

The “Simplex Priest”: Ministry with a Past, Ministry with a Future?

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BLESSED SOLANUS CASEY, a Capuchin priest deeply in love with God,¹ was a “simplex priest.” Although ordained to priesthood, Casey had no canonical authorization (“faculties”) to preach homilies or to hear confessions.² How such a priest, unable to engage in two of the most quintessentially priestly services we know, managed nevertheless to be raised to the altar of sanctity, sparks curiosity about his situation. Here I will explore what a “simplex priest” was under the canon law of Casey’s day, whether we still have simplex priests, and (if not) what ever happened to them? Finally, I will ask whether the concept of simplex priest might somehow come back into pastoral view.

For contemporary Catholics, the idea that a priest would not have the authority to hear confessions or that he would not be trusted enough to be allowed to preach a homily at Mass is virtually unthinkable. Nowadays we imagine such severe restrictions on ordained ministry as almost exclusively limited to situations where there is suspicion, if not proof, of some clerical misconduct or at least of serious and pervasive incompetence.³

But in thinking that way we show ourselves to be creatures of our times. It would help us to recognize that the conditions under which clerical ministry is exercised today did not always obtain in the Church. In fact, the present

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¹ For biographical details of Casey’s life see, e.g., Michael Crosby, *Thank God Ahead of Time: The Life and Spirituality of Solanus Casey* (St. Anthony Messenger, 2009), hereafter “Crosby.”

² Crosby 44-45 and 209.

³ From the Johanno-Pauline Code of Canon Law, see, e.g., 1983 CIC 764-765 on *restricting* faculties for preaching, 1983 CIC 974 on *revocation* of faculties for confessions, and 1983 CIC 1722 on *limitations* in ministry upon the initiation of a formal penal process.

widespread assumption that ordination itself suffices as evidence of a cleric's suitability to preach and of a priest's suitability to hear confessions is a novelty in the Church – a novelty in the sense of its being *new*, not *trivial*. To be sure, even in his day, the fact that Casey did not have faculties to preach at Mass or to hear confessions was unusual, and it was a cross for him, however graciously he accepted it.⁴ But the point is that these two restrictions on Casey's ministry should not be seen so much as some slight inherited stain on his ministry but rather, first, as the default setting for every man ordained to priesthood in those days and second, perhaps, as a manner of ministering that could be worth re-investigating in our day, given that we are facing some urgent ministerial needs.⁵

Transporting ourselves back to the decades before the Second Vatican Council, we could describe the authority of a newly ordained priest in regard to preaching (especially preaching homilies) and for celebrating the sacrament of confession in this way: there was no such automatic authority, neither for preaching nor for hearing confessions that was associated with priestly ordination itself.⁶ In other words, what Father Casey apparently experienced throughout his whole ordained life as a "simplex priest" (admittedly, the term did not appear in the old law) was the way in which every cleric began ordained ministry back then.

In Casey's day (and for some centuries prior to that) in order to obtain faculties (authorization) to preach or to hear confessions, priests had to pass a post-ordination examination (usually written), and sometimes two (one to gain preaching faculties and another for confessional faculties), whereupon the diocesan bishop could grant him faculties for public preaching and/or the hearing of confessions.⁷ Even after having bestowed such faculties, however, the bishop could revoke either one of them or both if he became concerned that a given priest was deficient in his public preaching or his confessional ministry.

Of course, a number of factors having little to do with learning and even less to do with holiness could have a negative impact on a priest's ability to pass either or both of these examinations. In Casey's situation, the irregular and interrupted education he received as a youth may have left him far enough behind on the learning curve that he simply could not make up the difference, or at least could

⁴ Crosby 209.

⁵ The recently announced Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region (the "Synod of the Amazon" set for 2019) will certainly address the clergy shortage in that area of the world and, as part of their examination of pastoral responses to that shortage, might wish to consider the potential role of simplex priests.

⁶ Note that all priests, even simplex priests, generally enjoy certain emergency faculties for confession such as in "danger of death" circumstances. See 1917 CIC 882 and 1983 CIC 976.

⁷ This restrictive Pio-Benedictine discipline was set out in 1917 CIC 1340 regarding faculties for preaching and in 1917 CIC 877 regarding faculties for confession. Diaconal faculties for preaching, while possible under the 1917 Code, seemed to have been rare.

not in an academically cognizable way articulate such learning as he had acquired. It is also possible that Casey might have suffered from an un-diagnosed learning disability,⁸ a theory that I have long suspected as a factor in the great St. John Vianney's dismal academic performance as a seminarian. Yet his poor performance did not obstruct Vianney's pursuit of holiness or interfere with his ability to bring others to Christ, such that he is now the patron of parish priests! Even Casey's moderate speech impediment could have affected his testing performance. But, whatever the explanation, Casey remained for his whole ministerial life what every priest in those days started off as: a simple ("simplex") priest.

But if Casey's lack of faculties for preaching and confession was not *quite* as noteworthy in his day as it would be in ours, that very point raises the question: Why not? What has changed in regard to approaches toward priestly ministry such that faculties for preaching and confession are almost (not quite completely, but almost) taken for granted upon the fact of ordination? What happened, I suggest, was Vatican II. In short, the conciliar Fathers deepened the Church's appreciation of the dignity and abilities associated with priestly ordination itself, whereupon canon law, which gives pastoral structure to the doctrines of Church, was changed to reflect this new understanding.

Presbyterorum ordinis, the Second Vatican Council's decree on priests (§4) states: "Priests are *debtors*, [so] that the truth of the Gospel which they have, may be given to others.... Whether by entering into profitable dialogue they bring people to the worship of God, [or] by openly preaching they proclaim the mystery of Christ..., *they are relying not on their own wisdom*, for it is the word of Christ they teach."⁹ Such language suggests that something "in virtue of sacred ordination"¹⁰ – and not something acquired in the course of studies – was crucial to a priest's ability to preach. Hence, high marks on a post-ordination academic exam would seem to be of less importance than before.

In its final form, and in a notable shift from the approach of Pio-Benedictine law (1917 CIC 1340) but presaged, I think, by *Presbyterorum ordinis*, Canon 764 of the 1983 Code now confers on all priests and deacons "the faculty of preaching

⁸ Crosby at 172 quotes an associate of Casey's commenting on Casey's pastoral notes to various people that "the spelling was bad, pure fifth-grade stuff, but the contents simply amazed me."

⁹ Second Vatican Council, Decree on Priestly Ministry and Life *Presbyterorum ordinis* (7 dec 1965), *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966) 991-1024, Eng. trans. A. Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Catholic Book Publishing, 1975) 863-902, emphasis added. See also Friedrich Wulf commenting on PO 4 in H. Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, in 5 vols., (Herder and Herder, 1967-1969) IV esp. at pp. 228-31 on the partly frustrated desire of the Council to treat the sacramental source of a priest's preaching power more thoroughly than it did.

¹⁰ *Communicationes* 29: 33 ("vi sacrae ordinationis"). Recall, too, 1983 CIC 762 stating the preaching is among the principal duties of sacred ministers.

everywhere,” including the giving of homilies – in effect shifting the canonical burden of proof from the individual cleric to show his suitability to preach to the bishop’s now needing to show why the cleric in question is *un*-suitable.

Something similar happened in regard to priestly faculties for confession under the new law. While confessional faculties are still strictly required (and probably always will be for reasons that go beyond what we can discuss here, per Canon 966), today (per Canon 968) all parish pastors (along with several other priestly diocesan officers) automatically have faculties for confession as part of their holding office.

Meanwhile, however, other diocesan priests (such as parochial vicars and priests serving in, say, educational or administrative roles) still need faculties from their bishop for confession (per Canon 969). To be sure, Canon 970 indicates that “examination” is one way those priests can demonstrate to their bishops that they are qualified for such faculties. But now faculties for confession can also be granted to priests “whose suitability is otherwise evident” and that option, quiescent under the old law (recall 1917 CIC 877 § 1), has become the norm under the new. In the United States “it is usual that all priests [are] conceded the faculty [for Confession] upon ordination without restriction as to the persons to be absolved or as to the occasions for the celebration of the sacrament...”¹¹ As McManus points out this is not an unreasonable position for law or bishops to take, especially given that under Canons 1050-1052 bishops are required to verify and re-verify a wide range of suitability issues regarding every man approaching holy Orders.

So, considering that pastors with automatic faculties for confession represent a high percentage of diocesan priests these days and that most other priests will receive the faculties for confession upon ordination itself, these post-conciliar changes in canon law have made the possession of confessional and preaching faculties much more common, practically to the point of their being automatic, in contrast to the way things were in Casey’s day. Hence, Casey’s lack of faculties stands out more to us than it would have to his contemporaries. But can we say which of these two approaches is better, whether it makes better sacramental and pastoral sense to confer faculties upon clerics virtually simultaneously with ordination or to delay them pending the outcome of one or two examinations or for at least an observable period of probation?

On the one hand, the strict examination requirements set out the old law served as a way for bishops to verify that the special skills associated with preaching and confession were indeed possessed by individual clerics who, though they had graduated from the seminary, might not be ready to be, as it were, turned

¹¹ Frederick McManus, commenting on Canon 970 in J. Beal, et al., eds., *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, (Paulist Press, 2000) 1157.

loose on the faithful – in rather the same way that bar exams make sure that law school graduates are able to perform their roles in real life and not just in the classroom. Physicians, nurses, accountants, engineers, and members of many professions and trades besides, must pass examinations administered independently of academe as a requirement for their licensing and public service, a “quality control check” that we do not have for ministry, ordained or otherwise.

On the other hand, we do believe that ordination, not simply because it currently comes at the end of a long graduate program of studies but as a function of the sacrament itself, confers certain graces and charisms meant to enable men to minister in, among other settings, the pulpit and the confessional, such that a canonical “suspicion” of incompetence regarding these basic priestly roles seems out of place theologically. There are, in short, good arguments for and against the current practice of effectively granting faculties for preaching and confession to nearly all clerics upon their ordination – arguments that we will not try to resolve here. But the example of Father Casey ministering for some fifty years without faculties for either preaching or confession suggests that such canonical enablements are not required for heroic service as a priest, which observation brings me to my final point.

First, recalling that a “simplex priest,” despite his ministerial limitations, could still profoundly witness to Jesus,¹² evangelize those around him, engage in several sacramental and spiritual services (such as solemnly baptizing, officiating at weddings, anointing the sick – though I do know whether Casey performed such functions, given his status as a religious in monastery life)¹³ and, most of all, recalling that a simplex priest could still offer the holy sacrifice of the Mass (which Casey did often), and second, appreciating that the clergy shortage today is severe and shows little sign of abating in the foreseeable future, the example of Casey, a priest able to perform many, though not all, of the clerical works performed by his brothers, suggests the usefulness of our taking a closer look at the simplex priest model as a way toward activating, for limited priestly ministry, a potentially significant number of men with spiritual maturity and servant hearts but with less theological erudition than that possessed by men going through seminaries and with, therefore, more restricted faculties for ministry.

I am not talking now about ordaining married men *per se* (and for reasons

¹² “While his life as a Capuchin Franciscan had been lived without the faculties to formally preach or hear confessions [Casey’s] way of embracing its evangelical witness probably reached more people than had any other friar in the one hundred-plus years of the Capuchins’ presence in the United States.” Crosby 209.

¹³ Casey did offer “ferverinos,” that is, spontaneous, semi-formal, exhortations to groups that, while not homilies, achieved much the same good effect. Indeed, on a few occasions (apparently, occasions special to his religious or personal family) Casey even preached a homily at Mass. See Crosby 60, 64, and 66. Also Casey as a priest made frequent use of sacramentals in his ministry. Crosby 56, 78.

unrelated to our topic, I think most such modern “simplex priests” should be single men, albeit perhaps widowers) and I can well imagine a number of practical and even canonical issues to be considered before moving forward with such an idea.¹⁴ But the example of Solanus Casey, working out his salvation in fear and trembling, while bringing uncounted others closer to Christ by his priestly, though notably restricted, ministry, should suggest at least some basis for our looking at the simplex priest as a possible but partial response to the clergy shortage. This shortage not only deprives the faithful of many opportunities for spiritual growth but also unduly stresses the full-faculty men ordained to serve them.

¹⁴ For example, Canon 250 requires a six-year program of philosophy and theological studies prior to ordination. Such a demanding course of studies, however, assumes that priests upon ordination will be equipped with all faculties for normal ministry, precisely the point in question regarding “simplex priests.” For a longer discussion of the notion of simplex priest in a modern setting, see Brian Van Hove, “Recovering Simplex Priests,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (June/July 2011): 24-27.