

How to Confront the Crisis and Endure in Faith

Answering some of Catholics' honest questions as they navigate their way through the latest scandal.

by Fr. Roger Landry

Two weeks ago, I wrote a column attempting to respond to many of the questions friends and reporters had about the crisis of sexual infidelity among clergy. Since that article, I have received many more emails and phone calls, and I would like to continue attempting to answer the questions posed as candidly as I can.

Much has happened in the last fortnight. The Pennsylvania attorney general's report concerning nearly 300 accused priests in six Pennsylvania — even though most of the cases concern the period before 2002 when the Church started to get her act together with regard to the sexual abuse of minors — brought home once again just how sordid things can get when the priests and prelates get corrupted.

It brought to mind Jesus' parable contrasting "faithful and prudent stewards" with unfaithful and wicked ones (Luke 12:42-48). The former provide for the needs of those the Master entrusts to them; the latter, thinking that the Master is far off, become licentious, get drunk and begin to abuse the "menservants and maidservants."

One was able to see clearly that license and degeneracy, flowing from the obvious absence of a close relationship with the Lord, throughout the report's 884 pages. The report also showed, just as the 2004 John Jay Report detailed, that most of the abuse in these six Pennsylvania dioceses was of post-pubescent boys. This reinforces that the crisis of the same-sex abuse of minors has been predominantly one of homosexual molestation, something essential to confront candidly if we're really going to provide an adequate remedy.

In the last two weeks, we have also seen many statements addressing the scandal. Pope Francis released a powerful "Letter to the People of God" on Aug. 20. Several bishops gave very strong and candid declarations, including Archbishop Allen Vigneron of Detroit, Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wisconsin, Bishop Kevin Vann of Orange, California — and, most noteworthy, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, the president of the U.S. Bishops' Conference, who outlined the first steps to addressing the crisis. And there have been scores of spot-on articles by priests and lay faithful, addressing the situation with the brutal candor and incisive proposals for the reform that the Church needs.

It is becoming clear that, unlike in 2002, when the U.S. bishops hastily adopted necessary but still inadequate reforms to address the sexual abuse of minors, leaving many other important aspects untouched, this time many Church leaders want to go beyond pruning some branches of clergy infidelity and episcopal malfeasance to addressing the evil at its roots. This is a sign of hope.

Let's turn to some of the many honest questions posed by those who have been calling and emailing me.

What if I can't stomach going to Mass at this time?

Many friends whom I don't believe have ever voluntarily missed a Sunday or Holy Day of Obligation in their life, have been tempted to skip Mass on the Assumption or on the Lord's Day because they were so angry about what has happened, or didn't want to pretend as if everything were business as usual, or because their faith in the Church has been shattered.

I think that we need to look at things from God's perspective and not just our own, so that we do not add to his sadness at this desecration of his Church and sacrilege against so many of his sons and daughters by distancing ourselves from him and his spiritual gifts.

When St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) was risking his life to preach the Gospel to the multitudes in Eastern France who had turned to Calvinism because of the rampant scandals among the clergy, he didn't hesitate to say that what the unfaithful clerics did was the equivalent of spiritual murder by destroying people's faith. Just as plainly, however, he called them not to commit something even worse: spiritual suicide through focusing on the scandals so much that they cut themselves off from Christ in the sacraments and from the Church he founded.

“Those who forge scandals for themselves [and] persuade themselves that they will die if they do not alienate the part that they have in the Church,” the doctor of the Church wrote in a pamphlet to the people of Thonon, are “much crueler than the man who gives scandal, because to commit suicide is a more unnatural crime than to kill another.”

Jesus had said, “Scandals are sure to come” (Luke 17:1) and had promised that a scandalizer would therefore “have a great millstone fastened around his neck and thrown into the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6). But St. Francis added that if we allow scandals to destroy our faith, we essentially tie a millstone around our own neck — and toss ourselves from the barque of Peter, where Christ is at the helm, into the depth of a sea of misery.

The worst sin against charity we could ever commit against ourselves, he said, would be to commit spiritual suicide in this way. We Catholics need especially at this time to be on guard against this diabolical temptation and draw even closer to Christ.

Why haven't bishops simply eliminated from the ranks of the clergy priests who are cheating on their vocation with men and women like they have attempted to do since 2002 with those abusing minors?

In a few cases, the bishops may themselves be personally compromised. In the majority of cases, I think the reason is fear about the consequences of a zero-tolerance policy. Several years ago, I spoke to bishop friend I've known since before I entered seminary. I brought to his attention what some people from one of his parishes where I had spoken had told me about their priest who was regularly preaching heresy against Marian dogmas, mocking people's devotions and giving advice opposed to Church moral teaching in the confessional.

The bishop asked, in a somewhat frustrated tone, what I thought he could do about it. “What would you do,” I asked, “if the faith of one of your nieces or nephews was being poisoned there?” After thinking about it, he admitted he would act, but confessed that he was concerned that once he started to crack down on particular priests, he would likely have to discipline a sizable number of his clergy, which could lead to closed parishes, protests, overworked priests who remained and various other troubles. It might indeed lead there, I replied, but it's better to have fewer priests truly building up the faith than dealing with many more who by words and example weaken or destroy it. He laudably removed the priest two days later.

The conversation taught me about the “maintenance” issues that can keep good bishops up at night — tolerating unfaithful priests to keep parishes open at a time of priestly shortages — and how it's essential to make such decisions “personal,” never forgetting the people who suffer because of unfaithful stewards. Because of this episcopal fear, I think that it's important for lay faithful who want to catalyze reform to let their bishops know that they are prepared to be personally inconvenienced in the practice of the faith, with fewer Mass times and even fewer parishes, if that's what it takes to ensure that they're served by priests who keep their promises.

Should I stop giving any funds to the diocesan appeal until my bishop proves that he has his act together?

A few articles have tried to start such a movement. Some think that the only means the faithful have to express their righteous anger is with their money, but such threats are, I believe, psychologically and ecclesialogically unbecoming. Wouldn't it be better to write one's bishop and use a different, and less confrontational, type of a motivation? “Bishop, if you take out your broom and start cleaning up this mess, I'll be right there with you. If you're attacked, I'll defend you. If others cut their contributions, I'll try to sacrifice more. I know that cleaning up corruption is a hard and often thankless task — but not only will I be grateful, I'll support you and try to recruit as many as I can to help in the reform.” The latter approach, I believe, will prove far more effective.

Why haven't the priests of my parish preached on the scandals?

I'm surprised at how common this question has been. Good preaching requires listening with one ear to God's word and with the other to the questions and needs of the people. Not addressing these scandals is therefore, I think, a severe pastoral omission. Several priest friends have contacted me for advice, however, and I think some of what they told me may shed light.

These brother priests told me want to address the scandals, but, with emotions so raw, they're afraid of making the situation worse. They struggle to find some “good news” amid so much filth and don't want to risk turning the celebration of the Mass into a place where people feel worse about the faith than better. They want to wait until the summer is over so that they can speak to all their parishioners, once religious education classes recommence.

They're concerned about how to address the homosexual dimension of this crisis in a way that won't unintentionally hurt those in their parishes with same-sex attractions.

They think their own bishop is a part of the problem and don't want to throw under the bus or blow a gasket against one to whom they have promised respect and obedience. I would urge laypeople in parishes that haven't mentioned the scandal to contact their pastor and say, "Father, I'm really struggling with how to reconcile these scandals with my practice of the faith. Can you please help me by shedding some light on it in your homily this weekend? So many of my friends and family members are also struggling and I don't know what to say to them. Please help!" I trust most priests will respond to such honest appeals.

Finally, what is the root issue for the crisis? Some are claiming that it's "clericalism." Others the culture of toleration of unchastity among the clergy, especially sexually-active same-sex networks. Which is it?

Both are important factors, but I've been noticing that "clericalism" and "abuse of power" seem to be the talking points of commentators who want to talk about reform while ducking the problem of priestly and episcopal unchastity in general and same-sex activity in particular. As we see in the case of former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and page after page in the Pennsylvania grand jury report, however, the two go together.

Clericalism, an excessive focus on clergy privilege, helps to explain how some bishops were more concerned with the rights of abusive priests than they were the lives of those who were being abused. But the worst forms of clericalism happen when priests forget that they are called, like Christ, to serve rather than be served, to sacrifice rather than receive, to share Christ's teaching rather than their own ideas.

When priests begin to live in defiance even of the Ten Commandments, substitute lust for agape, and think that they should still have the right to approach the altar and confessional, or use the rectory as their subsidized lair, one of the most virulent forms of clericalism ensues. This clericalism is something we've seen in all its ugliness among actively unchaste clerical gay networks — like the predatory homosexual child abuse ring in Pittsburgh — when they dominate seminaries, or dioceses or religious orders.

To try to eliminate clericalism without eradicating clerical sexual infidelity would be like trying to address a rising river without stemming one of its major tributaries. The reform of the Church requires fighting both, but it's a dangerous red herring to suggest that this crisis was caused mainly by priestly pride and not fundamentally by tolerated priestly unchastity and sexual sinfulness.

I hope to continue trying to answer such questions in upcoming columns.

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