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'Goodbye Father': The Vanishing Priesthood

By GARRY WILLS

A number of people tried, in the 1980's, to warn America's Catholic bishops that a pedophile scandal was brewing in their church. The Rev. Thomas P. Doyle, a Dominican priest, was a co-author of a report for the annual meeting of the bishops in 1985, warning that settlement of molestation suits could mount to a billion dollars in time. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago submitted a proposal for the same meeting, recommending that a research project be undertaken to gauge the extent of the problem and the best ways to respond to it. Both proposals were rejected by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. They would have come under the aegis of Cardinal Bernard Law, who was then the head of the conference's Committee on Research and Pastoral Practice. A conservative monsignor from Massachusetts told me, at last June's meeting of the American bishops, "These guys are kicking themselves that they listened to Law and not Bernardin back then."

The bishops' pattern of denial greeted another report from the 1980's, this one on the declining numbers of priests. Richard A. Schoenherr, a demographic sociologist at the University of Wisconsin, addressed the bishops on that subject. Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles reacted to Schoenherr's gloomy statistics by writing, in *Our Sunday Visitor* (Nov. 18, 1990) that "the Catholic Church in our country has been done a great disservice by the Schoenherr report," since "our future is shaped by God's design for His Church -- not by sociologists." The cardinal used his own projections to deny Schoenherr's description of decline in the Los Angeles dioceses during the next four years. But at the end of that period, there were 31 fewer priests in Los Angeles than Schoenherr had predicted as "most likely" -- the sociologist had underestimated the decline by 6 percent.

In 1993, Schoenherr and one of his graduate students, Lawrence A. Young, published their findings in the *Social Demography Series* of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, under the title "Full Pews and Empty Altars." It won the Distinguished Book Award from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. The authors, after charting the decline in priests (19 percent) from 1966 to 1984, had predicted as most likely a 40 percent decline in American priests over the years 1966 to 2005. Though this projection was dismissed by many analysts, Young demonstrated in 1998 that the projection for the preceding 10 years had proved accurate to within 1 percent. His and Schoenherr's track record is very good.

To respond to claims that the decline is merely temporary, Schoenherr began a huge study using models from the social sciences to see how organizations respond to hostile environments, and how (if ever) they succeed in defying them rather than adapting to them -- in this case, how the church will fare in responding to a world environment that has altered many of the assumptions on which the celibate priesthood was based, assumptions about the meaning of sex, asceticism, psychology, marriage, the family, women, professionalism, community, accountability, education, urbanization, natural law, biblical theology and other relevant factors.

Change in one or a few of these areas might be compatible with continuing mandatory celibacy as an essential element in the priesthood, but dissonance across the whole range of them makes the old position unsustainable. Therefore he predicts that priestly celibacy will become voluntary within the lifetime of the

current generation and that women will become priests within three or four generations.

Schoenherr finished his study in 1995, but he died in 1996 before making the cuts that publishers were demanding in his giant manuscript. His widow commissioned one of his ex-students, David Yamane, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame, to edit the work. "Goodbye Father" is dated in places -- as when Schoenherr treats Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee as a prophet with important future influence; Weakland later discredited himself by secretly paying off with church funds an adult homosexual lover. But otherwise this book is as convincing in its analysis as the earlier one was in its statistics.

Schoenherr's focus is on the priesthood in America, but he refers peripherally to a situation that is regularly misrepresented by conservative Catholics -- the numbers of priests in the developing world. They claim that seminaries are full there, and will even supply a surplus of priests for the declining West. They rely not on absolute numbers but on percentage increases in indigenous seminaries after the withdrawal of missionary priests from colonial countries. To double or triple formerly modest outputs there does nothing to solve the fact that the Southern Hemisphere is where the priest shortage is greatest. In the United States, the number of priests per 10,000 faithful declined from 12.9 in 1965 to 9.8 in 1990. In the same period the priests per 10,000 in Africa declined from 5.4 to 2.3, and in Latin America from 2.3 to 1.4. Any gains made in recent years do not come even remotely close to closing that gap. No wonder Schoenherr can report that bishops in Africa and Latin America have requested Rome's permission to ordain married men in order to fill their imperative need for more priests.

World figures for the priesthood are clear. The Catholic Almanac of 2001 gives the Vatican's own figure of 404,620 priests in 1998. In 1977, the year before John Paul II became pope, the figure was 410,030. Priests have not increased in number, though they have increased dramatically in age, as one would expect where the total was not growing. Meanwhile, 300 million new Catholics came into the world during this pontiff's reign, making the priest-to-faithful disparity ever more serious. The results of this are clear, even in America, which is far better off than Africa or Latin America. Lay Catholic ministers outnumber priests here, and most of these are women, and permanent deacons (male) now number one for every 1.6 parishes. These lay assistants and substitutes are required because of understaffed or nonstaffed parishes. Despite these statistics, some bishops continue to deny that the priest shortage is more than a temporary dip in the demographics. Some dip.

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