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# Roots of scandal 'go deep and wide'

Mark Coleridge | Aug. 18, 2010

*Following are excerpts from the pastoral letter ?Seeing the Faces, Hearing the Voices: A Pentecost Letter on Sexual Abuse of the Young in the Catholic Church? by Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Canberra and Goulburn, Australia. The full text can be found at* www.cg.catholic.org.au/about/default.cfm?loadref=86.

Here I mention briefly several factors which, in my view, may have combined to make the problem cultural rather than merely personal, at least in the Australian situation. ...

One factor was a poor understanding and communication of the church?s teaching on sexuality, shown particularly in a rigorist attitude to the body and sexuality. This was mediated in part through the formative influence of Irish Catholicism in the life of the church in Australia. We owe the Irish an immense debt of gratitude for what they have given us, but for complex historical reasons the church in Ireland was prey to the rigorist influence that passed from the Continent to Ireland -- often under the name of Jansenism -- and found fertile soil there. It then passed into the Irish diaspora of which Australia was part. This rigorist influence led to an implicit denial of the Incarnation, which had people thinking they had to deny their humanity to find their way to the divinity. The irony of this is that the Incarnation -- the fundamental belief that God took flesh in Jesus -- stands at the very heart of the Catholic sense of a sacramental universe. ...

Clerical celibacy was not in itself a factor, but -- like any form of the Christian life lived seriously -- it has its perils. When clerical celibacy works well, it is a unique source of spiritual and pastoral fruitfulness in the church; when it works badly it can be very damaging all round. It becomes especially risky when sundered from the ascetical and mystical life which it presumes: This is a large challenge, especially perhaps for secular clergy in the bustle of their daily lives. ...

A further factor was certain forms of seminary training which failed to take proper account of human formation and promoted therefore a kind of institutionalized immaturity. Seminaries were not always seen as schools of discipleship, since faith was taken for granted in a way that looks seriously questionable now. Seminary formation was not tied to a vision of lifelong formation, so that a man once ordained was thought to have completed all the formation he would need for his priestly ministry through life. This was fateful, given that pedophile tendencies, usually latent at the time of seminary training, often emerged only after ordination.

Clericalism understood as a hierarchy of power, not service, was also a factor. It was a fruit of seminary training that was inadequate at certain points, and it is almost inevitable once the priesthood and preparation for it are not deeply grounded in the life of faith and discipleship. Clergy could be isolated in ways that were bound to turn destructive. The authority proper to the ordained could become authoritarian, and the hunger for intimacy proper to human beings could become predatory. It is hard to believe that the church?s response would have been so poor had laypeople been involved from the start in shaping a response. In more recent years, lay men and women -- not all of them Catholic -- have been much involved in shaping the church?s response, and that is one reason why we are now doing better. The task belongs not just to the bishops and priests but to the whole church, with all working together in this fraught situation.

A certain triumphalism in the Catholic church, a kind of institutional pride, was a further factor. There is much in the Catholic church, her culture and tradition, about which one can be justifiably proud, as one can be of her achievements in this country; and Easter is always a motive for triumph of the right kind. But there can be a dark side to this which leads to a determination to protect the reputation of the church at all costs. ...At least in this country, our institutions in areas such as education, health and welfare were mighty contributions to society as a whole; and this gave the impression that we were a church that went from strength to strength. Others may suffer decline, but we did not. What mattered was to present well in public in order to affirm to ourselves and to others that we were ?the great church.? Such hubris will always have its consequences.

Another factor was the Catholic church?s culture of forgiveness, which tends to view things in terms of sin and forgiveness rather than crime and punishment. But in the case of clerical abuse of the young, we are dealing with crime, and the church has struggled to find the point of convergence between sin and forgiveness on the one hand and crime and punishment on the other. ... We are ?in the world but not of it?: but what precisely does that mean in the here and now? The church insists that it is to God, not to human beings, that final judgement belongs. Yet how does that fit with the need for human judgement when we move within the logic of crime and punishment? We have been slow and clumsy, even at times culpable, in shaping our answer to such questions.

Playing its part too was the culture of the Catholic church insofar as it favors a certain discretion, which in the case of the sacrament of penance becomes an absolute confidentiality. The church has long spoken of the sins of calumny and detraction. ... There are many things known to us about others -- certainly known to clergy -- but which charity forbids us to spread abroad. This is not always a matter of protecting the reputation of the church but of protecting the dignity of others in a way that charity commands. Yet this culture of discretion turned dark when it was used to conceal crime and to protect the reputation of the church or the image of the priesthood in a country that has never known the virulent anticlericalism of elsewhere.

The church may also have underestimated the power and subtlety of evil. This may seem strange to say of the church which is often regarded as taking evil and sin more seriously than do other churches and Christian communities. But it is evil we are dealing with in the case of sexual abuse of the young; and it is an evil which is not just personal. It is a power which reaches beyond the individual; it seems more metaphysical than moral. ...

None of these factors alone would have made the problem cultural in the church, but the combination may have done so. ...

I am perplexed when I hear it said that the church -- at least in this country -- has done nothing about the problem. A great deal has been done by many people, but there is still a great deal to be done. I do not believe that the bishops are simply indulging in ?damage control? and trying to ?manage? the problem. That may have been true in the past, but I do not think it is true now. ... What is clear is that there will be no quick fix to this problem, the roots of which go deep and wide. We are in for the long haul. On that journey, there is a need for cool heads and compassionate hearts which resist apocalyptic scenarios and keep striving instead to understand the reality calmly and comprehensively, always with our eye fixed primarily on the victims we have not seen and the voices we have not heard.

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