

Where is the church's moral authority?

Pat Perriello | Nov. 28, 2012 NCR Today

[Faithful America](#) [1] references [a story from The Associated Press](#) [2] about a Minnesota priest who withheld the sacraments for an entire family because of their 17-year-old son's support for same-sex marriage legislation. He posted a picture of himself on Facebook with a sign indicating his support for a same-sex marriage amendment that was on the Minnesota ballot.

Fr. Gary LaMoine of Assumption Parish in Barnesville, Minn., not only denied confirmation to Lennon Cihak, but also refused communion to the entire Cihak family, the story states. The family no longer attends Assumption Church.

In another corner of the world, *The Baltimore Sun* printed [a front-page expose](#) [3] of church failures in the area of sex abuse. The article tells of an incredible failure of the obligation to protect children by a south Baltimore school and archdiocesan officials. The record indicates that the school principal, Sr. Eileen Weisman, observed John Merzbacher in compromising situations but did nothing. Later, priests of the archdiocese were involved in firing another teacher for expressing concerns about Merzbacher's behavior, the *Sun's* story states. The archdiocese also paid cash settlements to victims and their families in the case.

It wasn't until about 20 years later, when Merzbacher was under criminal investigation in the 1990s that the church began to cooperate with civil authorities. Ultimately, Merzbacher was convicted of child rape and other crimes and is currently serving four life sentences. The church has much to answer for in its failure to protect our young people.

Yet how ready are those in authority in the church to pounce on a young man for having the courage of his convictions to express his ideas on a controversial topic? Do we no longer encourage young people to think for themselves? Young people will often change their minds and may even become overzealous in their emerging beliefs, but it represents part of their development into the adults we want them to become. Are Lennon's 17-year-old views so threatening to the universal church that he and his family need to be publicly punished and denied the sacraments of the church?

What a contrast these two stories make. The church up until now has failed to accept the degree to which its behavior in the whole sex abuse crisis has been morally bankrupt.

Church leaders still do not understand the damage that has been done to their position as an authentic teaching authority. A little bit of humility might be in order. A willingness to listen and learn from others would be good. A step back from an imperial approach to governance is essential. Just as church leaders would like us to be a little more understanding in our critique of their handling of the sex abuse situation, so also might they do well to be a little less judgmental in their dealings with their flock.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.faithfulamerica.org/>

[2] <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2012/11/15/politics/gay-marriage-supporter-denied-confirmation>

[3] <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/bs-md-archdiocese-merzbacher-20121124,0,163396.story?obref=obinsite>