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Two images of church: Which will survive?

Thomas C. Fox | Sep. 20, 2013 NCR Today

Two dramatically different images of church came across my desk yesterday. One was contained in a letter from a West coast business executive; the other in the words of Pope Francis, as seen in a lengthy interview in Jesuit magazines, including *America* magazine.

The executive is Carl Schlachte, ?Chairman, President, and CEO at Ventiva, Inc. [1] in Santa Clara, CA.

Francis presents us with an image of church that is inclusive, a church in which the clergy are called to be humble servants. Schlachte writes of a different church, a church that too many of us recognize. It is a church in which clergy fear the laity, in which clergy do not trust lay initiatives, indeed oppose them. It is a a church filled with clergy who abuse authority but meanwhile, lead as managers who would not rise to the ranks of middle management in the average U.S. corporation.

Just as Francis? interview is a personal reflection, so, too, is the Schlachte letter, which is filled with personal frustration and disappointment. As an man with considerable executive experience, he writes about the ?hidden costs? of the clergy abuse crisis, most critically the disenchantment of untold numbers of laity. It is a cost rarely, if ever, calculated, by our bishops, he maintains.

I want to share the Schlachte letter here in the hope it represents an image of church at the end of an era. My hope is that Pope Francis is ushering in a new era, one in which the shepherds will live among and associate with the flocks.

It seems that post-traumatic-Catholic-stress syndrome should make it into the classification of psychiatric disorders in the near future. At least it should if recent events like the movement to oust Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst of Germany are any indication. The pundits and analysts are picking over this latest fiscal scandal to hit our church--one where the German Bishop is living in luxury while extolling the virtues of poverty--and settling on an analysis that the popular discontent with him is due to overt hypocrisy. For me though the entire time I was reading about the rebellion against Bishop Tebartz-van Elst the accounting term "hidden costs" was sitting front and center in my mind.

The phrase "hidden costs" means those costs that are not included in the purchase price of goods because they are not known at the time. If you were buying a forklift for example, there is the purchase price, but the hidden costs are things like maintenance, or gas, or training of operators. When running an enterprise of any size, you spend a decent amount of time worrying about these hidden costs because they are really a "loss" that can prevent you from doing something else. What you are prevented from making because money isn't there is a hard thing to calculate which is why they're "hidden". Hidden costs never show up on a balance sheet, but they can ruin your business if you're not careful. Such is the case with the Catholic hierarchy today.

I had a similar thought during a much more mundane disagreement with my own pastor. I want more transparency from him; he wants to act on his timeframe and in his own manner. By taking his time and not being upfront and clear about some of his decisions, he, like Bishop Tebartz-van Elst, is not taking into account

those pesky hidden costs built straight into our community. In normal circumstances we should be giving these men as much latitude as they need to lead, but our church is not in normal circumstances any longer. I wonder how much our hierarchy understands that there are new and unseen costs in dealing with the laity. In the post-traumatic-clergy-abuse reality that is the new normal, perhaps our ordained leaders should appreciate that doing anything to the laity must simultaneously account for the cost of what the laity has already suffered though.

The essence of the outrage in Limburg Germany, like my debate with my pastor, is all about hidden costs. It is shocking to me that our leaders at all levels seem to be singularly unequipped to understand the concept. In my secular life, I sit on boards and run companies. My CEOs intrinsically understand this terminology and mindset because they have to. Woe unto the business leader that doesn't spend time in consultation with her board of directors and her stakeholders looking for these accounting demons.

A good CEO consults not because she is weak, but precisely because there are shareholders and livelihoods at stake if she misses something. The market economy is an efficient taskmaster for making good leaders. One simply cannot be in charge of an enterprise without looking for these concealed losses. You end up working with and listening to almost anyone who can help you find them. The same should be said for the economy of salvation. When will the Catholic church give us leaders that understand what even the most junior business leaders know?

What are these hidden costs to the leaders of our church? Trust, faith, respect. Good and/or great though many of these men may be, they will struggle from now on as they look to repay a psychic debt handed to them by the abuse and mismanagement of their own actions. The hidden costs not accounted for are just how wary we laypeople can be with top-down thinking and anything that smacks of clerical secrecy. If we have learned anything from the ongoing scandals of clergy abuse it is that even men who appear to be good need to be watched. As we laypeople line up to have background checks made on us, (just to volunteer mind you!) we are reminded every day what can happen when we stay silent because we were taught that all the decisions of the ordained are divinely mandated. That reminder, that collective shaming, are expensive hidden costs charged against Catholic leaders deciding to do anything to the laity, even if they are completely innocent of direct abuse themselves.

For my own part, because I could not get the transparency locally I thought we the laity deserved, I chose to resign all of my positions with my parish. I made this choice because I know the costs viscerally. I have lived the embarrassment of putting my own inky thumbprint onto a white card while reminding myself that I didn?t do anything wrong. Did you know that with age, our fingerprints can wear off? I didn?t, until one of my elderly fellow parishioners showed me how many times they tried to get her fingerprint to show correctly on a diocesan mandated form. The young law enforcement man running the background checks on us was as embarrassed as we were for what she was put through. As we stood there in line waiting our turn, each ashamed in their own way, I kept thinking of those ridges on her fingertips being worn smooth in a lifetime of service to the church. I wondered if our bishops would ever understand that there is more than one way to assault lay people.

These indignities both large and small are saved up over time and become a deep debt that continues to accrue. We remember and will keep remembering. Look at what was done to us, we say; look at what continues to be done. As a result, we are suspicious of priests these days not always because of what they are doing, but also of how they act. Any actions forced upon us are an awful reminder of authority gone horribly wrong. Good, well-trained leaders know this and act accordingly. Without such training and faced with resistance, our leaders have no idea how to act. Anger at my own stance has lead to some amazingly mean-spirited emails being sent. Curses are never more damning than when emails conclude with ?blessings? and ?I?ll pray for you?. These are what hidden costs look like in the pews these days: suspicions, meanness, authoritarianism, loss, and prayers that sound disturbingly more like ?go to hell? than supplications to a loving God. This is quite literally what we have been led to.

The laity doesn't have much recourse when it grows concerned that an ordained leader is exhibiting a pattern of poor governance. There is no whistleblower policy for a leader acting within a remit given to him by a church with an institutional dislike for questions and a deep love of control. We don?t get a vote or a chance to offer an appraisal. There are no reviews. The laity is left to register our dissatisfaction with blunt instruments: resigning volunteer assignments or maybe switching parishes. Perhaps the biggest hidden costs our leaders are facing are a laity that knows what good leadership actually is.

The educated, connected, mobile workforce here in the U.S. by and large work for companies that are using very modern techniques of management. Meanwhile Catholic seminaries churn out ever smaller classes of theologically astute graduates who have little or no cutting edge leadership training, if any training at all. One priest told me recently that in eight years of seminary they had one class one semester that he thought might have been a management class. It boggles the mind. Meanwhile the hidden costs in lost participation and real disenchantment grow ever higher. Want to know why your kids would rather go to a non-denominational mega-church rather than attend Mass? Look to the leadership in the church not the "praise band" or cappuccinos in the lobby. In mega-churches the brutal Darwinian ecosystem of leadership training is evident. The laity can fire their pastors; they also get to consult with them. The congregation can decide and act if they want to make a change in governance. To survive and get to a ?mega? designation these leaders have to be very capable. Our hyper-connected kids have cynicism dialed up to high and seem to almost smell hypocrisy. They will follow a well-trained, inclusive and inspirational leader with an immature theology over sophisticated theologians who have been taught to only see the laity as sheep. We have comforted ourselves that it is the Catholic ?graduate level? theology that is off-putting, but the sad fact is, it is the leaders and a centuries out-of- date management style.

The blessed irony is that perhaps we the laity are now beginning to realize the hidden costs of tolerating under-developed leaders ourselves. Congregations suffer when leadership is weak and then tolerated. The entire body of Christ is therefore diminished. There is no easy fix here. It will take work, accountability and above all, radical transparency. Like my own stance in my parish, there is no winner until we address these systemic issues. Our community is warier, our leaders defensive and neither of us moves closer to the kingdom. Meanwhile the losses pile up and while we may lament that we cannot move forward because of these hidden losses, we have not even begun to discuss how much investment is needed to build for our collective future.

Let the discussion begin now.

Carl Schlachte

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