

Truth Is Needed to Free the Church From Sacrilege of Clergy Scandal

**Now is the time to cooperate — and cooperate fully — with God’s
cleansing fire for his Church.**

by Father Roger J. Landry

The sad revelations about the sins of former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, involving the sexual abuse of both male minors and seminarians, have brought the Church in the U.S. and beyond to a second recent phase in the necessary purification of the clergy of the Church. The first phase happened in 2002, after the disclosure that more than 4,000 (out of 110,000) priests had been accused in the U.S. of sexual abuse of minors in the previous half-century.

The U.S. bishops convened in Dallas and adopted what has overall been a heralded systemic response to root out those who have abused minors from the priesthood, protect children and care for survivors. But there were several major problems with Dallas. First, the phrase “credible accusations” was exceedingly vague and could encompass even accusations that were immediately demonstrably false. Second, bishops exempted themselves from the policy. Third, they didn’t have the courage to address what the data clearly showed was the main part of the crisis: It wasn’t pedophilia, or the sexual abuse of pre-pubescent girls and boys; rather, it was ephebophilia, the same-sex molestation of post-pubescent boys, encompassing more than four out of five accusations. Fourth, they did not focus adequately on the corrupt culture that permitted such wide-scale abuse and the lack of determination to eradicate it: the practical toleration in many dioceses of priests living double lives, cheating on their vocations with men and women. As Father Thomas Berg recently wrote, “We can’t prevent the sexual abuse of minors or vulnerable adults by clergy while habitual and widespread failures in celibacy are left unchecked.”

The accusations against Archbishop McCarrick have exposed these last three lacunae in disgusting fashion. Several bishops, most notably Houston Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, have put out firm statements indicating that bishops must no longer be exempt, that all sexual abuse and harassment by clergy of anyone must be addressed — and all sexual activity by clergy is abusive, even if consensual, because it is spiritually incestuous — and that the Church must address the cancerous prevalence of an unchaste same-sex subculture in the clergy.

These are not easy issues to talk or write about. They sicken and justly scandalize believers. Light, however, is a great sanitizer. Just as the revelations of the thousands of cases of clerical sexual abuse of minors in 2002 was not the problem, but the abuse itself that had remained hidden for decades was, so the disclosures against Archbishop McCarrick and others in recent weeks, although nauseating and infuriating, are a necessary part of the healing process. The truth is needed in order to set the Church free of these sacrileges, which devastate individual victims and wound the whole Church.

Since this second wave of scandals has hit, I’ve received hundreds of phone calls and emails from friends and reporters. The internet has exploded with fair questions that deserve answers. The faith of many in the Church as a holy, rather than corrupt, institution has been shaken. People don’t know what to think about their bishops or priests. They legitimately ask how such depraved misconduct could go on so long. I’d like to attempt a candid response to some of their many questions.

How should we respond to this?

First, by reparation, because God is the most offended of all. Second, by demanding to get to the bottom of it, which is part of a firm purpose of amendment and will help to prevent its recurrence. Third, by focusing on living the faith. Jesus told the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30) to teach us that our fundamental focus should never be on rooting out the weeds, but rather on the growth of the wheat. Every crisis in the Church is a crisis of saints, and God will respond to infidelity with many graces of fidelity to help bring the Church back to the holiness in earthen vessels that he wants to characterize it.

How could God permit such abuse?

God created us free, free even to betray him and others. We see this in Judas and in the fleeing of the other apostles on Holy Thursday. To stop evil, God would have to eliminate our freedom. But God doesn't remain on the sidelines as a shocked and impotent bystander. He always wills to bring good out of the evil we commit or endure, just like he brought the greatest good (Jesus' resurrection and the eternal life it made possible) out of the greatest evil (the murder of Jesus on Calvary).

How could Archbishop McCarrick rise through the ranks while being guilty of such sins? It shows several clear holes in the process of selecting bishops.

Before one becomes a bishop, there is a lengthy process with multiple confidential questionnaires sent out to many who have lived and worked with a candidate, but the process is only as good as the information given in response and the weighing of that information. Once one is made a bishop, such thorough investigations are no longer part of the process. The candidate himself is never interviewed. While no process is perfect, this process is prone to gross errors, especially if someone has powerful promoters.

In Archbishop McCarrick's case, the process failed four times. His notorious case, the similarly infamous ones of Scottish Cardinal Keith O'Brien and Austrian Cardinal Hermann Groer, as well as recent scandals leading to episcopal resignations in Honduras, Chile and elsewhere, ought to precipitate appropriate reform.

How bad is the problem of same-sex unchastity in the clergy?

It varies among different dioceses and religious orders, and no hard numbers exist, but in various places, it's big enough to do serious damage. When priests cheat on their vocations with women, normally either the woman gets pregnant or gives the priest the ultimatum to choose her or the priesthood, with the result being that most priests who persist in infidelity leave the priesthood. It's relatively rare, therefore, that an active priest has a long-term mistress, although when he does, it's terribly corrosive.

Priests who cheat on their vocation with men or fellow priests, on the other hand, often continue to live the priesthood with a double life. When there's a high enough incidence, it can dramatically impact the culture of Church institutions and presbyterates, because such infidelity in one area of priestly life often leads to infidelity and corruption in many others.

Seminarians in the 1980s often had to confront openly homosexual subcultures among faculty and seminarians. I was a seminarian in the '90s, when the problem had begun to get cleaned up, but I still personally encountered it without nuance at the beginning of my seminarian application process and then while studying languages during summer break in a foreign country, when the priest tried to make his move 10 minutes after picking me up at the airport. Many priests, at some time or other, have come face-to-face with this clerical depravity.

Why didn't people who suffered or knew of the abuse say anything?

For the reasons that victims often don't: They don't think people will believe them, or, worse, they think those to whom they report the information will be part of the same corruption. Many have wondered, in particular, why the multiple seminarians whom Archbishop McCarrick pressured to share his bed didn't say anything. The reason, I believe, is that they didn't know to whom to go; they didn't trust that those authorities wouldn't protect the predator, since, after all, they had made him a bishop; and they feared that McCarrick, if he found out, would be able to blackball them from following their priestly vocation. Instead, they put down their heads, focused on their training, and tried to remedy the evil by getting ordained and serving God and his people as God desires and they deserve. To eradicate sexual abuse among the clergy, a known, trustworthy, effective, accountable reporting system is a must, and at present, it doesn't exist.

Is there hope that the situation will get better?

Yes. In many ways, it already has, because of various reforms in the last few decades. But there are issues that must be confronted candidly. There is a strain in the Church that basically has no problem with sexual immorality among the faithful or clergy, who want to reduce this crisis to one of the "abuse of power." This strain, in general, wants to use this second phase of this crisis like they did the first one, to pretend that "chaste celibacy" is the problem, as if allowing priests to have wives will eliminate the problem of same-sex molestation of post-pubescent boys or same-sex sexual infidelity.

Chastity, however, isn't the problem; unchastity is. Abuse of power isn't the main issue, but, rather, the sexual abuse that that power was used to commit and keep hushed. That's why we need more than revised "codes of conduct" that state the obvious; the Ten Commandments, and the Church's moral theology, are pretty clear, after all.

Fidelity is the only adequate response to infidelity, and holiness to sin and corruption. Just as there should be no room in the priesthood or episcopacy for those who would harm the young, so there should be no room for those who are determined to live corrupt double lives.

God always seeks to draw good out of evil, and throughout Church history, he has shown this time and again. Where sin abounds, grace abounds even more. Now is the time to cooperate — and cooperate fully — with his cleansing fire.

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