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Scandal vs. crisis; PR vs. raw data

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Ron Westrum, professor of sociology at Eastern Michigan University, suggests that organizations react in a series of stages to ?anomalous reports.? They are: 1) suppression, 2) encapsulation, 3) public relations, 4) local fix, 5) global fix, and 6) investigation of root causes. He came to his formulation through the study of the battered child syndrome that many people, even professionals, found hard to admit was a widespread phenomenon.

It is not difficult to match the trajectory of church response to allegations of hidden clergy sex abuse against Westrum?s model. It?s a good fit.

Even in the United States the church is not near the final stage -- the process of resolving root causes. Since the eruption of revelations in 2010 spotlighting sexual activity by priests across Europe it is obvious that even the U.S. church is still suspended between public relations and ?fixes.? People in the pews need to know and evaluate the bishops? public relations efforts against the raw material in church files. Those documents indicate what the bishops (pope) knew and when they knew it.

The church in the United States and Ireland worked hard at the suppression and encapsulation of the sex abuse among its ranks. The Vatican and Europe are struggling with that now, but the public relations fight everywhere is reinvigorated. Roman minions have begun pointing fingers and are repeating the defenses the United States suffered throughout the past two decades.

Pope Benedict XVI is raising the PR stakes by flirting with the idea that the ?sin is inside the church? at the same time that he blames the devil for the scandal [1]. But he is still stuck on scandal and avoiding the crisis. Nonetheless, the public relations program follows a programmed pattern beginning with accusations of ?anti-religion.? The PR sequence is organized and transparent enough to diagram -- ?there is no crisis; the media is causing the scandal; there may be a ?few bad apples? causing a problem; if any, it is only a small problem; there is a problem, but no bigger than in any other organization; abuse is not connected with celibacy; abuse is a societal problem; homosexuals cause it; we have done more than any other organization to combat with the problem of child abuse.?

After 20 years the schema is familiar to most U.S. observers. However, a new crop of bishops is recycling the old pattern -- beginning by blasting the press for reports of clergy malfeasance as unfair and anti-Catholic, anti-clergy, anti-religion. One recent example: Timothy Dolan, archbishop of New York, accused *The New York Times* of bias: ?It is not hyperbole to call prejudice against the Catholic church a national pastime,? he wrote on his blog. The attack was against Catholic columnist Maureen Dowd?s spirited defense of nuns -- Laurie Goodstein?s reports on a dying 22-year-old abandoned son of a still active priest -- and the paper?s lack of ?outrage? at reports of pedophile attacks in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. From the Vatican, Cardinal William Levada, also reprimanded the *Time* for what he termed ?attacks on the Holy Father concerning sex abuse? within the church. He pronounced them ?deficient by any reasonable standards of fairness.?

Dolan?s rant is reminiscent of Bernard Law, Cardinal of Boston in 1992 rankled by news reports about Fr. James Porter who admittedly abused 200 minors in five dioceses. Law riled against a biased anti-Catholic secular press he claimed was actually causing the scandal by writing an overblown account. ?By all means,? he said, ?we call down God?s power on the media, particularly the *Globe*.? That didn?t work. More stories came out.

The public relations efforts of the church have voiced interesting spins. In 2000 Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, spokesperson for the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference, asserted twice on national TV, ?I?m convinced that '99 and 44/100%' of priests keep their celibacy.? ("99 44/100% Pure" is the old Ivory soap slogan.) In 2004 Bishop Wilton Gregory proclaimed that the problem of clergy abuse was ?history.? In 2010, a John Jay spokesperson preparing a report for the bishops declared that Catholic clergy abuse is a historical and time-limited phenomenon.

Catholic clergy abuse stories in the United States now generally meet a media-weary reception. Does this mean that the crisis is over? No. The public relation efforts whether from the Vatican or home grown, so far are aimed at control of a scandal and its aftermath.

Every Catholic boy and girl learned in grade school that ?scandal? should be avoided at all costs. We may not have known any formal definition, but we knew it was bad. Public school kids and non-Catholics should never be given a reason to criticize our church. A scandal is ?a widely publicized set of allegations that damage the reputation of an institution, individual or creed? and we have it.

The scandal has partly gone cold -- it is old news. Most people now know that some Catholic priests are sexually active, some abuse minors, and bishops try to cover up.

The Catholic crisis remains. One key to addressing the crisis, and ultimately in fixing it, is in the review, revelation, and analysis of the documents that record the behavior of the clergy. That factor made *The Boston Globe*?s reporting seminal and preeminent in making ?hidden events? available for reform (Westrum, defines hidden events as an ?occurrence so implausible that those who observe it hesitate to report it because they do not expect to be believed.?). Bishops fight to keep the truth (documents) secret.

The church has not yet addressed the crisis; in fact, most bishops are still resistive and mired in an old familiar pattern of obfuscation if not deceit. Public relations efforts are aimed at damage control, not change. Crisis presents a decisive turning point that demands a ?fix.? Two lay Catholics chosen by the bishops to chair the National Review Board, Governor Frank Keating and Justice Anne Burke, rendered their opinions: Keating said bishops operate like ?cosa nostra?; Burke pronounced a judgment that the bishops are primarily interested in pursuing ?business as usual.?

Investigative reporter, Jason Berry already notable for forcing the crisis of abuse into U.S. public attention in 1984, labored intensively and extensively for a full decade to help victims of Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado tell their story of abuse, only to witness a 2004 PR photo of Pope John Paul II embracing and blessing this notorious founder of a religious order. There can be no doubt that the pope heard the stories about Maciel and discounted them as he had the well-founded reports of sex abuse by Cardinal Groer in 1995. The Vatican?s belated official verdict on Maciel in 2010 -- that he was dismissed in 2006 for immoral behavior, criminal acts and demonstration of ?a life devoid of scruples and authentic religious feeling? -- can hardly compensate for the laborious pain of discovery in addition to the rejection and humiliation involved in the battle to speak truth to power that Berry and the victims had to endure for two decades.

A more intrepid and dedicated advocate for victims of clergy abuse than Fr. Thomas Doyle is impossible to find. He describes his 25-year crusade for justice, accountability and transparency as ?wading through a

cesspool of toxic waste.? These men among others working to document facts and reveal healing truth are neither anti-religion nor anti-Catholic. Indubitably there are temptations to despair as we read what bishops have done and continue to do in their effort to deny truth and destroy evidence behind a pious PR curtain.

Those of us who have reviewed church documents -- raw data including the depositions of bishops -- and write about what we find do know what bishops knew about abuse and when they really knew it. There are records. We are not interested in scandal. We are concerned with the welfare of children. We are interested in a crisis that distorts and destroys peoples? lives and hope. We are interested in change--reform of a corrupting system and concerned about religious hypocrisy. We are respectful of a church that does much good despite its corruption.

PR campaigns by the bishops and the Vatican evade the historic and monumental crisis of epic proportions that is upon us. That is an additional scandal. The crisis awaits a fix.

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Read all the contributions to *NCR*'s Examining the Crisis series here: Examining the Crisis [2].

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