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U.S. Bishops: The Great Inertia

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Pope Benedict XVI has circled the globe,
raising expectations but leaving unfinished business.
In America and in Australia he confessed his shame
at sex abusing clergy, confronted bishops
and met with victims.
And nothing has changed

Benedict XVI has followed the same pattern in every country he has visited since his triumphant American tour in April during which television transformed him from the bad rottweiler into the good shepherd. The metaphorical transition was not small and he has capitalized on it as the gently nodding pope urging a kind of détente with secularism and a restoration of large glories to a smaller Church that he will ruthlessly purify of pedophiles. But he goes home, the excited crowds quietly disperse, and we are left wondering if the sex abuse scandal is better or less well understood, while its victims remain unattended and their wounds unhealed.

Although America?s bishops had dutifully nodded, Yes, Yes, to Benedict?s vow to ban pedophiles from the priesthood, they are still pressured to shake their heads and let their lawyers say No, No, to victims seeking compensation for being sexually wounded by members of the clergy. If this sounds familiar so did the reaction of Vatican officials to the pope?s strong springtime words about barring potential sex offenders from the priesthood. They harrumphed vaguely about new legal procedures to deal with the problem and lapsed quickly back into monastic silence. As the days wear away along the western front of the sex abuse scandal Catholics are left with what Emerson described as ?the sound of things that almost happen.?

In short, despite the expectations raised by Benedict?s being ?ashamed? of sex abuse by priests and his seeming concern for victims, for the latter, for Catholics-in-general and for bishops themselves, nothing has really changed in America or anywhere else either. How can this be?

Unresolved Authority

This behavior is a feature of the Great Inertia, that pervasive problematic with authority that prevented Church officials from reacting to the sex abuse tragedy before it blew the lid off the crock pot in which they had let it simmer for years. To understand the long top down suppression of information about sex abuse by clergy and its continuing public mismanagement one must re-examine something that we think we already understand, the way authority has been expressed and experienced in the Church.

Far from being the smooth absolute of the pre-Vatican II era in which hierarchs supposedly commanded and the clergy obeyed, authority was then exercised in an awkward pas de deux in which priests were far more skilled at handling their bishops than their bishops were in managing them. Good priests who were single-eyed needed no external orders to carry out their work while priests opting for double lives ignored or shrugged regulations off almost casually. The sex abuse scandal could not have developed without the freedom of movement available to priests on the open range of pre-Vatican II clerical culture. The enabling character of authority passively expressed and actively manipulated in old clerical culture was, in fact, described in psychological studies carried

out a generation and more ago at Loyola University of Chicago.

The psychological research on priests (?The Catholic Priest in the United States: Psychological Investigations? by Kennedy and Heckler, Publications Office, United States Catholic Conference, 1972) was but one of a series of coordinated studies commissioned by the bishops after Vatican II. They included an historical inquiry chaired by Monsignor John Tracy Ellis and a sociological analysis headed by Father Andrew Greeley. A follow-up study of bishops was carried out a few years later at Loyola. (?Toward an Understanding of the American Bishop? by Sheehan and Kobler, 1974, 1982.)

While the psychological investigation of American priests identified a strong cohort of mature clergy, it is best remembered for discovering a substantial subset of immature priests who were described as underdeveloped. These latter priests, the report explained, ?have not achieved an integrated psychosexual identity?. (M)any of them function at a pre-adolescent or adolescent level of psychosexual growth?.The seminary?s passive reward system did not spur these less fortunate candidates to develop internally. Unchallenged to grow, their psycho-sexual development lagged behind and was therefore out of synchronization with their physical and mental growth.?

Bishops and Priests: A Shared Ambivalence about Authority

Men functioning at this pre-adolescent level of development lacked ?a well thought out or consistent pattern of responses to authority. They may speak about changing it but they would feel very uneasy if they did not have its approval They may perceive it as personally oppressive and yet, for all practical purposes, ignore it ... (I)n the day-to-day transactions of their of their lives, it seems clear that these priests do pretty much what they want to do?.When regulations get in their way they frequently display real ingenuity in circumventing them.? (pp. 15, 16)

The bishops exhibited complicated feelings about their own authority. Troubled by power, many depended on papal authority to support their administrative decisions. Their whole sense of themselves as worthy pastors derived from the pope?s approval of their actions. They therefore exercised authority less by responding directly to the problem or person before them than fashioning responses that met the pope?s expectations. Their sails were filled with the fair wind from Rome and if they were becalmed they did not know what to do except to wait for the papal breeze to strike up again and carry them to a destination chosen by the pope.

Far from being harsh authoritarians, these bishops often felt burdened by the authority invested in them by their being appointed to their posts. Almost all the bishops looked on their episcopal authority, or power, as it had been described in canon law, as a great challenge and, for almost a quarter of them, its reception precipitated a life crisis. Dr. Mary Sheehan describes the bishops? uneasiness with their authority in this way:

This is a large number of men, who average 57 years of age, to find acceptance of their role the most serious crisis of their lives?.there is some reason to think that power itself is feared by many of the bishops?.they seem to have more trouble with ? interpersonal conflicts, rejection of their authority, and their being required to correct people or to say no to them. Thus the bishops as a group of men whom we have seen to be generally ?hardworking, well-wishing, religious idealists, can be expected to have difficulty when they are placed in a position which they and many others regard as one which must set limits, coordinate the activities of many, and be the last word within a certain sphere. Many of the bishops seem to conceive of their role as a very powerful one, while they as persons do not even feel authentic, much less powerful?.The authority-dependent style? shows itself in several ways: the bishops identify power with role, they feel their responsibility to higher-ups, and ultimately prefer the responsibility to belong to someone higher up, while they control the level below. (pp. 114, 116)

The bishops, therefore, held the reins of control loosely over their priests. In an extended analysis of the data on American bishops, Dr. Frank Kobler concluded that, ?It is a myth that the Catholic Church in this country is a

monolithic, authoritarian entity that gets things done automatically. I know of no group of men who are more free to do as they please and who, in general, do it, than the priests of the United States, if one is to judge this from listening to their bishops.? (?The Roman Catholic Bishops of the United States: A clinical interpretation of the responses of eighty-one (81) bishops to a sentence completion test. Loyola University of Chicago, 1979)

The Paternal Style: The Virtue in Doing Nothing

This uneasiness about exercising their authority almost certainly contributed to the bishops? practice of dealing with their clergy paternally, outside canon law and other regulations when possible, confident that through this informal style they could maintain their control of their priests and of the troubles whose trip wires they snapped regularly. The bishops? first response to alarms set off at any level in the Church was, and remains, restraint; in short, their default reaction is to do nothing. They are well disciplined in responding by not responding. This is not an accident but a tactic.

Doing nothing is not evidence of the bishops? apathy but rather of their realization, with a few exceptions, that they are ill-advised to use their power too quickly or in too final a manner, especially if they are unsure of what the pope would think of their actions. Doing nothing is better than doing something that offends the pope on whose favorable disposition they strongly depend. This constant raising of their wetted ringed fingers to see which way the papal wind is blowing introduces a note of hesitation into their own exercise of authority. This reinforces their habitual restraint in making decisions and increases their confidence in using a low key, off the record and off the books style in dealing with their priests. It explains the bishops? deferral of reaction to the 1971 research results about underdeveloped priests as well as their reluctance to respond to the reports of sex abuse by priests that were dropped steadily onto their desks over the next thirty years.

Despite the findings that suggested that many priests were poorly developed and might encounter serious difficulties in their work (eventually a number of sex abusing priests would arise from the cohort of priests ordained before 1971 that constituted the research sample) the bishops responded by doing nothing. Most of the bishops then in place were not shocked and probably not surprised to learn that many priests fell so far short of maturity. These bishops were less interested in probing the causes of their priests? lack of due growth than in keeping their priests functioning in some broadly if minimally acceptable manner, in getting as much out of them as possible even if this was not very much.

The ?Cover-up and Care for? Ploy

Popes had long urged bishops to be fatherly towards their priests, thereby reinforcing the episcopal paternalism that emphasized the carrot far more than the stick in keeping their priests in slightly wavering line. The bishops? paternalism towards the Catholic culture in general also enabled them to recruit a confederacy of friendly lawyers, doctors, and journalists to manage a covert recycling system for erring clergymen, including sex abusers. As in the other dominant institutions of the time, the objective was to protect and redeem the offending professional rather than to assist the offended victims. Doing nothing for victims was an integral part of this widely accepted strategy. Only a generation later did an awareness of victims, their suffering and their rights, enter the national consciousness.

It is hard to imagine that the bishops understood its implications when they opted for the Cover-Up- and-Care-For policy that other paternal hierarchical institutions employed, for example, in doing nothing in public about the tipsy judge who made a pass at a caddy at the country club, the C.E.O. involved in a hit and run accident, or the rock star who destroyed his hotel room and assaulted a maid. The strategy was simple: Keep them off the front pages under the cover of being sick rather than sinners and get them away for a period of ?help? in order to achieve the main goal of returning them to work without ruffling the surface of public consciousness about the doer or the deed.

This process was accepted by the bishops because, if it asked no questions it caused no troubles and therefore

served ?the good of the Church? and pleased the pope by keeping scandals under control and under wraps. This suppressive approach also laid down the tracks of a kind of underground railroad to safe havens for priests who abused their parishioners sexually, their parishes financially, or themselves alcoholically. Following the then accepted principle of returning professionals to their work unscathed and unscarred, troubled priests were spirited quietly away from the scene of their misbehavior for ?treatment? at centers, such as the Seton Institute in Baltimore, Maryland, that were experienced in dealing with clergy.

The bishops then passed the decision making onto the attending professionals to say when the priest was sufficiently rehabilitated to be returned to work as soon and as seamlessly as possible. They could always lean on the authority of the doctors to justify their paternalistic reluctance to express their own authority ? in short, to do nothing - that motivated bishops not to inform the problem priest?s new superiors of his troubled past.

Triggering the Sex Abuse Crisis: Gaming the Paternal System

As noted, even the finest priests recognized that this muted episcopal paternalism resembled an alarm system with a 60 second delay. Plenty of time was available for priests bound on mischief to slip inside this domain of absolute power, to take what they wanted and to reset the alarm so that they left no trace of how or what kinds of freedom they had burgled from bishops who did not even know they had been robbed. Sex abusing clerics gamed this episcopal preference to omit rather than commit themselves to action in order to find fire-free zones in which to hunt almost at leisure for their victims. It was almost easy.

At this point on the graph of clerical life the passive paternalism of bishops intersected with the freewheeling psychopathy of psychosexually immature priests to create the sex abuse crisis.

Their paternalistic bias led the bishops to react, from the first scattered reports in the 70s and 80s to the last headline revelations about the sex abuse crisis in 2002, in their usual manner, that is, as fathers who felt that this problem could be dealt with in the family rather than in court or in the newspapers. This led them to practice an unnerving forbearance in implementing what we might term the Prodigal Son model of dealing with erring clergy. In effect, they killed the fatted calf for them, keeping their riotous behavior quiet, getting help for them, sending them on sick leaves that were hard to distinguish from vacations and returning them to work with nobody the wiser for it. As a consequence, a healthy priest who kept his vows and remained at work without complaint was treated as if he were the prodigal son?s brother, that is, he was taken for granted and went unrewarded and unremembered.

Doing Nothing as Doing Something

During the 80s Jason Berry did the first investigative journalism on the cover-up of clergy sex abuse in Lafayette, Louisiana, and Father Thomas Doyle warned the bishops that if they did not address this scandal it would one day cost them a billion dollars. In ignoring both Berry and Doyle, the bishops felt that through their measured passivity they were protecting the Church and pleasing the pope. Others who tried to get the bishops to respond to the increasing reports of sexual abuse by priests were dealt with as if they just didn?t appreciate how well the bishops had the situation under control.

One of the latter was the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago. A leader rather than a follower, in 1985 he submitted a plan to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops for a scientific study of the already well identified problem of sex abuse by priests. His proposal was returned to him by the General Secretary of the National Conference with a terse letter saying that the bishops probably wouldn?t do anything about it anyway. Despite continuing efforts by Bernardin and others, the majority of the bishops stuck to their strategy, remaining passively benevolent towards the psychosexually immature priests who sexually abused children. Asserting hierarchical privilege, they continued to juggle the live grenade of this accelerating crisis until it exploded early in 2002 long after sadness beyond summing up had been visited on good and trusting Catholic people.

The Collapse of Paternal Clericalism

As its once tight boundaries became more permeable, clerical culture began to collapse from within. The readiness of priests to act out and the reluctance of bishops to act at all spelled the end of this once powerful culture?s cohesiveness. When bishops and priests crossed paths it was in an environment of authority so fogbound that it was hard to tell the difference between them. Priest sex abusers moved like phantoms through the lowered visibility that obscured the once commanding STOP signs of that once fabled culture. This situation may be regarded as an end-stage in the collapse of effective hierarchical authority, a stage in which bishops did not feel free to constrain their priests so that priests felt free of constraints as they searched for psycho-sexual growth through sexual experimentation. The bishops did not realize how anachronistic and ineffective their paternalism had become or how their hesitation in using their authority would make them seem callous and calculating in re-commissioning and re-circulating flawed clergymen to unsuspecting parishes.

These bishops were like innocents abroad in a changing world and, 30 years later, seemed stunned and overwhelmed by the unrelenting revelations about how many and in how many seriously damaging ways that priests, often like the underdeveloped priests described in 1971, had acted out their psycho-sexual conflicts on their people during the intervening years. Because the broader supportive cultural net also snapped and gave way, the police, medical experts, and reporters would no longer go along with the bishops? genial bluffing about clerical problems.

Borrowing the Authority of Others

The bishops manifested their willingness to yield to papal authority in accepting with hardly a murmur Pope John Paul II?s 1993 directive Apostolos Suos that operationally ended the initiatives that Vatican II had urged the National Conferences of Bishops to take on their own authority to address problems of their own region. This had led the American bishops to lead the country in a public meditation on nuclear arms and the economy as they developed pastoral letters on these subjects in the 80s. By accepting the terms of Apostolos Suos the bishops agreed to send their future pastoral letters to Rome for approval before publishing them. This surrender of their collegial right to authority from their ordination rather than from papal delegation symbolized the deep need of the majority of the bishops for the approval of the pope and their readiness to depend on his authority rather than their own in running their dioceses.

The bishops were, however, genuinely frightened by the strong reaction of Catholics to their handling of the priest sex abuse scandal. They were not sure of exactly what the pope expected as they nervously prepared for their 2002 meeting in Dallas but, on the basis of the visit of several cardinals to Rome in April, they felt that they needed to respond strongly to this public Catholic furor over the revelations. Unaccustomed to acting on their own authority and more comfortable doing little or nothing in the face of a crisis, the bishops searched for some surrogate authority to stand in for them.

This move was more pragmatic than principled as they turned first to a commission of lay Catholics, chaired by the distinguished lawyer Robert Bennett, to investigate the nature, extent, and origins of the scandal. They later demonstrated ?delegator?s remorse? at having yielded so much authority to this group and, after its members delivered their report, they declared that the sex abuse crisis was over and attempted to downgrade the commission?s scope and responsibility. Their paternalism had long stayed their hand in dealing with their priests who, after all, were fellow clerics. It bade them to deal very differently with the non-clerical lay people whose authority they had borrowed to support themselves during the most intense part of the crisis. By leading a passive campaign of ignoring them they turned their backs dismissively on them, we don?t need you anymore.

Their almost desperate need for the authority of others led them at Dallas, however, to forge a Faustian pact with the law, civil and criminal, thinking that this double agency of external authority would assume responsibility for and clean up the sex abuse scandal for them. The bishops reaped a bitter harvest for their calculated passivity when the law they were glad to lean on during the Dallas meeting attacked the crisis on its

own inexorable terms. The bishops reeled as they seemed to learn as if for the first time that sex abuse was not under their control after all but that it was a crime to be punished and an offense for which its victims could seek damages.

Further evidence of the bishops? easily spooked paternalism is found in their almost eager willingness to cut themselves free of the erring clergy they had previously supported. They talked and acted tough towards sex abusing priests at Dallas, adopting Draconian procedures that, for example, led to the removal of clergymen from ministry on the basis of one phone call charging them with sexual misconduct. Exempting themselves from such measures, the bishops were ready to disavow and disinherit the problem priests they had long protected like privileged orphans.
The biggest unreported and unanalyzed development in Dallas was the transformation of the episcopal culture from which its members have never really recovered. In seeking to prop up their authority by yielding the crisis to outside agents of authority, the bishops gave up for good the control they had long kept to themselves and the practical immunity they had enjoyed in running the Church in paternalistic fashion. In the early stages of the sex abuse crisis, doing nothing may have served them well but, in the short run of the public sex abuse crisis, it had done them in.

Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye
This paternal style?s ultimate destructiveness for both sex abusing priests and their passively pastoral bishops is found in the manner in which then archbishop of Boston, Bernard Cardinal Law, dealt with Father John Geoghan, a priest ordained in 1962 and therefore a member of the cohort of priests represented in the Loyola psychological research sample of the clergy. His tragic life story suggests that he may well have been one of the subgroup of psychosexually underdeveloped priests identified by this research.

Geoghan was reported and admonished and sent off, according to the policies of the time, for treatment at distant facilities and was then reassigned, always with Law?s fatherly encouragement of his archbishop, to start afresh in a parish whose people had no knowledge of his history. After Law finally removed Geoghan from ministry in 1993, he wrote to him in classic paternal fashion, ?Yours has been an effective ministry, sadly impaired by illness. On behalf of those you have served well, and in my own name, I would like to thank you?.God bless you, Jack.? When the scandal broke, Geoghan was being tried and found guilty for sex offenses and a year later was murdered by another inmate in the correctional facility in which he was serving his 10 year sentence. Not long after that, he paternalistic Bernard Cardinal Law was forced to resign as archbishop of Boston.

Doing Nothing as Somebody Else?s Fault
On his visit to Australia, Pope Benedict XVI?s suggested what he must have had in mind when he visited America a few months before: there ?was, in the ?50s, ?60s and ?70s, the idea of proportionalism in ethics. It held that nothing is bad in itself, but only in proportion to others?it was possible to think for some subjects ? one could also be pedophilia ? that in some proportion they could be a good thing.? This intellectual defense exculpates the Church, its teaching and its bishops, projecting the responsibility for clergy sex abuse away from hierarchy onto a cohort of moral theologians who, the Pope clearly implies, provided priests with a rationalization for sexually assaulting those in their care. This is an energetic, not to say tortured, exercise that is, however, compatible with the Episcopal Myth that makes bishops confident of their being placed on the highest level of the Church and divinely guided in their judgments.
Despite the many papal protestations of regret about clergy sex abuse and sympathy for its victims the use of such externalization explains why the sex abuse crisis has never been resolved. According to such reasoning, hierarchs can claim that ?We didn?t do anything. We are the real victims of a deviant generation of priests who were led astray by untrustworthy moral theologians.?

Somebody else is to blame here, somebody else is always to blame and we need not examine ourselves, our

teachings, or our traditions to find the real wrongdoers here. This not very artful argument increases the pressure on bishops to defend the concept of hierarchy and supports their avoiding public responses as they handle the problem on their own in their preferred paternalistic style. This makes their already difficult lives even more difficult and less relevant to those of their people.
The pope therefore comes and goes in America and Australia, expressing regret to victims and talking to bishops about the sex abuse scandal and offering theories about its origins. And nothing happens. That is exactly what one would expect. ?Doing something? is not what bishops do. When they appear to do nothing they are, by their lights, passively and paternally defending the Church.

Passive Authority and Virtual Sex Abuse
?Doing nothing? was and remains the bishops? pragmatic paternalistic response to the problems of their priests and in dealing with almost all challenges except those that arise from non-clerical organizations, such as Call to Action or the Voice of The Faithful. Bishops feel that they can be righteously stern fathers with lay groups whose members they treat like children, perhaps because such groups unintentionally set themselves up for this reaction by at times treating the bishops as fathers, that is, by seeking their approval for speakers or meeting locations or just for their general good will and cooperation in making administrative processes more transparent.

The bishops?well recognized master motive for exercising their authority with passive benevolence towards priests and passive indifference to laypeople remains today what it was all these lost and gone years since the priest studies were published. We can understand now that Call to Action was exactly the right name for the movement that arose as a response to the bishops? preference for inaction, for making a virtue out of doing nothing ?for the good of the Church.?

The bishops do not realize, of course, that this use of their power exactly parallels the way a sex abuser uses power over those who lack power. They would be horrified if they recognized that in their efforts to raise up their clergy they have first had to put down their laypeople in ways that humiliate and demean them. Some younger clergy are gratified by this process and do not understand that by this lordly approach they extend the sex abuse crisis into a new virtual phase in which all laypeople are potential victims.

The crucial difference between their treating adult laypeople as if they were children and in treating child-like priests as if they were adults is a function of the clerical status of the clergy and the lower caste lay status of groups of dedicated laypeople. Ignoring these lay groups is one way of passively expressing their authority by doing nothing. This doing nothing finds its operational equivalent in the systematic taking away of the laypeople?s role in handling the sacred vessels at Mass and in doing anything more inside the sanctuary than altar boys have done since time immemorial. The dynamic of the recent spate of regulations to keep laypeople at a distance from the Eucharist and, for example, to bow before its reception, is to give ordinary Catholics nothing to do of significance in the liturgy, to diminish and demean them in order to prop up the clerical state. They say in effect, we have power and you do not and we are going to use it negatively on you.

Benedict?s projection of sex abuse away from hierarchy reinforces its members? already powerful sense of (a) being special, (b) being privileged, and (c) being fundamentally benevolent rulers. Hierarchs have thereby painted themselves into a corner. Their preference for the passive benevolent style helps us understand, however, why, after the Pope has come and gone and supposedly confronted them about the sex abuse crisis, nothing has changed. Uncomfortable with their own authority, borrowing it from others, principally the pope, in their vaunted seeking ?the good of the Church,? the bishops are not going to start using or sharing any of their own authority to address the problems of the American Church. Perhaps they remain convinced that doing nothing beats the risk of making a big mistake. And perhaps they are willing to wait for their justification at the Last Judgment. Perhaps they expect God to speak as Will Rogers did of the Depression era Congress, ?They didn?t do anything but that?s exactly what we wanted done.?

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