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

Compromised hierarchy needs relational wisdom of women

Charlene Spretnak | Jun. 15, 2010

Examining the Crisis[1]

What accounts for the fact that bishops and other members of the Catholic church hierarchy responded to cases of sexual abuse by predator priests with nearly the same response, in country after country for decade after decade? As we now know, those priests were most often reassigned to yet another parish where they commonly abused still more children.

In numerous cases, moving the predator priest from parish to parish was repeated several times. If avoiding scandal for the church had been the sole consideration, the accused abusers would have been quietly but immediately moved to desk jobs with no access to children, though this option could have violated civil law, which usually requires reporting the crime to the police. Instead, the predator priests were coddled, protected and indulged by higher-ranking members.

Attempting to explain their failure to protect the children, some bishops have stated that it was not understood then that the psychological counseling sessions to which the priests were sent, sometimes just for a few weeks, were nearly always ineffectual in eliminating the behavior. In fact, the bishops knew early on that counseling was usually followed by still more reported incidents of sexual assault once the priest was reassigned to an unsuspecting parish.

Another explanation that has been offered is that the church hierarchy did not understand at the time the psychological seriousness of sexual assault. That rationalization, bereft of sympathetic imagination, dissolves entirely in light of the fact that, even in the early decades, many traumatized victims and their parents presented detailed accounts of severe suffering to the bishops. Worse still, families reporting the crime to their bishop were often treated in response as enemies of the church, ostracized and bullied into silence by diocesan attorneys.

We are left wondering why the bishops responded in such a uniformly callous manner cross-culturally. Surely there was no conspiracy, no secret line of communication instructing bishops in every country to quietly reassign predator priests to a different parish or school where a new array of potential victims would be available. On the contrary, the administrative decisions seem to have arisen organically from within the system in disparate locations. But why?

Because throughout the ranks of management within the church, the life-shattering violation of a child was routinely considered for decades to have far less weight than the progress of a man?s career.

That is, a patriarchal value system was in place and informed the church?s responses. It is clear now that the priesthood was widely considered from the inside to be a men?s club that protected its own -- and did not hesitate to sacrifice the most vulnerable among those who stood outside the club. There was no sense of horror at what had been done to the children, no strong empathy for the victims, no fierce determination to protect other children.

These attitudes, spanning more than five decades of the church?s international sexual abuse crisis, constitute sins of omission of gargantuan proportions. It is this central element of the scandal -- the why behind the church hierarchy?s alarming pattern of response -- that must be examined and finally understood by the men who were and are involved if they are ever to regain the trust and confidence of the laity. Instead, the church seems to be leaping over this step, choosing to focus on promises of future ?accountability? and ?transparency? and putting into place new procedures for addressing any future incidents of sexual abuse -- all of which are long overdue but are not a substitute for the needed examination of conscience.

It would be a grave error on the part of the church to regard the international sexual abuse scandal as an isolated aggregation of regrettable administrative decisions. The church hierarchy does not seem to realize that its appalling failure to protect children from sexual abuse stemmed from an infrastructure of patriarchal values -- and that there are many additional areas of repression, loss and casualty in the church, quite apart from the current scandal, that have also resulted from that same skewed orientation.

Only if everyone who was involved in this scandal commits to a deep self-examination of the patriarchal assumptions and preferences operating within the church hierarchy and much of the priesthood will they be able to drop the rationalizations and approach the stage of penance with deeper self-knowledge, culpability and sincerity sufficient to correct the status quo. This process is a matter of examining patterns of patriarchal socialization and assumptions, not a matter of pinpointing ?bad men? in the church hierarchy.

In order to regain credibility and signal a deep program of renewal, the compromised hierarchy now needs more than ever to bring into central positions those members of the church who, according to a very large body of psychological research, routinely experience far more empathy than do most men and tend to favor an ethics of care. The relational wisdom of women is desperately needed if church leaders are to demonstrate that they have truly absorbed the implications of the sexual abuse scandal and are committed to a concomitant level of change. The crisis has destroyed whatever rationalization there was for the recently reinvigorated patterns of overlooking women for high administrative positions, discouraging lay ministries, disallowing altar girls, harassing communities of nuns, and refusing to even discuss female ordination.

If the church is to emerge from the crisis and enter a new day, rather than being permanently degraded and diminished by it, a vital project of renewal is needed. It would involve all Catholics -- laity, nuns and priests, including the hierarchy -- in an energetic search for creative and vital means of replacing patterns of domination and control with more cooperative ways of interacting. A regenerated church would honor and ensconce the talents of both sexes throughout the levels of management as well as all areas of pastoral care.

Such a project of renewal would be understood by all to be a spiritual practice and discipline. This massive effort would be ?offered up? in the wake of the sickening tragedy of sexually abused children.

[Charlene Spretnak is author of *Missing Mary* and *States of Grace*.]

This essay was published in the May 28 issue of *National Catholic Reporter* under the title "Church renewal can be a spiritual practice."

Source URL (retrieved on *09/18/2014 - 05:05*): http://ncronline.org/news/accountability/compromised-hierarchy-needs-relational-wisdom-women

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