

## **Bishops, Priests, and Religious: Do they see a crisis and how are they responding?**

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### Introduction

The topic Bill Shea assigned to me is interesting—and daunting. It is posed as a question but assumes the answer to the question is positive for we immediately ask how bishops, priests, and clergy are responding to the crisis.

The recent study conducted by Dean Hoge of The Catholic University and James Davidson of Purdue University reveal that 85% of Catholics believe the sexual abuse of children and teens by clergy is a serious problem. But 15% of the Catholics polled do not ! A minority, certainly; but a significant minority.

Recently, while chatting informally with a small group of bishops, my own bishop, Anthony Pilla of Cleveland, was complimented as being one of the first bishops to acknowledge publicly in his role as then president of the USCCB that we have a priest vocation crisis. Some bishops believe the church doesn't have a crisis, a vocation crisis or an abuse crisis or any other kind of crisis, unless they say there is a crisis. Talk about wishful thinking. Talk about denial. Talk about being out of touch!

Addressing the topic assigned is fraught with dangers and difficulties. There are about 380 U.S. bishops. And they are not, as we know, all of one mind. Cardinal McGarrick's recent statement about the unity of the bishops relating to life issues may be true, but there appears to be numerous other issues, such as the role of women in the church, the church's theology of sexuality, and mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests of the Latin rite where there is public disagreement.

Nevertheless, I will plunge ahead with remarks that will necessarily be generalizing. My apologies to the bishops who do not fit the profile to follow.

The same danger and difficult arises when tackling the response of priests and vowed religious. Generalizations always offend some and so my apologies to all whom I am about to offend.

### The Bishops' Response to the Crisis

Let me begin with two characteristics that define almost all of our bishops: loyalty and responsibility. In their episcopal-clerical culture, which I argue is in numerous ways a feudal culture, their loyalty is fundamentally upward—to the bishop of Rome and to the welfare of the church, often understood as the welfare of the institutional church. There is certainly a certain loyalty to their brother bishops, but arguably less so than a generation ago.

This loyalty to the institution has prompted many bishops to assume that the goal of the church is the church itself. “For the good of the church” really means “for the good of the institutional church.” This understanding of episcopal loyalty sheds light on the behavior of numerous bishops who put the reputation and dignity of the priesthood in particular and the church in general ahead of the wellbeing and safety of our young people.

Bishops believe they have a responsibility to keep the institutional church strong and vibrant—and that includes the church’s resources of personnel and money. And, of course, they do. But they have a primary responsibility, I believe, to place the welfare and dignity of the most vulnerable among us first. Otherwise, bishops become ecclesiastical bureaucrats. The bishops first responsibility is to the gospel and to the people of God.

Initial responses of many bishops to the abuse crisis:

It is a matter of morality and human weakness

It is a matter of spiritual laxity—not enough prayer

It is a matter of psychological illness

It is a societal problem due to our secular culture

It is a crime and we will cooperate with civil authorities

It is a problem exploited by the media

It is exaggerated by a still virulent anti-Catholic bias

It is exploited by greedy attorneys

It is exploited by greedy victim/survivors

But it is not a church crisis, it is not a structural crisis.

The bishops who hold to this last point, I propose, are mistaken, badly mistaken.

I don’t recall any bishops acknowledging that the sexual abuse of minors by clergy has marked the long history of the church.

The Didache, the early-second-century commentary on the gospels, sternly warns, “Thou shalt not seduce young boys.”

Two centuries later, John Cassian, one of the early monastic giants of the West, admonished, “Let no one, especially when among young folk, remain alone with another even for a short time, or withdraw with him or take him by the hand.”

Pope Julius III, who reigned from 1550-1555, created a scandal when he picked up a fifteen-year-old boy from the streets of Parma and named him a cardinal and Secretary of State.

Between 1880 and 1930 a literary genre surfaced in England focused on clergy-acolyte relationships. During this roughly fifty-year period there was a proliferation of priest-acolyte narratives and poetry about the loves—and lust—of both Anglican and Catholic priests for their acolytes.

Few bishops seemed interested in probing the historical, structural factors relating to the abuse scandal. That would lead into dangerous political waters.

There are indications that many bishops want desperately to get back to the way things were before the sexual abuse crisis erupted in 1984. Most here today remember Bishop Wilton Gregory’s opening remarks at the February 2004 news conference releasing the

report of the National Review Board and the John Jay College studies relating to the abuse scandal: "The terrible history recorded here today is history."

His words had the ring of a well paid public relations consultant.

A good number of bishops today feel frustrated and beleaguered. I think they are saying to themselves, "What more can we do?"

We have created a charter and established norms for the protection of children and youths.

We have established the National Review Board and commissioned the College of John Jay studies.

We have established a national office for the protection of children and youth (from priests and bishops).

We are providing counseling for survivors and their families.

We are trying to settle lawsuits and claims to the best of our ability with the resources at our disposal.

Some of us are meeting personally with victim/survivors.

We have apologized for the mistakes we have made.

These initiatives, as imperfect and limited as they may be, deserve to be acknowledged and affirmed. The appointment of the National Review Board, as David O'Brien has noted, was an unprecedented and historic initiative by Bishop Gregory and the USCCB. We can wonder how that played out inside the halls of the Vatican curia.

### The Priests' Response to the Crisis

Most priests, without question, are profoundly disturbed, shaken, and unnerved by the abuse of some of their brothers and bishops. More than a few have ministered personally to victim/survivors and their families. The scandal appears to have touched every diocese in the U.S. as well as every parish.

Priests my age and older have seen the collapse of a remarkable respect and deference extended to the clergy in decades past. The mistrust in the eyes of the parents in their parishes remains upsetting.

Parish secretaries receive phone calls inquiring if there will be chaperones other than the associate pastor on the youth retreat.

Some priests have shrunk their world to the boundaries of their parishes simply trying to survive. They are overworked and psychically drained by the cultural wars evident in some of their parishes. They count the years until they can retire. And retire they will, they promise each other.

Some remain in denial, their psychic world and security threatened by the abuse scandal. Like many of today's seminarians, they feel that the worst is over, that soon we will

return to the days or relative, imagined calm, to the days romanticized in film by Bing Crosby playing Father Chuck O'Malley in *Going My Way* and *The Bells of Saint Mary*.

By and large, priests are more willing to look at the historical and structural dimensions to the scandal. Many believe that mandated celibacy for diocesan priests just isn't working. Numerous young men tell them they are interested in the priesthood but feel called at the same time to marriage and family life.

Priests today are polarized. Not a few of the straight priests feel there is de facto optional celibacy for gay priests who can freely socialize, travel, and vacation with their close male friends. Many of the gay priests still suffer from leading a double life of deflection and subterfuge, of ministering in a church that defines their orientation as an intrinsic disorder.

Both straight and gay priests, at least a good number of them, feel oppressed and suspect that are complicitous in their oppression. Speaking honestly to their bishops of their concerns and issues remains a daunting task. Those who have tried question whether or not they have been heard.

Almost to the man, they are concerned about the future of the ministerial priesthood. The drastic drop in the number of candidates in our seminaries is met with pleas from their bishops to recruit more actively and to pray more ardently for vocations.

Many priests, I believe, live in fear that an accusation will be made against them and that their world will collapse. Many, too, resent the U.S. bishops who hold them to an unworkably comprehensive zero tolerance standard they are unwilling to impose on themselves. These priests believe the bishops have made the same mistake twice.

In the 1980s and 1990s the bishops put the welfare of the institutional church and the reputation of the church's ordained ministers ahead of the welfare of our children and teenagers. In Dallas in June of 2002, the bishops put the welfare of the institutional church and their own credibility ahead of the welfare of their priests.

It is not an easy time for bishops. It is not an easy time for priests.

#### The Vowed Religious' Response to the Crisis

It is most dangerous here to generalize about the response of religious orders and congregations—they simply do not provide a common population from which to measure their response.

Some superiors and councils have responded in similar fashion to many diocesan bishops—defensively. They possess the same instinctive inclination to protect their orders reputation and resources. They, too, have instructed their attorneys to play “hard ball” if alleged victims choose to file lawsuits.

Others, like the Christian Brothers of Ireland, have responded to cases of abuse by their members with contrition, compassion, and real efforts to bring about healing and justice.

Overall, I suspect there is less denial, dissimulation (dishonesty), and arrogance in the response of vowed religious to the sexual abuse scandal. Let me add (and conclude) with a footnote to this last observation.

I know a provincial of a large religious order who had to respond pastorally and administratively to widespread abuse of minors by his brother religious. He told me that the wisest decision he made was to send the perpetrators to secular rather than Catholic sponsored treatment centers. The assessment reports he received and the treatments offered appeared less encumbered with institutional concerns and issues than those from treatment centers run under Catholic auspices.

Conclusion

A generation ago, the French theologian Louis Bouyer (*The Church of God*) reminded us that feudal systems of power and authority were expressions of dominion—an ownership of property and persons. Power and authority in the church, we now understand, should be expressions of ministry—of service to the church as the people of God. The exercise of episcopal power as dominion has finally caught up with the hierarchical church.

In these difficult, dangerous times, it becomes clearer by the day that it is the laity's moment. They are arguably the best educated Catholic laity in the church's history. The clergy sexual abuse crisis has awakened them from the long adolescent slumber sustained and encouraged by the monarchical and feudal structures of the hierarchical church. They are energized as never before with a holy anger—even outrage—at episcopal decisions that put their children at risk in order to protect and defend the church's ministers who exploited the most vulnerable of its members.

These liberated Catholic men and women appear ready and determined to hold the bishops to the accountability and transparency promised in June of 2002. Their rising voice should be welcomed and embraced by church leaders.