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Church knew the sex abuse scandal was coming

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Mar. 3, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

"What the Twin Tower attacks were for the United States," Italian journalist Massimo Franco tells *NCR*?s John Allen [1], "the sex abuse scandals are for the Church."

As a matter of fact, there is a critical difference between the 9/11 attacks and the sex abuse crisis that, like bombs rigged to go off sequentially, has now exploded across the entire world.

Failing to grasp what makes these events different explains why the institutional church has still not come to grips with the problem and is unlikely to do so in the near future. That, as they say in philosophy, is a distinction with a difference.

Put in starkly simple terms, the Twin Tower attacks were not predictable while the eruption of the sex abuse crisis was -- on the basis of what church officials knew -- so predictable that traditional moral theology would have discouraged betting against it, as it does with all ?sure things.?

The event of 9/11 may be described, in the phrase popularized by Nicholas Taleb, as a ?Black Swan,? an ?outlier? -- that is, something lying beyond the range of our ordinary experience, whose occurrence cannot be predicted.

?Black Swans? are unpredicted surprises that deliver an enormous destructive impact. They are rationalized later -- that is, experts or executives give ?good reasons? that are not the ?real reasons? to explain the incidents.

Companies and organizations may not be able to predict Black Swans, Taleb notes, but they can prepare for them and limit their impact.

The notion of a Black Swan comes from the old belief that all swans were white and therefore no Black Swan could exist. This was changed when explorers discovered them along Australian rivers, upending a certainty with a rarity that might be remote but was no less real for that.

The sex abuse crisis is not a Black Swan. Its potential had been known for years by most Church officials familiar with the sex abuse problems of priests that were dealt with, as a matter of policy, discreetly and with little if any curiosity about their causes.

Indeed, in America, the alarm had been sounded as clearly as an air raid siren in the 80s by Fr. Thomas Doyle who, working at the Apostolic Delegation, identified a growing clerical sex abuse problem [2]that, as he prophesied, would cost the church ?a billion dollars a year? and a million heartaches beyond, if officials did not respond to it.

They did not look into it and Doyle lost his job. At the same time they refused to accept Joseph Cardinal Bernardin?s proposal for a study of the sexual conflicts of priests.

Over a decade before that American bishops learned, from the Psychological Study of American priests that they commissioned and funded, that a substantial subset of priests was psychosexually immature -- that is, the latter?s inner psychosexual development lagged far behind their chronological age.

Nothing was done to respond to this finding although it was from this cohort of priests that many sex abusers did arise with tragic consequences for themselves and their victims.

The officials of the church can hardly claim now that they were ?surprised? by an event that was in fact ?predicted,? thereby taking it out of the Black Swan category into which 9/11 may be placed.

While we await the results of the Causes and Effects Study being completed at John Jay College, we can understand that unless the institution faces the facts as deeply and fully as possible this sex abuse scandal -- whose roots are tangled in ancient and long unexamined structures and policies of the church -- will not be addressed and the victims, as uncomforted as Rachel, will continue to weep.

And it will go on, disguised, discreet. But still there whether anyone care now to admit it or not.

Perhaps church officials look at their years of service as this distinguished person did on his:

?When anyone asks how I can best describe my...40 years at sea, I merely say uneventful....I have never been in any accident of any sort worth speaking about....I never saw a wreck and never have been wrecked, nor was I ever in any predicament that threatened to end in disaster of any sort...?

He added that he ?could not imagine any condition which would cause a ship to founder.?

The bishops who pilot the bark of Peter might be interested to know that these were the words of E.J. Smith before he took the HMS Titanic on its maiden voyage into a fierce Black Swan-like night in April, 1912.

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