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## Hierarchy's inability to mourn thwarts healing in church

by Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea



A snow-covered statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is seen at dusk on the grounds of Sacred Heart Cathedral in Rochester, N.Y. (CNS file photo)

### COMMENTARY

The Catholic hierarchy from the papacy on down seems to be roiling through a series of manic episodes in which they execute perverted power plays against those perceived as enemies. This kind of mania often is exhibited by large identity groups whose power has been threatened and who are unable to respond adaptively to that loss through a process of healthy mourning.

For decades now, the power of the Catholic monarchy to control the social, spiritual, and political lives of its members has been in decline. While *Humanae Vitae*, the 1968 papal encyclical that upheld the church's traditional ban on artificial contraception, placed Catholic dissension (or perhaps spiritual maturation) in relief in the late 1960s, the sexual abuse crisis returned it to center stage throughout the past decade. In fact, *Humanae Vitae* was only superficially about birth control and the sexual abuse crisis was only partially about sexual abuse. Both crises were fundamentally about power: who holds it, over whom, to what extent, in what areas of life.

Along with victims and advocates who have aggressively brought the church to task for the crimes of power inherent in sexual abuse, religious women -- usually much closer to actual human beings trying to live their lives than are the ecclesiastical nobles -- have raised powerful voices exhorting the Catholic community to attend better to the world's suffering, especially that of the most marginalized. Even more recently, priests in some quarters have assumed a power to insist that attention be paid to the need and the rightness of expanding priestly ministry to the married and the female. In other words, the common citizens of the realm are calling out the royals on their failures to care well for those most in need -- victims of hierarchical neglect and abuse inherent in the sexual abuse crisis; priests who cannot meet the needs of the flock; women speaking on behalf of women and children, minorities, the Earth, and the poor.

When a large group's identity is threatened and power is lost, the healthy group will mourn before reworking their sense of self to accord with a new reality. When mourning goes well, there is a cleansing of mind, spirit, and psyche to go on after loss; to reconstitute self, relationships with others, hopes, dreams and beliefs in a renegotiated engagement with the real and the possible. There is self-examination about our own contribution to the control we are losing, perhaps ending in a rueful recognition that we never should have had that much control. The crisis of mourning well done can morph into a kairos leading to deeper connection with self, others and the Divine.

When mourning is refused, however, we may deny that loss is permanent and instead manically try to restore that which is forever changed. Nostalgia, memory's rose-colored cousin, rules the mind and soul. In some cases, we select someone or something defined now as "Other" onto whom we direct rage for "causing" our loss of power and control even if our own behaviors actually ushered in the loss. Mourning is submerged beneath rage and exclusivity -- we are OK, they are not; the badness is out there while goodness and heroism is within.

The failure to mourn power that is crumbling is rampant among the Catholic monarchy. A manic thrust to restore the past can be seen in a nostalgic return to cathedral length trains, cassocks, birettas, and a new/old missal in which words are more important than meaning.

Rather than mourn, the Catholic nobility send their minions out to battle against SNAP, the Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests, a powerful voice for those harmed by the bishops. While the attack on SNAP may have legal currency, it is awfully tough to find the Gospel passages that undergird it.

Rather than mourn, the pope appoints a trio of lords to rein in those galling daughters of Eve, the nuns who dare to take the Gospels seriously, thinking they focus mostly on service rather than control.

Rather than mourn, Benedict lashes out at his weary priests who shout that others than celibate men might be needed and effective in spreading the Good Word.

Rather than mourn, Bishop Daniel Jenky pours venom, twisted history, and incoherent verbiage on a president who appears to think the poor need as much of a break as the rich guys.

These are all manic maneuvers that substitute perverted power plays for healthy mourning.

Advertisement

Catholicism and Saudi Arabia are the last all male kyriarchical monarchies left on the planet. The Catholic monarchy's power cannot be restored to what it was. While the hierarchy shows no signs of

growing and growing up through an adaptational mourning process, the rest of us can mourn the loss of the church we thought once was, so we are ready if a new day ever comes.

[Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, a clinical psychologist, was the only mental health professional to address the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on the sexual abuse crisis at their 2002 Dallas meeting, and she was one of the clinicians speaking about sexual abuse to the Conference of Major Superiors of Men that year. Frawley-O'Dea is coauthor of *Treating the Adult Survivor of Childhood Sexual Abuse* and coeditor of *Predatory Priests, Silenced Victims*.]

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