

REFLECTIONS

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The Barque in a Raging Sea

Suddenly a violent storm came up on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by waves; but he was asleep. They came and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" He said to them, "Why are you terrified, O you of little faith?" (Matthew 8:24-26)

The Barque of Peter is now being buffeted by revelations and allegations of clerical immorality and hierarchical cover-up. The recent report of the Attorney General of Pennsylvania describing widespread sexual exploitation of seminarians and adolescent males by priests in that state, coupled with the accusations of the obscene behavior of Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, have been devastating. Many people in the Church, clergy as well as laity, have feelings of shock, anger, sadness, shame and betrayal.

Yet, this may be only the beginning of an investigative frenzy. The attorneys general of Missouri and Illinois have announced they will conduct investigations of the Catholic dioceses in their respective states, while the attorneys general of New York and Nebraska appear to be preparing to conduct similar probes. Several seminaries also have announced they are undertaking independent examinations of accusations of sexual abuse within their institutions. Various media outlets are suggesting that comparable investigations should be conducted in every state, and that the U.S. Department of Justice file federal racketeering charges against the Catholic Church under the RICO Act. The Vatican is sending Archbishop Charles Scicluna, its most experienced sex-crimes investigator, to study the situation in the United States. His previous investigation into sex abuse cover-ups in Chile led to the mass resignation of the entire conference of Chilean bishops. The hierarchy in America may soon face greater scandal, a torrent of litigation, and hierarchical upheaval.

Pope Francis, in his *Letter to the People of God* on August 20, adopted the words of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger: "How much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to [Christ]!" Some may consider that the clerical abuses are no greater than what has occurred among media moguls, public school teachers, athletic directors and others in lay positions of power. But clerical abuses are worse because those in religious vocations are responsible for the faith and the salvation of souls.

Most bishops and priests are faithful to their vows, lead chaste lives and are wonderful shepherds to their people. This does not, however, lessen the malefaction in the Church.

Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison stated: "[W]e are talking about deviant sexual – almost exclusively homosexual – acts by clerics. We're also talking about homosexual propositions and abuses against seminarians and young priests by powerful priests, bishops, and cardinals...It is time to admit that there is a homosexual subculture within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church."

There will be significant changes in church operations and oversight. Carl Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, has called for "a full and complete investigation of sexual abuse led by an independent commission that includes laity," and "complete transparency by the Catholic hierarchy into all matters of criminal sexual misconduct past or future," adding that

“priests and bishops who refuse to live according to their promises of celibacy should be removed from public ministry.” Similar recommendations have been made by several bishops and archbishops, including Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, USCCB president.

But, the issue of sexual abuse and cover-up in the Church demands more than administrative changes. There is no shortage of effective policies and procedures already in place in many dioceses. The problem, as Bishop Edward Scharfenberger of Albany described it, is a “profoundly spiritual crisis.” Archbishop Samuel Aquila of Denver went a step farther, stating: “We have also failed to recognize that the spiritual battle is real. Some say the Lord has forsaken the Church, but this is not true. Rather, there are some within the Church who have forsaken Jesus and the Gospel. The devil is real and uses confusion, chaos, discouragement, and negative thinking to draw us away from Jesus.”

With this turmoil, some may regard the Church to be a failed institution and turn from the faith. That is exactly what the devil wants. As Cardinal Raymond Burke has stated, “What we must never permit is that these gravely immoral acts, which have sullied so much the face of the Church, permit us to lose trust in Our Lord.”

Bishop Robert J. Baker of Birmingham gives us a path forward: “We cannot allow these scandals to destroy our faith...Only by turning to prayer and penance, and by living a life of sacrificial virtue, steeped in the sacraments of the church, does any one of us stand a chance against the great evils of our time.”

Repentance, reform and rebuilding are needed. While action is necessary to address the temporal aspects of the problem, prayer is essential in order to center the activities on God. Prayer and action, the spiritual and the temporal -- when the two are combined the Church can be rebuilt on a foundation of Biblical principles, on the love of God and charity to our neighbor.

We must strengthen our devotion to the Mass, the rosary, Marian hours of prayer, retreats, spiritual readings, Eucharistic adoration, and other means to connect with the will of God. We must pray for the Pope, cardinals, bishops and priests that they are faithful to Christ. We must pray that the Church, though it is composed of members with human weaknesses, remains one, catholic, apostolic and holy.

We must fast to atone for the sins of depravity committed by members of the clergy for, as Bishop Morlino reminds us, “Some sins, like some demons, can only be driven out by prayer and fasting.” With faith in God’s mercy, the Barque will survive the storm.

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