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A few in the hierarchy show honesty, courage

by NCR Editorial Staff

Most Catholics in the United States and other Western countries now affected by the priest sex abuse scandal understand that in any other organization so deeply damaged by what one archbishop has termed "spectacularly wrong" handling of the problem, heads would have long ago rolled and a serious search for the causes of the tragedy would be well underway.

That has not been the case in the Catholic church. Not only have bishops mostly escaped having to stand accountable for their actions, they have demonstrated, at least in the United States, an astounding lack of curiosity about what went wrong.

So it is encouraging to see what appears to be a growing body of serious questions and new resolve being voiced about the scandal by bishops in various parts of the world (see story, Page 1). They openly wonder what in the culture of Catholicism provided the conditions in which abuse of children remained hidden and was allowed to spread so widely. They conclude that reform is needed, though without providing specifics.

"I came to think that the problem was in some way cultural," wrote Australia's Archbishop Mark Coleridge in a recent pastoral letter on the sex abuse crisis. "But that prompted the further question of how; what was it that allowed this canker to grow in the body of the Catholic church, not just here and there but more broadly?"

Coleridge doesn't arrive at any convenient or easy answers, but his sober, measured consideration of the reality that he has come to understand deserves a far wider discussion.

So do the anguished questions raised by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, Ireland. Martin's reaction to the revelations of a government report documenting widespread abuse of children by priests has been remarkably free of the defensive and excuse-ridden responses that we have heard in the United

States for more than two decades.

It probably is neither coincidental nor insignificant that both Martin and Coleridge, hardly flame-throwing liberals, took the time to read deeply into the documentation of the scandal in their countries, to read court transcripts and to listen to victims. They were shaken by what they saw and heard.

Coleridge wrote that his meetings with victims "showed me the extraordinary damage done to many of them by the abuse they had suffered. ... I could see that these were people in need of all the care and compassion we could offer and that any response that did not have them as its prime concern was bound to fail -- at least if the Gospel was the measure of success and failure. I could also see, and have come to see more clearly since, that those abused can be overlooked, even hidden. The challenge for me was to see their faces and to hear their voices, and that was not easy."

Looking deeply into the evil of the sex abuse tragedy isn't easy for any of us. But that difficult work is essential to understanding the crisis and preventing similar maladies from festering in the body of the church in the future. Perhaps we're beginning to see in the hierarchy the level of honesty and courage required for the task.

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