

# Toward a Post-Clerical Church

by Ivan Illich

Dear Kelly,

When you dropped in on my hideout it was two in the afternoon. Now it is two in the morning. You are on your way back north, for a second semester in a course of *aggiornamento* for aging missionaries offered at a Canadian Jesuit university. I am still ruminating on the conversation we had. For myself and a couple of friends, “Kelly” already evokes two realities: the thoughtful, generous and delicate man and priest whom I was surprised to meet, and a contemporary “type” for whom I just cannot think of a more thought-provoking representative, and into which both Lee and I would want to fit.

This is not really a personal letter. It’s a letter to the Kelly whom you have given us for reflection. I write it because I will not sleep peacefully before the format of a letter gives me the framework within which I can say something which has haunted many conversations during the last years. If something in this introduction sounds too personal for a letter I would like to share with others, you and I both know that the Kelly I address is a critter of my imagination.

When you called from downtown, where you somehow had gotten my number, I was sitting under the banana tree excerpting 12th-century rules of hospital communities. That’s the century in which the very first houses specializing in the recovery of sick people had been established in western Christendom. Crusaders, who had been impressed by such houses in Byzantium, and who had observed the practice of medical hospitalization in Islam, brought the idea of *nosokomium*, “the sick house”, to southern France. In the course of

only a few decades the new idea caught fire, and not just dozens but a few hundred examples of the new institution began to dot the world of the Pope.

With the idea of such a house a new kind of religious community came into existence whose members dedicated their lives in obedience, celibacy, and poverty to the care of the sick. To guide their common life, they picked up a letter addressed to pious women by the Church Father Augustine, and added a set of recommendations made at the beginning of the century by Raymond de Guy. He had founded such a house for crusaders in Jerusalem when they were too sick and tired to venture a return home. Some of these rules were for “sisters and brothers called to the hospital”, healthy persons who had heard an intimate invitation to care for those marked by disease. In other early rules, the bodily mark of disease was interpreted as a divine calling to religious community life, and the healthy who joined as members found in leprosy or gangrenous ergotism a reason to live with those more visibly marked, apart from the rest of society.

I mention this at the outset of my letter because it tells you in what mood I was when you called. In conversation with Lee, I was trying to find the right sentences to make it believable to my readers that the very idea of “hospitalizing the sick under Christian care” has a beginning in history, and that half of the Christian history we know was over before it was accepted as an obvious “need” in the medieval town.

Then you walked in. What a pleasure it was to make your acquaintance! In a few minutes it was obvious that you were not only a fellow historian, but a learned one at that. First a decade of ecclesiastical studies, completed when the 19th-century routine of seminary training was still uncontested. This made you acquainted with a standard canon which – for those of us born sufficiently before World War II – gave a common culture to Catholic priests all over.

Just ordained, you went to Africa for a first “trial” without any preparation. You had to grope your way into the history and culture of the mission, trusting your basic intuitions and letting yourself be imbued by the prejudices floating around at the mission station. A dozen years followed as a missionary in tropical Africa. You were sent to care for people whose language in the meantime had changed beyond recognition, and because you did not properly record it, will not be remembered.

Next came demanding studies. As a middle-aged man, you spent several years as a graduate student at one of the world’s major universities and wrote a doctoral dissertation in cultural history, based on oral testimony you had collected. And back you went for another ample decade as a white cleric in a region which had turned into a black nation, mostly “to care” for people who had little use for you. What a life! In many profound ways, a life that follows a pattern which people twenty years younger than we will have to reconstruct from biographies, because it will be beyond their grasp.

I do not know how you took the seminary fare of the post-war period with its insistence on Latin, its smattering of Thomas Aquinas for the sake of the clergy’s mental insurance, its fragments of Biblical studies – just prestigious enough to discourage personal reading and totally insufficient for nourishing homilies. But one thing became clear as we sat around Valentina’s table with your Central European traveling companion who works among the Basutos: The new generation, which poor John Paul brings forth from contemporary places of clerical learning – in comparison to those of our time – no longer has either canon or study habits, nor that minimum of ambiguous rootedness which came as a bonus with our experience.

What a maddening idea, that you should now be on leave from your equatorial mission station to submit to a

pedagogical potpourri of curricular offerings planned to bring you “up to date” in theology, spirituality, and pastoral care! How sad the state of the Church that, after years of isolation and intellectual starvation, lack of books and dependence on journalistic reports about Church and Faith, overwork and aging in the boondocks, she has nothing better to offer you on your sabbatical than one more return into the curricular market. This is the point at which our luncheon conversation became serious. Both of you asked questions and I gave answers by which, unwittingly, I might have shocked you.

I meant what I said. Yes, I do believe that current discussions on the future of the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church are overwhelmingly beside the point because they focus on the future of the clergy: Should there be a married clergy? Should ordination be limited to the male clergy? What place should be given to the local community – clerical and lay – when it comes to the election of a bishop or the shaping of liturgical forms? Must clerics who hold opinions divergent from the Roman tradition be removed from their posts? Not the mystery of the Trinity or of the Incarnation, but the “mystery” of the clergy now polarizes the Church. A mystifying “class struggle” has been thrashed out with such noise over the last twenty-five years that not only sophisticated Jews but even Japanese tourists have the impression that to be a Catholic means to take sides on these issues.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not one of those who denies that these are important questions on which, to a high degree, the kind of political institution which the Roman Catholic Church becomes, depends. But they are relevant only as long as you accept a hypothesis that results from a historical accident, and not from anything in Scripture or Tradition. These questions are important only as long as you live with the certainty that “the clergy” is a

God-willed attribute of the community founded by Christ.

From personal experience, many conversations, and phenomenological analysis, I have come to the conviction that clergy – when mentioned in connection with the Roman Catholic Church – has at least one essential characteristic today which was absent from the essence of any church-grouping in previous epochs of Church history. This characteristic is the result of a proposed professional education, first formulated by Cardinal Pole in England (in the National Synod of 1556), which slipped almost verbatim into the 3rd session of the Council of Trent through Cardinal Morone, and whose provision was then defined as a duty incumbent on every bishop in the 23rd session of the Council. This proposal envisages the institutional formation of secular priests, something as unheard of in Latin Christendom at this time as poor houses which limit admittance exclusively to the sick had been unheard of during the 11th century. But unlike the idea of a specialized recovery of the sick – which spread like wildfire – it took several centuries before Canon Law began to define the attendance at seminaries as a prerequisite for ordination.

Perhaps these remarks will explain my deep interest in the “invention” of hospitals in the 12th century. I believe that this social creation of a new institutional device which was motivated by heroic charity and deep trust in personal divine vocation, in the course of the next half millennium transformed our perception of what a good society ought to be. We can no longer imagine a good society which would lack special institutional agencies where people with special physical or mental incapacities can be bedded, stored and treated. The need for hospitalization has become one of our basic certainties, and with it we accept as obvious that there are certain acts of charity which “just cannot be absolved by simple hospitality.” I am studying not so much the history of the hospital, but the history of hospitality – now largely reduced to

invitations for Christmas dinner. I argue that this degradation of hospitality happened in good faith, in the shadow of a society built on the idea of hospitalization.

Just as there is a profound difference between a society that abandons the stranger who does not find hospitality, and a society that mediates the needs of strangers through taxation and professionalization, it should be clear that there is an essential phenomenological difference between a Church which prescind from an institutionalized routine for the specialized preparation of its priests, and one in which formal education is seen as a prerequisite for ordination, and increasingly to be repeated for the continued exercise of priestly functions.

What I find scandalous is the cocky innocence with which a Roman western tradition that claims catholicity is bound up with the fate of a kind of clergy whose competence, status, function, and income are determined by a factor which is radically alien to the first three-quarters of the history of the Church. I write you this letter in the hope that you, or other “Kellys” who are returning in old age to service seminary retraining will help to make this point. Unless persons like you take the Church’s non-clerical future into your own hands by sharing your wisdom and discipline as hosts rather than as educators, the reform of the Church will be a miracle rather than the promised marvel it has always been.

We had so little time yesterday, so I take the liberty as a colleague to remind you of the literature which supports my claim. Let me sum up: Until the Council of Trent, there were no institutions of any kind that had as their purpose the training of pastoral agents. What in retrospect is made to look like the ancestry of seminaries are historiographic phantoms invoked to justify the contemporary existence of an educational agency which, at its best, gifted those alumni it almost inevitably warped. Until the late 16th century, you became a priest the way in which you became a healer or cobbler

or musician – by picking up what it takes for the task. You picked up what you needed for your ordination as best you could get it – your Latin, your store of pious stories and your common sense – on which the bishop might test you before making you a priest. There is no evidence that the need for institutional initiation for the secular clergy has ever been felt. Certainly Canon Law – which so often is a mirror for ecclesiastical utopias – gives no sign of a desire to institutionalize preparation for the priesthood. It is only the Second Lateran Council which admonishes bishops to employ a “Magister” in each cathedral, who will be available to teach poor clerics without asking for tuition. The decree reflects both the new opportunity available for scholars to make money on their learning and the new trend to put the emerging profession under ecclesiastical control.

The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 made its wish more explicit: There should be a “theologian” who can instruct priests and others in Holy Scripture, and who is placed particularly at the service of those who are engaged in the “care of souls.” The Council did not dare request that this be done by every bishop, but only that such a charge be created by archbishops at their Metropolitan Sees. It took a millennium – from the time of the Greek Fathers to the time of monastic and conventual training in early scholasticism – for a council to make a first attempt toward a separately institutionalized “learned service” for the diocesan, as opposed to the religious, clergy. Two hundred years later the first colleges were created with the explicit purpose of housing students whose intent was pastoral rather than learned and legal: Capranica and Nardini in Rome, Antonio di Siguenza (1477) in Spain. But it would be reading a non-existent category into these early Renaissance foundations to interpret a few charitable hostels – meant mostly for poor boys who were looking for a curial benefice – as forerunners of the kind of college which came to be known as a seminary.

It took the Tridentine decree on seminaries as many centuries to be accepted by the Catholic world as it took to have all dioceses recognize the decree on the need to solemnize marriage. Most of the seminaries started in the first hundred years after the Council by the bishops themselves did not survive their first or second generation of students. The late 16th-century colleges that were run by Jesuits and later by other orders for future secular priests – as distinct from their own members – survived better, but served the formation of elite ecclesiastics rather than local pastors. In Spain it took until the late 17th and 18th century until the idea of seminary training entered the majority of dioceses. In Germany, the practice never was accepted. In France, Jean-Jacques Olier created that unique company of St. Sulpice which, after 1642, succeeded in stemming the extinction of the few remaining seminaries founded in the aftermath of Trent.

As the seminary memories of your traveling companion brought to our attention, the spirit and literature generated by this band of spiritual pedagogues still affected people born in the second quarter of this century. Over the next 300 years the Sulpicians created an unprecedented style of fervent piety which would be a fascinating subject for an unusually gifted historian of religious mentalities. Outside of Europe, and especially in Latin America, only during the 19th century did seminaries become standard equipment in the typical diocese. And at that, they were often the one place where a boy could get some classical preparation. I still remember the Puerto Rican generation of seminary alumni, most of whom became the province's lawyers or poets rather than priests.

When one discusses this background of the Church's reliance on seminary-trained clergy with churchmen or almost anyone, at least two points are immediately made. First, admiration is voiced for the seriousness with which the post-Reformation Church accepted the challenge by insuring



“educational” progress, and then my interlocutor calls attention to the claim that “modern times” demand formal education. They interpret the Church’s dependence on professional preparation of its staff as a consequence of a secular trend, and are blind to the evidence that this trend might just as well be interpreted as a secularization of an ecclesiastical model. They ask me if I can imagine a modern Church indifferent to the “education” of its leadership and without professional formation among the myriad of new fields that must be related to the Gospel if the Christian message is to remain relevant to the modern world. This is a point made very explicitly yesterday while we ate our rice.

My answer to both these questions is “no”. Of course, I could *imagine* both, but I abstain from doing so. History is what I know has been. I need all the imagination I have to grasp what has been, something I find even more difficult when the subject is the Church. But I would like to insist on two points: First, it is the Church which has pioneered the concept that a certain amount of “education” is the prerequisite for admission to status, function, and privilege. In the process of adapting the medieval *artes* into a condition for the ordination of its priests, the idea of the curriculum took shape, and with it the basic assumptions upon which the ideology of universal education could be built.

That social topology, within which our various institutions are concrete configurations, depends on the assumption that eminence in any specialty presupposes curricular inputs rather than what you pick up. The prejudice against the informal learner which has grown during the last several hundred years is a characteristic of all our institutions, not just of the Church. But, in a unique way, the Church initiated this prejudice: with the *seminarium* — the seedbed of the next generation — it set the model for a leadership qualified by curricular consumption. The one institution which solemnly

celebrates its continuity over the last two thousand years is also that institution which pioneered a gnoseocratic bureaucracy based on certified curricular consumption, *and* the institution which claims that this kind of “knowledge”-based aristocracy is not just opportune or “natural” but the result of God’s own will.

Second: Men like you, and many others I know, are in danger of *apostolic castration* due to these historical and ecclesiastical assumptions about the relationship between schooling and evangelical leadership. I purposely use the above word. After you had gone, and I tried to return to the 12th-century transmogrification of hospitality into hospitalization that was motivated by compassionate mercy. Lee, whom you met, after a long silence, quoted Matthew: “He sent them out ...” Did He not trust each of his disciples to gather with whom they met? Did He not expect, even bless, their “balls”, encourage the practice of personal hospitality in men who, for his sake, had forsaken their own home?

Yes, you were right in your suspicion that twenty-five years ago I wrote that book on the deschooling of society in the hope that a secular discussion would lead to proposals for the deschooling of the Church. As far as I know, I failed. But my conviction has only deepened: The time of qualification by curricular attendance, the time of schooling which grew out of the idea of the seminary and the *ratio studiorum*, is over. Even now, higher learning depends crucially on hospitality and friendship and lifelong personal emulation in those virtues which establish the independent stance of heart and mind on which *studium* —in the age of A.I., sociobiology and the apocalypse of science —depends.

Bob, am I wrong when I feel certain that the future of Christian learning depends on how I share it with others, or you with your friends? Am I wrong when I suggest that you tell a few of your friends that next year, between two rainy

seasons, you can give sack and sorgo to no more than seven; that you have two books which you want to follow when you address them between Psalms on Monday and Wednesday; that you would like to read beforehand the books which they will comment when they speak on the other evenings?

Ivan Illich

P.S.

I do not believe that the de-clericalization of the priesthood and the de-clericalization of consecrated ascetism, at this moment, depend on the de-clericalization of learning; but rather, on the creation of *faits accomplis* here and there. Further, the unique view on the current predicament of the world which a rootedness in the Roman Catholic tradition enables us to have can be celebrated with circles of friends – by you and by Lee and by Dara (of whom I told you) and can be celebrated with a scope which is and must forever be out of the purview of those caught within the “educational assumption,” be they the Pope himself.