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and  
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Moving Beyond  
a Clerical Culture

# Moving Beyond a Clerical Culture

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Kevin Egan and Cora Lambert

When a ship is sinking the captain instructs the passengers and crew to abandon ship and head for the lifeboats. In the Irish Catholic Church there is a growing consensus among priests and pastoral workers that this is the time to abandon the clerical culture and head for the lifeboats.<sup>1</sup> The clerical culture has been described as a culture of “Do and Tell.” It has been a culture of lone practitioners where the objective is to get things done quickly and efficiently and instructing or telling others what to do. The emphasis is on instructing people what to do rather than developing a relationship with them. We all have been brought up in a culture which takes for granted that telling is more valuable than asking. To ask might be perceived as revealing ignorance and weakness. The fact that Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a drink of water shocked his disciples (Jn 4: 7). To take an example from the world of management. Edgar Schein reports on a study where management students were asked what it means for them to be promoted “to manager.” Without hesitation they replied: “It means I can tell others with to do.”<sup>2</sup> If the same question were asked of you: what does it mean to be a parish priest or a leader in the Church, the answer may not have been all that different.

## THE ART OF HUMBLE INQUIRY

The polar opposite of telling people what to do is to ask them to tell you about themselves, their feelings, thoughts and needs. For this

1 Some of the material in this article is based on a talk, ‘Supporting Priests in Ministry and in Life: Changing a Culture’, given to the priests of the Clonfert Diocese in Knock on October 17th 2017

2 Edgar Schein. *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers 2013, p. 59.

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## THE FURROW

reason, we want to explore with you the skill of asking questions. Edgar Schein refers to this as “the art of humble inquiry” – he calls it the gentle art of asking instead of telling.

Humble Inquiry is the fine art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person.<sup>3</sup>

Humble inquiry begins from a stance of recognizing our interdependence. Humility is frequently conceived of as adopting a lowly stance, not lording it over others. Priests are dependent on the laity and the laity are dependent on priests. To quote Cardinal Newman: “without the laity the clergy would look strange.”

### ASKING FOR FEEDBACK

All the literature on leadership stresses the importance of asking for feedback from those we serve and work with. While many of us agree with this advice on an intellectual level, we fail to integrate it into our daily practice. To start asking for feedback would be one way to change the culture of “do and tell.” We have pondered over the question: how does one bring about change in a culture? Does one have to do something radical and revolutionary? In fact, the opposite is the case. The beginning of successful cultural leadership is often “a small act of creative transgression.” It needs to be small because “transgression on a larger scale amounts to revolution and will be vigorously resisted ... It must also be transgressive because in order to shift the culture we must challenge it: we must do something counter-cultural. And it is creative, rather than merely disruptive, because it appeals to the culture’s deeper values, its ‘better self.’”<sup>4</sup> For a parish to look for feedback from its parishioners is a movement away from the “Do and Tell” culture. We would describe what Pope Francis seems to be about, as giving cultural leadership in the Church. There are many examples. He sent out a questionnaire to married couples and families prior to the Synod on the family. Recently he disclosed that as provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina he went regularly to see a psychoanalyst. Here he is challenging the clerical culture of self-sufficiency by seeking out the help he needed at the time.

Perhaps you are wondering what exactly the term feedback consists of? Feedback consists in “feeding something back” to the

3 Edgar Schein. *Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers 2009 quoted in Schein op. cit 2013, p. 2.

4 Maureen O’Hara and Graham Leicester. *Dancing on the Edge: Competence, Culture and Organization in the 21st Century*. Axminster, Devon: Triarchy Press 2012, p. 94.

## MOVING BEYOND A CLERICAL CULTURE

practitioner to help them in their practice.<sup>5</sup> The practitioner in your context may be a colleague, a lay person, a pastoral worker, or even the bishop! We can distinguish between five types of feedback: *corrective, evaluative, informative, affirmative and exploratory*.<sup>6</sup> It is only recently we have stepped up our practice of asking for feedback. Do you ask for feedback? If you are reluctant to do so why do you think this might be the case? To ask for feedback is to open oneself to receiving feedback that falls into any of the above categories. Affirmative feedback is, naturally easier to receive than corrective, but it is from integrating the latter category that learning occurs and practices and ministries.

We all need affirmation for the work we do. In our experience church leaders fall way behind leaders in the business world. Workers in the business, health and education sector are all familiar with receiving feedback in the form of performance appraisal. This seldom happens in the church. There is a culture in place which prevents it taking place. Try to recall when was the last time you received positive feedback from a colleague? When was the last time you gave it? While moderating a conversation with a group of priests, one of the participants gave positive feedback to another on a liturgy he had recently conducted. His intervention had a powerful impact and changed the climate in the group – a practical illustration of one small act of creative transgression. Here was one priest affirming another in front of fellow priests. We all had a sense that this was powerful and unusual. Up to this point the exchanges had to do with expressing views on matters of mutual concern. We discovered something new. Participants were not only willing to share ideas, they were willing to use their power to affirm each other. This is an example of one of those small acts of creative transgression that contributes to cultural change.

### ASKING RATHER THAN TELLING

We have described the clerical culture as a culture of “Do and Tell.” Pope Francis would seem to be of the view that this culture has run its course and needs to be jettisoned. In a recent letter to Cardinal Marc Armond Quillet he wrote:

It is not for the pastor to tell lay people what they must do and say, they know this better than we do. It is not for the pastor to establish what the faithful must say in various settings<sup>7</sup>

5 Daphne Hewson and Michael Carroll. *Reflective Practice in Supervision*. Hazelbrook, NSW.: MoshPit Publishing 2016, 129

6 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

7 Pope Francis Letter to Cardinal Marc Armond Quillet, PPS, President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America. 19 March 2016.

## THE FURROW

We want to encourage you to engage in changing that culture. For this reason, we want to explore some of the reasons why we should put the emphasis on asking rather than telling. In his book, *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*, Edgar Schein points out that:

Telling puts the other person down. It implies that the other person does not already know what I am telling and that they ought to know it. On the other hand, asking temporarily empowers the other person. It draws them into the situation and into the driver's seat.<sup>8</sup>

We much prefer to be asked instead of told. It is not that telling is always wrong. It depends on the amount or extent of it. In some cases, it is appropriate to tell by giving information or advice. But it is usually helpful to ask a question first – Hence the principle: Ask before you tell. Reading the accounts of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel's it is evident that he wasn't afraid to ask questions. He asked his disciples: "who do the crowds say I am? And he followed it up with the question: "who do you say I am." Jesus was a master of asking questions to invite people to grow: What are you looking for? (Jn 1:38). What do you want me to do for you? (Mk 10: 51). Do you believe I can do this? (Mt 9:28). He used questions to engage people in a conversation. When he encountered two disciples on the road to Emmaus he asked them what they were talking about? (Lk 24:17). Thomas Groome makes the observation that he walked along *with* them: "*neither for, nor against, nor behind, nor ahead of.*"<sup>9</sup>

### ASKING QUESTIONS OF ONESELF

We usually think of humble inquiry in terms of asking questions of others but there is another form of humble inquiry that is equally important and that is asking questions of ourselves. Why do we need to ask questions of ourselves? We need to do so because we need to continually check out our perceptions. by asking in a humble manner: Am I reading this situation, right? Was I open to the perspective of the other? Is how I am behaving a reflection of who I want to be? This is a wise practice and a core activity in relationship building.<sup>10</sup>

In pastoral supervision a parish priest described how he was getting into conflict situations with some parishioners and that he wanted to be able to handle the situations differently. Critical to

8 Edgar Schein op. cit 2013, p. 8.

9 Thomas Groome. *Will There Be Faith? Depends on Every Christian*. Dublin: Veritas 2011, p. 40.

10 Schein op. cit 2013, p. 95.

## MOVING BEYOND A CLERICAL CULTURE

this outcome was his learning and practice of the art of humble inquiry. This consisted of him giving the parishioners space to express their views and letting them know he had heard them, before making a response. Practising humble inquiry is especially helpful in situations of high anxiety or conflict with an individual or a group. “In such a state there are generally three faculties that shut down. People don’t think clearly, they don’t speak rationally, and they don’t act compassionately.”<sup>11</sup> It is in these situations that one needs to observe one’s emotional reactions. We do this by asking ourselves questions: What am I feeling? What am I thinking? How is this affecting me? How are the others reacting?

Priests and those in pastoral leadership by and large want to have good relationships with parishioners. They don’t want to cause hurt or offence. Ministry is unpredictable and they frequently find themselves in highly charged situations or encounter parishioners with a chip on their shoulders or an axe to grind. (The psychological language for this is displaying transference reactions). In these situations, it is important to be able to reflect on the interaction at the same time as you engage with it. Hence the value of asking reflective questions of yourself.

### CRITICAL REFLECTION ON ASSUMPTIONS

Priests are the key figures who can bring about change in the clerical culture. Asking for feedback, asking for support, showing an interest in each other’s ministry can all contribute to this change. However, if real change is to take place in a culture the participants need to critically reflect on the assumptions on which it is based. Hewson and Carroll use the term “assumption hunting.” By this they mean searching for the premises or assumptions that underpin our work. They define assumptions as “the taken for granted ‘truths’ we have come to accept without question, to the point where we don’t seem to notice them.”<sup>12</sup> These assumptions aren’t just private to ourselves, we share them with others in the culture and they often reflect “dominant social power arrangements” in the hierarchical culture.<sup>13</sup>

In asking you to critically reflect on your assumptions we are not presuming that they are all based on untruths. An assumption is something whose truth status is uncertain, it may nor may not be true. Hewson and Carroll recommend that we treat them as hypotheses, they may or may not be true. Critical reflection allows us to test their truth – to stand back from them and question them. In the words of Robert Kegan, they are not so much assumptions

11 Loughlan Sofield and Carroll Juliano. *Principled Ministry: A Guidebook for Catholic Leaders*. Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press 2011, p. 114.

12 Hewson and Carroll op. cit 2016, p. 108.

13 Ibid, p. 113.

## THE FURROW

*we have*, they are assumptions that *have us*. “We are not aware of them or responsible for them; they run us.”<sup>14</sup>

We have put together a list of possible assumptions that make up what has come to be known as the clerical culture. We grouped them under three headings: the priestly role, relationships with laity and change. As you review the list pick out ones that you no longer hold to be true. How long have you held this assumption and what were the circumstances that led you to abandon it?

### Assumptions relating to Priestly Role:

- I always need to be available
- I am responsible for this diocese/parish
- If I don't do it myself, nobody will
- The most efficient way to get things done is to tell people what to do

### Assumptions relating to the Laity:

- The majority of the laity prefer to be told what to do rather than consulted
- The ordained-laity relationship can't be based on equality
- Most of the laity don't have a degree in theology and can't be expected to be consulted on everything

### Assumptions relating to Change:

- People don't want too much change
- I am too old for too much change. The way things are will see me out.
- It is important to control the process of change

A bishop reading through this list might recall a time when he felt he alone was responsible for the diocese or he might like Mariano Magrassi, the former Archbishop of Bari, acknowledge that while no bishop has “all the gifts,” he has “the gifts of all.” He is like the conductor of an orchestra who can't play all the instruments but who knows how to lead and coordinate all of the musicians.<sup>15</sup>

The writer Paul Wilkes in his book *In Mysterious Ways: The Death and Life of a Parish Priest* (1990) gives a wonderful example of how the experience of an illness can lead one to questions an

14 Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey. *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2001, p. 152

15 Rocco D'Ambrosio. *Will Pope Francis Pull It Off? The Challenge of Church Reform*, Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press 2017, p. 67.

## MOVING BEYOND A CLERICAL CULTURE

assumption that many priests hold, namely that to be better priests all they have to do is work harder and longer. This is how the parish priest explained it:

The harder part of priesthood to deal with is a certain kind of deception that is the downfall of most of us: we have the ideal and actually think we can will ourselves to live up to it. That if we work harder and longer we'll be better priests. It took having cancer, being so sick, for me to finally acknowledge the source of strength and health.<sup>16</sup>

### A CULTURE WHERE ONE CAN SEEK SUPPORT

One of life's paradoxes is that when we most feel in need of support, we isolate ourselves and find it almost impossible to reach out for the support we need. For priests and those in leadership there is the added assumption that as ordained person's and a source of support for others, they are somehow exempt from needing to ask for support for themselves. What do you think might be the assumptions that make it difficult for priests to reach out for support? What has been your own experience of looking for support? Recall an incident where you sought support from either a professional, a classmate, a colleague, a team member, a parishioner, a family member or friend. Did the experience lead you to question the truth of your assumption? What have you learned from the experience?

Sometimes it is our assumptions that block us reaching out for support, sometimes it is the difficulty of the task itself. A Jesuit priest told me a story many years ago that has forever remained imprinted in my mind. He was doing post-graduate studies in the United States and lived in a house with about twenty overseas Jesuits doing similar studies. He felt homesick and desperate to talk to someone. He selected someone he thought was approachable and went to his room. He stood outside the door raised his hand and couldn't bring himself to knock. What was blocking him do you think? What "clerical cultural rules" was he breaking?

There are many ways priests and pastoral workers can look for support. We would like to highlight one of them, namely, pastoral supervision. Whenever I mention the term I invariably am asked: What is that? A former colleague of ours at All Hallows, Bob Whiteside, used to described supervision as "a place to lay your burdens down." It is a place where you go to talk about your ministry. It can take place in a one-to-one setting or with a group of peers. The supervisor helps you to tell the story of your ministry through a process of humble inquiry. Sometimes it takes the form

16 Paul Wilkes. *In Mysterious Ways: The Death and Life of a Parish Priest*, New York: Random House Press, 1990, p. 87.



## THE FURROW

of reflection on action already taken. At other times, it takes the form of reflection for action that lies ahead. Or it may combine both. This reflection helps the supervisee to go back to ministry with more clarity and an experience of being supported. It helps break the isolation that many priests complain of.

We began this reflection by describing the clerical culture as a culture of Do and Tell. We went on to critique it and proposed in its place a culture of Humble Inquiry and Reflection, where the priest or pastoral worker is open to receive feedback and learns to reflect on his/her assumptive world: an opportunity of ask oneself questions out of a desire to understand one's own reactions and those of others. It is a far cry from the priest/leader with all the answers, all the power and all the responsibility. It opens the way for real living, because "all real living is meeting."<sup>17</sup>

17 Maurice Friedman. *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue (4th ed)*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1955, p. 66.

**Trust.** The consolation we draw from trusting God is not based on the expectation of dramatic instantaneous changes - although sometimes they do happen, sometimes God does act immediately and decisively. Even in these cases, however, taking refuge in God includes trusting in whichever way he acts, whether by intervening straight away or waiting or even not doing anything, he is loving. What we trust in is this love. And this is the real miracle.

– LUIGI GIOIA, *Touched by God* (London: Bloomsbury) p.61.