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A \"Catholic Moment\" by Any Other Name

Ken Briggs | Jul. 1, 2010 NCR Today

Ross Douthat, the designated conservative New York Times columnist, is a refreshing presence, often reminding me of my more traditional roots.

In the latest *Atlantic* he states flatly that the "Catholic Church is Finished," positing its collapse on the immensity of the Watergate-like sex abuse scandal. Douthat infers that the damage is so immense that the church's "big story" has become a tough sell.

The trouble he cites takes place, of course, within a culture increasingly influenced by a scientific mentality that relies on a kind of skepticism that makes Christian claims less marketable.

Douthat's succinct verdict generally sounds right to me and can be debated by others. My concern is that the concept of "sex scandal" needs to be expanded to include the church's treatment of women.

The two scandals, one involving clergy abusing children, and the other, Catholicism's relegation of women to subservience, are rarely linked by those who comment on the current crisis. But I think there's good reason to do so.

Abuse of children is without question ghastly and reprehensible on its very face. The specter of male authorities of the church committing crimes and covering them up undermines the idyllic picture of "higher" character that presumably justified the restriction of church privileges to men.

The mistreatment of women as second class Catholic citizens seems either a false understanding of Christianity by "radical feminists" or far less onerous than forcible rape and molestartion. Besides, it's so ingrained in so much of Catholic culture that it's hardly acknowledged. That's just the way things are.

The two situations are, therefore, filed under completely different categories by a host of those who have become incensed, and rightly so, by the frightfulness of child abuse.

Though they are different, it seems to me they are analogous, in a manner similar to the way in which Cardinal Bernardin advanced his "consistent ethic." Abortion was a major focus, he affirmed, but a variety of other threats to human dignity like poverty and capital punishment deserved similar attention because they stemmed from the same reverence for life.

Likewise, abuse of children necessarily occupies center stage, but the perpetuation of male dominance over women in the church bears striking, unsettling parallels. The two brazen investigation of nuns by the Vatican testify to the history of a type of abuse that is difficult for many Catholics to acknowlege because it has been in the practices of their religious tradition for all the time they've known it.

Both kinds of abuse involve the fundamental instincts that drive bad sexual conduct, control and submission. For some of the early church fathers, women were classified as defective men. Women were excluded from the

priesthood and any seat in the official church. They were directed to take their marching orders from men. Basically it hasn't changed.

Except, of course, that Western culture has changed around it. Women who awake to the discrimination (I know the rebuttal from defenders of the status quo -- "the church isn't authorized to do otherwise") are more likely to leave the church. As the church loses its grip and adherents, I don't know to what degree this trend is prompted by a growing defection of women, but I wouldn't be surprised if women were exiting as never before in this country.

What's happened to women, therefore, belongs analogously to the "sex" scandal and should be counted in the overall impact of that scandal. Meanwhile, more women are, as they say, voting with their feet.

The Commonweal blog recently solicited responses to Douthat's claim. Among the many interesting entries, there was virtually no reference to women's plight as part of the cause. I understand it but would suggest a widening of the lens because I think reality justifies that assumption.

At any rate, I think the Douthat prophesy speaks of something quite different from Richard Neuhaus's conviction a few yesrs ago that a "Catholic Moment" was at hand, signifying a rebirth and renaissance of Catholicism in America. Like some current commentators, however, he thought an era or triumph could take place without paying heed to the causes of women.

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