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Where is Catholicism's Tahrir Square?

Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea | Mar. 16, 2011 Examining the Crisis

Editor?s Note: Part of the column is graphic in nature.

Across the Middle East and in North Africa, courageous citizens are calling to account monarchies and dictators who have invested in power and personal privilege over the wellbeing of their people.

The sheer volume and tenacity of the crowds indeed are bringing change as some leaders fall and others hasten to gesture to their populace in ways meaningful enough to keep the peace.

In Philadelphia, the second grand jury in 6 years issued a second scathing report highlighting the moral corruption and indifference to souls we have come to expect from the Catholic hierarchy in that city and, indeed, around the world as events in Germany, Ireland, Austria, the Netherlands, Spain, and Switzerland have amply illustrated.

This time, the grand jury recommended criminal charges against three priests, a teacher, and Msgr. William J. Lynn, former secretary for clergy, who has been arrested.

Once again, a prince of the church -- fuschia-lined cape flowing behind him, gold ring shimmering in the camera lights trained on him -- stood at a bank of microphones apologizing for harboring 21-37 alleged sexual predators, many still laboring in the ministry he controls.

Really? Is there anyone left who believes this hackneyed and heartbreaking theater of hypocrisy?

So where is Catholicism's Tahrir Square? Why isn't the Philadelphia chancery surrounded by thousands of Catholics and their priests shouting for Cardinal Rigali to "Go! Go!" What will it take to mobilize the People of God to insist on, to fight for an end to a privileged patriarchy holding up a feudal monarchy whose members tolerate sexual and spiritual slaughter of the lambs?

When will the people say, "Enough!" and assume the power that is theirs to wield within their own church?

We hear about all the "good and decent priests" who are unfairly tarred by this never ending story of power perverted through sexual assaults against the innocent. Can one truly be an *alter Christus*, a shepherd of souls, and not rebel, protest, turn over the tables of the money changers of today, and shout "Enough!"

What will it take for priests to speak, to insist? Priests have that power. There is no Catholic Church without the ever-shrinking community of contemporary priests. The power is there to be assumed and imagine if it were.

Jesus faced the Pharisees directly and called them out publicly for their greed, indifference to those in need, and their gross abuse of power. Should not a contemporary *alter Christus* do at least as much?

And where is the laity? Philadelphia renders us out of excuses and rationalizations. Hundreds of thousands of

children's bodies and souls have been desecrated worldwide by men of God who still today are then shielded by the hierarchy and set out among the unknowing.

At this point, "sexual abuse" has been so overused that the words are stripped of their emotional clout. What we are talking about here, however, is not "just" a priest flashing an altar boy after Mass. As the John Jay report made clear, about a third of abusing priests penetrated their victims or engaged them in oral sex and only 16 percent stopped at touching under the clothes.

It is imperative for every one of us to "get" what this means. It means an adult man's erect penis tearing anal tissue; it means a child's small mouth forced around an engorged and pushing penis; it means a man's hand -- one that the day before may have transformed wine into blood -- probing a little girl's vagina or pulling at the penis of a pre-pubescent boy, perhaps after plying the young person with drugs and alcohol.

We *must* conjure these scenes in our minds and feel them in our guts in order to do what is right. Only by imagining *ourselves* on a rectory bed, under a crucifix, with a priest we love and trust lying on top of us grinding to orgasm, can we access appropriate empathy for the victims and outrage at those that still, today, cover up sexual crimes and soul assaults committed by priests in their charge.

Catholic laity, where do you stand? What will you risk to take seriously Jesus' clear warning, "If any of you puts a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believes in me, it would be better if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea."

Do we not take him seriously? The pope, cardinals, and bishops have privileged those who put the worst kind of stumbling blocks before generations of children, stumbling blocks that keep tripping them up, often for decades. What do you think you should do about it?

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel's declares: "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

Similarly, psychoanalyst Sue Grand (author or *The Reproduction of Evil*) chills us when she addresses the roles of bystanders in the perpetration of evil: "Secrecy, concealment, denial, ambiguity, confusion: these are Satan's fellow traveler's ? The operations of silence potentiate evil and remove all impediments from its path."

Silence about evil, minimization of evil (mistakes were made, but it's time to move on), obfuscation of evil (no one really knew how bad sexual abuse was); and projection of evil (the whole crisis is over-blown by anti-Catholic media) allow evil to reproduce itself. What should we do?

Is it possible that the Holy Spirit, like those yearning and determined souls in Tahrir Square, persists in calling us to action through the endless, crushingly repetitive exposure of careless indifference to suffering and moral depravity most recently exemplified in Philadlephia?

Will we respond? Where will the Catholic Tahrir Square be found? When will it be filled with righteous indignation and sacred insistence that "Enough is Enough?" What would Jesus do?

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