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The gift of shame

Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea | May. 10, 2010 Examining the Crisis

Examining the Crisis

Jesuit Fr. James Martin suggests on the Huffington Post that the church?s hierarchy, from the pope on down, largely has failed to perform penance for its role in the relentlessly ongoing sexual abuse crisis. This omission is a grave deviation from the church?s own paradigm of penitence and restoration -- the sacrament of reconciliation -- which requires the penitent to make reparation to those harmed and to the larger community. The steadfast refusal to welcome the hope accompanying shame may be at work in this pastoral absence.

Shame is a tricky business. Shame is about our essential being, not just something we did that we now regret. The latter evokes guilt, an emotion comparatively easily faced in comparison to shame. Shame is about who we are, not just what we did. It is usually a profoundly destabilizing emotional, physical and spiritual state; we blush, feel sickened in stomach and spirit, are afraid and want to hide. Too much of it can stultify growth, creativity and relational availability to others. When shame cripples, we can no longer look ourselves or our communities in the eyes. We are alone. Too many sexual abuse survivors, in fact, labor under this burden of often self-destructive and always isolating shame that was never theirs to carry in the first place.

At the same time, there is a shame experience that deepens our relationships with self, others and the sacred. This shame signals that we have transgressed, instructs us to make amends, and warns us to refrain from behaviors that lead to the deepening of shame with its concomitant fragmenting of our psyches, souls and connections to others. Lord Alfred Douglas captures the hope embedded in this shame:

> I am shame that walks with
> Love,
> I am most wise to turn cold lips
> and limbs to fire;
> Therefore discern and see my
> loveliness
> And praise my name.

Because of the intense physical, emotional and spiritual discomfort accompanying even creative shame, it is tempting to defend against conscious recognition of the experience, unfortunately therefore also shunning the possibility for redemption holding hands with shame. Until Pope Benedict XVI assured the Maltese of the church?s shame over sexual abuse, the hierarchy has seemed intent on keeping shame at bay. Instead, too many bishops and other church officials have projected what should be their shame onto others -- the media, plaintiffs? attorneys, therapists, anti-Catholics -- by whom the church then declares itself victimized. The oppressors subjectively experience themselves as victims and, poof, the need for penance evaporates.

While many folks justifiably would like to see ecclesiastical heads roll, with bishops fired for their cover-up of the sexual exploitation of the church?s young, this may be the easy way out. The bishops go and with them perhaps the shame that is better invited into the parlors of the Vatican and chanceries across the globe. If, on the

other hand, Benedict is truly willing to lead his bishops into creative encounters with shame, meaningful acts of public and ongoing pastoral penance become easily imaginable.

What if bishops worldwide substituted for pectoral crosses millstones fashioned to be just heavy enough to remind these men of the suffering they and their brethren turned blind eyes to? (Looking away is one way to refuse the gift of shame.) Worn publicly they would also serve as icons of remembrance to other priests and Catholics who should remain vigilant about holding themselves and each other to accountability for the safety of the children of the church.

What if members of the hierarchy got out of their chanceries and spent time every month in the kitchens of survivors and their families, listening abundantly to their stories and apologizing to these people of God? What if they visited the families of every victim in their diocese who committed suicide and with every victim who is in jail or rehab -- and apologized on behalf of themselves and for all Catholics? What if they visited with judges, plaintiffs? attorneys, attorneys general, district attorneys and grand jurors, listening with fullness to the perspectives of those who have seen sexual abuse within the church from other angles?

What if bishops, clad in sackcloth, dedicated every first Friday to leading the Stations of the Cross in honor of victims, inviting victims and their families to be present if they can stand being in a church or with clergy again?

The list goes on and on, limited only by the willingness of the hierarchy to draw it up and to enact its items.

Benedict and his bishops need hang their heads in shame. Then, they need lift their heads to look the people of God humbly in the eyes while entering into community through sincere acts of public penance, now and over time.

[Mary Gail Frawley-O-Dea, a clinical psychologist, was the only mental health professional to address the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on the sexual abuse crisis at their 2002 Dallas meeting, and she was one of the clinicians speaking about sexual abuse to the Conference of Major Superiors of Men that year. Frawley-O?Dea is coauthor of Treating the Adult Survivor of Childhood Sexual Abuse, and coeditor of Predatory Priests, Silenced Victims.]

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