

A Time for Redemption

by David Reinhard

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I think the Roman Catholic Church has turned the corner on its priest sexual abuse scandal. Yes, turned the corner.

True, the stories about pedophile priests—the crimes and cover-ups—will fill the news and fuel the outrage of Catholics, non-Catholics and anti-Catholics for some time to come. The courts, civil and criminal, will continue to mete out some measure of justice in these cases for a good while.

And commentators of all stripes, faiths and motivations will offer their opinions on what ails the Catholic priesthood. But, in recent weeks, the church has finally moved to right itself, and not because of any recent statements from the Vatican or American bishops, welcome as they may be. I've seen the first fitful steps at two churches in Portland [Oregon], and I'm sure many other Catholics have witnessed the same thing at their churches. It happens when a priest breaks from discussing the daily scripture readings and devotes his homily to today's all-too-routine headlines. It happens when a priest marshals the courage and grace to speak about the unspeakable—a priest's sexual abuse of children, what Philadelphia's Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua calls "the most depraved of moral aberrations."

How difficult it must be for these priests to address this with their congregations, particularly with altar boys or girls and other youngsters in attendance. It must be uncomfortable as, well, hell. Certainly, it is for the most faithful Catholics.

But silence will not suffice. Screening out unfit candidates for the priesthood and maintaining zero-tolerance for priests

who have sex with minors—a category that extends beyond pedophilia, which is about adult sexual attraction to prepubescent children—are important. It's encouraging that most dioceses have taken action. But sometimes talk is as important as action, particularly when the actions have occurred in the church's bureaucratic warrens and within secret legal settlements.

Facing this scandal head-on—finally speaking about the unspeakable—is, I think, vital for the priests and their parishioners, not to mention the church. Priests and parishioners need each other now more than ever. Their responses to the scandal are probably not so different.

That became clear—painfully and comfortingly—on a recent day when Father Paul Peri stood in the center aisle at St. Michael's in downtown Portland and poured out his heart. He wanted to talk about the proverbial elephant in the living room, the Catholic topic everyone and no one was discussing at church services. So he talked to the congregation.

He talked about how sad he was for the victims of this abuse. He talked about how angry he was at those who had brought shame on the church and, yes, the media's hyping this story out of proportion. He talked about the shame he feels and his worry that this scandal will turn away men seeking the priesthood. He talked, as well, about the priests he knows.

They're probably not so different from the 40,000 other priests across the nation. They get up each day, celebrate Mass, teach and minister to the poor, the lonely, the dispossessed. They're not without sin, but they are without scandal. They live in the light, not the darkness. Yet they are not the public face of the Catholic clergy these days—Boston's defrocked priest John Geoghan is—and the scandal of this maddening reality was Peri's own cross to bear this Lent.

He ended on an upbeat note that day, but it was not Peri's hopeful words that seemed to move his flock. It was the mere discussion of "the issue" and the fact that his feelings—his sorrow, anger, shame, and frustration—mirrored their own. Did the tears come from witnessing Peri's pain or from a relief that our common scandal was brought out of the darkness and into the light?

Parishioners, of course, cannot know what it means to be a priest these scandal-filled days. If you're a priest, how does anyone know you haven't molested a child? How do you defend yourself against suspicions when the crime itself occurs in private? You almost have to prove something didn't happen; you almost have to prove a negative.

It's an impossible burden that makes an often lonely calling lonelier. In the current atmosphere, the clerical collar becomes a kind of choker. As one priest told me, "You stand up there and feel people who don't know you suspect you of being a child molester."

This has been a season of suffering for the Catholic clergy and laity. You hear or read the stories of clerical sexual abuse, as well as reports that molester-priests were shuffled from one parish to another. You're outraged on almost every level. You know this goes on in other institutions. The news is full of reports of sexual abuse in other religions and helping professions. There's scant evidence that pedophilia is any more prevalent in the Catholic Church than in the larger population.

But the gap between the church's moral teaching and these acts—the hideous behavior and the church hierarchy's apparent tolerance of it—is great. It makes the church a natural and legitimate target of special outrage. You know these pedophile priests are a relative handful of men who've served in the priesthood over the years. You know these cases most often go back decades when pedophilia was seen more as a moral

failing—"go and sin no more"—than an intractable psychological pathology.

But you also know that a single instance of sex abuse is one too many, particularly when it's committed by an alleged man of God and facilitated by the church's actions; particularly when it alienates a young person or family from God's love.

If Peri's homily put the current scandal in human context, Father Emmerich Vogt's homily a few days later at Portland's Holy Rosary Priory placed today's news in a historical and cultural context.

This is not the first time that scandal has rocked the church. In fact, said Vogt, the church was born in the scandal of Judas. "Judas priests" have been with the church throughout history and continue to this day—not only in today's pedophile priests, but in priests and other religious figures who soft-pedal the church's moral teaching on abortion, homosexuality, adultery, illegitimacy and pornography. Even the papacy has had its scandal. Pope Alexander VI's four illegitimate children in the 15th century are but one example.

This certainly isn't the first time Catholics have been called on to speak out against scandalous clerical behavior. As Vogt noted, St. Francis de Sales was asked to do so in his day. "Those who commit these types of scandals are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder," said the 17th-century bishop. Their terrible example destroys the faith of others in God.

The church might be a divine institution, but it's filled with imperfect humans who are inevitably products of their time and culture. And look at our era's sexed-up atmosphere. What should we expect? Our priests come from our culture's families. Vogt said it's mystifying to witness a secular culture that celebrates or tolerates all of today's degradation now zeroing in on the church's sex scandal.

Yes, the stories of abusive priests command attention.

Nobody's more eager to bring justice to these priests than the parishioners who love their church and children, or the priests who are unfairly tarred.

But, as a Catholic, the attention often seems outsized to me. Is the church being singled out for special scrutiny here? Is it because the church has resisted the postmodern moral order? Is it because the church maintains an unshakable belief in absolute truth and opposes all of today's media-friendly hobbyhorses—abortion, relaxed sexual mores and all the rest? Is it because there are many other agendas at work?

What else to conclude when Catholics and non-Catholics offer up as fixes such things as ending priestly celibacy or opening the Catholic priesthood to women? In New Jersey, an Orthodox rabbi will soon go to trial on charges of groping two teen-age girls. In South Carolina, a Baptist minister is serving a 60-year prison sentence for sexually abusing 23 children. In Maryland, a former Episcopal priest was convicted recently of molesting a 14-year-old boy. In Portland, the Mormon Church announced last fall a \$3 million settlement in a lawsuit brought by a man claiming he was abused by a high priest in the early 1990s. Celibacy and the all-male clergy didn't lead to the sins of these religious leaders.

And yet, however disproportionate the current targeting of the Catholic Church may be, this sad reality remains: Some Catholic priests violated their vows and their parish's children, and the hierarchy didn't respond in the best interests of its children. Priests and parishioners together must say, "Enough." Today's Judas priests must find no sanctuary in the Catholic Church.

Past scandal, Vogt assured his flock, has always produced good men and women to renew the church. We've seen the first stirrings of this in places like St. Michael's, Holy Rosary and other parishes across the country.

Yes, the sex-with-minors scandal is infuriating, depressing and embarrassing. But there's worse to endure. As St. Francis de Sales also said about scandal in the church, "While those who give scandal are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder, those who take scandal—who allow scandals to destroy their faith—are guilty of spiritual suicide."

Yes, the church will have to carry this cross well beyond Lent. But Catholics are ever a hopeful people who believe in the redemptive power of suffering. We are, this day reminds us, an Easter people.

David Reinhard is an associate editor for the Oregonian newspaper. This article originally appeared in the March 31 edition of the Sunday Oregonian.