

Words matter

Kate Childs Graham | Apr. 22, 2010

The sex abuse scandal within the Catholic church has been reported on in every way, shape and form. However, many journalists neglect to make the distinction between the Catholic church and the culprits of the sex abuse scandal. Instead, they write sensationalist headlines about how the Catholic *church* is plagued with pedophilia or how the *church* is a hide-out for sex abusers.

My reaction to this has been: No, this is wrong. It isn't the Catholic *church* that has a problem with abuses of sex or power, it is members of the hierarchy. After all, we, the faithful, the *church*, do not condone the actions of the perpetrators of sexual abuse or those who have sought to cover up these crimes. We are as shocked and appalled as the rest of the world.

I still stand by that reaction and would urge journalists to be as specific as possible when it comes to the grave problem of sex abuse within the Catholic church. At the same time, though, I am starting to think that maybe the faithful has a bigger role in the perpetuation of this scandal than I've been willing to admit.

When I was child, a priest was removed from a local parish after being accused of sexual abuse. People talked in hushed tones about the cause of the removal and shook their heads in disgrace. But they didn't stop putting money in the collection basket. They didn't write letters to their bishop. They didn't alert the media or the police. They didn't speak out for justice.

I believe that the faithful have as much responsibility as the hierarchy to instill and ensure justice within our church. And, yes, it would be much easier to fight against injustices if there were clear, more democratic avenues to do so. But a long history of reformation is the church tells us that while creating positive and essential change is sometimes mucky, it is always worth it.

And we've even got it (a little) easier than early church reformers. We've got rights in the Code of Canon Law. Canon 212 states:

“They [the laity] have the right, indeed at times the duty, in keeping with their knowledge, competence and position, to manifest to the sacred Pastors their views on matters which concern the good of the Church. They have the right also to make their views known to others of Christ's faithful, but in doing so they must always respect the integrity of faith and morals, show due reverence to the Pastors and take into account both the common good and the dignity of individuals.”

I don't know about you, but I'm not sure there is a matter that is of higher concern to the church than the sex abuse scandal. The scandal obliterates the human dignity of victims of abuse and severely detracts from the common good. We must make it known to the pastors of the church -- as well as public officials and authorities -- that we will not stand for it.

Unfortunately, the rights of the laity are often understated. But that doesn't mean they are lesser rights, it just

means that we are going to have to work harder to claim those rights, to make our voices heard. After all, on the flip side of every right is a responsibility, and speaking out is our responsibility.

The sex abuse scandal is something we, [as a big tent](#) [1], can and must come together to speak out against. We must strive for justice. It does the hierarchy no good for us to defend actions that they themselves know were ungodly. It is not enough to shake our heads in disdain. It is our right and responsibility as members of the Catholic church to hold the hierarchy accountable and to bring justice to our brothers and sisters who are survivors of abuse. Our words -- and actions -- matter.

Ready to speak out? Visit www.snapnetwork.org and www.cta-usa.org.

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