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"Christ Washing the Feet of the Disciples" (circa 1509-10, detail) by Albrecht Dürer (National Gallery of Art)



by Tom Roberts

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Hierarchy and vulnerability are seemingly incompatible ideas. Hierarchy (in the Catholic imagination) signals status, power, privilege and the ability to control. Vulnerability, on the other hand, signals weakness, a flaw of some sort. It is to be avoided.

But vulnerability, properly understood, is precisely what members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy need to embrace as a strength, argues [Fr. James Keenan](#), a Jesuit theologian. If it is ever to understand an essential interior element at the core of our humanity, the absence of which lies at the core of the sex abuse crisis, the hierarchy must develop a culture of vulnerability.

Keenan, Canisius Professor and director of the Jesuit Institute at Boston College, is developing an important and fascinating insight into the abuse crisis, elevating the discussion about clerical and hierarchical culture well beyond the changes in law and protocols and institutional structure that the scandal has forced upon the church. So I'm going to stick to one subject this week, with connections to past columns on the same and a hope that the discussion continues in the future.

Two months ago, in [a segment of this column](#), I made extended reference to an insightful piece [by Fr. Mark Slatter](#), associate professor of theological ethics at St. Paul University, Ottawa, Ontario, on clerical culture. He generally described culture as "a network of personal meaning and valuing." In the clerical world, that means a psychology that "engenders webs of kinship among priests, bishops and similarly disposed lay groups, bishops and cardinals, wealthy lay Catholics and think tanks."

Keenan read it and was particularly taken with Slatter's line that "hierarchical culture is the gold carrot for those predisposed to its allurements." He had been searching for the word to express that level of the culture that was different from clericalism in its formation and privilege. When he saw Slatter's use of "hierarchical culture," he thought, "That's it. So I sat down and wrote you that letter," he said in a recent phone conversation from Rome, where he is teaching this semester at the Pontifical Gregorian University.

[In that letter](#), in part, he said: "Hierarchicalism is that culture precisely at the center of the more recent sexual abuse scandal. ... The hierarchical culture has greater power and greater networking capabilities than clerical culture. We need then to distinguish the two, not because clericalism is not pernicious, it is, but because we have to understand better the viciousness of the culture more isolated and protected than the clergy's and certainly more complex, insidious and driven than we know or acknowledge."

Isolating hierarchical culture, he said in our recent conversation, "shifts the agenda to a more creative and more successful resolution of things."

Simultaneously, he was pondering the possibility of emphasizing vulnerability as a central issue in resolving the abuse crisis. The idea originated during his work with [Fr. Hans Zollner](#), a fellow Jesuit, recognized expert on sex abuse and head of the Centre for Child Protection at the Gregorian University. At the time, Keenan was developing an approach to sexual ethics.

"I think that the reason why we're so concerned about sexuality is because that's where, in those relationships, we're most vulnerable," he said in the recent phone interview. "As adults, people seek this, to be vulnerable and to be vulnerable with one another. I thought vulnerability was something to reflect on, and as I began to reflect on vulnerability — and read more and more on it — the more I began to realize that it had a broader connotation than simply sexual ethics."

Those two ideas — the distinctive culture of hierarchy and the concept of vulnerability — came together in a paper he delivered at the request of Archbishop Charles Scicluna to his priests in the Malta Archdiocese. It was a daunting invitation. Scicluna is that rare cleric who is widely respected for his work as point man for the Vatican in sorting through the sex abuse matter.

Keenan cites the work of Irish moral theologian Fr. Enda McDonagh, who developed a theology of vulnerability in his book *Vulnerable to the Holy: In Faith, Morality and Art*; American philosopher Judith Butler; and psychoanalyst and feminist theorist Jessica Benjamin. Keenan argues that vulnerability is not "a liability" but rather "something which establishes for us as human beings the possibility to be relational and therefore moral."

"Too many people think of vulnerability as a liability," he said in the paper, "because they confuse it with precarity."

To illustrate the point, Keenan uses two parables: the prodigal son and the good Samaritan.

Of the first, he writes, "While the beginning of the story focuses on the younger brother's precarity, the center of the parable focuses on the vulnerable one, who is the Father who recognizes his son in the distance, embraces him, re-incorporates him, and works to restore all that was unstable, threatened, exposed, and jeopardized. The same Father remains vulnerable to his older son who does not really suffer from precarity but from resentment. The stability in the story is the vulnerable father."

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In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus, Keenan writes, answers the question, "Who is my neighbor?", in a surprising way. At the start of the story, we are led to think that the answer to the question "is the man lying wounded on the road, that is, the precarious one. But by the end of the story we are no longer looking for the neighbor as the precarious one but at the vulnerable one who is acting. The Scribe rightly answers that the neighbor is the one who shows mercy."

The parable, then, writes Keenan, "is about the scandal of our redemption, not how bad we are, but how vulnerable God in Jesus Christ is."

He closes with the question, "Why couldn't we develop an ecclesiology based on the risk-taking vulnerability of God? Right now, as we muddle through trying to rebuild our church, should we not look precisely at vulnerability, a reality that we overlooked as our bishops turned deaf ears to vulnerable parents, about vulnerable children and vulnerable adults who were horrendously violated?"

The examples of Jesus' vulnerability are abundant, not least the example he gave at the Last Supper when he "relinquished his garments and washed the feet of his disciples, conveying the very vulnerability that he displayed in his passion and death," writes Keenan.

How would we form clergy and especially episcopacy — whose members are largely trained, as Keenan points out, on a track quite distinct from other clergy — in which the emphasis of the training "was not on dominance but on vulnerability? How would we be with the laity and in particular with women?" And would clergy, thus

vulnerable, be attentive "to those whose vulnerability has been long overlooked or whose precarity is now most at risk?"

Vulnerability is not a means for preserving hierarchy. "In order to get to a servant priesthood or to a servant episcopacy we must pass through and live out a culture of vulnerability," he writes. "There is a profound graceful irony in this: for it is precisely vulnerability that our clerics and hierarchs ignored throughout this scandal."

At the end of his paper, he notes, "We priests and bishops have really, rightly taken a beating: everyone has a program. A judgment, a claim, a strategy for us." But he sees behind each critique "a hope that our defensiveness and that our guard come down and we become what we really are, vulnerable."

"If we let the vulnerability of our God enter into our seminaries and our chanceries, maybe we could put away some of those allurements that we already know are as banal as they are compromising," he said.

Perhaps.

These are the kind of questions essential now, in what Keenan describes as phase three of the abuse crisis, the one in which, finally, the clerical and hierarchical cultures come front and center. He told me he is continuing to develop the ideas and their implications and we'll be publishing more as he checks in with us. It is a privilege to host this kind of discussion in this space. Stay tuned.

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