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Editorial

Messengers of Hope

The tragic suicide of a French priest, Rev François de Foucauld, raised concerns about the state of the clergy after that. The great-grand cousin of Saint François de Foucauld (1858-1916). He had served in the diocese of Versailles, France, for 18 years as a priest and would soon turn 50. The brief press notice from the diocese, which is signed by Bishop Luc Crépy, states that his body was discovered last night in the Rambouillet forest before adding, “Following difficulties in the exercise of his ministry, he had no mission since September 2021.”

The press announcement from the diocese reads even shorter because Father François's passing has sparked a lot of discussion on social media. Many point to the deceased's column which *The Cross* published in December 2021 and that unexpectedly appears to be a posthumous letter. He outlines how his hierarchical superiors, as well as “a small circle of clergy and lay people around the bishop who assumes the ultimate word,” also engage in power abuse and the procedures that give rise to it.

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“Suicides are always tragic events. It throws us off balance. ...a priest is a messenger of hope, so the suicide of a priest is heart-breaking when that priest no longer sees a way out in his ministry, in his personal and ecclesial mission.”

On the social network Facebook, some criticize his struggles in his former parish and the complicated relationships with the diocese; others speak of the priest's complex personality, whose “René Poujol, a longtime friend of the priest and the former director of the weekly Pilgrim, writes on his personal blog that the priest had an intransigent temperament that did not lend itself well to compromises or concessions because he was convinced it was

his duty to help awaken a Church engulfed in deadly torpor. According to Luc Crépy, Bishop of Versailles, in a video posted on the diocese's website on Wednesday, July 6, “all, in any case, agree on the missionary zeal of Father François, endowed with many pastoral qualities, having the concern for a renewed, missionary Church, which has always sought to make the Church closer to others, more alive.”

The passing of François de Foucauld sparked grief and perplexity. It shocked many. “Suicides are always tragic events. It throws us off balance.” Luc Crépy further states in his film that “a priest is a messenger of hope, so the suicide of a priest is heart-breaking when that priest no longer sees a way out in his ministry, in his personal and ecclesial mission.”

Some Serious Questions

Father Vincent Siret, who serves as the superior of the French pontifical seminary in Rome has witnessed numerous priestly generations come and go. “Like in a family, it causes ripple effects throughout the body when one of us suffers to the point of making this choice.”

We ponder what we failed to do, what we overlooked, and how we may have stopped it. Unfortunately, clergy suicides are unfortunately not that uncommon. Everyone recalls the two incidents in 2018 that occurred only a few days apart in the dioceses of Rouen and Orléans and involved the young priests Jean-Baptiste Sèbe and Pierre-Yves Fumery.

Yann Vagneux, a priest of the Foreign Missions of Paris (MEP) currently serving in India and a fellow seminarian of François de Foucauld and also of the other priest, Jean-Baptiste Sèbe, asserts that if we could count the number of suicides among priests, men and women religious, monks and nuns, members of new and lay communities on ecclesial mission since the year 2000 and if we calculated the percentage of suicides in relation to the total number of priests (Vanhouten, 2022). The MEP priest does not think twice to invoke this phenomenon by using the adjective “structural.”

The same observation is made by Robert Scholtus, a former dean of the Carmelite seminary where Jean-Baptiste Sèbe and François de Foucauld, among others, were students. “On my tiny scale, I have counted four priest suicides and two religious suicides over the course of several generations of priests and religious.”

Suicide is taboo in society, and it is taboo even more in the church. There are no statistics, we never discuss it, and each death is handled individually. There is, of course, a fragility, a personal weakness that exists beforehand. However, I believe that the suicide of priests and other religious men and women is a widespread problem.”

Being Merely Pawns

However, the Metz diocese priest notes that there are numerous contributing factors. Vulnerability may be relevant, particularly given that being a priest necessitates a certain level of sensitivity. But Robert Scholtus notices several characteristics in common with the priests and religious who killed themselves close by: They possessed a broad view, tremendous pastoral and intellectual

ingenuity, and spiritual aspirations. But one day they realized they were at a dead end for a variety of reasons.

The former seminary supervisor spoke about men who thought their charm, singularity, and ability to work were being abused. These men felt their generosity and ability to work were not valued. the feeling that they are essentially nothing more than tools used to save a failing institution.

The experts emphasise the need of avoiding generalization. This network of 80 expert coaches has voluntarily assisted priests, bishops, congregational leaders, and their teams in the performance of their ministries since 2006. Many priests are encountered challenges in their ministry. Suicide is an extremely difficult topic. In an act of unbelievable savagery, something will always elude us. Anyone in severe agony may experience the want to die.

A Totally Different Ministry Practice

Every suicide has some element of mystery. It would be dishonest to create a pattern or hunt for a culprit because the requirements for acting are so complicated. On the other hand, it might be claimed that the requirements for performing priestly ministry are drastically different in a culture where religion no longer serves the same social function as it formerly did.

“To be a priest in today's society is nearly to be condemned... And unlike in the past, this priest does not have a small community, church, or garden. Robert Scholtus, who describes the priesthood as a career of management that throws you in the institutional, the organizational, depriving the priests of the personal link, of the contact, observes that he “nearly becomes the small bishop of an extensive region.”“

Luc Forestier, a theology professor at the Catholic Institute of Paris, who speaks about the episcopate's dilemma, maintains

that the connection to authority is likewise no longer the same. The only person who can connect the parish priest and the pope is the bishop.

The episcopate is the fullness of the sacrament of orders, according to the Second Vatican Council, and the bishop is required to act as a father, brother, and judge for his priests while staying on the lookout for abuse. But that's not feasible! The bishop is responsible for everything in the diocese!" Difficulties that they are aware of at the time of their appointment: The rejection rate for bishop appointments is roughly 50% (Vanhouten, 2022).

Others refer to dechristianization, the “man-sandwich” side between the bishop on one side and the parish community on the other, all in the context of synodal reform and the fight against clericalism; the ordination of men who are sometimes fragile and whose flaws reveal themselves in the exercise of the ministry; the loneliness and isolation of priests imposed by the extended territorial network; and.

Some priests, who possess enormous inner freedom, are able to avoid being overcome by all of this and make choices that allow them to take on a different role—that of a pastor. Robert Scholtus argues that inner freedom cannot be gained from literature. This forces us to think of the fall of the Christian system as a catastrophe in the etymological meaning, which forces us to shift course, view the Church in a new light, and create new, more modest and small-scale communities.

Psychological and Spiritual Help

How about the priests' psychological and spiritual support during these challenges? Only diocesan priests are advised to get spiritual accompaniment, which is required in religious communities. Many of them either don't use it to their advantage or don't take the time to do so.

According to Vincent Siret, “It all depends on the perception they have of the priest. They might see a superpriest who is a towering,

gorgeous priest. Realizing that you require assistance is difficult.” However, Vincent Siret asserts that the younger generations of priests are considerably more in need of spiritual and/or psychological help. This may be because the vast majority of seminaries provide psychological counseling for aspirants for the priesthood. “Young people are takers; everything that can be of assistance to them (Vanhouten, 2022).

According experts the spaces where priests can stay and express their unease are precisely what Father de Foucauld's departure calls into question. Given the demanding pastoral responsibilities, exhaustion, interpersonal dysfunctions, and, most importantly, the need to share even more, there is urgent need to help the priests, who could be better agents to help others. The consecrated individuals need to address issues of burnout and the pre-burnout, before it become tragic.

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The Indian Situation

It is very disheartening that there are some cases of suicide of priests and religious in India. We need to accept it as a problem, be transparent about it and try to resolve the problems faced by the priests and religious. The life of each one of the priests and religious, who are called to be messengers of hope, are precious and need to be protected and promoted.

Therefore, it is very important that we need to keep a list of such tragic cases, with a view to preventing such incidents in the

future. We need to provide them with psychological, pastoral and spiritual help, so that they can carry on helping others who are much more in need. We need to recognise the cry of our own brothers and sister – priests and religious – and respond to them with care and compassion! That is truly an urgent need! Nearly 800,000 people die or are injured by suicide attempts in the world each year, which is roughly one death every 40 seconds. Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death in the world!

Every suicide is personal and tragic. But those of priests and religious, called to be messengers of hope and joy, is still more tragic.

The Editor

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