

The Image of the Priest: A Study in Stereotyping

JOHN F. DOHERTY

Ateneo de Manila University

In two studies on the prestige evaluation of occupations in the Philippines, the priest ranked relatively high.¹ Yet, it is a fact that few young men follow the priesthood as a career. In 1963 only one out of every 3,200 males between the ages of 14-29 entered a seminary. The present paper is an attempt to shed some light on the reason for this disinclination toward the priesthood as a vocation.

Source

The findings to be presented here are based on a study of 75 male Catholic College Juniors in the City of Manila, each of whom was asked to write an essay on "The Image of the Priest."² The essays were most interesting and contrary to what might have been expected from students in Catholic colleges who have had extensive contacts with priests, the results were ambivalent. The image of the priest projected by the essays was freighted with stereotypes, that is, pictures and judgments, some favorable, some unfavorable, many con-

tradictory, and most, exaggerated.³ The overall impact of the essays was the rather startling realization that these young men did little differentiated thinking about the priesthood as a career. The essays themselves give the reasons for this but before discussing them, it might be well to present the stereotypes associated in these essays with the image of the priest. They can be conveniently summarized under three headings: namely, the priest is unmanly, unsociable, and materialistic.

The priest is unmanly. The picture most frequently associated with the priest was that of unmanliness. This was expressed in various ways: "the priest was effeminate," "he did not work with his hands"; "he was weak," "soft," "he was unable to defend himself against attacks," "a sissy," "helpless," "uninspiring." Many related effeminacy to "wasting one's manhood," or to "piety," or to "dealing only with women." The soutane, as might be expected, came in for much criticism as "cloaking the inadequacies of one's manhood."

Yet, many of those who accused the priest of unmanliness also stated that the life was difficult and demanded many sacrifices and that the course of studies was long and exacting. When asked in a subsequent discussion on the essays if any of them ambitioned working with their hands, the answer was "no."

¹ Edward A. Tiryakian, "The Prestige Evaluation of Occupations In an Underdeveloped Country: The Philippines," *The American Journal of Sociology*, LXIII, No. 4 (January, 1958), 390-399, and Gelia T. Castillo, "Occupation Evaluation in the Philippines," *Philippine Sociological Review*, X, Nos. 3 and 4 (July-October, 1962), 147-158.

² They were asked to confine themselves to the image of the Filipino diocesan priest. Some, however, drew comparisons between Filipino secular priests and foreign priests. The comparisons were interesting. Generally these young men pitied the foreign priests whom they perceived as stepping down socially to minister to the poor and ignorant in isolated barrios.

³ Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Garden City, New York: A Doubleday Anchor Book, 1958), p. 190.

All of those who mentioned effeminacy in one way or another also referred in their essays to clerical celibacy. They stressed the importance of the family, the obligation of carrying on the family name, gratitude to parents, the great desire for children found in Philippine culture and finally, that priests were afraid of marriage and of being real men.

The priest is unsociable. The second stereotype associated with the image of the priest in these essays was unsociability. This was expressed also in various ways: "the priest is unapproachable"; "indifferent to the needs of the people"; "aloof," "introverted"; "a bookworm," "grim-looking," "living in the dark halls of a *convento* isolated from family, friends and pleasures," "not well-rounded," "having little understanding," "not radiating the happiness of his state in life," "a disappointed, frustrated professional working at something he finds distasteful."

At the same time that he was criticized for being unsociable, the priest was also criticized for being "too effusive," "always having a smile," "being over-friendly," and "seeking a good time."

The priest is materialistic. A third stereotype associated with the image of the priest was that he was materialistic. This was related to the supposed social class status of the priest. The priesthood was perceived by most respondents as an avenue of upward mobility into which "the poorer classes tried to push their sons to ensure their own advancement and security" or, "through which they could advance from the squalor of the barrio to the relative comfort of the *convento*." Again, the priest was seen as "a talented and ambitious member of the lower class who, aware of a rather bleak future in his own social bracket, desires to join a religious order to get away from the slights and handicaps of the less fortunate and get a chance

to mix with the more fortunate and experience their way of life." Linked to the expressions on the lower class origin of the priest were such expressions as, "the priest is an ordained houseboy," "a puppet," or "a rubber-stamp produced to give his approval to baptisms, weddings and house blessings." Because of the supposed desire to improve his own status and that of his family, the priest was said "to be given to material possessions and comforts," "interested only in money," and "greedy."

Yet, the same respondents said that "poor *provincianos* could not afford the expense of a seminary education," "that the priest sacrificed a great deal," "that he stepped down socially," that he led a life with few compensations or material advantages, and that the priesthood, in contrast to the other professions, offered little in the way of advancement.

Other factors in the image. A number of students dwelt on parents' opposition to the priesthood as a vocation for their children. They stated that "parents generally forbid their sons to be priests because they feel that when their son enters a seminary, they lose their greatest treasure and that all their plans for his future are being frustrated." Again, young men entering a seminary were accused of being ungrateful and shirking their responsibilities to their families. On the other hand, it was said that "parents would not oppose a weak, sickly, unintelligent or unattractive son pursuing the priesthood as a career." In this case "the young man would not be a drain on the family, might even be able to contribute something to it and would at least be assured of a lifetime of support."

Some mentioned the fact that young men who enter a seminary do so because they are disappointed in love or wish to get away from it all. Frequent reference was made to the fact that the image of

the poor, ignorant and promiscuous priest of Spanish times has not been entirely superseded. Finally, reference was made to unsavory jokes and stories about the priesthood, many of which are used to discourage young men from following a priestly vocation.

The stereotypes presented above of the priest as unmanly, unsociable, and materialistic are not consistent. The priest was said to be weak, soft, effeminate. Yet, at the same time he was said to be pursuing a difficult career, demanding many sacrifices. He was accused of not working with his hands in a culture where few who can avoid it work with their hands. He was said to be glum and unsociable, yet criticized for always having a smile and being too effervescent in his social relationships. Finally, he was criticized for being greedy and interested only in money while at the same time pursuing a career with few material advantages.

In view of such contradictory statements concerning the priest it might seem easy to reject the data presented in these essays as worthless. To do so, however, would be to lose some very valuable insights into the image of the priest, for stereotypes are often contradictory. We indicated earlier that stereotypes operate to prevent differentiated thinking. These young men obviously opposed the idea of the priesthood as a career. Consequently, they subscribed to any and all stereotypes that would justify this opposition. Whatever priests "are like or not like, do or don't do," the dislike of the priesthood as a career finds its rationalization for these young men in some presumed aspect of the priesthood.

As Allport has indicated, self-contradictory stereotypes are a proof that group traits are not the point at issue.⁴ The point is rather that opposition to the priesthood as a career requires justifi-

fation, and that any justification which fits the context will do.

Scapegoating

The question remains, however, as to why the young men studied opposed the priesthood as a career and rationalized this opposition by self-contradictory stereotypes. The answer, I think, lies in an analysis of the phenomenon of scapegoating. The word itself, as Allport indicates, "originated in the famous ritual of the Hebrews, described in the book of Leviticus (16:20-21). On the day of Atonement a live goat was chosen by lot. The high priest, robed in linen garments, laid both his hands on the goat's head and confessed over it the iniquities of the children of Israel. The sins of the people thus symbolically transferred to the beast, it was taken out into the wilderness and let go. The people felt purged, and, for the time being, guiltless. The type of thinking here involved is not uncommon. From earliest times the notion has persisted that guilt and misfortune can be shifted from one man's back to another."⁵

In scapegoating, then, people project their own emotions, desires, insecurities onto others. They refuse to face the fact that responsibility for their actions may lie with them and shift this responsibility onto other individuals or groups.

The young men studied formed stereotypes of the priest, because the priest was a convenient scapegoat for the ambivalences and insecurities surrounding the male role in Philippine society. In doing so they explained and justified their own *insecurities and ambivalences* by reference to the imagined behavior of the priest.

Philippine society is characterized by strong family ties and family influence

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 236 ff.

pervades all segments of Philippine social organization. One's influence is generally related to the extensiveness of one's kinship system. Under such circumstances children are highly valued not only as cementing family alliances through marriages but as potential sources of future alliances. Yet, relationships between the sexes are circumscribed within a rather rigid system of norms to which strong sanctions are attached. "The display of affection between members of the opposite sex, for example, is forbidden in public and appears to be minimal even in the privacy of the household. The channel which provides for the release of normal emotions is interaction with a person of the same sex."⁶ This pattern prevents the male from legitimately testing his own masculinity by association with the opposite sex. This does not mean, however, that the male cannot test his masculinity, as the double standard of morality so prevalent in Philippine society attests. Teen-age college students, however, are not as yet adult members of society, hence they have much less opportunity to prove their masculinity by taking advantage of the double standard. Even where the opportunity does present itself, the immediacy of their Catholic college training would be much more likely to make them feel guilt at having performed a sinful act. The combined result of the formal proscription against even the legitimate display of affection between the sexes and the official condemnation of the informally approved double standard serve to induce in young men an insecurity or fear regarding their own masculinity since it precludes even legitimate expressions of affection between the sexes by which they could establish their masculinity. This insecurity is the basis of the stereotype of the priest as effeminate. It is not that one

finds more males with effeminate characteristics in the priesthood than in the other occupations and professions but rather that the discrepancy between official norms and unofficial practice generate for the young men caught in the middle an anxiety regarding their own masculinity, a masculinity which we might add, is often identified with sexual escapades. Scapegoating the priest, the visible celibate in their midst, is a form of compensation, one effort to establish a masculinity, these young men were not as yet quite sure they possessed. To understand the process of scapegoating outlined above, it is necessary to consider the socio-cultural factors involved in the selection of the priest as a scapegoat onto which the anxieties of the young regarding their masculinity are transferred. The essays themselves as well as the other stereotypes listed above give some insight into this selection.

Socio-Cultural Factors

First of all, many of the essays made reference to the low status of the Filipino priest in Spanish times. Historically this low status was a fact explainable in large part by what Merton has referred to as the self-fulfilling prophecy.⁷ Under the *Patronato* the Philippines was divided among the religious orders for purposes of missionary endeavor. This led to a colonial policy which gave no encouragement either to native candidates to aspire to the priesthood or to missionaries to train them. The *Patronato* also meant that the bishop could only exercise limited power over the majority of his parish priests who were also religious and hence subject to their religious superiors. This overlapping of authority occasioned numerous conflicts between

⁶ Robert B. Fox, "The Family and Society in the Rural Philippines," *Science Review* (April, 1961), p. 5.

⁷ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957), pp. 128-129, 421-436.

the bishops and the religious orders.⁸ Finally in 1767 an attempt was made, supported by King Carlos III, to break the power of the religious orders. A court appointed prelate was named Archbishop of Manila and he proceeded under various pretexts to deprive the religious orders of their parishes. Then, to fill the vacancies thus created, he established a seminary which he claimed "in one year supplied a suitable number of ministers for the parishes thus vacated."⁹

In a short time, however, the Archbishop was lamenting his hasty action, for the priests he ordained were poorly selected, ill-trained, and generally unreliable. By their conduct, they quickly proved that they were unworthy of the priestly office.¹⁰

The activity of the priests ordained during this time resulted in the general acceptance of the fact that Filipinos were by nature incapable of the full responsibilities of the priesthood and were in the future to be only employed in strictly subordinate positions and to be trained as such. Thus did the self-fulfilling prophecy operate against the development of the native clergy. Poorly trained and unqualified priests were ordained for responsibilities they were incapable of assuming and the fact that they were unable to shoulder these responsibilities was in turn used to justify a policy which either kept natives from the priesthood entirely or ordained them for inferior positions.

Many of the statements summarized under the headings of unsociable and materialistic indicate that the unfavor-

able image of the priest in Spanish times has not been completely eradicated. Though, due to the policy of the Spanish Church and to the operation of the self-fulfilling prophecy, the image of the Filipino priest as inferior did have a basis in fact, this image lingers on even though the historical situation which gave rise to it has long since changed.

The persistence of these images in the face of contrary evidence at present indicates that they still perform a positive function. They reinforce the stereotype of unmanliness and serve to rationalize the choice of the priest as a scapegoat for the anxieties surrounding the male role in Philippine society.

Other Studies

If the explanation presented above is correct, how explain the high prestige accorded the priesthood in the studies on occupational prestige referred to earlier in this paper?

In his study of 641 urban and rural Filipinos, Tiryakian found that the priesthood ranked sixth in a scale of thirty occupations. His study indicated that the professions generally ranked high on the prestige continuum of occupations listed by the respondents themselves, namely, service to country, economic factors, social prestige and educational attainment. He also found that the prestige evaluation of occupations in the Philippines correlated highly (.94) with similar prestige evaluations in more highly developed countries.¹¹

A more significant study, for our purposes, is that of Dr. Gelia Castillo. In a questionnaire administered to 476 Senior students from six non-Catholic high schools Castillo found that students

⁸ Horacio A. de la Costa, "The Development of the Native Clergy in the Philippines," MS., p. 16 ff. Originally published in *Theological Studies*, VII, No. 2 (June, 1947), 219-250.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹⁰ De la Costa cites reports sent to the Archbishop on the greed, cruelty, and immorality of many of these priests.

¹¹ Frank Lynch *et al.*, "Trends Report of Studies in Social Stratification and Social Mobility in the Philippines," 1963, Institute of Philippine Culture, MS., p. 31.

ranked the priest fourth in prestige on a 25 item occupational scale. The same students, however, ranked the priesthood 24th in occupational inclination, that is, only 50 of the 476 students questioned ambioned the priesthood as a career. On the scale of occupational inclination only the unskilled factory worker ranked below the priest.¹²

This discrepancy between the prestige evaluation of the occupation and the disinclination to pursue it poses certain problems with regard to the scale itself. First of all, the scale used in the Castillo study omits many of the more prestigious occupations in Philippine society such as: Supreme Court Justice, Judge, Cabinet member, Senator, Congressman, Provincial Governor, Mayor of chartered city, Banker, Scientist, Economist, Army officer, Industrialist, etc. Secondly, a number of occupations included in the scale could have been further differentiated (e.g. Doctor: rural doctor, physician/surgeon; Teacher: Elementary school teacher, high school teacher; Soldier: Officer, Private).

This failure to include the more prestigious occupations in the scale and to distinguish on a number of occupations that were included combined to weigh the scale heavily towards the lower half of the occupational hierarchy. Relative to the occupations included in the scale, therefore, the priesthood would understandably rank high, especially since only four professions have been included. It is probably more significant that the priesthood ranks lowest among these four professions in prestige than that it ranks fourth on the entire scale.

The Castillo findings tend to bear out the conclusions of the present study in as much as they indicate little differentiated thinking about the priesthood as such. In the prestige scale, students ranked the

priesthood merely as a profession, while on the inclination scale, it would seem that all the insecurities and ambivalences surrounding the priesthood came to the fore and led the respondents to rank it low on the scale of desirable occupations.

Conclusions and Suggestions

This study has been an attempt to shed some light on the image of the priest in Philippine society. As such it has been mainly exploratory. The limitations of the data based on a sample of urban Catholic college students and the complexity of socio-psychological mechanisms involved in the phenomena of stereotyping and scapegoating should indicate caution in generalizing beyond the group studied. Much more solid data is needed before any hard and fast conclusions can be drawn regarding the image of the priest. In conclusion, therefore, it might be well to outline some suggestions for further research which emerge from the present study.

1. It cannot be assumed that there is but one image of the priest. The image discussed here is a predominantly urban, upper class image. Other studies should control for rural background and social class status. The Philippines has been traditionally a two class society. Predictably, therefore, priestly vocations have been few since it would seem that neither the upper nor the lower classes in Philippine society are in a position to realistically ambition the priesthood as a career. The wealthy have security and seem to be generally unwilling to jeopardize this security by a voluntary step down the social ladder into what they conceive as an unattractive and demanding occupation. The poor, on the other hand, do not

¹² Castillo, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

have the educational background nor the requisite training in independence nor achievement motivation to make them desirable candidates.

2. A study of the social class background of priests and seminarians may indicate that the stereotypes of unsociability and materialism have a basis in fact. Individuals bring their social frame of reference with them into their professional life and their attitudes towards others will always be conditioned by the class positions of the families in which they grew up. Though priestly candidates from the poorer classes may have changed their roles it would seem that the structure of the subordinate-superordinate relationships specified by their old roles continues to exist and makes it very difficult for them to assume a superordinate role without overplaying their authority.
3. The fact that neither the poor nor the wealthy are in an opportunity structure conducive to following the priesthood as an occupation would seem to indicate the desirability of a broad based middle class as a source of priestly vocations in the Philippines. The virtues traditionally associated with the middle class such as independence, drive, dedication, and frugality would seem to

hold most promise of good material for the priesthood.

Secondly, the ideology of the middle class is equalitarian and hence more likely to render this class acceptable to both the upper and lower classes in Philippine society.

It would follow from this that those interested in encouraging vocations to the priesthood would do well to interest themselves in socio-economic development. For without such development a middle class cannot develop and the image of the priest will not appreciably change.

4. This study indicates the need for much more intensive research into dominant and variant Philippine values. Only when the results of such research are available can we speak with any degree of certainty on the prevalence of the double standard and on the insecurity of the male role in Philippine society.

Finally, the study indicates the need for a more wholesome and realistic sex education. Unless such an education is given, a life of celibacy will always be misunderstood as a cloak for sexual inadequacy or a rejection of something inherently evil rather than as a valuable expression of a life dedicated exclusively to the service of God.¹³

¹³ "Married Priests," *The Commonwealth*, LXXX, No. 8 (May 15, 1964), 224.