The Crisis of Clerical Sexual Abuse in the Church

Reflections of a Pastor

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A pastor recognizes God’s ongoing presence as the Church begins to move beyond the darkness of the sexual abuse scandal. While forgiveness cannot be forced or exacted, only hoped for, the author calls on all those ordained, bishops and priests, to lament the sins committed so that all of God’s people can move forward.

In nine seconds on August 14, 2003, fifty million people and businesses were deprived of electricity. Our precarious connection to one another was exposed. Some areas of the same grid, however, checked the possibility of a complete domino effect along the electrical network. In deregulated times the electric companies in those unaffected areas had reinvested profits into upgrading their infrastructure. In those short nine seconds, a hundred million people could have been affected but fortunately were not.

In February 2002 the public discovered that the sexual scandals facing the Church held national implications. The tragedy for individuals and families was shown to be a systemic crisis. The abuse of children by priests and bishops—and the horrifying cover-up by some diocesan bishops and religious superiors—exposed sin, crime, and serious mismanagement. The Archdiocese of Boston became the epicenter of a sensational crisis. Many of the ordained caused sinful

harm, and some did so with full knowledge of the situation. Nor could the festering crisis escape the attention of Pope John Paul II and Vatican officials. Righteous indignation was heard around the world: from the adults who had been abused as children and their families, from the abusers—including priests and bishops—from the laity, parish and diocesan communities, from neighborhoods and society itself. All cried out in pain and demanded justice.

Every Sunday, parish priests and pastoral ministers faced the questions, concerns, sadness, and anger of their congregations. While the media were sometimes inaccurate in their reporting, they rightly exposed the horrific news: some priests and bishops, always persons in positions of power and trust, compromised the safety of our children. Indeed, a blackout of trust had occurred, and many demanded a drastic repair of the Church’s pastoral infrastructure. The Dallas Norms of 2002, approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, pointed to several directions, and each direction was hopeful and responsive. However, the episcopal leadership neither took itself to task publicly nor did it censure some of the most egregiously delinquent members of its own college.

Sunday after Sunday, these forces could not be easily ignored. Parishes were thrust into an interactive world. A cover-up anywhere in the Church mattered everywhere. Eventually, what assisted many pastors and parish ministers were the routines of parish life. These routines offered an impetus for deepening insight, for collective recovery, greater awareness of the need for systemic changes, and an openness to Real Presence. Pastoral stories and parish routines provided metaphors to imagine Church in our own day.

Real Presence

On the night he was betrayed, he took bread and gave you thanks” (Eucharistic Prayer III). Not long ago, when I proclaimed the Eucharistic Prayer, I paused for a long period. It took me some time to “return” to the altar and to the host I was holding. I knew I had been given a “word” for my personal prayer and reflection later on in the day. How can someone in the throes of imminent betrayal by his friends give thanks to God? People betrayed by their spouse or siblings, by politicians or priests, by CEOs or cardinals rarely see the opportunity for giving thanks. Parish ministers know this dynamic and engage it pastorally again and again.

Several years ago I was called to the hospital in the early hours of the morning. A woman had just given birth to a still-born child. I arrived to see the mother and father in the physical embrace of pained intimacy. The mother was holding a perfectly formed baby boy, who had just completed nine months of growth in her womb. The eyes of these parents flowed with gentle tears. They were like three people as one. Although I had never met them before this moment, I went to
them and awkwardly joined in their pained embrace. What permission priests receive!

There was silence, quiet tears, sighing, and a lack of hysteria and screaming. “Father, would you baptize our son, Joshua?” I heard them say, as their tears fell on this perfect child. “Sure,” I replied. My eyes too began to fill with tears. Instead of going away to find some tap water, I took the tears of the child’s mother and father, three times touching the infant’s forehead saying, “Joshua, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Life had betrayed this couple, yet they wanted to connect this moment to God and to their Church. I find our language of “Real Presence” for the Eucharist apt in describing the real presence of God even in the darkest moments of betrayal. After all the infidelity of the Israelites, it is Joshua who writes, “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Josh 24:16). So, too, the parents of little Joshua desired to serve the Lord, even though they felt betrayed by life at that moment.

Another example comes to mind. In February 1982 a photo of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin appeared on the front page of the Chicago Sun-Times. The cardinal was shown presiding at the funeral for three members of the Janus family. There were three caskets at the foot of the sanctuary. They had been killed by someone who had tampered with bottles containing Tylenol in a drugstore. Chicago, indeed the nation, felt terror in the face of the reality that medicine had intentionally been used to poison innocent victims. Cardinal Bernardin did not know the family personally, yet there he was presiding at funeral. That is my kind of bishop! Cardinal Bernardin placed himself at the center of a family, a city, and a nation in pain. His pastoral presence absorbed some of the pain of life’s betrayal and so empowered us to stand alongside the suffering of others in the strength of the sacrifice of Christ.

While many spontaneously rant and rave in the face of the sinfulness of betrayal, to give thanks rarely crosses their minds. It is, of course, not thanks for the betrayal. Still, to give thanks provides the increased capacity to claim the power which only vulnerability can provide. “My grace is enough for you; for in weakness power reaches perfection” (2 Cor 12:9). A family or a Catholic parish community that thrives on factions and nurses hurts cannot survive.

Betrayal creates loss and hurt. A parishioner I know struggled with repeated bouts of cancer, problematic family relationships, and a stroke that left her searching for the way to form words. Her commentary was poignant. “When
your losses and hurts no longer control you and you no longer blindly react to them, healing has begun.” Betrayal can either leave us seething in anger and cynicism or launch us toward moments of vulnerability and transition. As the Real Presence of the Eucharist holds the eyes of the assembly and priest, so too facing the painful moments of vulnerability and transition can lead to wholeness.

**Deepened Insight**

“By the mingling of this water and wine, may we share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” During the preparation of the gifts, these words are prayed silently by the deacon or priest while he adds water to the wine. When I pray these words at the 6:30 A.M. Mass, I add more than a drop of water, however, since the water dilutes the wine a bit. Is this the history of the gesture's meaning—cutting the homemade brew of centuries ago? A simple ritual moment can become a parable. Our sacramental traditions reveal the incarnate mystery—the mingling of the human and divine. Our rituals mix human and divine with everyday meaning. I know the scientist can remove water from wine, but how intoxicating would that be? God has decided to “mix” with us so that we might “mix” with God.

Our Church has three ways to refer to the sacrament of penance: confession, penance, reconciliation. After two millennia of renewal and re-organization, a number of versions of the sacrament remain. While confession was always first, for centuries public penance was required prior to absolution. Eventually, only the promise of performing a penance was required before absolution was granted. I was slow to conclude that the Third Rite of the Sacrament of Penance—that of a general confession of sins with general absolution—was really a disservice to the people, because the “naming” of failure remained unstated. We hate to admit sin and failure. We hate to linger in the pitiable behavior that alienates ourselves and others from God. Let's get to the forgiveness part and bypass the confessing of our sins, if we can!

I use a tactic when I prepare older children for the sacrament of penance. I talk about growing up and maturing. I might say, “You know how little kids blame someone else for their mistakes. Sometimes they say things like, ‘He started it’ or 'She called me a name.’ Mature persons can frankly admit, ‘It's my fault, I did it.’” But we adults, too, can easily be self-absorbed, and so the children learn from us to use the tactic of blame to let themselves off the hook. Maturity begins when we see ourselves as being at fault, not someone else. When we internally acknowledge our faults and failures, then there is the possibility of our uttering our guilt.

Recently, our parish school held volleyball tryouts. They were handled poorly, however. The children were hurt and their parents were angry. When the admin-
istration clearly took ownership for their failure, the tension eased. The hurt still lingered, but the volleyball games were able to begin. Simply admitting failure and expressing sorrow for the ensuing hurt prevented a festering of anger and hurt.

Confession is the starting point. Only the individual, or the leader on behalf of the group, can admit failure and express sorrow. In the document entitled A Report on the Crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States (February 27, 2004), the lay members of the commission appointed by the United States’ bishops acknowledge in no uncertain terms that concealing the sins and crimes of priest-abusers and the bishops who protected them was a higher priority than the safety of our children.

Also, most priests who have abused children cannot admit the harm and hurt they did to them. They might say, “So much time has passed; what does it matter now?” The priest-abusers seek forgiveness but without admitting the sin and the crime, and thereby put yet another burden on the abused. God forgives for the asking, but we must admit our culpability. And, our mea culpa (“It is my fault!”) must find expression. As for the forgiveness of the abused, it cannot be rushed. God will inspire it in God’s own time.

On March 12, 2000, John Paul II held a prayer service on forgiveness, “A Day of Pardon.” I found it remarkable. I distributed the text of the rite to our weekend congregants. The Holy Father asked forgiveness from God for the sins committed by the Church over the centuries: for sins committed against Israel, for sins caused by the Church’s rejection of other cultures and religions, for acts of hostility toward women, and for placing impediments in the way of the human race; all these sins were committed in the service of truth. For so many, an important distinction was lost. The Holy Father was not requesting forgiveness from those offended; rather he was publicly admitting the sins of the Church and asking God for forgiveness. The admission of sin can lead to the offer of forgiveness. However, one cannot require forgiveness from the ones harmed; that places an additional burden. God’s forgiveness is immediate when we are truly repentant. For human beings however, the response of forgiveness to genuine repentance might take some time.

The sexual abuse scandal requires the public and genuine admission of sin, by individuals and the institution. We must pray that God will move hearts toward forgiveness rather than revenge or resentment. Perhaps we can only pray

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for the desire at some point in the future for those harmed to find forgiveness possible.

In the mid-1980s Archbishop Harry Flynn, while he was bishop of Lafayette, Louisiana, shared an aspect of an abuse case. After all the legal procedures—civil and ecclesiastical—were completed, after the admissions of guilt and the settlements, Bishop Flynn asked a family member of the one abused, “I must ask one last painful question.” “Yes,” she replied. “Have you forgiven the priest?” “No, and I fear for my soul.” The bishop paused and then said: “Then I will ask God that at some time in the future you will be granted in some small way the beginning of the desire to forgive him.” Forgiveness can neither be forced nor exacted. It must be given freely. When the person abused regains freedom, then grace will abound.

Our ritual of facing sin—confession, penance, and absolution—is the rite of our human access to divine mercy. To miss any step means missing the whole process. To blame others, to lessen the severity of abuse, to believe simplistically that time heals, to become mute in the face of the evil experienced—all these forces divert the mingling of the human and divine in the process of reconciliation.

I pray that the priests and bishops who have harmed children will find the courage to admit the crimes they have committed and the tragedy for the individuals, their families, the community, and society that they have provoked.

I pray that bishops who compromised the safety of our children for the sake of priests or the institutional Church will have the courage to admit their sin and do so publicly, for their own sakes as well as for the Church and the broader society. I especially pray for those bishops who deliberately avoided implementing the five principles the bishops of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops agreed to in June 1992.

**Collective Recovery**

The media has been, perhaps inadvertently, very catholic, in the sense of all-inclusive. Members of other professions have abused children. Even representatives of other religious bodies have done so. This scandal caused by Catholic priests and bishops has captured the collective imagination precisely because the public and our culture have understood the underlying oneness of the priesthood itself.

And yet, so many priests seem to resist this basic awareness. When one succeeds, all succeed. When one falters, all falter. When one priest commits a crime, all priests are affected. While our vocational call is personal, it is not isolated. We are intimately connected. Our behavior over the years has reflected a commitment to ministry and to the good work of the priest. We never truly act alone. The same is true of a bishop. There is no diocesan bishop without diocesan...
priests, and there are no diocesan priests without fellow priests and a bishop. We simply do not exist in isolation—literally!

The salient rediscovery of Holy Orders for me uncovers the sacrament of us all. We are a priestly people. While on retreat in March 2003 I discovered this intimate connection, lodged deeply in the recesses of my heart. As is customary for a priest on retreat, I found a confessor and confronted my need for forgiveness and healing. I was surprised, then, that as I was making my confession, I broke into tears. This Irishman tears up on occasion, but he never cries! My confessor, knowing that a nerve had been touched, let the weeping continue. When I could finally find the words, I simply said, “Priests have harmed children.” These four words revealed the depth of my inner lamentation in the face of sin and evil. “I have never done that before,” I hastened to explain. My confessor gently and kindly called me to the meaning of what was happening. He said, “You are participating in the pain of Christ; you are in a state of lamentation not for your sin but for sin, terrible sin. This sin requires the tears of the Shepherd.”

Somehow, priests along with bishops and the laity must enter the lamentation for sins committed. Legalities must not stand in the way. The Church must impose upon all those who have sexually abused children those sanctions that convey our unambiguous commitment to protect all children. A group of priests from South Dakota have gotten the insight. According to newspaper reports, thirty active and retired priests from the Diocese of Rapid City have established a nonprofit fund that they call the Lazarus Fund. These priests contribute 5 percent of their monthly salaries to the fund. In addition, they agree to fast once a week and to offer Masses to pray for healing for the pain that priestly sexual abuse has caused. The fund is administered independently of the diocese, though the diocese can apply for funds to pay for counseling of the survivors of clerical abuse. How hopeful for the Church if this practice was to become national, if the priests who have abused children would participate as well, and if the bishops who have abused their authority would participate! The valuable insight that the priesthood is one would have a public impact that could be national in scope.

Systemic Changes

“God gave the growth” (1 Cor 3:6). Changing hearts belongs to God. However, we need to embrace the difficult journey of implementing systemic institutional changes for the good of children as well as the whole Church. The black-out of trust requires renewing the pastoral infrastructure of our institutional life. Any institutional change causes loss before it sees growth. Although many agree that change is inevitable and necessary, resistance to it remains an important reality in the Church and a challenging aspect of any transition.
While in college, I participated in a seminar in group dynamics. Two similar principles have assisted me in almost all my pastoral ministry: 10 percent of any given group will disagree and will challenge any change in direction. This disagreement remains critical to the direction sought and serves several purposes. The Holy Spirit can speak from within the minority, even though it be a lone and contrary voice. Every leader and group must invite opposing views and listen carefully to them. Differing voices offer important insights. One should not be surprised at encountering resistance, and leadership need not get defensive. This kind of careful listening results in a more nuanced understanding of a situation.

Parish life knows this important dynamic. Any pastor or leadership team who recognizes that a parish community or school needs systemic changes will encounter resistance. As the church in the United States and our bishops develop a new attentiveness to the protection of children, resistance may offer the right challenge to deepen effective systemic changes. However, moving forward cannot occur if we wait for everyone to be on board.

The Dallas Norms have initiated the right process. In January 2004 the first of many annual reviews of 191 dioceses and eparchies was released. The annual review examines the protocols that are in place to assure the protection of children. These protocols include the immediate handling of any allegations, removal of priests as required, assistance for those abused, and educational programs that address the tragedy of child abuse and the ways to prevent its re-occurrence. The public reviews of the 191 dioceses and bishops in the ongoing implementation of these protective norms assure that the correct systemic changes are still effective.

The reports of February 27 summarized the fifty-year history of abuse of children by priests and the financial costs the abuse has entailed. The emotional cost and spiritual brokenness cannot be quantified. These two reports point to some systemic changes. Bishops have opened their records on this topic to public scrutiny, and they have set in place systems to assure the safety of children. True enough, some bishops are still resisting. While resistance must be heard, the protection of children must be assured in national terms. Any diocese that fails to go public regarding its protocols arouses the question of why it chooses not to be transparent. Secrecy has been the demon throughout the scandal. Covering up criminal action did not serve the past and cannot serve the future. No longer can the leadership hide behind privilege, power, or position regarding the safety of children.

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We pray that this time we will get this right. If we do, the Church could make a major contribution towards a cultural awareness of the horrific effects of child abuse and the ways to prevent its recurrence. Years ago a handful of angry mothers founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Now we are aware of the deadly mix of drinking and driving, and behaviors have changed. In another example, when pharmaceutical companies realized that their medications could be poisoned, they reacted with tamper-proof bottles. In both cases, the problem was perceived and addressed.

Less secrecy, more transparency, children protected before adults, deliberate listening processes, priests calling each other to the accountable behavior they have promised, and priests and laity challenging their bishops to reject the triumphal leadership styles of the past and to embrace more collaborative styles of governance: these are some of the tasks remaining for our collective attention. Simply put, we cannot behave as we have done in the past.

**Conclusion**

A crisis exposes a person for who he or she is. When Jim told his barber about his thirty-five-year-old friend Steve, a father of three, who fought cancer for almost two years, the barber listened. Steve had struggled with several types of cancer. No one knew whether the cancer had been caused by chemicals used in his time fighting forest fires in the Pacific Northwest, or whether it had resulted from his exposure to chemicals in the first Iraq war. Nonetheless, the cancer won the twenty-month battle. Steve was courageous throughout the ordeal. He was a pillar of strength for his wife, his children, his parents, siblings, and his friends. “He found such strength,” Jim said to the barber. The barber responded: “I think a crisis actually exposes a man rather than invites him to an unfamiliar place.” Indeed, the wisdom of a barber! The cancer proved Steve’s true depth and breadth.

Scandal-filled times reveal the inner life of a person, a community, a church, a society. The Church is indeed exposed. Serious sin and crimes have occurred. Grave malfeasances on the part of bishops have been aired. Systemic changes of policies and administration of those policies have been required. Our Catholic roots have been deepened. When one sins, all are affected. When one succeeds, all succeed. When each diocese creates public and transparent protocols to protect children and invites public scrutiny, trust has a way of finding itself embedded in our faith-filled lives again.

Allow me to return to my opening metaphor. The public response to the August 14, 2003, blackout did not include violence, theft, or rioting. People slept on the streets of New York City without fear. Visitors in Cleveland were given water and food. Fifty million people behaved decently! No one person led this...
humane response to tragedy; everyone found kindness and compassion aplenty. Could this response have been a hidden result of the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States? One can only speculate. However, evidence of collective and spontaneous human kindness on August 14, 2003, was abundant. Humans can behave humanely and compassionately!

It seems to me that this blackout of trust caused by the scandal may have embedded in our Church a call to the basic expectations of the Master. We simply must behave differently. The report of February 27, 2004, remains an extraordinary document. The bishops called for the review; the laity has called the ordained back to their responsibility as shepherds; specific bishops have been called to task; the college of bishops has been chided publicly for failing to act as a college, i.e., not calling each other to safeguard the protection of children.

This is an important time to be a priest. Today, priests and bishops must inwardly adhere to their basic commitments. If the ordained minister truly allows Christ to take center place in his unfolding life; if the ordained wish to grow in the transparency of faith and behavior; if the ordained actively seek to avoid the pedestals of privilege, power, and position; if the ordained see the essential role of the laity in the quality life of the parish and church; if the ordained exercise true fraternal correction, then the Church and the priesthood will flourish.