

The Dark Night of a Priestly Soul

by Fr. Gordon J. MacRae

“It seems to the soul in this night that it is being carried out of itself by afflictions . . . This night is a painful disturbance involving many fears, imaginings, and struggles within a man. Due to the apprehension and feeling of his miseries, he suspects that he is lost and that his blessings are gone forever.” (St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, Ch. 9, 5, 7)

In his new book, [*Secular Sabotage*](#) (FaithWords, 2009), Catholic League President Bill Donohue wrote masterfully of the front lines of the culture war between the sacred and the secular. More than at any other time of the year, these two forces face off in the Christmas season in a culture seemingly at war with its own soul.

When I was a younger priest, the period from Thanksgiving to New Year’s Day always felt like a mixed blessing. The demands on a parish priest at Christmas are very great. A spiritual observance of Advent and Christmas is an exhausting challenge against an ever-advancing tide of secular materialism.

We priests experience in the Christmas season both the hope of the Incarnation and the limits of our human condition. It’s a spiritually vulnerable time that can heighten the intensity of loneliness, the pain of personal struggles and alienation, the agony of loss. Christmas can bring with it a deeply felt awareness of suffering and shadow, of spiritual and emotional vulnerability. It’s a time when, for some, the spring of hope can feel a lot more like the winter of despair.

When I was asked to write an article addressing the priesthood crisis, at Christmas time, I felt very limited in scope. I was about to mark my seventeenth Christmas in prison. Frankly, Christmas in here is simply not what it is out there. It’s a time when the people around me suffer a great deal. Those with families and children are separated from them

by impenetrable prison walls. Those who are alone have their loneliness magnified by the onslaught of Christmas imagery.

I set out to write something warm and fuzzy for other priests at Christmas, but, well, it just wasn't coming. I kept being drawn to some unfinished business, something that has gnawed at me for eight years. Justice requires that I try to make some spiritual sense of it. Now is the time. What I am about to write may be very painful for some to read. Whether you are a lay Catholic, or a priest, deacon, or religious, if you are reading this, I beg you to read carefully and understand.

Eight years ago on December 29, 2002, a brother priest in my diocese took his own life. Father Richard Lower was 57 years old. He was a popular and very gifted – and giving – priest and human being. Father Lower had served Our Lady of Fatima Parish in New London, New Hampshire for the previous thirteen years, and he was much beloved by his parish family.

There was a lot that happened in Father Lower's personal life over the preceding year. He had undergone his sixth painful back surgery. Then he developed septicemia for which he was hospitalized again. Father Lower's mother died that November. These factors, and likely others that are unknown, left Father Lower physically, emotionally, and spiritually bereft to face the newest terror that was to enter his life two days after Christmas eight years ago.

NO CRUELER TYRANNIES

On December 27th, every priest's worst modern nightmare was visited upon Father Richard Lower. He was informed by a diocesan official that a claim of sexual abuse had been lodged against him from thirty years earlier in 1972. Father Lower had never been previously accused. The accusation stood alone, but was enough – three decades later – to abruptly end a life of ministry and priestly self-giving.

Based on the single, uncorroborated thirty-year-old claim, Father Lower was informed that the police would be notified. In accordance with the “zero tolerance” policy of the U.S. Bishops’ new Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, he was suspended from ministry and told that he must immediately vacate the parish he had served for thirteen years.

As was every priest in the Diocese of Manchester, Father Lower was also painfully aware of an announcement from his bishop and diocese made just weeks earlier. In an unprecedented agreement between the Diocese and the State announced in December, 2002, the files and details of every accusation against any priest – regardless from however long ago – would be included in a vast public release of documents in March of 2003. Any privacy rights of the individual priests under canon or civil law were summarily discarded and waived by the signing of this agreement.

Two days after celebrating Christ’s birth with the parish community he loved and served for thirteen years, Father Richard Lower lived Christ’s scourging, and was about to live the Scandal of the Cross in a way for which he had no defense. Succumbing to the darkest night of his soul, this good priest, walking alone in the valley of darkness, took his own life.

Father Lower died without having either acknowledged or denied the 30-year-old claim brought against him. He died alone, apparently having reached out to no one. He left no note. A lot of people – including a number of priests – lamented that they could only imagine what Father Lower went through in those three days after Christmas.

I did not have to imagine anything. I knew exactly what he went through: the feeling of living in a vacuum, the sense of isolation, the feeling of powerlessness, the utter despair of never, ever being able to erase the scarlet letter indelibly marking the accused – guilty and innocent alike; the sheer impossibility of any defense after the passage of three decades; the overwhelming despair of exactly what Saint John of the Cross described in his Dark Night of the Soul:

“Due to the apprehension and feeling of his miseries, he suspects that he is lost and that his blessings are gone forever.”

Do you know what you were doing on any given day in 1972? Can you document your answer? If you're a Catholic priest, you may have to, and your very life may depend on it. Innocent or guilty, what Father Richard Lower faced in those days after Christmas eight years ago is a hopelessness unlike anything one could imagine without going through it. It was for good reason that Dorothy Rabinowitz entitled her 2005 book about the power of false sex abuse claims, [*No Crueler Tyrannies: Accusation, False Witness, and Other Terrors of Our Times.*](#)

In my prison cell a few days after Christmas in 2002, my eyes closed when I read the headline story. I knew Father Richard Lower. He was a priest I admired, and one of only three priests of my Diocese who ever wrote to me in prison.

Nine months before he was accused, Father Lower wrote to another friend lamenting the terror being visited upon other priests. When so many others looked away in silence, Father Lower wrote courageously to challenge the lack of due process and presumption of guilt when other priests were accused. From an April, 2002 letter of Father Lower to a friend:

“The minute a man is accused, he’s immediately suspended. He is forced to leave his rectory within the hour. The result of this horrendous policy is that the priest is seen to be guilty until proven innocent.”

With reference to his back surgery and other pressures, Father Lower reacted to the media attack that had so consumed the priesthood that year. In the same letter, he wrote:

“With all the bad press the Church has received lately, it is very difficult to either work as a priest in public or even to recuperate as a priest ...

As Always, the press has had a heyday with this topic and reported

things whether true or untrue. Because the Church did not handle it properly in the past, they now have a policy of no tolerance ... Another fallout to the scandal is that a 'witch hunt' has begun. It feels like all priests are suspects and no one can be trusted. Please pray for us."

After Father Lower's tragic death, an official of the Diocese of Manchester acknowledged the truth of exactly what Father Lower-feared, but also defended the policy. In a local news article, Father Edward Arsenault was quoted thusly:

"In parish communities where priests have been put on leave, parishioners already believe them guilty. I know there is some expense. But I am confident that our policy is fair."

TREASURE AND TRAGEDY

It has been documented that some twenty-five American Catholic priests have taken their lives after being accused. Some in the news media have implied that their despair is evidence of guilt. How sad and shallow.

People of justice and conscience have expressed concern that our use of the death penalty in criminal cases may have resulted in the execution of some innocent men. Given the hundreds of innocent men who have been wrongly imprisoned for rape and other crimes, then exonerated by retesting DNA evidence, the concern is justified.

But isn't it just as likely that some innocent priests were on that list of twenty-five who lost hope? Isn't it possible that what some of them despaired most was the apparent end of justice and fairness, the sheer impossibility of defending themselves? Believe me on this, accusations of sexual abuse are far more devastating for the innocent than for the guilty. I believe that others who have been falsely accused will corroborate this fact.

Absent clear and convincing evidence – and there has been none – I presume Father Richard Lower’s innocence. It’s what the United States Constitution bids me to do. It’s what the rule of law – both Church and civil – bids me to do, and it’s what the Gospel bids me to do. To presume anything else, absent evidence to the contrary, would belie a heart too jaded to claim to live justly and fairly, to claim to live the Gospel of Mercy.

After the tragic suicide of another priest, Father William Rosensteel, in June, 2007, Catholic columnist Matt C. Abbott published a powerful statement on <http://www.RenewAmerica.com>. It was from an unnamed supporter of Father Rosensteel:

“We need to remember how important a person’s good name is. To knowingly harm a person’s reputation without cause and clear evidence is a serious violation of the Eighth Commandment. The consequences of such violations are far-reaching and irreversible. Even a priest who is known to be guilty of the crime of child abuse should not be required to forfeit his life to satisfy attorneys, insurance companies, the media and plaintiffs. How much more is this true of a priest whose ‘case’ has not yet been decided?” (RenewAmerica, August 7, 2007)

As I held the local newspaper in my hand on December 30, 2002, with a headline declaring the scandal of a priest’s suicide, I would have given anything to be on that wooded path that day with Father Lower at what he feared was the end of all things he held dear. I now wish I had the means to write in 2002 what I am writing here. It may have saved this good priest’s life. Even now there is hope – for Father Lower and for us.

First, there’s a lesson to be learned. It’s especially important that priests and lay people reach out to priests burdened with the tyranny of decades-old claims of abuse. In “The Sacred Priesthood,” an essay for the Year of the Priest Father John Zuhlsdorf wrote:

“The sacred priesthood is the common treasure and responsibility of the whole Church.”

Doesn't that treasure warrant the benefit of the doubt for priests accused? Doesn't it call us to support them with our words, our prayers, our mercy, and – if needed – our forgiveness?

“Today, the Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2283) recognizing that people who commit suicide suffer from anguish that can mitigate moral responsibility. I don't think anyone can look justly at what happened to Father Lower and not see anguish there.

This Year of the Priest is a time to have hope for Father Richard Lower's soul, and, from our practice of mercy, for ourselves. We owe it to him and other priests who lost all hope to assist them still with our prayers and Masses, with our Gospel mandate to be merciful. We owe it to our spiritual brothers and fathers in the priesthood to resolve to never again let another priest walk alone through the valley of darkness.

For my brother, Father Richard Lower:

*“Softly and gently, dearly-ransomed soul,
In my most loving arms I now enfold thee,
And, o'er the penal waters, as they roll,
I poise thee, and I lower thee, and hold thee.
And carefully I dip thee in the lake,
And thou, without a sob or a resistance,
Dost through the flood thy rapid passage take,
Sinking deep, deeper, into the dim distance.
Angels, to whom the willing task is given,
Shall tend, and nurse, and lull thee, as thou liest;
And Masses on the earth and prayers in heaven,
Shall aid thee at the throne of the most Highest.
Farewell, but not forever! Brother dear,
Be brave and patient on thy bed of sorrow;*

*Swiftly shall pass thy night of trial here,
And I will come and wake thee on the morrow."*

Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman,
Conclusion: *"The Dream of Gerontius."*

Fr. Gordon MacRae writes weekly for <http://www.TheseStoneWalls.com> . His writings from prison have also appeared in First Things, The Catholic Response, Catalyst, and many online Catholic venues.