

Catholic Church In Crisis?

By Jim Seghers

Across the U.S. the media has featured headlines like “CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CRISIS,” which highlight the awful problem of pedophilia and other incidents of sexual abuse committed by some Catholic priests. Enemies of the Catholic Church were quick to use this scandal in an attempt to undermine the moral influence of the Church. Some of these assaults came from within the Church, men and women whose promotion of sexual promiscuity and heretical agendas form a root cause of the problem.

Some want to blame the problem on celibacy. This makes as much sense as blaming alcoholism on sobriety. What our local and national media is not reporting is that sexual abuse is worse in Protestant churches. Consider the opening sentence of Mark Clayton’s article in the April 5, 2002 edition of the *Christian Science Monitor*. “Despite headlines focusing on the priest pedophile problem in the Roman Catholic Church, most American churches being hit with child sexual-abuse allegations are Protestant.”

It is a painful reality that we are dealing with an American problem that is the result of a society going amuck with sexual promiscuity. This is the evil fruit of the so-called freedoms of the sexual revolution. Examples abound. The New Orleans *Times Picayune* reported on May 18 that three fifth-grade boys were arrested on charges of sexual battery at Bunkie Elementary School. In the same issue it was reported that a 42 year-old man was arrested and charged with carnal knowledge of a 14 year-old girl.

The fact that the problem is everywhere does not argue that sexual abuse by Catholic priests and bishops together with the mishandling of these crimes by our shepherds is anything less than horrifying. Even one case is too many. The problems in the Boston archdiocese have been well documented. Similar tragedies are emerging in other dioceses, for example, Los Angeles and Milwaukee. There is a diocese in Florida in which three successive bishops have resigned because of their personal implication in sexual misconduct. Unquestionably, the crimes being made public reveal deep-rooted problems, which like a cancer, has been festering for years.

At the same time it must also be stoutly affirmed that the vast majority of our priests do not deserve to be indicted by association. This is malicious slander. It makes as much sense to attack priests generally as it would to criticize the eleven Apostles because Judas was a traitor. If anything, we should marvel that we have so many good priests. It is a miracle of grace. Nor do the attacks stop with priests. At a public school in Mississippi a Catholic boy who serves Mass was smeared in a school publication with the label: “Most likely to become a pedophile priest.”

It is not the purpose of this article to provide lurid details of this distressing problem or to elucidate its primary causes: 1) unfaithful shepherds, 2) homosexuality in the priesthood, and 3) perverted seminaries that foster immorality and heresy while discouraging and weeding out faithful men who feel called by God to become priests.

I want to address this painful issue from a spiritual perspective and focus on what we should do about it.

President Harry Truman used to say, “The only thing new in the world is the history you don’t know.” When I read articles decrying the terrible state of the Church implying that this may be the death knell of the Catholic Church, I wonder if they have seriously studied history. False prophets have been predicting the death of the Catholic Church for 2,000 years. It is helpful to reflect on the words of my pastor Fr. Bill McGough spoken in a recent homily: “The Church is not in crisis; the Church is in Christ!” The Church has experienced other black days.

Two thousand years ago on a little hill outside of Jerusalem called Golgotha the times were very dark. The sinfulness of mankind had reached such an intensity that the greatest imaginable of crimes was committed, the killing of the God-man. Of the twelve apostles chosen and trained by Jesus, one was a traitor who committed suicide, the head of his little Church denied his Lord, and the others abandoned him with the exception of John. On Good Friday Jesus died and his infant Church seemed crushed. Three days later Jesus snatched victory from the very jaws of defeat.

Acts and the Epistles record the trials of the Apostolic Church. Persecution began shortly after Pentecost with the murder of Stephen. The most deadly enemy then and now is the enemy within. St. Paul warned us about this. “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come among you, and they will not spare the flock. And **from your own group**, men will come forward perverting the truth to draw the disciples away after them” (Acts 20:29-30). Should it surprise us that we are also living in such a time?

Have you ever heard of the Roman Empire? Persecution reigned against the Church from about 66 AD until the Edict of Milan in 313. In the first 200 years of Christianity every Pope but one was martyred. Before the battle of Milvian Bridge (October 27, 312) Constantine saw a new standard by which he could rule the empire. *In hoc signo vinces*, “by this sign you shall conquer.” That symbol was not the eagle of the Roman legions, but the cross of Jesus Christ. The Roman Empire is long gone, but the Catholic Church is still here because the Church is in Christ.

After the Church was legalized, it endured terrible internal struggles against heresies. The worst of these was Arianism. Many bishops embraced this heresy, which denied the divinity of Jesus. If combating heresy was not enough, western civilization was being torn apart by the barbarian invasions. The Goths took Rome in 410. The Lombards settled in much of Italy, the Visigoths in Spain, and the Franks in Gaul. Britain was divided into 7 Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Nor was the East spared. Fifty-one years after the death of Mohammed beginning in 683, the Mohammedan hordes conquered the Middle East, North Africa and Spain. Charles Martel and the Franks finally stopped their military advance on October 25, 725 A.D., before the city of Tours.

In this little historical survey we shouldn’t forget the dark days brought about by bad kings, the Protestant Reformation and even sinful Popes. Another great crisis occurred in

the form of the Ottoman Turks who threatened to overrun Europe. Pope Pius V formed alliance with Philip II of Spain and the Venetians. On the day of the battle, Pius V was discussing business with his secretary. “Suddenly he lapsed into silence, went to his window, and opening the large shutters, was lost in thought as he gazed out into the void. Then, recovering himself, he turned to the secretary and said: ‘It is not the time for doing business now. Let us return and give thanks to God. Our Armada has even now defeated the Turkish fleet’.”

As Napoleon’s armies swallowed most of Europe, the proud emperor once bragged to a Church official: “Je détruirai votre église” (I will destroy your Church). On hearing this boast Cardinal Consalvi of the papal court replied, “He never will succeed. We have not managed to do it ourselves!” Yes, the Church has survived wicked kings and emperors, the Reformation, conquering armies, and even sinful popes, bishops and priests.

There is a purpose for this little history lesson. It’s designed to put the ugly situation now coming to light in a balanced perspective. Yes, this is a terrible scandal that demands purification. However, there is also great vitality in the Church. In dark times God raises great saints and new religious communities. This is true today. We need only recall Padre Pio and Mother Theresa of Calcutta to say nothing of the inspired and courageous leadership of Pope John Paul II. Dynamic new communities like the Legionaries of Christ and Opus Dei are thriving. In the last few years over 450 Protestant ministers have converted to the Catholic Church. Jesus always snatches victory from the jaws of defeat. “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32).

On October 13, 1884, a dramatic event occurred in the life of Pope Leo XIII. After Mass the pontiff lapsed into what appeared to observers to be a coma. On returning to his senses he exclaimed: “Oh, what a horrible picture I was permitted to see!” Pope Leo immediately went to his office and composed his famous prayer to St. Michael. The Pope later stated that during the vision he saw demons and heard the horrible voice of Satan boasting to God that he could destroy the Church. He challenged God to give him a century to enhance his influence. He was given that century, the 20th century!

On December 6, 1941, the American people went to bed with a mental framework of naïve complacency. We were emerging from the great depression. The struggles in Europe and Asia seemed far away. All of that changed on December 7. The attack on Pearl Harbor woke the American people from their slumber. It was war. In record time the United States became the arsenal of democracy and the greatest military power on earth.

Once again Americans are under attack. No, this is not a reference to the terrorist assault of 9-11. The real enemy is demonic and he has gained entry into our Church. Satan knows where Jesus Christ resides. It’s within the tabernacles of the Catholic churches. The devil also knows the true Church Jesus established, the Catholic Church. Why, then, are we surprised that he’s assaulting the priesthood through his henchmen, some of whom are bishops, priests and deacons, together with religious and many are laymen. Make no

mistake, we are engaged in spiritual warfare for the soul of our country. The great question is this, will we answer the call to arms? There is a great deal that could be said on this subject of spiritual warfare, but the focus here is on three key areas: conversion, study and prayer.

A popular hymn contains the words, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Personal conversion is where we must start. What good does it do to condemn these abuses if a divided hearts diminishes our allegiance to Christ? We need to discover those things we love more than Jesus. Television? Sports? My career? Sex? Pornography is a major problem today. How am I selfish? Selfishness destroys marriages and makes parents ineffective. Is it any wonder that many high school boys and girls speak about their parents in negative terms and describe a distant relationship.

The epidemic of sexual abuse we are experiencing does not occur in a vacuum. It is spawned in a pagan society. Can there be any doubt that the present sad state of the moral climate in the U.S. is attributable in large measure to the easy compromises of Christians? Reflecting on his relationship with God prior to his conversion, St. Augustine lamented, "How late have I loved Thee!" When I reflect on these words I add, "and how badly do I love Thee still!" Isn't that an admission we can all make?

When Israel went into battle the high priest and the ark of the covenant led its armies. In this present spiritual battle we are also led by our high priest, Jesus Christ in the person of John Paul II who has called for a new evangelization. Will we answer the call? The real ark of the covenant, the Blessed Virgin Mary, also leads us into battle. She implores her children with great sadness, "Please do not offend my Son, who is already so grievously offended." Will we answer her call?

Eleven years ago I heard Patrick Madrid speak about apologetics, that is, the reasoned defense of the Catholic Church. The large meeting room was jammed with well-educated Catholic men and women, the vast majority of whom were business and professional people. However, when it came to the Catholic faith, they couldn't correctly add two plus two. Simple questions like the following left them tongue-tied, embarrassed and stammering. "Are you a Christian?" "Have you been saved?" "Why do Catholics call their priests father when Jesus explicitly teaches in Mt 23:9, 'Call no man father'." Very few understood the biblical foundation of Catholic beliefs.

The Second Vatican Council affirms the words of St. Jerome, "ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." It has been my privilege to witness the transformation and excitement that occurs when ordinary Catholics discover the biblical roots of their faith. This enthusiasm naturally leads to a deeper commitment to Christ and dynamic evangelization.

It simply makes no sense to have an adult's knowledge about all the areas of one's life except for one's faith. Where does one start? I like listening to audiotapes on Sacred Scripture and apologetics. St. Joseph Communications (www.saintjoe.com) has an wide offering of inspiring Catholic audiotapes. You can also check out the offerings at Totus

Tuus Ministries (www.totustuus.com). For those who like to read, the Totus Tuus website also has extensive bibliographic information, an on-line bookstore, and many links to other authentic Catholic websites.

In 1899 Pope Leo XIII wrote a letter to Cardinal Gibbons (*Testem Benevolentiae*) warning about the great danger facing the American church because it was neglecting the spiritual life and excessively focusing on activity. This error was given the name of Americanism. It was rooted in the distorted ideas of Paulist Fr. P. Hecker. He had an exaggerated idea of me and Jesus that led to the rejection of external spiritual direction. He extolled the natural over the supernatural virtues, for example, social and economic reform over spiritual conversion and prayer. This led to a preference of activity, apostate works, and organization over passive and self-focused virtues like mortification, penance, obedience, and contemplation. Religious vows were viewed as not compatible with Christian liberty. Underneath these ideas was a twisted notion of individual freedom under the guise that the Holy Spirit acts on the conscience of the individual more directly than the hierarchical organization Christ established. Finally, new approaches to non-Catholics were advocated that stressed accommodating modern civilization and a more democratic approach to the Church's teaching. Instead of transforming the world the ideal became to mirror it.

Tragically, the American church neglected the Pope's warning much like Peter ignored the warnings of Jesus, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation." During the next 68 years we complacently went our way bragging that we were "the strong right arm of the Pope." That proud boast seems hollow today after 40 million abortions, sky rocketing divorce rates and rampant sexual immorality. The storm that shook the tree struck in 1968. It was called contraception and the sexual revolution. Like Peter we simply caved in and denied our Lord. The result was a culture of death and depravity. We are a civilization that is on the slippery slope of self-destruction.

Finally, we need to focus on prayer. The battle of prayer and the battle of the spiritual life is the same battle. If you want to know how much you love Christ, if you want to measure the extent of your divided heart – check your prayer life. Our priests and bishops should always be included in our prayers. Prayer is essential for three reasons.

First, prayer by its very nature is rooted in humility because it acknowledges our utter helplessness. When Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing," he meant it. Fervent prayer is desperate prayer because we recognize our utter helplessness, which leads us to rely on God.

Secondly, prayer facilitates falling in love with God. It is the nature of best friends and of lovers to spend time together. Conversely, when people do not spend time sharing with one another, they drift apart. Every prayer contains the affirmation, "I love you." God never gets tired of hearing it; neither do we.

Third, prayer conquers all. Recently, one of my daughters was telling me about a situation that was troubling her. Her concluding comment was, "I guess the only thing I

can do is pray.” I responded, “That reminds me of a story. Once, there was a country that was fighting tanks with bows and arrows. As the invaders crushed this poorly equipped army, their general said, ‘Well, I guess the only thing we can do is use our atomic weapons’!”

Prayer is our nuclear weapon. It is invincible. Best of all, the first fruit of prayer is a change in the praying heart. The prayer of a young martyr brought about the conversion of St. Paul. What would have happened in the last eight years if all the Christians who criticized Bill Clinton stormed heaven on his behalf? What would happen if the Catholics in this country fervently and persistently begged God to end abortion? What kind of conversions would happen in our families, communities, and businesses if we were truly a man and women of prayer? In June, the American bishops are meeting to discuss the present crisis among the clergy. Their track record is not very good. What will happen if Catholics ardently implored God to make them faithful shepherds? What will happen if we don’t? Will we answer the call?

Before ending this discussion about the vital necessity of prayer, there is an important connection that needs to be made between the present sexual abuse scandal and Eucharistic adoration. In a recent homily, my pastor called it the “scandal behind the scandal,” namely ignorance of the Eucharist. The gravity of this problem is highlighted by the affirmation of the Second Vatican Council that the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life” (Lumen Gentium 11). Indeed the *Catechism* states that “all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are orientated toward it” (# 1324).

While the Second Vatican Council was still in session, Pope Paul VI was warned that prominent theologians were preparing books that attacked the real bodily Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. To counter this insidious danger the pope promulgated the encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* on September 3, 1965 - the feast of St. Pius X. The initial attacks on the Real Presence came from Karl Rahner in his book *New Theology* published in 1966, and the *Encyclopedia of Theology* of which he was the editor, together with Edward Schillebeeckx’ *The Eucharist*, which appeared in 1968. Tragically, the writings of Rahner and Schillebeeckx became standard texts in most seminaries. Little attention was given to Pope Paul VI’s instruction in *Mysterium Fidei*.

American theologians also began to attack the Real Presence. Tad W. Guzie, who taught at Marquette, promoted the same errors as Rahner and Schillebeeckx in his work, *Jesus and the Eucharist*, published in 1974. Monika Hellwig published her *Understanding Catholicism* in 1981. Ms. Hellwig, a leading radical feminist, was a professor of theology at Georgetown. In July 1996, she was named the director of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities of the N.C.E.A. She reduced transubstantiation to changing the community into Jesus, not changing the bread and wine into Jesus. Adding to the confusion was Anthony J. Wilhelm’s attack on the Eucharist in his popular book *Christ Among Us*, which sold almost two million copies! Wilhelm was a former Paulist priest. In April 1984, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, ordered Archbishops Gerety of Newark and Hunthausen of Seattle

to withdraw their imprimatur. Archbishop Gerety, on Ratzinger's orders, told Paulist Press not to market or reprint Wilhelm's book.

With this background it is no surprise that many Catholics, including priests and bishops, have fuzzy ideas regarding Jesus' true, physical presence in the Blessed Eucharist. The negative impact of this diminished faith in the Eucharist on the moral vitality of the Church is dreadful. In the words of the greatly revered priest, Fr. John Hardon: "one cannot be chaste without the Eucharist." Only prayer will turn this tide of evil, but it must be Eucharistic prayer.

In the Book of Revelation the first of the seven letters was sent to the church in Ephesus. St. Paul was in Ephesus, so were Timothy and the great preacher Apollos. The Apostle St. John was in Ephesus as was the Blessed Mother. That's a hall of fame! Tragically, the church in Ephesus did not heed the warning of the Holy Spirit. Today, there is no church in Ephesus. So while the Catholic Church will weather the current storm, just as it withstood all previous storms, there is no guarantee for the American church.

We are privileged to live in this time when the Church is staggering up Calvary like Jesus. She is battered from without and betrayed from within. American Catholics are experiencing a spiritual Pearl Harbor, our wake up call. The question is this, will we answer the call?

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