

How to write a complaint letter about a priest

You shall not go about spreading slander among your people; nor shall you stand by idly when your neighbor's life is at stake. I am the LORD. You shall not hate any of your kindred in your heart. Reprove your neighbor openly so that you do not incur sin because of that person. Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your own people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD. -Leviticus 19:16-18

*Admonish your friend—he may not have done it; and if he did, that he may not do it again.
Admonish your neighbor—he may not have said it; and if he did, that he may not say it again.
Admonish your friend—often it may be slander; do not believe every story.
Then, too, a person can slip and not mean it; who has not sinned with his tongue?
Admonish your neighbor before you break with him; and give due place to the Law of the Most High.
-Sirach 19:13-17*

*“If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.
-Matthew 18:15-17*

“Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he wrongs you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times saying, ‘I am sorry,’ you should forgive him.” -Luke 17:3-4

Brothers, even if a person is caught in some transgression, you who are spiritual should correct that one in a gentle spirit, looking to yourself, so that you also may not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so you will fulfill the law of Christ. -Galatians 6:1-2

Introduction

Sometimes our priests say or do things we don't like or they omit to say or do something we do like. Some people choose to endure this in silence. Some people choose to complain among fellow parishioners or all the way up to the bishop.¹ In accord with the words of Our Lord in St. Matthew's Gospel, it is just and proper for any complaints about a priest to be addressed first to the priest himself. In this way, he has a proper chance to defend himself or apologize or both. Especially if the matter is not urgent, the priest should be given an adequate amount of time to respond in writing or to arrange a meeting in person if this is mutually agreeable. Your priest is not just a clerk about whom you complain to a manager. Your priest is a spiritual father and deserves to be respected.

Guidelines to consider

The following are some tips for writing a letter that is respectful and effective in resolving a concern with a priest. These are not exhaustive or covering every circumstance.

1. Address the priest cordially.
2. Acknowledge his efforts and even some things about which you are pleased and grateful.
3. Always presuppose good will. Avoid outright accusations.
4. Accompany your letter with sincere expressions of prayerful support.

¹“Any Catholic, whether Priest or Deacon or lay member of Christ's faithful, has the right to lodge a complaint regarding a liturgical abuse to the diocesan Bishop or the competent Ordinary equivalent to him in law, or to the Apostolic See on account of the primacy of the Roman Pontiff. It is fitting, however, insofar as possible, that the report or complaint be submitted first to the diocesan Bishop. This is naturally to be done in truth and charity.” (*Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 25 March 2004, #184).

5. Ask a question in a non-accusatory fashion, if possible.
6. Be specific about your concern. Not every concern calls for a letter. Consider if it is for the good of souls. Try to focus on only one main point.
7. Be meek in your tone. Unless the matter is especially egregious or urgent, a more forceful letter could be composed later if the first is not effective.
8. Allow for resolution. If the priest feels like he is already condemned it will be harder for him to respond positively. You might gently suggest a way to resolve the perceived problem. Be ready to forgive.
9. Remember that the priest spent years of his life in seminary formation and may well have spent a substantial amount of time in prayer and planning for particular liturgies and homilies. He might have a good reason for what he did or did not do or say.
10. Have recourse to the priest's superiors only after offering him a chance to respond and only if the resolution of the concern is not feasible without it.

Bad and Good Example of a Letter

Any complaint letter that is first of all given to the priest is already better than a letter going over his head to his pastor, regional vicar or bishop. However, there are some letters that are less effective and can be inadvertently discouraging to the priest. Here is an example of a bad letter which is less likely to be as helpful for the priest and effective in bringing a resolution to the concern. Then see the example of a good letter likely to be encouraging to your priest and receive a better response.

Letter A (for abrasive):

Dear Fr. Ed.,

You don't have enough Confession times. Last Saturday, I had to wait too long in line. Why don't you care about your people?

Sincerely,

John Doe

Letter B:

Dear Fr. Smith,

Your ministry in the Confessional is very much appreciated by your devout parishioners. Would it be feasible to expand the timeframe of Confessions? Other devout parishioners and I would be delighted if an evening time slot for the Sacrament of Reconciliation were available. Tuesday evenings would be my suggestion as this would fit well with the school and parish schedule. Thank you for your kind consideration of my request. Please let me know if you are available to meet to discuss my ideas in person.

In Christ,

Bob White

Even from this simple example, we can see how Bob's letter is much more likely to be received kindly by Fr. Smith. However, even the abrasive letter would be better than a complaint directly to the bishop that Fr. Smith neglects the spiritual care of his people.

Conclusion

It is better to express your concerns to the priest than to hold a grudge or gossip. Be respectful and be ready to forgive as priests, though raised to an awesome dignity, are fallen men in need of grace and mercy, mercy from Our Lord, and mercy from the people whom they serve. Priests may never give up on even one soul under their care. Don't give up on your priests.