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Did the Council of Trent enable the sex abuse scandal?

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Feb. 20, 2014 Bulletins from the Human Side

The conviction of Philadelphia's Msgr. William J. Lynn for endangering children by allegedly providing cover for priest pedophiles was recently reversed by a higher court. Lynn, after serving 18 months in jail, is out on bail under house arrest as the district attorney appeals to the state Supreme Court.

The original guilty verdict was, according to *The New York Times* [1], "hailed by victims' rights advocates who have argued for years that senior church officials should be held accountable for concealing evidence and transferring predatory priests to unwary parishes."

"The revelations of sexual abuse," the *Times* noted, "and seeming official indifference have tormented an archdiocese [Philadelphia] that was long known for imperious leaders and an insular camaraderie among its priests." That defines clericalism, the energy source of clerical culture, that first-class section of the plane from which its members could look back at the everyday Catholics jammed into coach who had to buy their own tickets and pay for the clergy's, too. That's how clerical culture understood the phrase, "It is right and just."

To construe the conviction of Msgr. Lynn as making high church officials finally accountable for their mix-and-match policies in dealing with sex-offending priests is on a par with, as Jimmy Breslin once wrote, "blaming the Johnstown flood on a leaky toilet in Altoona."

You cannot stop the Mafia from selling protection by arresting an aging low-level capo who has never been more than a gofer and who lives far beneath the godfather who hardly knows his name. Neither can you stop the official church from providing protection for clerical sex abusers by indicting an aging bureaucrat who also lives far beneath the archbishop who wonders, as Chicago's late Cardinal George Mundelein famously asked his secretary on the way to a priest's funeral, "What is Monsignor's name anyway?"

Msgr. Lynn is a product and a victim of the same hierarchical structuring that divides the church into football stadium seating with the owners (the bishops) on the top in the skyboxes; the priests and religious in reserved seats below them; and in the standing room by the one-yard line with a skewed vision of the game, the ordinary men and women who, in fact, are the church. The hierarchical dynamic put everybody in their proper place. That is why, for example, there has been a major move to install altar rails in churches and new regulations to prevent laypeople from handling the sacred vessels while mandating them to bow to the priest before receiving the Eucharist. You can't make this stuff up, but the hierarchical mind grinds such regulations out in order to get lowly laypeople out of the sanctuary and back where they belong.

No great victory has been gained by those who think getting the monsignor out of his purple robes and into a prison jumpsuit really gets at the bishops who have, in effect, scapegoated the loyal bureaucrat for their own sins.

The sex abuse scandal is a function of hierarchy; that is, of a system that places all power in the hands of those at the very top of its steppe-like structure. This divided concept of the universe was not what Jesus had in mind when he established his collection of apostles.

The divided concept, a model of which can be seen in the da Vinci museum in Milan, originated in the map of the universe split into heaven above and earth below, devised by priests in that land we now call Iraq as, 4,000 years before Jesus, they observed the passage of planets through fixed stars.

This pattern of the heaven above and earth below led to earthly kingdoms presided over by monarchs endowed with power "by divine right." Their courts of privileged princes and other dignitaries (vestiges of which are found in "domestic prelates," as monsignors were originally designated) were thought in some ancient cultures to be so identified with the monarch that they practiced "sacral deicide," burying court members with the monarch when he died.

The hierarchical model granted unusual privileges and exemptions to those who lived on top and to whom respect was to be paid at all times. The ethic of unearned privilege is second nature in a monarchy, a system that foundered and failed in the First World War and now survives symbolically, for example, in the British royal family that, now that the sun has set on the empire, serves as a combination of national soap opera and tourist attraction.

The hierarchical model made the sexual abuse of children possible because it cloaked its priests in special privilege on a level above laypeople, who were denied any real standing or voice in forming church policies. It also created the clerical culture, a gated community for priests who were welcome because their ordination confirmed their status as superior to the excluded masses of ordinary, garden-variety Catholics who were to respect and go along with, if not strictly obey, their priests and bishops.

This culture conferred automatic deference to anybody who wore a Roman collar. The demand for celibacy in the ranks of its courtiers and priests served the hierarchs well because it was less a spiritual ideal than a pragmatic discipline that made the lesser acolytes of hierarchy sign on for a life of servitude to the system and to the superiors on whom they were emotionally and financially dependent.

Control a person's sexuality, monarchs understood, and you control them completely, and there is no need to worry about the suppression, confusion, and stunted psycho-sexual growth problems that were the side effects of such hierarchical dominance. Where there should have been a warning label for applicants to read, there was a printed a favorite hierarchical mantra: This is God's will for you.

That is where Msgr. Lynn came in as a victim of a hierarchical system on which he was completely dependent and in which he was to carry out the orders of his cardinal-archbishop without hesitation or question.

In a reflection of sacral regicide, the archdiocese was willing to let him be buried with Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, who was responsible for the orders given to Msgr. Lynn but who died before he could be thoroughly examined on how, as an all-powerful hierarch, he presided over a kingdom in which sex-abusing clergy were dealt with as carefully as if they really deserved their privileged aura as members of the clerical court.

What has this got to do with the Council of Trent, you ask? One can read all about it in Jesuit Fr. John O'Malley's excellent book, *Trent: What Happened at the Council*. The three-part council pursued many objectives in its effort to forge a Counter-Reformation to the revolution Martin Luther had so spectacularly begun. One of this council's principal goals was to justify and bolster the church as a divinely established hierarchical structure.

In its 23rd session, for example, it stated in Canon 6: "If any one saith, that, in the Catholic Church there is not a hierarchy by divine ordination instituted, consisting of bishops, priests, and ministers; let him be anathema."

Canon 7 avers that anyone who says "that bishops are not superior to priests; or, that ... the power which they possess is common to them and to priests," along with several other assertions of the independent validity of a bishop's powers, "let him be anathema."

The council also insisted on the "excellence" of celibacy and condemned the view that marriage was a more blessed state than virginity or celibacy. When some European princes who were very interested in the council's impact on their functioning asked for mitigation of celibacy for their priests, their requests were denied.

Spain's Philip II, O'Malley tells us, "let the pope know he was utterly opposed to any concession, arguing that, if a change were made for the empire, other nations would demand it which would result in an end to the church's hierarchical structure."

We have here an important clue about the origin of the sex abuse scandal. It is found in the impact of the hierarchical imperative on the inner development of candidates for the priesthood and religious life. Celibacy and chastity were the dynamite packed into their official endorsement as conditions for the privileges of accepting their lot as God's will and serving, much like the butlers and maids of "Downton Abbey," in the secondhand glory of the great hierarchical palace. Questions of sexuality, other than identifying its least impulse as a sign of serious sin rather than a signal of being a healthy human being, were ruled out of order. As Philip II realized, if the pope were to give ground on celibacy, there would go the whole hierarchical neighborhood.

I had a firsthand experience of this many years ago, when I chaired the psychological research panel of the multidisciplinary study of American priests commissioned by the bishops themselves. Cardinal John Krol of Philadelphia was the bishop coordinator when we reported our results. Although he could be a genial man, he was furious that day, telling me I should never have allowed any investigation of the sexual adjustment of priests. He waved away my explanation that priests were neither more nor less than human and one could not understand them without some knowledge of their psychosexual development.

"These priests," he snorted dismissively, "merely want to exchange their power over the body of Christ for power over the body of a woman!" I did not realize it at that explosive moment, but its fuse was strung across the four centuries that had passed since Trent placed the preservation of hierarchy above the understanding of human personality.

It is possible to speculate that the refusal to consider women priests, highlighted by the recent crackdown by lofty hierarchs on women religious and the refusal of the official church, despite the history of sex abuse by the clergy, to examine celibacy, is rooted in the Tridentine fear that yielding even an inch on these subjects would threaten the entire hierarchical structure. This reflexive assertion of the intrinsic superiority of forsaking sex for the Kingdom thus emerges as a political rather than a theological conviction.

In 1965, as the Second Vatican Council neared its end, the Brazilian bishops expressed interest in discussing celibacy. Pope Paul VI responded with a letter, read by Cardinal Eugene Tisserant to the council fathers on Oct. 11, 1965. Paul VI considered such a discussion highly inappropriate, and he further insisted that he intended to

safeguard and maintain the ancient discipline of Latin church in that regard. "The letter," O'Malley tells us in another of his books, *What Happened at Vatican II,* "was met with applause."

Trent also established an Index of Forbidden Books that was first published in 1559. O'Malley observes in *Trent: What Happened at the Council* that this index "would be an ongoing feature of Catholic life. It remained such for the next four hundred years." Trent, he observes, "helped develop the Catholic mindset reluctant to admit change in the course of church history."

Through several centuries, in order to maintain a hierarchical structure, church officials have insisted on celibacy for priests and exalted virginity over marriage. Trent refers to ecclesiastical hierarchy "as an army set in array" and declares that "bishops who have succeeded to the place of the apostles, principally belong to the hierarchical order."

Long centuries afterward, Msgr. Lynn has emerged as the subject of this tangled system of which he was a servant, indentured to be sure, rather than in any sense an author. Philadelphia is a classic example of what a hierarchical institution convinced of its divine commission and confident of its privileged position is like when it is faced with preserving its order of battle or allowing anyone to examine closely the claims to the superiority of celibacy and chastity: It defends itself rather than the children entrusted to its care.

We may hypothesize that the seeds of the sex abuse scandal whose flowers of evil bloomed fully in the 21st century were planted in the 16th century by a church reeling from the Reformation that refused then, as it does now, to examine in depth its presumptions about human sexuality. It remains divinely confident that it is right and remains ready to sacrifice a thousand Msgr. Lynns to maintain a hierarchical structure that may indeed be more sinning than sinned against.

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