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

Sex: Obedience & Disclosure

A.W. Richard Sipe | Jun. 1, 2010 Examining the Crisis

Theologian Yves Congar once said, ?In the Catholic Church it has often seemed that the sin of the flesh was the only sin, and obedience the only virtue.? This dynamic dichotomy forms the linchpin to the structure of the entire clergy sexual abuse crisis currently embroiling the Catholic Church.

But the sexual abuse of minors by clerics vowed to celibacy is only the symptom of a system desperately in need of fundamental reconsideration.

Human sexuality is the core of the whole Catholic upheaval that the Pope and the Vatican still refuse to face and discuss realistically.

In 1990 a bishop returning from Rome told me that Pope John Paul II personally instructed every new bishop that he ?should not discus in public? birth control, a married priesthood, women?s ordination, abortion and the host of celibate/sexual issues that constitute an agenda that theologians have pointed out for decades are precisely the ?tangle of issues that clog up? the Catholic agenda.

Roman Catholic leadership has failed to deal credibly and openly with all of human sexuality. William Shea outlined the challenge most elegantly already in 1986 when he listed the issues that need discussion: ?divorce and remarriage, premarital and extramarital sex, birth control, abortion, homosexuality, masturbation, [women?s ordination, mandated celibacy] and the male monopoly of leadership.? He opined that the fear and perhaps hatred of women could be at the bottom of the ecclesial hang up.

It would be disingenuous to protest that the Church has discussed these issues or invites dialogue about human sexuality. True enough, the Vatican has made pronouncements and declarations on every item on the list, but none invite dialogue. Congar?s observation is validated; sex is all sin virtue is submission and obedience to authority and its dictates.

Despite Pope John Paul?s four-year effort to define a Theology of the Body he never transcended some of the basic constraints of church teaching that sex is sin. Sex remains permissible and holy only within a valid marriage.

A chronic problem with church pronouncements about sex is their use of the idea of natural law as they define and apply it. The Vatican represents their interpretation of sexual human nature as an absolute determination. They isolate the idea and impose it as an instrument of control. The approach fails to acknowledge that natural law is also the inherent practical and reasonable guide to conscience independent of revelation. Many Catholics use natural law as the road map to guide their sexual behavior. For instance natural law often trumps the dictates of Humanae Vitae in matters of family planning. Some behaviors labeled by the Church ?contrary to natural law? (masturbation one instance among many) should be open for examination and dialogue in the minds and hearts of many serious Catholics.

?Intrinsic? is a church-word that seals off any possibility of conversation. Birth control is presented as

intrinsically evil; so is abortion; and masturbation. Sex with a minor girl, however, is not considered intrinsically evil only gravely sinful.
Homosexual acts are ?intrinsically disordered.? A 1986 document authored by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger declared that homosexual orientation although not sinful in itself, ?is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.? As if the concept of Original Sin were not sufficient to cover all human beings of any orientation or inclination.

The definition of sex as sin establishes and maintains authoritarian control because bishops and priests (alone) have the power to forgive mortal sin. They are lords over the inner territory of the soul where secret violations are stored. Catholics are required to submit grave sins in sacramental confession for a priest?s absolution at least once a year. All sexual sins, of course, are grave according to Catholic teaching.

The operation of bishops throughout the clergy sex abuse crisis demonstrates their belief that sex with minors by a cleric is primarily sinful and only secondarily criminal. This clerical stance has led to the revelations of monumental harm plus the exposure of unrepentant clerical arrogance.

Within the clerical system the repentant priest-abuser is easily forgiven?repeatedly?by the power of absolution; the innocent child-victim is abandoned with the undeserved psychic burden of guilt and shame. Since 1946 the Church has established a number of treatment centers to comfort and help control abusive clergy. The dismissive attitude toward victims of abuse as bothersome adversaries stands in stark contrast to the protective and tolerant concern for clerics.

Under severe public pressure since 2002 the USCCB instituted measures to educate employees and children about abuse?good and bad touch. Diocesan audits to measure conformity to the Dallas Charter, fingerprints and protocols for church employment and more are now in place. But has the Church really altered any of its understanding of human sexual dynamics in response to the evidence of clergy sexual activity and celibate miscreants? Is church authority transparent and accountable in these regards?

Not withstanding current concessions about reporting clergy crimes to civil authorities clerical power over sexual sin remains constructed and executed with the conviction that the Church?s determination encapsulates God?s own knowledge and immutable law about human sex. In their estimation bishops still prevail as the final arbiters of their sexual behaviors despite bows to civil law and courts that function only according to man?s inferior laws. Grand Jury reports and depositions of priests and bishops in civil cases of clergy abuse provide glaring examples of this attitude on the hoof.

Church representatives who already declared the sex abuse crisis ?history? and their research representatives who estimate that the phenomenon was a time limited phenomenon and ?over? understand neither the history of religious celibacy nor the real dimensions of the current crisis. Their callowness does a major disservice to the Church, priests and people.

Woven into the fiber of Catholic sexual teaching and celibate operation are unresolved factors that make immoral behavior, secret lives, and sociopathic patterns of personality adjustment not only common, especially in the upper echelons of power, but also inevitable across the board in too many clerical lives. The unresolved issues form a sick system.

The Vatican insistence that every question about human sexuality is settled and beyond discourse?it is only for a person to obey and conform?takes important life decisions out of the realm of moral inquisition, responsibility and decision. The refusal of the Pope and Vatican to enter into serious dialogue about the sexual/celibate agenda has stripped the Church its moral leadership and credibility and been an essential component in the worldwide Catholic clergy sex abuse crisis.

It is impossible for Church authority to reestablish even a modicum of respect and believability until it can discuss openly and honestly the full range of sexual issues that so vitally affect human welfare.

[Richard Sipe is a mental health counselor and author who earlier spent 18 years as a Benedictine monk and priest.]

Source URL (retrieved on *07/30/2014 - 05:27*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/examining-crisis/sex-obedience-disclosure