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Is there a Gorbachev in the Catholic church?

Maureen Fiedler | Apr. 5, 2010 NCR Today

On Easter Sunday, I had dinner with two friends with whom I share a great love of heated, newsy topics. Although they are not Catholic, the recent revelations of sex abuse and its cover-up in the Roman Catholic Church came up.

I mentioned that Tom Roberts of *NCR* offered had analyzed the problem (in an interview for Interfaith Voices [1]) as rooted in the ?clerical culture? of the church, which includes secrecy and protection of the institution above all else.

As I watched news over Easter weekend, his analysis seemed ?right on.? The hierarchy continues to try to portray itself in the role of victim, and seems to be totally self-absorbed in its own negative press. When words like ?simple gossip? are used to characterize widespread charges of criminal activity and cover-up (words used by Cardinal Sodano on Easter Sunday), one wonders if the Vatican has separated itself from reality.

As I discussed that with my friends at dinner, I suggested that the problem went beyond the ?clerical culture.? That culture is embedded in a *structure* that needs to change in fundamental ways if the church is to retain any credibility. We need public arenas that give lay people a real voice (and vote) and provide meaningful accountability. But alas, I said wistfully, it is a bit of a mystery as to how that might come about.

?You need a Catholic Gorbachev,? said my friend Ed. You need someone who is on the inside of the current structure, sees its fatal flaws, and can move to change the very system itself. Now, the old USSR does not provide a perfect analogy with the Church, but the structural and cultural elements are close enough for some comparisons. Both institutions were/are closed structures, secretive, and punitive toward those who questioned authority. Both were/are self-perpetuating, with those of like mind choosing their successors.

Gorbachev was a breakthrough with his policies of *glasnost* (openness, transparency) and *perestroika* (restructuring, rebuilding). Maybe we had our Gorbachev with Pope John XXIII. But if so, we need another. So I started to wonder: is there a Catholic Gorbachev who sees the severe problems in the structures of the Church, and is ready to act? Anywhere?

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Links:
[1] http://www.interfaithradio.org