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Divided loyalties: an incredible situation

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

For all the certainty about the facts of the case, there is still an aura of discontent everywhere about the situation surrounding clerical sex abuse in the church. No one disputes the data now; everyone disputes the nature of the problem. And worse than that, the data simply keeps piling up on all sides.

First, the world called it an "American problem." As in, those Americans are a wild bunch anyway, what else can you expect?" The Vatican went so far as to dismiss the issue as simply another demonstration of American exaggeration -- what the Irish call the American tendency to be "over the top."

Then Ireland found itself engulfed in the problem and suddenly the outrage was no longer seen as "over the top." On the contrary, it became a display of integrity. Nor were the numbers seen as being exaggerated by the media. On the contrary, the numbers of child victims, the world began to understand, had, if anything, been minimized.

Now, the boil has broken in Europe, too: in the Netherlands, in Austria, in Germany, and, oh yes, in the Vatican, as well.

Now, the United States is no longer seen as being hysterical about a non-problem but early in its confrontation of it, also a decidedly American trait.

But what, precisely, is "it?" What is the real problem?

Note well: After stories of the first few high-profile cases of serial rapes and molestations and their unheard of numbers died down, the focus shifted away from individual clerical rapists to the unmasking of what was now obviously a systemic problem. This prevailing practice of episcopal cover-ups, of moving offenders from one parish to another rather than expose them either to legal accountability or to

moral censure in the public arena, occupied the spotlight. It was a practice that saved the reputation of the church at the expense of children. It traded innocence for image.

But we know all of that. So why doesn't all of this just settle down and go away? Why won't these people -- these survivors -- "just forget about it," some people said.

The answers to that question is both personal and social.

For some, of course, the need to expose their experiences comes out of the need to heal themselves by reclaiming a sense of control over their lives. To stop living in the shadow of victimhood and powerlessness. For others of them, it was because, having had their secret shame exposed, they now found the courage themselves to speak out about the unspeakable ghost that had for so long haunted their lives.

But it is also possible that the survivors go on drawing our attention to the situation because, this time, consciously or unconsciously, they are trying to warn us of a second aspect of the problem, still largely undefined, that is at least as serious -- even the incubator, in fact -- of the obvious issues of cover-up and concealment.

This time, however, it is Ireland, not America, that is ripping away the veil from this even deeper dimension, the one that moves beyond the problems of sexual repression and institutional face-saving. The unmasking of this context requires changes in the church that are in ways more serious -- and certainly as important -- as is the awareness of the danger of the sexual abuse itself.

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The dilemma that really threatens the future of the church is a distorted notion of the vow of obedience and the tension it creates between loyalty to the Gospel and loyalty to the institution -- translate: "system."

In this case, the problem swirls around Ireland's Primate, Cardinal Sean Brady, a good man with a good heart and a good reputation. Until now. In 1975, then Fr. Sean Brady, a newly certified canon lawyer and secretary to then Bishop Francis McKiernan, now deceased, in the diocese of Kilmore, took testimony from two young boys abused by the serial rapist Fr. Brendan Smyth. At the end of those interviews, Brady exacted a vow of silence from the boys which effectively protected Smyth from public censure and enabled him to go on abusing children -- including in the United States -- for another 18 years. Brady, too, said nothing to any one about the case, other than to his bishop, ever again. Not to the gardai, not to the courts, not even to the bishops to whose dioceses Smyth had then been sent.

Challenged now to resign because of that failure to give evidence of a crime, Brady's answer is the Nuremberg defense: He was only following orders; he did not have the responsibility to make any reports other than to his bishop; he was only a note-taker. All of these elements of the situation are now in hot dispute.

But the question is deeper than the simple ones of role and organizational responsibility.

The question is why would a good man with a good heart, as he surely is, think twice about his responsibility to take moral and legal steps to stop a child predator from preying on more children everywhere, some of them for years at a time?

The answer to that question is a simple one: It is that the kind of "blind obedience" once theologized as

the ultimate step to holiness, is itself blind. It blinds a person to the insights and foresight and moral perspective of anyone other than an authority figure.

Blind obedience is itself an abuse of human morality. It is a misuse of the human soul in the name of religious commitment. It is a sin against individual conscience. It makes moral children of the adults from whom moral agency is required. It makes a vow, which is meant to require religious figures to listen always to the law of God, beholden first to the laws of very human organizations in the person of very human authorities. It is a law that isn't even working in the military and can never substitute for personal morality.

From where I stand, if there are any in whom we should be able to presume a strong conscience and an even stronger commitment to the public welfare, it is surely the priests and religious of the church. But if that is the case, then the church must also review its theology of obedience so that those of good heart can become real moral leaders rather than simply agents of the institution.

A bifurcation of loyalties that requires religious to put canon law above civil law and moral law puts us in a situation where the keepers of religion may themselves become one of the greatest dangers to the credibility -- and the morality -- of the church itself.

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