

February 16, 2007 - More priests should follow their leader

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Sometimes when I'm driving through Whitefield, I'll see Fr. George working in his tee-shirt and overalls with hoe in hand, sweating in the summer sun as he tends to his tomato plants, staked in orderly rows in a garden outside the rectory.

Other times, I'll pass through this small town in the mountains, and he'll be cutting the lawn on Saturday afternoon. He's a priest who's not afraid of work. He drives an old Subaru and is unfamiliar with the priestly extravagance we've been hearing about in lower Fairfield County, which includes everything from luxury cars to powerboats and Florida condos.

Fr. George, who is responsible for two parishes and a mission chapel, has chosen a simple life in upstate New Hampshire, where one of his few "luxuries" is a day-pass to Bretton Woods, so he can cross-country ski.

Luxury has no part in the lives of most priests I know. Fr. Eddie, who worked with the poorest of the poor in Bridgeport and in the prisons, said he never had to worry about money problems because his parishes had no money. And then there's Fr. Bob, whose Buick probably has more than 100,000 miles on it from driving recovering drunks to AA meetings.

None of these men drives a Jaguar or a BMW, and none lives in a rectory furnished by Ethan Allen. They don't lay down platinum AmEx cards at Tiffany's, Cartier and Hermes like Fr. Jude Fay, who allegedly spent more than \$1.4 million of St. John's money on his lavish lifestyle. They also inhabit a different world from St. Michael's in Greenwich, where \$500,000 was reportedly misplaced by the former pastor.

When a Villanova study found 85 percent of dioceses surveyed reported embezzlements within the past five years - 11 percent of which involved \$500,000 or more - you have to wonder where the donations are going. If you can't trust the priest with the collection plate, who can you trust? All these highly publicized reports about misappropriation and hidden bank accounts have prompted a diocesan debate about financial controls, but the problem is more fundamental than accounting procedures: Whatever happened to the life of honesty and integrity and self-sacrifice that Jesus adjured his followers to live?

More than once I've heard - as if it's a justification for clerical extravagance - that diocesan priests don't take a vow of poverty. What characteristics, then, should define the priestly life? Should it be an imitation of Christ or an imitation of the lifestyles of the rich and famous that you find in GQ and Town & Country?

Another peculiar apologia for self-indulgent priests maintains that since they usually work in rich parishes, they have to adopt the high life because it lends credibility to their ministry. Is an extravagant priest more in tune with the gospel of the rich? Does he have to drive a Jaguar to be taken seriously? At the same time, you have to wonder what a poor parish would think if the pastor wore Armani suits and drank Johnnie Walker Black.

Jesus was pretty clear on this question of excess. More than once he said the life of self-sacrifice is the best life. And let's not forget his very troubling comments about it being easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man, or woman, to get to heaven. He also made it pretty clear that you can't serve two masters - God and Mammon.

To my thinking, the greatest scandal isn't the misappropriation of money or stealing from the collection plate, but rather that the Gospel message has been virtually ignored.

No one wants priests to be so poor that they need to panhandle - although Francis of Assisi did just that - but surely they shouldn't be obsessed with material possessions and the fineries that come with wealth. A measure of moderation and self-restraint would do them all well.

And what does it say about the crisis in the church when it needs rigorous financial oversight to keep money from disappearing? Shouldn't our religious leaders have higher moral standards than, say, executives at Enron or Cendant?

St. John Chrysostom, who abandoned a legal career for the priesthood in the fourth century, had some valuable advice for clerics that applies equally well today: "If you would rise, shun luxury, for luxury lowers and degrades."

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