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Sex abuse and the legacy of lay passivity

Jamie Manson | Mar. 14, 2011 Grace on the Margins

This past Ash Wednesday, while most Catholics were being told to turn away from sin, the faithful in Philadelphia were informed that the hierarchy had, once again, failed to do so themselves.

After reading the details of this latest fallout of the church?s sex abuse epidemic, I am starting to wonder if there is anything left to say. For nine years we have heard unceasing, grim revelations about predatory priests and the bishops who protect them. Everyone knows it?s evil, it?s wrong, it?s the greatest stain on the sullied reputation of the Catholic Church.

Even with so much already said, there is still one question that troubles me. Why are we, the Catholic laity, still letting the hierarchy get away with it?

Yes, some great reform groups like Voice of the Faithful and Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests have been created in response to this crisis. They have done noble work in their advocacy on behalf of victims and in arguing for institutional change.

But why isn?t *everyone* speaking out? Why isn?t every church-going Catholic demanding repentance and genuine reform from church authorities?

Perhaps what disturbs me most is the impact that our failing to speak out might be having on young Catholics.

The sexual abuse crisis is not an issue like women?s ordination, married clergy, or the inclusion of gay and lesbian Catholics. Those concerns are critically important issues of justice.

But the sex abuse crisis is much deeper and darker. It?s about the rape, sodomy, and psychological abuse of children and adolescents by priests. It?s about church authorities going to great lengths to cover-up and to protect predators. The hierarchy cannot use the Bible, Canon Law, or tradition to defend themselves against these crimes.

The comment sections of the *NCR* columns on the Philadelphia scandal offer some great suggestions for protesting the offending hierarchs. Many agree that the only way to get the church to respond in a decent and decisive manner is for the laity to withhold its money.

Much as I agree that such a tactic would work, am I the only one sickened by the fact that depriving the church of financial support is the only way to shock them into acting with integrity?

Again, I ask, how is the church still surviving amid such a legacy of sexualized violence? What other institution in the U.S. would still persist amid corruption of this nature? What is it that keeps all Catholics from calling the hierarchy to accountability for the crimes that they have committed against children and adolescents over many decades?

Perhaps it is the passivity that characterizes Catholic inculcation that keeps us from believing that we have a voice, and that we, as baptized faithful, have a right to demand integrity from the church that we support and fund.

Or perhaps we?re suffering with garden-variety self-centeredness. If it didn?t happen to our child or in our parish, we don?t really have a stake in the issue. Often we continue our relationships with unjust or harmful institutions when the injustice or harm does not affect us directly. We separate our parish community from the wrongdoings of our overarching authority.

Or, perhaps, there is an even deeper psychological reaction at play here.

At the recent conference ?Lost? Twenty-Somethings and the Church,? Dr. Lisa Cataldo, assistant professor of pastoral counseling at Fordham University, spoke of the role of dissociation in the responses of the clergy and the laity to the sexual abuse crisis. Cataldo explained that when parts of our worldview are threatened too much, they have to split off from our consciousness so that we can avoid dealing with them.

Dissociation usually occurs in response to trauma, and allows the mind to distance itself from experiences that are too difficult to process. Is it this psychological safeguard that has allowed the laity, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to continue to enable the hierarchy by attending liturgies and financially supporting the church?

Even if the reasons behind the laity?s continued involvement with the church are psychologically complex, Cataldo believes that we would be remiss if we did not recognize that the church?s crimes have had an indelible impact on young adult Catholics.

The evidence presented at the ?Lost?? conference suggests that these repercussions have been sadly underestimated. Most young adult Catholics interviewed for the conference cited the sex abuse crisis as most damaging to their relationship with their church. Twenty-something panelist, Patrick Landry, summed up the thoughts of many when he reflected:

> Children are the most precious gift we have. Not only was this abuse happening, but other priests -- and bishops possibly -- knew. It?s confusing for us who are in our twenties ? what could have happened to this church that we grew up with such a strong connection to?
>
> It shook our faith in the church as an institution. This is an organization that seeks to define how you should live -- and then you find out all these terrible things [are] going on in their houses.

Most twenty-somethings were in their adolescence or teens when the sex abuse crisis broke. They were at the most vulnerable point in their emotional and sexual development when they learned that the church of their childhood failed to intervene while thousands of children became victims of sexualized violence at the hands of Catholic clergy.

And, yet, the hierarchy blames everything from the internet to movies to fashion for the mass descent of young adults into the ?culture of death.? They wonder why twenty-somethings have rejected their relationships to the church.

The church refuses to realize that they are asking young adults to trust an institution that betrayed families and violated innocent children.

If young adults cannot find much to respect about the institutional church, older adult Catholics should at least give them a reason to respect the laity. If we have felt unaffected enough by the crisis to keep silent, the wounds

of young Catholics -- both past and present -- should inspire us to raise our voices.

If we truly believe that the Eucharist we receive is the body of Jesus, we must find the courage to oppose the religious leaders who continue to inflict harm on the body of Christ.

So often we lament the lack of integrity in church authorities. But if we continue to remain immobilized by denial, weariness, or complacency, we may leave the next generations asking, where was the integrity of the laity?

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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