

Revisiting the “Year of the Priest”

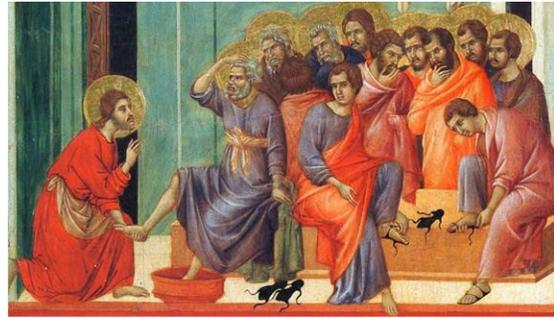
There is a principle drawn from the world of quantum physics called “the observer effect:” roughly speaking this refers to changes that the act of observation will make on the phenomenon being observed. I have heard people apply this principle to much less complex matters within the realm of everyday human life. Of course, the application is only meant as an analogy to the quantum-physical reality.

The idea occurred to me some years ago as we observed a so-called “Year of the Priest.” I was a bit uncomfortable with the focus given to the priesthood because, at the time, we were experiencing a clash of cultures within our own priestly ranks. The one-and-the-same “Year of the Priest” was being observed quite differently by, essentially, two cohorts of priests.

Younger, newly ordained priests were emerging from seminary training ready to vigorously assert, what could be called, a “**cultic model**” of priesthood. The assertion of this model seemed to be over-against the “**servant-leader model**” which had been the model in which those of us who had been trained from the time of Vatican II through, perhaps, the early 1990’s.

Whereas in the “servant-leader model” we were indoctrinated into ideas of collaboration with the laity, our **similarity** to them, and our journeying-with them; in the “cultic-model” the emphasis seemed to be on the **difference** between the priest and the laity due to the effects of ordination, the responsibilities of governance, and the powers to preach God’s word and to

dispense the Sacraments.



As I revisit this issue, some nine years after the fact, I believe that we are emerging from the worst of the rancor and the grumbling which was so unhealthy for a group of men needing, more than ever, to be of mutual support. Moreover, I can see that both “cohorts” of priests were, to a large extent, products of a “culture of reaction:” My cohort, the “servant leaders,” were reacting to the phantom of authoritarian clericalism characterized by abuses of power, and terrible preaching. The “cultic” cohort were reacting to “hippies” who had visited every manner of abuse on the sacred liturgy and turned the priest into a psychologist and/or a social worker.

As I have written before, being a reactionary always seems to involve some manner of “throwing the baby out with the bath water.” In fact, I would submit that an over-emphasis of one or the other model has its hazards. We can harmonize these two views without violence: A priest should be both a fellow on the journey and a leader of right-worship. He certainly must govern and guide, but this doesn’t exclude close collaboration with the laity, (by which I mean, taking their input and their challenges seriously).