

Crisis in the Priesthood

Twenty-two years ago I wrote a book, *"A Crisis of Truth: The Attack on Faith, Morality and Mission in the Catholic Church,"* because I was so concerned at the prevalence of false teaching and the open acceptance of immorality even in leadership circles of the Church. (The book is now out of print). The chapters I wrote on "The Undermining of Sexual Morality," "Seeing and Not Seeing," "Powers, Principalities, and Organizations," "Pastoral Passivity," "Pointing Toward Judgment," and "A Time for Repentance," provide amazing documentation on the root causes of the corruption that is being revealed today.

When the bishop of Palm Beach, Florida resigned, admitting inappropriate sexual behavior with seminarians when he was rector of a seminary, it was interesting to note that he invoked the theological climate of the late 1970's as a factor in his behavior. But just as the moral theologians who were spreading this corruption widely among the leadership circles of the Church were ineffectively corrected and disciplined by the bishops, so too were the priests and many others who acted on the basis of their corrupt theories. This is now becoming clear to everyone.

Eight years ago, Fr. Benedict Groeschel declared in an interview that this is "the darkest time in Catholic history and the history of the United States." Since then, it has only become darker, at least regarding the manifestation of the bad fruits that were hidden for so long. And of course this problem is not restricted to the United States. The Church in Canada, Ireland, and Australia has gone through waves of shocking revelations in this regard and the cleansing and purification in these countries is by no means over. And as I write, bishops in Germany and Poland have just been asked to resign because of sexual immorality.

As I write this, a day hardly goes by without some additional revelation of the cover-up of sexual immorality among the clergy. But as one of my priest friends recently said, "this is only the tip of the iceberg." **The focus is on immorality that is also a civil crime, namely, the sexual exploitation of minors. But there is a much wider problem of sexual immorality among "consenting adults" that is also being covered up and is sapping the vitality and fervor of the Church.** I have gotten so many heart-breaking letters over the years from parishioners who have stumbled upon this corruption (of adult homosexuality, adultery and fornication) but have been frustrated in their efforts to deal with it. Bishops have ignored their pleas for help, and have simply transferred offending clergy to another parish. Admittedly some of these cases were tough judgment calls and reasonable people could have decided these differently with no imputation of irresponsibility. And it's far easier to see clearly in hindsight than it sometimes is on the spot. Others of these cases though were so clear and so abominable that it is truly difficult to imagine how these priests could have been reassigned again and again with "good recommendations."

What are we to make of all this? **While these are sad and dark days, they are also very hopeful days. For the first time since the corruption of the post Vatican II times set in, there is the hope that honest and vigorous repentance and reform may come about.** It is not because the Church leadership willingly took this path, but because the world is forcing us into it. That is shameful but not without precedence. When God's

people in the past didn't judge themselves he would send for "outsiders" to carry out the chastisement that was needed. And who of us has not experienced this at least in some measure in our own lives?

And while these are dark days, there have been dark days before, very similar to what we are experiencing today, that God has brought the Church through. Catherine of Siena, writing in the 14th century, gives us an example of how to deal with such situations as she confronted the sexual corruption among clergy of her day. On the one hand, she made very clear our need to honor, respect and value the dignity of the priesthood as an amazing gift from God, and at the same time not to cover-up moral corruption when it appears. Catherine shares what she senses God the Father showing her about the situation (the reference numbers are chapters in Catherine's book, "The Dialogue" in the Paulist Press edition):

"I have told you, dearest daughter, something of the reverence that ought to be given my anointed ones no matter how sinful they may be. For reverence neither is nor should be given them for what they are in themselves, but only for the authority I have entrusted to them. The sacramental mystery cannot be lessened or divided by their sinfulness. Therefore, your reverence for them should never fail— not for their own sake, but because of the treasure of the blood." (118)

"For those who are not corrected and those who do not correct are like members beginning to rot...But those who are in authority today do not do this. In fact they pretend not to see (119)...They will never correct persons of any importance...They will, however, correct the little people (122)... And do you know why? Because the root of selfish love is alive in them, and this is the source of their perverse slavish fear...They believe they can succeed through injustice, by not reproofing the sins of their subjects... Another reason they will not correct others is that they themselves are living in the same or greater sins. They sense that the same guilt envelops them, so they cast aside fervor and confidence and, chained by slavish fear, pretend they do not see." (119)

"I want to show you the wretchedness of their lives, so that you and my other servants will have the more reason to offer me humble and constant prayer for them. No matter where you turn, to diocesan or religious, priests or bishops, lowly or great, young or old, you see nothing but sin...the filth of deadly sin." (121)

"They get up in the morning with their minds contaminated and their bodies corrupt. After spending the night bedded down with deadly sin they go to celebrate Mass! O tabernacles of the devil!" (123)

"No, these wretches not only do not restrain their weakness; they make it worse by committing that cursed unnatural sin...The stench reaches even up to me, supreme Purity, and is so hateful to me that for this sin alone five cities were struck down by my divine judgment. For my divine justice could no longer tolerate it, so despicable to me is this abominable sin." (124)

Concerning the active practice of homosexuality, Catherine hears the Father say: "How abominable this sin is to me in any person. Now imagine how much more hateful it is in those I have called to live celibately." (124)

“And how can those who are so sinful bring their subjects to justice and reproach them for their sins? They cannot, for their own sins have left them bereft of any enthusiasm or zeal for holy justice...And sometimes when they recognize that these religious are incarnate devils, they send them from one monastery to the next to those who are incarnate devils like themselves. Thus each corrupts the other... Superiors are the cause of these and many other evils because they do not keep their eyes on their subjects...they pretend not to see their wretched behavior.”
(125)

Why is this corruption being revealed? So a true cleansing can take place. So proper authority may finally act. So we may pray. So all of us may examine our own lives as well. So, obstacles to the coming of a new springtime for the Church may be removed in all of us.

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11 we suggested that we all pray and fast in some way, especially on the first Friday of each month during this year, for God’s mercy to be poured out on the world. And now we need for God’s mercy to be poured out on the Church as well.

We need to remember as we face these distressing realities that God is in control and that He is only permitting this to be revealed because it is such an abomination, and it is sapping the vitality of the Church so greatly. On the other side of this judgment and cleansing will be a Church more able to reflect the holiness of Christ, to be a light to the world, and a fragrant aroma to the Lord.

United with you in prayer, repentance, suffering and hope.

Your brother in Jesus,
Ralph Martin