

Pope, cardinals don't need prayer; they need to listen

Thomas P. Doyle | Nov. 11, 2010



(CNS photo/Paul Haring)

COMMENTARY

Recently I finished reading [Xavier Rynne](#) [1]'s monumental volume on the Second Vatican Council. I didn't read it when it was first published because I was struggling through theology, just trying to get a grip on the dogmatic and canonical mysteries of the Catholic church I was born into and into which I had thought I'd soon be ordained.

Reading the book now was more soul-jarring than had I read it then. What's so shocking?

At the council there were a significant number of bishops, archbishops and cardinals who actually had a handle on the real world and on the reasons the Church Triumphant left by Pius XII was so out of touch. This is shocking in light of the fact that these men were raised in a radically different church, steeped in clericalism, power and control.

Some of the men I read about had a much better grip on reality than most of the gilded hierarchs that have been inflicted on God's people over the past two decades. Pope John XXIII and his cohorts may not have liked everything they saw when they opened the windows of the clerical bunker, but at least they realized that before they condemned what they didn't know it might be smart to check it out.

Today's collection of bishops is radically different. Many of them, at least the ones who are regularly holding forth on what is wrong with everything around them, sound and act as if they are living in a hermetically sealed alternate reality. They are convinced that the world "out there" is wrong about most moral and ethical issues. They of course, being the divinely appointed teachers of the human race, are always right. They act and sound as if the only acceptable way for the world to exist is according to whatever norms, models and structures these satin and silk-enshrouded anachronisms hand down. They firmly believe the outside world, steeped as they claim, in secularism and relativism, must change to the extent that it clearly reflects their myopic view of existence.

The pope keeps agonizing over these encroaching threats of "secularism" and "relativism." Many of the bishops,

wanting of course to gain favor in the pontifical eyes, parrot the papal pronouncements in their own attempts to communicate to their "faithful." I have struggled to figure out just what the pope means. I am losing the struggle because I have only a smog covered clue ? what he's afraid of is that people out there in the real world ? the abode of the vast majority who aren't Catholic clerics, don't think the way they're supposed to think and that means they don't think like he does.

[The Vatican announced Nov. 8](#) [2] that the pope would hold a meeting Nov. 19 of the world's cardinals, of which there are 183 according to the 2010 *Annuario Pontificio*, the topic of which will be the world-wide clergy sex abuse scandal. He's also inviting the latest batch of appointees although technically speaking they won't be *real* cardinals until the following day when they get to put on their scarlet raiment for the first time.

The meeting, according to Vatican press dispatches, is supposed to include "prayer and reflection." If nothing else, the proposed gathering shows that the worldwide nightmare of clergy sex abuse, which the popes, cardinals and bishops have been desperately trying to shut down by every means imaginable, has finally gotten the pope's attention. If it has the pope's attention and he took the unprecedented step of calling this kind of meeting, you can be sure a lot of the Vatican luminaries who surround the pope and "advise" him have finally realized that the problem isn't going away.

The trouble is that this will end up being another meaningless disappointment. The worldwide sex abuse nightmare doesn't need "prayer" and "reflection" now and it never needed it because these pious sound-bites are really ineffectual attempts to shift the attention from the gravity of the real problem. If prayer and reflection worked, the problem would have been gone long ago. What the pope and the cardinals really need is an unvarnished assessment of just how horrendous the world-wide scourge really is and an unvarnished admission that the pope and the collected cardinals and bishops are not just *part* of the problem. They are *the* problem.

Pope John Paul II summoned the U.S. cardinals to Rome in April 2002 and told them sex abuse of a child is a crime and a sin. Duh!!!! After this meeting several of the cardinals continued to confirm their abrasive and uninformed attitudes by mouthing off to the effect that it's all a media exaggeration and that priests and bishops cannot be held accountable to civil authorities.

Nothing happened and nothing could have happened just as nothing can possibly happen in the upcoming extravaganza.

If the pope wants to get a real picture of the sex abuse phenomenon, presuming his emotions and intellect can handle it, he needs to talk to the right people. When he and these people get together all he needs to do is say "Hello! Have some nice espresso." Then he needs to sit quietly and listen, no matter how long it takes.

He needs to listen to the victims, not just for two minutes apiece as he has done with the dozen or so he's met, but for as long as it takes for him to get a slight glimpse of the horrific nature of this worldwide pandemic. From all he has said so far it's clear that he's a long way from "getting it." He needs to absorb their fears, their anger, their disappointments and he needs to hear their demands.

He needs to forget about defending the perverse actions of the bishops, archbishops and cardinals because there is no honest defense.

He needs to listen to the men and women survivors who have arisen from their prisons of fear and shame and have pulled other survivors together in world-wide support groups. He especially needs to listen to these people because they are the ones in the driver's seat of this whole debacle, not the churchmen who thought they had control of it throughout the decades and even centuries. The popes and the bishops never had control. If they did they would not have had to lie so much.

He needs to listen to some of the attorneys from the United States, Canada, Ireland and England, especially the ones the Exalted Lord Bishops have vilified because these same attorneys forced them to look at the damage they had caused. Many of these attorneys have done what the bishops and priests were either unable to do or afraid to do ? they listened, they believed and they provided support.

He needs to listen to the psychologists and psychiatrists who have struggled to help so many victims find peace.

He needs to listen to the same mental health professionals who have tried in vain to wake the episcopal aristocracy up to the harsh reality that most Catholic priests are very immature and some deeply troubled. Unless something radical is done, the sex abuse debacle we have been living through will hardly be the last one.

He needs to listen to those who have been telling him that mandatory celibacy doesn't work.

He needs to listen to those very few priests and even fewer bishops who have stood with the victims and survivors, always at great cost to their own careers. He needs to listen well as they describe what it's like to try to help people whose souls have been shredded and who can't possibly believe in the same God the holds out.

Above all, the pope needs to sit and listen to the devout, faithful, generous and loyal mothers and fathers of the victims. He needs to hear from these men and women the anguish they felt when they learned their little boy or little girl had been raped and molested. He needs to see and hear the abject horror they experienced when that terrible blow was followed by one much worse .. that the man who did this was a *priest!*

The pope and the cardinals are wasting their time and a lot of the people's money ? money the donors naively thought would go towards helping those in need instead of supporting an anachronistic and hedonistic lifestyle. They are setting themselves up to deliver yet another elaborate public relations "happening" to the world. The Vatican spokesman keeps telling us the pope is deeply concerned about the clergy abuse "crisis," There is little doubt that he is, but not because of the massive harm done to countless victims and their families and to the disappointed faithful who are tired of waiting for the "church" to do something meaningful.

He and the cardinals are deeply concerned, but they're concerned for the wrong reasons. They see their credibility, their power and their relevance eroding at an ever increasing rate. They see a rapidly growing number of Catholics who refuse to be treated as children by the bishops and who pose a very serious threat to the crumbling myth that the pope and the bishops know what's best for all. They see the growing chasm between the moral code the hierarchy is trying to persuade everyone, even non-Catholics, to accept and the reality of what is *really* happening out there in the world they are so afraid of.

This meeting will come and go as will the elaborate ceremony the next day when the pope will formally invest the 31 new members of the "Sacred" College. In the long run the most concrete effect of it all will be the added business for the Roman robe makers. The pope, the Vatican and the rest of the world's hierarchy will not bring about the needed change because they are unable and not simply unwilling to do so. Their personal interests are far too deeply ingrained to allow them to make the sacrifices needed to step down from their thrones and *be* for the suffering and marginalized rather than for themselves.

The pope and the cardinals have betrayed the real church. They have perpetrated the sexual and spiritual violence just as much as the priests who physically violated the victims. They need to be willing to say "I hurt you" and not hide behind Vatican mumbo jumbo and double-speak.

They need to acknowledge that the formalities and legalities they have relied on to protect their own interests have been secondary and equally vicious acts of violence against the victims.

They need to admit that restitution is essential and deserved by the men and women abused by the immediate perpetrators but also by *the church*.

They need to acknowledge that they have intentionally tried to shift the responsibility for this worldwide debacle to other persons, to societal forces and even to the victims themselves and they need to admit without qualification that they, the hierarchs of the church, are solely responsible for the horrific damage to the victims and to the Body of Christ.

It is beyond hope that anything but more useless words will come out of this meeting. The fallout will be even more evidence that the institutional church is completely incapable of initiating a change in its self-destructive course.

Editor's Note: Read Eugene Kennedy's take on the pope's meeting with the world's cardinals: [Sex abuse doesn't top cardinals' agenda -- literally](#) [3].

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