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Detroit weekend of lectures, emotions neglects sex abuse crisis

Thomas P. Doyle | Jun. 22, 2011 NCR Today

COMMENTARY

Several thousand Catholics from around the U.S. and even a few foreign countries gathered in Detroit June 10-12 to ponder their assessment of the present and hopes for the future of the Catholic Church.

It was a weekend of much more than public lectures, breakout sessions, networking and over-active emotions. The larger of the groups, the American Catholic Council met at the Detroit Renaissance Center. On the other side of the ideological and theological chasm was the Call to Holiness Conference.

The weekend revealed some toxic aspects of today's version of the institutional Church. It also revealed some expected and also disturbing aspects of each group.

The first and not unexpected revelation was the response of the local archbishop, Allen Vigneron. He reacted to the American Catholic Council with negativity and threats that served as a thin cover for his fear, sparked by what he was certain was happening in the Renaissance Center. His response to the Call to Holiness was praise for its theme, ?Call to Fidelity: The Power of Truth.?

The Call to Holiness participants attended a ?Solemn High Extraordinary Form? Mass at a prominent Detroit church which, for those who are unfamiliar with Vatican code talk, is a Mass celebrated according to the Tridentine Rite, which was put out of business by Vatican II and rehired by Benedict XVI. The American Catholic Council wound down with a Eucharistic Celebration, A.K.A. Mass, that the archbishop tried to prevent and which is now under investigation for what he deems serious violations of liturgical rules.

The Call to Holiness conference was strongly supported by the archbishop who predictably urged participation. The ACC was dangerous territory for the faithful and semi-faithful of the archdiocese.

Well ahead of time the archbishop warned everyone that the ACC was not really Catholic -- as if independent thinking had been added to the list of nefarious ecclesiastical crimes. He also threatened any priest who took part in the Sunday liturgy with loss of canonical assignment and did everything short of forbidding priests to even attend.

The first brave man who agreed to preside at the Sunday Mass was persuaded to stand down by the probability that he would be removed as pastor from the parish community he had nurtured for many years. His decision was not based on fear or the usual pathological docility expected of priests by bishops. Rather, he responded to the concerns of his parishioners that he would be taken from them. In the end a retired Benedictine priest celebrated the Mass, which provoked the expected response of the archdiocese that it would be investigated and the priest punished.

The priest told the media that he felt good about what he had done and wasn't worried. The archdiocese

manifested the usual hierarchical omniscience with its ability to criticize and condemn an event about which it had no direct contact. They denounced the "forbidden Mass," replete with heretical departures from the official liturgical mediocrity, before it had even taken place.

The ACC leaders took great pains to make sure the Mass followed the current liturgical guidelines, but the archbishop would have found something wrong nevertheless. As far as scaring the local priests away, he was not too successful as it was estimated that at least fifty were present.

For more on the American Catholic Council Mass, see: **Liturgy bends rules despite prelate's threat** **[1]**

The archdiocese sliced and diced all four main speakers without the slightest idea as to what they would say. Their complaints consisted of perceived departures from "official doctrine" by each of the four. Duh! The whole point of the ACC was a gathering of adult Catholics who were not hobbled by the Vatican's prohibition on thinking.

The ACC represented a cross section of people who are part of "church" as a movement of the Spirit and a community of believers and not a monarchy fueled by fear of loss of control. They voiced a number of legitimate, pressing concerns about the church as an organization and the church as a way of following Christ -- and their concerns reflected the harsh reality that there is a massive chasm between values of the church as a pilgrim people and the church as a hierarchical organization.

I looked at the agenda and schedule of the Call to Holiness, which I obviously did not attend, and was not surprised at the reactionary tenor of the whole program. In short, it met my expectations. My greatest disappointment was not with the archbishop, whose fear-based authoritarian responses are typical, business-as-usual for most bishops. Nor was I disappointed with what I read about the Call to Holiness. It appeared to be a reaction to everything they perceived as wrong with the majority of active Catholics who still believe in the validity of the Second Vatican Council.

My disappointment and frustration is with the ACC, the basis of which I sincerely *hope* is not a reflection of today's thinking Catholics.

The single phenomenon that has forced into the open the tragic and often toxic flaws of the institutional Church has been the worldwide rape and molestation of the vulnerable by Catholic clerics, and the inadequate and often destructive response of the bishops in the U.S. and around the world. This nightmare is not over and won?t be over as long as the institutional church places maximum value on image and power and minimal, very minimal, value on justice and healing for the victims of their own clergy.

During the conference there was a lot of discussion about the clerical culture and how it systematically denies the rights of any group in the church that threatens its control. The rights of the hundreds of thousands of abuse victims are different however. Their right to justice and spiritual healing is fundamental. It cuts to the very core of what the church is supposed to be about.

Yet, officially, the conference only gave the abuse issue a passing nod: a single breakout session on Saturday afternoon originally scheduled for a small meeting room with two round tables and chairs around the walls. The turnout far exceeded the room?s capacity so the session was moved to a much larger area.

The nightmare of church-wide sexual abuse might have been on the minds of many at the conference but it was not urgent enough for the planners to give it the prominence it deserved. Rather than trying to figure out ?why I am a Catholic? the participants should have been searching for ways to help the church?s countless victims.

Did the planning committee really believe the bishops? nonsense that the ?problem? is now behind us? Did the listening sessions that took place around the country reflect that today?s Catholics aren?t all that interested in the constant grinding of this problem at the heart and soul of the church?

Whatever the reasons given for treating the abuse issue as a tangential problem, they are insufficient. I was not surprised to find the abuse scandal missing from the list of topics addressed at the Call to Holiness conference. I was surprised to the point of being scandalized that the reform group leaders who put together the ACC treated the abuse phenomenon and consequently the victims, in such a dismissive manner.

My friend Paul Kendrick reminded the ACC and me that the late Bishop Kenneth Untener once said that every meeting should reflect on how their agenda will affect the poor.

The Latin American bishops, before they were decimated by John Paul II, set as a top priority the ?preferential option for the poor.?

This message is equally applicable to the Call to Holiness. The victims and survivors of the church?s own destructive forces have joined the ranks of the poor for whom there must be a clear preference if the church is to be what it purports to be, the Body of Christ.

[Tom Doyle is a priest, canon lawyer, addictions therapist and long-time supporter of justice and compassion for clergy sex abuse victims. He is a co-author of the first report ever issued to the U.S. bishops on clergy sex abuse, in 1986.]

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