

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

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April 1, 2021

Over the past few months I have been trying to organize and catalogue the vast collection of files I have on clergy sex abuse. They go back to when I first got involved in 1984 and are in both paper and electronic form. As I continue I am struck by the many attempts of the institutional Church to respond. The most recent trend has been the emergence of Catholic higher education from the shadows. The entire phenomenon needs deep, fearless academic research and dialogue. Now that Catholic higher education is in the act, is there a chance this might evolve from the dedicated work of a tiny minority and motivate some of the best Catholic scholars to take up the challenge. This tragic reality has been a known part of Church life and culture since the first century. The momentous change in direction that started in 1985 was based on public revelations of behavior that had been deeply and intentionally buried in a thick blanket of secrecy for centuries. 1985, not 2002! Thirty-five years ago, plenty of time to start trying to figure it all out!

Between 1985 and 2002 the public knowledge of sexual abuse by clergy steadily grew. The bishops were in a state of defensive denial, still claiming it was only a “few bad apples” but knowing full well it was far more than a few and deathly afraid to face the fact that the main problem was not the apples, no matter how many, but the barrel itself.

The so-called Catholic intellectual elite were either totally silent or arrogantly defensive. The late John Richard Neuhaus proclaimed that he had reached moral certitude that the accusations of sex abuse leveled against Marcial

Maciel-Degollado and coverup by the once mighty Legion of Christ were all false. The brave victims who spoke out were not only vilified by Neuhaus and the Legion bosses but some had their careers and lives altered because of the attacks by the Legion. This outfit and Maciel, its bizarre, psychopathic leader for life, were the darlings of John Paul II and of some prominent members of the Catholic laity who happened to be the elite at the time. I recall criticizing them to John Allen one day and he replied: “by their fruits you will know them.” He was right but in ways he never expected! They seemed to have it all. Large numbers of new priests every year, universities and colleges in several countries and the leader who proved to be one of the most successful fund raisers in Church history. They had it all, except for one ingredient that certainly seemed missing from the leadership, namely, a clear understanding of and commitment to Christianity. Then after Josef Ratzinger was elected pope it all changed. The veil of deception crumbled and not only was Maciel exposed but the world began to get an inside look at the weirdness of the Legion. One prominent woman leader in the fight for justice for survivors, attended a meeting at the Legion university in Rome and said to me later that the seminarians and young priests reminded her of Stepford Wives.

Between 1985 and 2002 the bishops gave clergy abuse token attention. The victims on the other hand, were organized and not buying any of the public relations nonsense generated by the various dioceses or by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The other arena where things were happening was in the secular courts. Between 1986 and 2002 there were several hundred cases filed in courts throughout the U.S. This raised the overall public awareness but even more crucial, through the legal discovery process, the secrets were coming out.

This was hardly an unknown issue for the bishops, the clergy, the Catholic press and the Catholic higher educational establishment. The bishops did basically nothing but dodge and weave. The few, and I mean *few* priests and women

religious who publicly stood with the victims and cut through the official church's conventional non-wisdom with their statements were ignored, written off and even vilified. Where was Catholic Higher Education, especially the more renowned Catholic universities back then? Nowhere to be seen or heard! Some of us were invited by various groups to speak at Catholic institutions, including colleges or universities. In my case and in that of the others, the local bishop almost always got into the act and forced a change of venue because in their words, our presence at such an event and in a Catholic environment, would confuse the faithful!

Now, 18 years after the pivotal Boston revelations, Catholic higher education started to act as if they suddenly had a major revelation and were therefore going to rise to the occasion and provide the Church with the answers.

Georgetown University, for which I have an otherwise very warm spot in my heart for personal reasons, issued a report on Nov. 4 titled "Lay Leadership for a Wounded Church and Divided Nation." It was based on a two-day event held at the GU law school on June 14 and 15. The report provides ten strategic directions that emerged from the June meeting. What is so significant about the report or even the June meeting for that matter? Nothing! The "strategic directions" have all been repeatedly articulated by victim/survivors, their advocates and supporters and many of their attorneys not for years, but decades. The authors of the report may think they have cooked up something revolutionary and opened new doors for the Church but they haven't. One thing is certain. The report is an insult to the dedicated and battle-scarred victim/survivors who have been speaking out since the sex abuse tragedy was uncovered in the mid-eighties. It gives the impression that no one has been on top of this issue until this year. It's true that G.U. and the other universities that are on the bandwagon have included one or two survivors, and to my knowledge, the ones they have included are outstanding choices and here I am referring for example, to Juan Carlos Cruz. But most of the other so-called

“experts” lack the historical perspective and more important, the in-depth involvement with the victims. Nothing said by any of the big names in lay Catholic culture is new by any stretch of the imagination and no one has yet ventured into the minefield of the systemic causes. Some of the remarks of the newly endowed experts have not only been embarrassingly superficial but downright ridiculous. To stand up at a university and lay the blame on diabolical influence is on the same level as claiming the dog ate my homework. Other equally off-the-wall attempts at explaining the issue: blaming it on gays or the gay culture which makes as much sense as blaming adultery on heterosexuality, and claiming it was the influence of the free-love culture of the sixties.

At this point I have to point out that Georgetown University sponsored one of the most significant events I have ever been involved with, a panel discussion that took place in April 2016 and filled the largest venue in the university. It was organized by the students, led by then-freshman Aiden Johnson. They did not worry about political correctness and the university to their credit, gave full support. The speakers were those ordinarily verboten on Catholic turf: Richard Sipe, Martin Baron former editor of the Boston Globe, Mike Rezendes, key player with the Globe Spotlight team, Bob Bennet, one of the original members of the National Review Board and me. This venture came from the *students*, not the theology department or the law school.

It seems as if some of the universities were and are looking for prominent names to populate their programs. Some of the speakers have more than superficial experience with the issue and have made significant contributions. But unfortunately most lack the experience of having been in the trenches. They are saying things that have already been said many times over. For years those who were speaking out before it was “safe” to do so were ignored, shunned and written off because what they had to say was way too threatening to the hierarchical

establishment. The bishops finally started waking up to the fact that all their defenses and excuses were rapidly crumbling and everyone knew it. Now it's "politically correct" for the bishops to at least say some of the right things even though their behavior still has a long, long way to go. Catholic higher education no longer has to worry about incurring the hierarchy's wrath so they are jumping on the bandwagon whereas for years they acted as if the subject didn't exist. Now, it's "in" for the major universities to sound like they have just made a new and earth-shaking discovery. One irritating trend has been to try, even subtly, to exonerate the hierarchy and point out all that they have done to make it better. This is counter-productive and a waste of time. Anything the bishops have done has been forced on them. The Dallas Charter never would have happened were it not for the anger and even fury of the victims and their supporters and the non-stop embarrassing revelations coming out of the civil legal processes. Too many forces and voices in the Church are still trying to rescue the bishops. But it's not about the bishops. It's about the countless people whose lives have been forever altered because of the self-serving narcissism of the leadership of the institution from the Vatican on down.

The hierarchy and the Catholic intellectual establishment are either unwilling, unable or both, to move beyond their superficial to mid-level discussions into the forbidden zone of systemic causality. The first question that needs honest and unvarnished answers: why has the institutional Church attracted, nurtured and promoted so many men who are emotionally immature and sexually dysfunctional? The second directly involves the nature of the priesthood. The exaggerated mythology about priests being "other Christs" based on the unexplainable and unrealistic concept of ontological change needs serious and objective excavation. The third and final and most important question is that of systemic causality. The bishops are understandably but regrettably terrified of this

because the answers that are emerging and will continue to emerge are a threat not only to their image and power but to the very reasons for their existence.

The fundamental glaring hypocrisy needs to be addressed: The Church has presented its doctrine and way of life as the path to salvation in the footsteps of Jesus. It has preached love but also has given its people one of history's most stringent and restrictive codes of sexual conduct. At the same time those who are the guardians of this lofty way of life have committed and systematically enabled the commission of sexual violations of the most vulnerable that are deemed by all societies as the most horrific and disgusting that can be inflicted on another human being. Who is responsible for this? Not the obedient, devoted laity but the successors of the Apostles and those who take the place of Christ.

If the Catholic intellectual elite expect to move beyond the mediocre where they are now stuck, they *must* look beyond rescuing the ecclesiastical-clerical establishment and tackle this contradiction that looms over the entire Church, both institutional and People of God, like a black cloud.

As the answers emerge, and the inevitable threats to the clerical and hierarchical *status quo* are faced, but not allowed to once again derail the search for truth, only then will we begin to gain mastery over the dark side. For those who still hope to find their true spiritual home in community of Catholic believers, it may well be the moment to embrace the truly foundational concept of Church as *People of God* and give it a chance. It might just work.