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Editorial: Church leaders need to re-examine response to sex abuse

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Editorial

In 2010, Fr. James Connell, then vice chancellor of the Milwaukee archdiocese, was publicly accused of complicity in protecting abusive priests. Connell was deeply stung by the accusation, which he denies. But rather than lash out at his accuser, abuse victim Peter Isely, he asked himself a question: "What if I had been a victim of sexual abuse by a priest?"

That question led him to a meeting and ultimately a friendship with Isely, as well as to an increasing activism on behalf of clergy abuse victims and in pursuit of the truth about the scandal.

Connell's response is especially significant in light of the recent release of some 6,000 pages of documents relating to clerical sex abuse in the Milwaukee archdiocese and church officials' response.

The documents disclose a distressingly familiar pattern: The archdiocese shuffled offending priests from parish to parish; increasing numbers of youngsters were abused; little was done to stem the abuse until it reached scandalous proportions and was made public; the Vatican was appallingly slow in acting on the charges when bishops finally were pushed to deal seriously with the problem. And at every point in the crisis, the hierarchy's primary concern was protection of the clergy culture.

Each time there is another disclosure of documents -- correspondence, transcripts of depositions, diocesan memos -- the reality of an insular, secretive, Renaissance court culture aggressively protective of its clerical status and privilege becomes more apparent.

There are no ideological or national boundaries or characteristics that otherwise explain what is going on. From such darlings of the left as Archbishop Rembert Weakland and Cardinal Roger Mahony to stalwarts of the right such as Cardinal Bernard Law and the late Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, and across cultures, the unifying factor is the same. One wishes someone would find the appropriate wall in the Vatican on which to affix the sign: It's the culture, stupid!

Connell's question emerges from a familiar biblical imperative. Doing unto others what we would have them do unto us requires both knowing ourselves well enough to really want to know what the other thinks and feels. "What if I had been a victim of sexual abuse by a priest?" is a question that requires stepping outside of one's experience, outside of the comforts and privileges of the culture, and risking understanding the devastating effects of being abused.

Asking that question changed Connell's life.

The palace no longer can contain the secrets, and it seems that so much is tumbling out these days that the apparatus for denying the scandals can no longer keep up. The document release in Milwaukee and the arrest of a monsignor charged with trying to illegally bring into Italy 20 million euros on a private jet are but the latest evidence that the worst of clerical culture is flying apart.

Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listecki warned the faithful to "prepare to be shocked" at the content of the documents, that their very faith might be shaken. He pleaded that people understand the "evolution of thinking" on sexual abuse of children since the 1970s. "Church leaders and other professionals tried their best to deal with the issue given the knowledge available at the time," he said.

Sadly, the only thing shocking at this point for anyone who's been paying attention is that it has taken this long for the church in Milwaukee to release the truth of the matter and that the truth still remains hidden in so many other dioceses.

As for the frayed excuse that there was an evolution in thinking about sex abuse, please spare us. Of course there's been development in understanding the deep disturbances that cause adults to sexually abuse children.

However, when prelates went to their lawyers before they went to the victims, when they agreed to pay millions for victim silence, when they lied by omission repeatedly in transferring priests without telling unaware pastors, congregations or even other bishops of the deep problems of the priests involved, one can only conclude that the bishops were engaged in a devolution of their understanding of the Gospel.

As Connell says, "When I was in high school [in the 1950s], we learned about statutory rape. We knew that for an adult to have sexual activities with a minor was against the law, and that didn't change over time."

It is time that more priests and bishops begin asking the questions that point beyond their own narrow interests and the culture they seek to protect. They should engage the victims who were abused and the community that has been repeatedly betrayed.

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