

The Church: Holy, yet Embracing Sinners to her Heart

July 19, 2007, by Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop, CA

Last week, I responded to statements from the Vatican regarding the primacy of the Catholic Church. While identifying in many ways with non-Catholic Christians, and not wanting to pour salt on the wounds of division already existing in the Body of Christ, I did defend the right – and the responsibility – of those entrusted with maintaining authentic Catholic doctrine to clarify and articulate publicly the unique status of the Catholic Church, especially as being “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.”

Then, last Saturday, the very same day as my article was published, news of the \$660,000,000.00 settlement out of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles appeared online. Cardinal Mahoney, who only recently had taken our legislators to task for their “*moral failure*” in not achieving immigration reform, would write that Monday (July 16th): “After much prayer, time, and effort by all of the parties involved, I am able to announce to you today that the Archdiocese of Los Angeles has reached an agreement in principle with attorneys representing clergy sexual abuse victims in the 508 civil cases that remain filed against us. I wish to express my gratitude to all those who participated in today’s settlement meeting...I again extend my personal apology to victims who suffered sexual abuse by clergy and repeat again my steadfast commitment to continuing all of the abuse prevention programs and policies currently in force in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. As Chief Shepherd of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, I will also continue to meet with any victim of abuse who wishes to meet privately with me.” (From the Archdiocesan Website)

The upbeat tone of this announcement and apology only hints at the immense pain among our Bishops, and Catholics in general, at the cruel betrayal of hundreds of innocent victims by the ministers they trusted. It masks the ongoing agony of a Church hierarchy which failed woefully in protecting the vulnerable, even as they boldly proclaimed a gospel of life.

Some do not believe that the hierarchy truly cares. Were it not for the lawsuits, they contend, the innocent would never have been vindicated. I know, from experience, of cases in which Church authorities seemed too quick to defend the priests and other ministers accused of a crime. But as reprehensible as this sounds, it reflected a prevailing attitude in deference to authority which shielded not only clergy, but also grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins, brothers and sisters, teachers, administrators, coaches,

camp counselors, scout leaders, physicians, and countless other kinds of trusted authority figures who, according to statistics, have proven to be equal or even more prone to sexual abuse than Roman Catholic clergy.

Domestic abuse – that perpetrated by members of the child’s own family – is not only the most common form of sexual exploitation, but also the most commonly enabled by parents or guardians unwilling to accept the bitter truth. How do I know? It’s not just that I read. I have heard, firsthand, accounts of abuse and victimization of children who tried in vain to report it to their own family members, suffering the consequences.

I am a mandated reporter. On three occasions, without violating the seal of confession, I have helped an abused child make contact with the CPS and find his or her way to safety, to healing, and to restoration. But what hurts the most is hearing of exploitation which happened long ago, and still continues to haunt and to handicap a child now grown into adulthood. Some of those cases have already been investigated, without resolution.

For every time I’ve connected a child to CPS (Child Protective Services), there’ve been many adults for whom I could do little more than pray, offering advice for coping, for counseling and for ways to find wholeness.

Though statistically only a small fraction of all abuse is caused by priests, it breaks my heart to think that anyone entrusted with protecting and caring for the children of God could be so heartless as to deliberately, at times with premeditation and predatory precision, victimize an innocent human being for the sake of his own gratification. While judges and psychiatrists try to analyze the complex dysfunctions which would lead an otherwise good and compassionate person to do something diabolical – there is no better adjective for systematic abuse – most of us simply sit back and feel sick to our stomachs. Then, we sense a holy, boiling anger.

But why does society, and the media which feed society’s appetite for whatever is sensational and controversial, seem so obsessed with Catholic clergy, often ignoring equally deplorable stories involving other abusers?

The reasons are numerous. First, there’s nothing the radical left craves more than to thoroughly discredit the Church which most vocally, and at times with the greatest clout, opposes their comprehensive liberal agenda.

The Church vigorously defends the traditional foundations of our society.

Yet in defending the rights of immigrants, the indigent, the laborer and the incarcerated, and for opposing war, she’s judged by the ultraconservatives.

Secondly, many people resent the fact that the Catholic hierarchy seeks to bridge the rigid separation of Church and State in the effort to influence political, social, economic, and military policy with Christian values. These people want God kept in a straightjacket, rendering him irrelevant.

Third, there are people who've been injured, somehow, by representatives of the Church. They can't find light in the shadows, and suffer despair. Bound by their grief, they tend to assume that every accusation is valid.

A few people are still fighting the religious wars of the Reformation era, or are tortured by the Inquisition, or still captive to the Crusades, and thus rather than living in the present, harbor a distorted image of the Catholic Church. Their desire to see the Church brought down can be obsessive.

The truly misled think the Pope is the Antichrist and the Catholic Church, the Whore of Babylon. These people are so thoroughly confused, there is little hope to break through their fanatical zeal to undermine Catholicism.

Some love to hear and to embellish any negative news about the Catholic Church. All we can do is pray for them to overcome their prejudice and to see the hand and heart of God at work through the Church Jesus founded.

But the truly legitimate reason to focus on the Catholic clergy, in cases of sexual abuse, is the fact that the higher our expectations, the greater our pain in seeing them dashed against the ground. All the combined efforts to desecrate the image of the Catholic priest derive from the common intuition that priests are called to be holy, consecrated, delivered from the sinful and addictive behaviors that plague humanity into a place of greater communion with Almighty God. Christ-like, the priest is universally seen as one whose role is to bridge the infinite gap between heaven and earth.

And just as his contemporaries were scandalized by Jesus' association with sinners and his seemingly unholy behaviors (not washing his hands on occasion before eating, not strictly observing the Sabbath, being seen with women in public places, defending the guilty, drinking alcohol, and appearing to be a political agitator), so too our contemporaries tend to scrutinize in detail, with critical care, every move a modern priest makes.

Yet, in the case of abuse, this scrutiny is absolutely justified, just as the stronger reactions of disappointment, indignation, and determination to defend the victims, are healthy responses of those who believed in the priesthood and now challenge the Church to hold her priests accountable. Those who love the Church want her, too, to be healed of *her* wounds.

For the Church is, in her essence, Holy. She is the extension of Christ's presence and activity throughout history and in every corner of the earth.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church contains a number of paragraphs dealing with the paradox of a Church both holy, yet composed of sinners.

In what follows, I'll include some key citations from the Catechism. I have dropped footnote references, and at times made minor changes in the text or quotation marks, so that you can read with less distractions.

We are a work in progress: "The Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real though imperfect. In her members perfect holiness is something yet to be acquired. Strengthened by so many and such great means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state—though each in his own way—are called by the Lord to that perfection of sanctity by which the Father himself is perfect." (825)

"Christ, 'holy, innocent, and undefiled,' knew nothing of sin, but came only to expiate the sins of the people. The Church, however, clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal. All members of the Church, including her ministers, must acknowledge that they are sinners. In everyone, the weeds of sin will still be mixed with the good wheat of the Gospel until the end of time. Hence the Church gathers sinners already caught up in Christ's salvation but still on the way to holiness:

"The Church is therefore holy, though having sinners in her midst, because she herself has no other life but the life of grace. If they live her life, her members are sanctified; if they move away from her life, they fall into sins and disorders that prevent the radiation of her sanctity. This is why she suffers and does penance for those offenses, of which she has the power to free her children through the blood of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" (Par. 827, Quote from Pope Paul VI, who served 1963-78).

"Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace." (1431) May our conversion be brought to its fullness as we all seek to grow in the Image of Christ, whose Blood has sanctified his Church. And may God forgive, transforming from predators to protectors of the innocent, those who sin.