be against clericalism is not the same as being anticlerical. The latter signifies strong secular resistance to the Catholic Church's social and political power. Clericalism is about an excessive emphasis on the role of the clergy in the Church's internal affairs. It implies clerical elitism, the superiority of the priesthood over the laity. Anticlericalism, as a concept in Continental European politics, is some way past its sell-by date. But clericalism is very much still in currency as a key concept in analysing the cultural factors that gave rise to the clerical sex-abuse scandal inside the Catholic Church. It has almost become de rigueur for church leaders to say they are against clericalism in this context.

Clericalism was dealt a heavy blow by the emphasis in the teaching of Vatican II on the priesthood of all believers and on common baptism. But there is evidence of a clericalist backlash among some of those undergoing training for the priesthood or recently ordained. In dress and attitude, some of them appear to hanker – almost narcissistically – after a restoration of the priest's elevated status that characterised parish life in the 1950s. A softer form of clericalism is still apparent in diocesan structures and in the Vatican itself, where few lay people are to be found, and usually in relatively junior positions. And clericalism automatically marginalises or excludes women.

It is also sometimes implicit in the motivation of those who are pushing for the return of the Tridentine Rite to general use. While the post-Vatican II new-rite Mass emphasises the Eucharist as an activity shared by the whole community, the Mass named after the Council of Trent puts more weight on the separation of roles, with the priest active and the congregation passively watching.

The Vatican is continuing to put ammunition in the hands the pro-Tridentine lobby in the Church, as in the latest instruction, *Universae Ecclesiae*, issued by the Pontifical Commission *Ecclesia Dei*. Does it not realise how much this will encourage divisive tensions in the Church and a spirit of reactionary rebellion against local episcopal authority, not to mention the revival of a misogynistic and elitist clericalism?

The reinstatement of the Tridentine Rite was intended to unify the Church and reconcile those alienated from it; there is a real danger of it having the opposite effect. If bishops are not alarmed by this, they should be.

Meanwhile, the latest instruction from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) regarding the handling of clerical abuse allegations moves in the opposite direction. It recognises that while bishops cannot shirk their responsibilities, they cannot be a law unto themselves in such matters. National episcopal conferences are being required to draw up guidelines and submit them to the Vatican. The importance of cooperation with secular authorities such as the police is emphasised, though curiously the CDF only stresses the duty to report all cases where that is already required by law. It needs to be more general than that: in many countries there is no obligation to report a crime. That apart, the instruction moves the Church into the real world, with best practice (as in England and Wales, perhaps) being made the common standard. As a result, the Church will be that much less clerical – and safer.