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The one necessary thing: honesty

Joe Ferullo | May. 29, 2012 NCR Today

I do not want to be haunted by what goes on in the church today. I do not want this, but I can't escape it.

A few days ago, we were at our daughter's graduation from a Catholic girls' high school here in Los Angeles. It was a stunning ceremony, a testament to the nuns who founded and still run the school.

The evening before, out on a lawn in the golden setting sun, there was a pre-graduation Mass, attended by the students and their parents. The priest was from a nearby parish and gave one of the most stirring and sincere homilies I'd heard in a long time. The Gospel reading was from Luke, where Jesus speaks to Martha about how her sister Mary has found "the one thing that is necessary." But what is that one thing? the priest asked. It was, he decided, honesty. To live your life honest to yourself and those around you -- no matter where life takes you and with whom -- guaranteed a moral foundation.

Two nights later, we were at a graduation party and found ourselves talking with several parents. The subject turned to that beautiful homily. One mother turned to me and said, "Did you feel the elephant in the room, though? Did you feel it?"

Because when the subject is honesty, the elephant is the behavior of church hierarchy over more than a decade of scandal. The elephant is also large enough to hold more than that on its back or in its trunk: It also carries the rightward shift of the bishops as they step boldly into the political realm; it carries their bewildering admonition of American nuns and the Vatican drift that has lead to a scandal in Rome [1] over document leaks that allege corruption and mismanagement of the Holy See.

The parents at the party were astounded that the priest could talk about honesty and not at least nod to these events. But, I said, maybe he did. Here we are, all talking about it -- that's probably no accident. And our daughters, they're also well aware of what's going on. To tell them at graduation -- as they head out into the world -- that honesty is the thing above all others ... well, that's kind of radical, isn't it?

We smiled. Not bad, we all thought, not bad. We slipped back to more typical graduation party chatter, about colleges and orientation dates and the need for real winter clothes for the students going back East.

But it is funny, the way the hierarchy and what they are doing haunts me and others in unexpected ways at unexpected times. The way it threatens to place a layer of clouds over everything we celebrate in our parishes and schools.

I shook my head, stopped myself.

I asked somebody at the party where the wine was -- they pointed off to the other side of the backyard. I grabbed a glass and hurried over.

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[1] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18240459