NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The Vatican Blues

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The proposed investigation of American nuns is the latest riff in the Vatican Blues, better understood as the Post-Hierarchical Blues that now drift as dolefully as the *Dies Irae* once did across St. Peter?s Square. This Roman run on nuns is a transparent effort to restore high noon glory to the hierarchical style on which the sun of history set long ago. A sad but simple analysis reveals that this inquisition is a prime, but by no means singular, example of Virtual Sex Abuse that can be found in today?s Church.

Virtual Sex Abuse describes actions, often sprinkled with holy water and haloed with incense fumes that share genetic markers with physical and psychological violations of the Sex Abuse Crisis. In each, the powerful look down on the powerless as beneath and subject to them and exercise their power over them to control them by humiliating and demeaning them. This process is always swathed in the camouflage of pseudo-authority - how many times have you heard it? - this is ?good for you,? we don?t take questions and you are never allowed to talk about this either. In short, and though it is infinitely subtler, it?s Father Maciel masquerading as Mother Superior.

Fever Spikes
This inquiry into the women who did nothing less than build the Catholic Church in the United States, is also related to other sacred sorrows, such as the self-satisfied efforts to repudiate and repeal Vatican II, as well as to other lesser embarrassments including Pope Benedict?s raising the Lazarus of the Latin Mass from the dead and his giving general absolution to heretical Lefevbrists while offering a particular scolding to loyal theologians as ?dissenters.? On the hospital chart of history, however, these actions are not evidence of Roman triumphalism?s revived vigor; they are rather temperature spikes in the Roman fever to resurrect the long dead hierarchical form.

These febrile readings indicate that these restless assaults on good people, women religious and sound theologians are the symptoms of ecclesiastical necrophilia, the perverse public embrace of dead hierarchical methods to regain live control over the Church. The Church possesses the generative authority that flows from the word?s Latin root, augere, meaning to grow, to increase, to create, or to help others to develop fully. Bureaucrats corrupt this, however, into authoritarianism, a style of controlling or limiting persons, of stifling their growth to keep them as docile as children. Common sense, or the sense of the Catholic community, tells us that authority is healthy and authoritarianism is unhealthy.

The roots of this layered hierarchical structure can be traced back to the crude division of the universe into the heavens above and the earth below, the organizational model that prevailed from four millennia before Christ,

when priests in what we now call Iraq first mapped the night skies, until they were redrawn in the Space/Information Age. The hierarchical prototype not only divided heaven from earth but body from soul, ranking persons from those placed by God at the top to those assigned by Him to the lowest level of existence. This array, challenged vainly by Copernicus and Galileo, granted divine rights not only to monarchs, including popes, but to those who presided over other entities, including dictators, old time slave masters, present day Mafia godfathers, and the known and unknown powers behind the gilded thrones of the business, sports, and entertainment complexes.

Hierarchical formulations died because their wedding cake levels posited a multiply fractured cosmos that does not match the Space Age revelation of a unified universe in which the earth is clearly in rather than separated from the heavens. Hierarchical representations do not reflect what either the world or we are like. Their useless bloat was on the mind of Robert McDonald, Procter and Gamble?s new CEO, when he responded to the Wall Street Journal about what he was looking for. A ?flatter organization,? he replied, cueing the battered papal trumpets that whine out the first notes of the Vatican Blues.

These Blues penetrate the bones of all Catholics, Pope, bishops, and people alike. As in all Blues, they express what words cannot of the dissension, strife, and sadness caused by the still unhealed wounds of the Sex Abuse Scandal and the untreated bruises caused by cordoning off the sanctuary solely for self-conscious clerics who think they own the Church while penning out the people too busy to think about themselves who really are the Church.

The Vatican Blues sing sourly of history?s pitching the Institution headlong from the hierarchical heights down to the flat plains of the Space/Information Age. Tumbling blindly down through this cascade of change, hierarchs grab for handholds in Trent?s Middle Ages but make hard landings in Vatican II?s Modern Times.

The Bishops? Forced Choice

Bishops are taking this long blurry fall in obedience to papal orders to reinstate hierarchy in order to re-establish what Roman officials term traditional authority, their talking points term for their reflexive authoritarianism. The authoritarian command and control style is clearly evident in the recently released documents outlining the detailed interventions planned for everything about American women religious, from the soundness of their lifestyles to the ?soundness of the doctrine? they teach.

American bishops are frustrated by their commission to do CPR on hierarchy because, although it gives them the satisfaction of carrying out their duty to the Holy See, it also visits them with a conflict they hesitate to acknowledge, much less name out loud. Most American bishops want to exercise true authority but this drill forces them to employ authoritarianism instead. As an example of their preference for what is healthy, American bishops have previously used a pastoral approach to temper the impact of curially inspired investigations. They mediated the Vatican?s heavy handed examinations of American seminaries and theologians by using their instinctive American fairness to make these probes helpful by involving themselves to widen their scope and make them positive experiences.

America?s prelates will no doubt employ a similar style to sift the grain from the chaff in the proposed Red Scare study of American women religious. They also know that their pastoral approach of simultaneously supporting and tempering the Roman hierarchical thrust may cause them to be misunderstood by everybody from the investigators to the investigated.

For curial officials, however, the end of re-establishing their concept of authority/ authoritarianism justifies using means that, like watered down rocket fuel, doom the journey they are meant to energize. These Post-Hierarchical Blues rise as midnight music does from brokenhearted New Orleans, expressing the unhealthy authoritarian longing of Roman bureaucrats to assert their control over whatever they can, American nuns being

the most recent but hardly the only targets of this fated endeavor.

The Birth of the Blues

As summer yielded to autumn in 1962, a cluster of events signaled the remaking of the world and of our view of the universe, decisively ending the era whose boundaries were drawn on hierarchical blueprints and raising the curtain on a universe re-imagined according to the flattened parameters of the Space/Information Age. On September 12, President John F. Kennedy told a sweltering crowd in Rice Stadium in Houston, Texas, that exploring space was ?the natural extension of the American position on earth? and proposed a ?great national effort to put a man on the moon within the decade.?

A day less than a month later, on October 11, Pope John XXIII opened Vatican II, not only venting Church windows to let healthy fresh winds enter but also to serve as portals through which it could make passage into the changed and changing world from which it had romantically exiled itself for generations. Urging the Council Fathers to cast aside fear, the Pope felt ?bound to disagree with these prophets of misfortune who are forever forecasting calamity ? as though the end of the world were imminent. And yet today Providence is guiding us towards a new order of human relationships which ?will bring us to the realization of still higher and undreamed of expectations.?

Exactly one week later, on October 18, the Cuban Missile Crisis gripped the world in eleven stand-off days of tension over the possibility of nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States. Not only did this underscore a global consciousness of the glowing heat of the supposedly Cold War but, even in its incidentals, symbolized the world?s entry into post-hierarchical times. It rendered absolute control from the top of any institution obsolescent, in effect setting the dynamite charges beneath the Communist Empire that would bring it down a generation later. Space Age technology made it impossible for those at the topmost level of the Kremlin hierarchy to conceal missile transfers to Cuba and, as futurist Herman Kahn then observed, for the first time an American Commander-in-Chief, John F. Kennedy, could by-pass the silver starred links in the Command and Control military culture and give orders by speaking personally to servicemen on the line in the theater of action.

In 1969, the first cohort of astronauts realized Kennedy?s vision of a voyage to the moon. In the year before that, Ted Hoff had invented the microprocessor, placing the power of the truck size pioneer computers into the hands of the first citizens of the Information Age. 1968?s May?s uprisings on the boulevards of Paris, the Yippie entanglement with the Police at the August Democratic Convention in Chicago, and the Hippie Flower Children?s simultaneous rejection of their parents? values on the streets of San Francisco, were signals of the agony and the ecstasy of letting the rocket booster of hierarchy tumble away as the world entered the horizonless landscape of space.

Reading the Signs of the Times

At Vatican II, the oldest of institutions sensed and reacted to the newest of things a full generation before General Motors or General Electric, along with other industrial giants, realized that hierarchies no longer worked. Vatican II?s assembled bishops spoke of ?something new coming into human experience? and, reading the signs of the times, grasped that the age of hierarchy had ended. In their clearest response to the inexorable change underway the Council Fathers returned to the concept of collegiality that recognized that bishops possessed authority by their ordination rather than by delegation from the Pope, and that they presided over local Churches rather than as pro-consuls carrying out the orders of a monarchical Pope.

The Church was meanwhile involved in an exciting but disordering renewal. In his recent memoir, Archbishop Rembert Weakland poignantly describes Pope Paul VI?s touching but personally exhausting efforts to preserve the collegial spirit of Vatican II against the massive efforts of curial officials to reinstate hierarchical control in their Vatican offices. To his successor, John Paul II, the Vatican Blues sounded like the Communist

Internationale. He resolved to drown them out with the Gregorian Chant of a refurbished choir of complacent bishops who would loudly sing the one note scale of hierarchy. Pope Benedict XVI, despite demonstrating sensitivity to human personality in his first encyclical on love, has continued these policies with the mannered but nonetheless Teutonic rigor with which he presided over the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith.

That Old Time Religion

The Vatican Blues bewail the present widespread attempt to bring the Church into the second decade of the 21st century by returning to the first decade of the 20th century. The hierarchical presumptions about divided personality that placed enmity between the spirit and the flesh, relentlessly subordinated the married to the celibate, and condescendingly claimed superiority and protected status for clerics: these were the necessary and sufficient conditions for the steady, tangled, largely hidden but widely seeded growth that led to the bitter harvest of the Sex Abuse Scandal. This scandal was not, as is often superficially charged, a result of Vatican II?s new ?liberal? Church but rather of Vatican I?s old, controlling, secretive, conservative and clerically top heavy Church. That long unreformed sexually conflicted ecclesiastical culture that preyed upon immature seminarians, stunting their psycho-sexual growth, before they preyed in turn on the children placed in their care.

Bringing back that old Church re-energizes the hierarchical ethos that generated and rationalized the modern slaughter of the innocents known as sex abuse. The resolution of the Sex Abuse Crisis has not been blocked by the massive legal actions pending against the official Church. The latter are the bitter fruits of the late hierarchical culture?s expectation that the police, the professionals, and their own people would give it cover from publicity, public inquiry, or public humiliation in the justice system. Clearing up the Sex Abuse Crisis is stalled at the intersection shut down long ago by the hierarchical truck that lumbered out of the past to collide with the future, stopping traffic in all directions.

One of the most familiar strains of the Vatican Blues is played by the street musicians who watch one of the most common and painful examples of the conflicts engendered by the efforts to restore an Old Church in New Times. That is the clash reported almost every day between lay Catholics who believe in the Church of Vatican II and bishops who have been told to restore the old hierarchical Church of Vatican I.

Many theologically sophisticated Catholics, for example, belong to the Voice of The Faithful, a group convened in response to the reckless sexual dynamics of hierarchical clericalism. Chapters of the Voice of the Faithful repeatedly find themselves caught in an ancient pas de deux in which they ask their bishop?s permission to meet or have a speaker address them on Church property. The bishop, viewing these good Catholics through hierarchical lenses, and following what is expected of him by Roman officials, refuses them the use of their property or the approval of their speakers, often accusing them of being dissenters dangerous to the faith. Thus is reenacted the modern day Passion Play in which unnecessary and damaging confrontations occur regularly between bishops and their people as a direct result of the strenuous widespread effort to bring back the Old Church whose hierarchical dynamics, as we shall examine further, precipitated the Sex Abuse Crisis that brought the Voice of the Faithful into existence.

The Sexual Sub-Text

As traditional Blues music is saturated with sexual longing, frustration, and the risky gambles of love, so the Vatican Blues are drenched with conflicted and suppressed sexuality. Its signature theme can be felt in the irregular rhythms of hearts numbed by the hierarchical denial of ordinary people?s simple hunger to be human. This commonplace sexual restiveness is no less real for its being regarded with the hierarchical condescension expressed by Pope John Paul II. His attitude was as hard to read as his Slavic half smile because, although he championed the person in abstract philosophical writing, he urged an idealized sexuality that transcended the human condition.

In this well remembered pope?s view from on high, personality was divided into superior and inferior areas

whose borders were as volatile as those between Israel and Palestine. For John Paul II, the good elements were the intellect and the soul and the suspect elements were the body and the flesh. John Paul II believed that, even for the married, foregoing sex was, as classic hierarchical thinking expresses it, a higher good.

It was this long false and painful hierarchical structuring of the person by Church leaders that inflicted a sexual wound on believers who were thereby made to feel guilty for the alleged crime of being human and being sexual. Church officials closed the great bronze doors of St. Peter?s, leaving the cries of the sexually wounded to be swallowed up by the cheers of the pilgrims crowding the square outside. Such misunderstanding and mismanagement of the sexually violated set off the weeping beat of the Vatican Blues, that plangent lament rising from the tumbled and telescoped cars of the Hierarchical crash scene.

A swift sad current of conflicted sexuality sweeps through the major issues in contemporary Catholicism from birth control and celibacy to resurgent clericalism?s ambivalence toward homosexuals and its allergic reaction to women. Their common elements are found in the Sex Abuse Crisis. The latter symbolizes the boxes within boxes of ecclesiastical structures and presumptions that are functions of the very hierarchical form that, following the intransigent convictions of his never-quite-pleased-with-us predecessor, the present we-never-quite-know-what-he-thinks-of-us Pope is determined to restore in the Church. It is impossible to imagine that John Paul II was or that Benedict XVI is aware of how an old Church hierarchical dynamic played a role in fostering this indefensible sex abuse, prompted its formal but profoundly flawed ecclesiastical defense, its lingering insensitivity to its victims and its inherent resistance to attempts to resolve it.

Bishops as Victims

Attention should be paid to the true Willy Lomans of the Church, the bishops, good men worn down and worn out by orders to carry the heavy cases of wind-up hierarchical goods that they cannot give away, much less sell, to the modern world. Indeed, the bishops find themselves trapped inside the yellow ribboned intersection where the multi-car accident of the Sex Abuse Crisis occurred. They remain stunned, accused of being uncaring witnesses who could have seen it coming, dozing passengers who weren?t paying attention, or the reckless drivers who, confident that they had the right of way, drove through the Stop Sign at high speed.

The bishops deserve more than a moderate measure of sympathy because, unrecognized, indeed unsuspected, they remain the first victims of the Sex Abuse Crisis. The Post-Hierarchical Blues bemoan the bishops who are ignored by the medics at the Sex Abuse crash scene that is now crowded with lawyers, police, and bankruptcy judges. Bishops bear their own invisible wounds without complaining, talking about, or even deriving the small comfort that comes from talking about one?s troubles. One of the bedrock demands of the hierarchical culture, tragically illustrated in the Sex Abuse Crisis, is that victims are silenced, forbidden to speak about their experience to anyone else. As punishing as this imperative has been for lay victims of abuse, this practice of loyal silence forces bishops to defend the indefensible hierarchical treatment of victims, thereby making it impossible to defend themselves as victims of the same smothering landslide of hierarchical slag.

Submission as Mission

The Vatican Blues can be heard in the spinning wheels of the overturned Hierarchical truck, its fuel bleeding across the pavement strewn with contents taken from ancient tombs. Papal orders for bishops to right the vehicle and to get it running again are destined to fail. The bishops are dutiful but are not ennobled by and are minimally appreciated for making daily efforts to carry out these orders. The hierarchical imperative traps them in a Faustian bargain in which they are commissioned with power over others in exchange for their submission to the power of the institution.

Submission is the lost chord in the Vatican variations of the Blues; nobody wants to admit how it haunts the melancholy music. Bishops accept submission as an aspect of their roles without understanding how much or what they must surrender of themselves to its veiled dictates.

Through their trusting submission they make themselves vulnerable, never suspecting that, in the exchange, power will be used against them. Their resulting wound is secret and they bear silently what the Code Hierarchical demands of them. This parallels exactly the experience of the victims of sex abuse who make themselves vulnerable by submitting trustingly, never suspecting that clergymen will use their power in an unhealthy way against them. These latter victims are typically told to bear their wounds in secret and in silence following the frayed but familiar phrase, ?for the good of the Church.?

The bishops are therefore victims in what only seems to be a bloodless or sexless transaction in which they must submit themselves completely not to the Church of Jesus but to the arbitrary Mayan gods of hierarchy. The essence of the experience is the same for all victims: Somebody with power exercises it over somebody who lacks countervailing power or possesses no power at all. Victims, be they boys surrendering to the needs a controlling priest or bishops yielding to the demands of a controlling curia, submit to an unmistakably unhealthy transaction that yields satisfaction to those wielding power but takes something that can never be retrieved from those on whom it is exercised.

The Sex Abuse Scandal grew out of the hierarchical soil that is rich in the minerals of unchecked power that always corrupts by distorting healthy authority into unhealthy authoritarianism. The latter?s presumption to privileged control of other persons recapitulates the essence of sex abuse. Hardly any bishops are hard at heart hierarchs and, as the Sheehan-Kobler research at Chicago?s Loyola University shows, most of them are actually uneasy about exercising the power of their office. They are victims of the hierarchical culture to which they sacrifice themselves, ?over-committing? themselves, as Erik Erickson wrote of youth?s vulnerability to great causes, to the hierarchical system that may not ask them for a down payment on entrance but forecloses swiftly once they are inside its pseudo-sacred confines.

Bishops may often feel but cannot express the sting and throb of submitting themselves to Roman commands because the latter are always presented as tests of their loyalty to the Pope and of their absolute acceptance of his teaching authority or Magisterium. Like soldiers carrying out orders to charge in the foggy heat of battle, many bishops may not even know how seriously they have been wounded until afterward, perhaps only after they are transferred, retired, or find themselves left, without hope of further advancement, to wait for death, wondering why they were not fully rewarded for a life of loyalty, everything is fine, they say, smiling weakly for a last photo for the diocesan paper as the hierarchical procession passes by without them.

Vis Dominativa and Sex Abuse

As dutiful bishops soon discover, authoritarianism, or control from the top down, characterizes the hierarchical tradition. As in the Divine Right of Kings, hierarchies invest those who preside at the top of their pyramidal structure with absolute power to rule over the lesser ranks that spread down like a marble staircase to the broad foundation stones of those with no power at all. The first codification of Church law conceived the Church as a perfect society whose hierarchical blueprints were diagrammed by the Council of Trent that, confusing the accidents of time with the dictates of eternity, anathematized anyone brash enough to deny that Jesus had established a hierarchical Church. The Church was defined and accepted as a canonical legal entity, a perfect society whose rulers possessed what was described as vis dominativa, dominative power, an absolute power of jurisdiction over Catholics.

One may acknowledge that the original intent of the phrase was to guarantee good order without denying the unlimited mastery it confers on those who possess it over those who lack it. In this theory of dominative power we detect the coda of the Vatican Blues that is the background music for the current investigation of women religious. Dominative power asserts the basic hierarchical claim to rights over others coupled with immunity from any counterclaims from them. This was the all too recognizable dynamic of power exercised in the high days of hierarchy not only over the public behavior but also over the private lives, personal thoughts, and

intimate relationships of Catholics. Split the hard mineral rock of this word and find a revelation in its shards. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, dominative power implies ?lordly authority? and the ?quality of dominating? granted to its possessors.

Whoever ?dominates? is understood ?to control ? to have commanding influence on, to master? others. The kindred word ?domineer? means ?? to rule or govern arbitrarily or despotically,? ?to act imperiously? and ?to dominate with absolute sway.? Strikingly, it can also mean ?to tower over.? These fragments of the broken open word ?domination? point like prophet?s array of stones toward the perverse landscape of power in which ?domination? connotes the unhealthy uses of subjugation in rites that mock rituals. ?Towering over? describes the stance of the sexual conqueror over the sexually conquered. These phrases muster together as a cloud of witnesses to the shadowed heart of sexual seduction, the demand that someone lacking power submit to personal violation by somebody who possesses power.

Victims and Victimizing

Understand why bishops hesitate to explore the meaning and implications of the traditional ?dominative power? that is now being used against America?s nuns. Dominative power was the active ingredient of classic clerical culture that conditioned the attitudes and appetites of those priests who were first victimized in their seminary days by introduction into the heady atmosphere of this elaborately graded system. Psychosexually undeveloped candidates were not helped to grow but were left after ordination to tormented twilight lives of searching for scraps and bits of themselves by using their share of protected hierarchical power to gain gratification from the powerless in their care.

Hierarchical entities may be identified by the dominance/submission syndrome that, howsoever disguised, is ever present and always contains a sexual element. What such emotionally deprived hierarchs demand in whatever guise, from the sachem of a secret society to the devil who wears Prada in a publishing house, is submission not only to their decisions but to themselves and their sweetly rationalized or raw as red meat needs. Submission is a favored concept of the hierarchically minded; it is what they demand of their subjects, whether they are presumably innocent couples seeking to get married or presumed guilty theologians seeking to defend their life work.

Submission, whether by voting against your conscience and for the party line or sacrificing your integrity in the name of productivity, good order, or increases in profits, converts, or power itself, is found at the core of every transaction based on the superiority of hierarchs over those beneath them. Wielders of such absolute power are subtle masters of humiliating and demeaning others, of forcing those who want their patronage or approval to submit to them. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, staining the hand of the unhealthy ones forcing submission and wounding the healthy ones forced to submit.

It is burdensome for healthy men to become hierarchs; they recoil from the very form they are expected to support and, indeed, to symbolize in themselves. Most American bishops wear the regalia of medieval court life and follow its practices because this is expected of them not because they crave the meager internal rewards delivered to those among them who long for these all their lives. The latter sub-group re-enact before our eyes the Narcissus myth for they are enthralled with images of themselves empanelled and empowered on the highest level of the hierarchical display. Drawing too close to their own cherished images, they shatter these great mirrors that then embrace them, like the many armed Indian goddess of death, in their sharp deadly shards.

Burying the Dead

The sexual wound in the lives of Catholics remains so because Church officials are themselves caught in hierarchical pressures whose unhealthy aspects they do not recognize. Dedicated hierarchical bureaucrats will not examine the negative and damaging aspects of this dead process because for them it is an elixir, the Vatican Viagra by which they maintain their potency.

That explains why they have rejected Vatican II with its renewal of the collegiality that would disturb lives whose snug arrangements depend on hierarchy?s survival. The Vatican II Deniers among the clergy are less enamored of so-called doctrinal purity than that of the less than pure enjoyment of exaggerated hierarchical privileges. Often self-absorbed, such clergy offer, in their frequently condescending treatment of their people, further examples of the virtual domination/submission sex abuse that lies at the chilled heart of the elaborately rationalized this-is-good-for-you investigation of American women religious.

The sexual wounds in Catholicism can never be healed and the Sex Abuse Crisis never resolved in the unhealthy atmosphere, acknowledged or not, that prevails in the full court press to restore dead Old Church hierarchical practices and privileges to a Church that can only thrive collegially. The Vatican Blues are like New Orleans funeral music trailing off a lost procession wandering through a maze of side streets so that it jolts the moldering corpse of hierarchy along on its catafalque but never buries it. Perhaps now, however, we finally understand those once puzzling words of Jesus, ?Let the dead bury the dead.?

Kennedy is a well-known Catholic author and psychologist.

Source URL (retrieved on *08/31/2014 - 03:34*): http://ncronline.org/news/vatican-blues