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The John Jay study of clergy sex abuse challenges evangelical Catholics

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 16, 2007 All Things Catholic

Perhaps it's a measure of how badly the image of American Catholicism has been tarnished as a result of the sexual abuse crisis that so many bishops, meeting in Baltimore Nov. 12-15, could seem relieved at the news that the church's record on the abuse of minors is actually no better, but also no worse, than anybody else's.

That seemed the bottom line from preliminary results of a study presented to the bishops on Monday by Karen Terry and Margaret Smith of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice on the "causes and context" of the crisis. Terry said their research suggests that the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy, which peaked numerically in the mid-1970s, for the most part reflected "overall changes in behavior, attitudes, and media representations in American society during this time period."

"This is in conflict with the idea that there is something distinctive about the Catholic church that led to the sexual abuse of minors," Terry said.

To bolster the argument that there's nothing unique about the church, both researchers pointed to a recent study by the Associated Press [1] concerning the sexual abuse of children in American public schools, which found more than 2,500 cases over five years in which teachers were punished for sexual misconduct with students that the AP described as ranging "from the bizarre to the sadistic."

To be sure, not every bishop was eager to take comfort in such results.

"It's a bit like my doctor telling me that my cancer is no worse than my hospital roommate's cancer ? Our situation should be much better," said Bishop R. Daniel Conlon of Steubenville, Ohio.

Nonetheless, when the first part of the new John Jay report appears next summer, it's likely to strengthen the view that the Catholic church has been unfairly scapegoated for a much broader social problem. That contention has been voiced in Catholic circles, often in subterranean fashion, since the first stories about the John Geoghan and Paul Shanley cases broke in Boston in late 2001 and early 2002. At the peak of the crisis, however, when the PR order of the day was to avoid anything that smacked of defensiveness or denial, few American bishops were willing to say it publicly.

In today's less intense climate, the belief of some bishops that the church has been treated unfairly is emerging into the clear light of day.

Archbishop Elden Curtiss of Omaha, for example, said from the floor that the study will be of "great interest," especially as a way of debunking what he called an "unfortunate media problem" and "a myth, reinforced over time, that there's something unique about a Catholic priest, about a bishop and his staff," when it comes to sexual abuse.

In an interview with me Tuesday morning, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver struck a similar note. The AP series about abuse in public schools, he said, is "nothing for us to rejoice over," but it does suggest the need for a level playing field.

"If our culture can look at the whole picture and make judgments about what we should do in the future in terms of the legal system of our country, that's fine, as long as it doesn't isolate the church as a particular problem, or a scapegoat," Chaput said.

During a press briefing on Tuesday, Bishop Thomas Wenski of Orlando also cautiously suggested that, at least in some ways, the church has not been given a fair shake.

"It is a bit disconcerting when the headlines talk about incidents that happened 30 or 40 years ago, and we don't hear much about what has been done since the mid-1980s to implement programs [such as] child protection programs, background checks, and all the other efforts the church has made," Wenski said. "History will determine how much of the unfavorable publicity we got was also unfair."

Efforts to resist what are perceived as unfair assaults are also behind recent arguments from Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Chicago and Bishop William Murphy of Rockville Center, opposing extensions of the statute of limitations for civil lawsuits against the church, and calling for a restoration of the legal doctrine of "charitable immunity" to cap monetary judgments against non-profit organizations.

To be clear, most bishops are not arguing that the suffering of victims, or the need for effective controls against sexual abuse, has been exaggerated. In summing up the results of the John Jay study, Bishop Gregory Aymond of Austin, who heads the bishop's Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People, said it represents an occasion to "renew our commitment to the healing of victims, and the protection of children now and in the future."

What a growing number of bishops are saying out loud, however, is that this is not a specifically Catholic problem, and that it's unfair to frame it that way. All things being equal, that chorus seems likely to swell when the new John Jay study appears.

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Boosting the apologetic argument that "it's not just us," however, may prove to be only the short-term impact of the John Jay study. In the long run, its most significant fallout may come in the arena of today's growing discussion of Catholic identity.

In theory, Catholicism is supposed to shape a distinctive culture among its followers based on church teaching and tradition; put crudely, Catholics are supposed to be different. In the old days, visible markers that set Catholics apart, such as abstaining from meat on Fridays, were intended to symbolize and reinforce a deeper sense of unique Catholic identity. Since the mid-1960s, however, a growing number of voices in the Catholic world have warned that the church seems to be losing this counter-cultural thrust. As then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, today Pope Benedict XVI, put the point in 1984, "Among the most urgent tasks facing Christians is that of regaining the capacity of non-conformism, i.e., the capacity to oppose many developments of the surrounding culture."

What the John Jay study appears to suggest, taken at face value, is that at least in the arena of the sexual abuse of minors, a distinctive Catholic ethos is tough to discern. Abusive behavior by priests has mirrored similar misconduct in other walks of life, according to the early results, and the corporate response of the church has often reflected the same patterns as those followed by other social institutions.

Unsurprisingly, Cardinal Francis George, the newly elected president of the bishops' conference, was the first to intuit the deep implications of that finding.

At a press briefing in Baltimore on Tuesday, I asked the bishops if they felt the John Jay results suggested they had been unfairly singled out, eliciting the response from Wenski quoted above. The session then turned to other topics, mostly focusing on the "Faithful Citizenship" document about the church and politics.

Just as the session was drawing to a close, George, unprompted, signaled that he wanted to add something. Here is what he said, in full:

"May I do something that the media people tell me never to do, which is to speculate? On the question of the reporting of the sexual abuse crisis, it seems to me that it's only common sense to recognize that the media not only report, but they also select, and in that sense they create a reality. So that's a question: Is what has been created here adequate to the reality itself? There are many different aspects to that, because there are many different media instruments, and they're very different from place to place.

"The more interesting question, though, is whether or not the church herself, and particularly the priests and bishops, should be held to a moral standard that is higher than that of the general populace. That was raised by one bishop very astutely, saying that we should not be relieved to find out that our own standards just conform to what is the normal behavior, what has become so in the last several decades.

"Speculatively, and I'm not sure whether you're interested in the question or not, but [the results of the study] point to a sociological thesis or question: Is religion an independent variable? Or is it simply reduced to a cultural reality that can be explained in terms of something other than religion itself? If that's the case, then the

secularists shouldn't be disturbed about religion, because it has nothing original to say anyway, and it's not going to impose itself on anybody's behavior. That's a very important question. It's not going to be decided here, and I don't know the answer to it. I have different answers depending upon which sociologist I talk to. I think that however this thing finally turns out, it will inform the larger issues that are now before us in this country about secularism, the influence of religion in society, and all those good questions that we're not going to discuss directly here."

Under the impact of deadlines and, perhaps, the sheer vastness of the subject, nobody pursued George's point, but it would be a serious miscalculation to take it as idle musing.

On my list of ten "mega-trends" shaping global Catholicism, a current that I call "evangelical Catholicism" figures prominently, referring to a strong public reassertion of traditional Catholic identity, premised on the need to defend the church against assimilation to secular society and what Benedict XVI refers to as a "dictatorship of relativism." Evangelical Catholicism is the most important mega-trend shaping the official policy of Catholicism, with consequences in every area of the life of the church, from liturgical practice to doctrinal teaching, to the vision and operations of church-run schools, hospitals and social service centers. The core objective across the board is to recover a "thick" sense of Catholic distinctiveness.

In that light, and assuming the preliminary findings are confirmed, the impact of the new John Jay study seems destined to extend far beyond analysis of the crisis itself. At least in some circles, the results will be taken as a *reductio ad absurdum* on a diminished sense of Catholic identity, adding to the perceived urgency of forming a generation of Catholics, beginning with priests and bishops, who are more clearly in but not of the world.

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Daily coverage of the Nov. 12-15 fall session of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops can be found here: **http://ncrcafe.org/blog/2682[2]**

One final note about George. As is customary, he made some brief remarks as the new president of the conference on Wednesday, in part joking about the clean sweep for Chicago in the conference elections. (George is a Chicago native, as is Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, the new vice-president. The new conference secretary is Bishop George Murry of Youngstown, Ohio, who served as a Chicago auxiliary in the mid-1990s.)

"Maybe the headquarters of the conference should be moved to Chicago," George laughed. "No, we are who we are ? but, it's a thought."

"Sometimes I control my urge to divulge all my thoughts, and sometimes I don't," he added.

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