

Failed Leadership: A Primer

by Daniel Carlson

The adverse public reaction took the police chief by surprise.

The whole thing had started, innocently enough, when he organized a private catered lunch at police headquarters. The gathering itself, though, was not the problem ... it was the list of those he had invited to join him. Incredibly, the chief had brought together a number of his former officers, each of whom had been fired or disciplined for ethical or criminal misconduct during their careers ... and citizens were, rightly, outraged.

At a hastily called press conference, the chief said that the purpose of this event - which was not open to the public - was to provide a platform for the former officers to gather in a spirit of repentance, but was in no way intended to signify the restoration of their police authority. Having come to understand the wrongheadedness of his plan, the police chief apologized.

At this point, I must pause to note that the foregoing scenario is fictional. No police chief organized an event of this sort. As a matter of fact, any law enforcement leader contemplating such a gathering would, undoubtedly, face serious questions about judgement and decision making ability.

But as we celebrate the fact that responsible organizations would never countenance such a bizarre event, we shake our heads ... once again ... upon learning that the Catholic Church (in this case, the Diocese of Buffalo, New York) recently did exactly that.

In late February, 2020, at a parish in suburban Buffalo, the interim Bishop celebrated a private Mass with a number of priests the diocese acknowledges are credibly accused of child sexual abuse. In defending his decision, the Bishop said the event was an opportunity to gather in prayer and penance with priests who have been placed on administrative leave or who do not have faculties to participate in Mass publicly.

Voicing regret that this gathering - which was not open to the public - had caused added pain for those victimized, the Bishop went on to underline that the participation of the disgraced clergy should not be seen as a restoration of their privileges to celebrate Mass publicly. Instead, he said, its emphasis was on the need for genuine personal remorse and penance for the harm caused to survivors of child sex abuse.

Several days after his awkward apology, though, the Bishop went further. After apologizing, again, for any suffering caused by his assemblage of fallen clergy, he defended his support of abusive priests. Maintaining that they remain part of the "family" of the church, he rejected the notion that abuse survivors should be reluctant to join a "family" in which the father figure was open to including child abusers as well.

Sigh.

As a retired police officer and a "cradle" Catholic, I know that my experiences in both of those institutions were instrumental in forming me over the years. That said, it is not difficult to discern the dramatic differences in the way those two bodies deal with malefactors. And for a Shepherd in the Catholic church to suggest that he considers child predators among his "family," well, that is beyond the pale.

With the differences noted, there is one important cultural protocol that weaves through both policing and the clergy ... the code of silence. When it manifests itself, this phenomenon results in police officers “covering up” for derelict police officers, and in problem clergy refusing to speak out or take action against disgraced members of their ministry. In other words, members of a “family” ... even a dysfunctional family ... tend to stick together, even when it comes to protecting colleagues accused of wrongdoing.

In the Diocese of Cheyenne, Wyoming, for example, the current Bishop has spent the first two years of his pastorate dealing with dissension stemming from accusations against one of his predecessors ... a very popular now-retired prelate, with a long history of financial settlements for sexual abuse. After a series of “listening sessions” with laity and priests across his diocese, the Bishop has reached two conclusions: first, the Church has historically failed to show proper concern for victims of clergy abuse viewing them, instead, as adversaries rather than brothers and sisters. Second, in most of the listening sessions, more than an hour would pass before anyone would ask a question about victims.

Given the continuing lack of vision and compassion among Church leaders, it should come as no surprise that, according to some research, the second-largest religious denomination in the United States is that of former Catholics. And of those, more than half have forsaken religion altogether.

Although he died in 1936, G. K. Chesterton could have been talking about the current hierarchy of the Catholic Church when he said:

*It isn't that they can't see the solution.
It's that they can't see the problem.*

Daniel Carlson is a retired police officer and a life-long Catholic. He is the author of *Vanishing Predators: Disgraced Catholic Clergy Flying Under the Radar*. He may be contacted at daniel@vanishingpredators.com