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What's the matter with the Catholic church?

Pat Marrin | Apr. 7, 2010 NCR Today

When Kansas newspaperman William Allen White sat down in 1896 to write his famous editorial about a provincial, stuffy and self-satisfied Midwestern state that couldn?t admit its prejudices, he was addressing his own neighbors and, of course, himself. The question was really, ?What?s the matter with us??

Likewise today, any loyal Catholic who dares to critique his or her church is in the same fix. Emotions are running so high, the only positions one can take on the sex abuse/cover up crisis are as either an enemy of the church engaging in a ?vile defamation campaign? (*L?Osservatore Romano*) or as a staunch hear-no-evil defender of the church. It is better (and safer) to shut up and say nothing.

Clarity is in short supply on all sides, but at the risk of bringing down hot coals of misunderstanding from everyone, let me offer my own personal take on the central issue here, stated thus: The real crisis for the church, not just now but from its founding moment, is not about sex but about power.

How we got ourselves from a Jewish Jesus who loved Torah and who washed feet and warned his apostles not to lord it over others to the Holy Roman Catholic church, ensconced in silk and gold brocade and embedded in the same Master Card and bullet-proof motorcade culture it shares with other multi-national corporations is one for the history books. Read it and weep, but don?t pretend the church has no issues.

I love the church, have always defined my existence within the mystery of the church and will swear on my Irish Catholic father?s grave and my late mother?s prayer altar on her dressing table at home, that the body of Christ is inseparable from an often sinful institutional church that I will remain a part of until the day I die. I grant the church the same right I insist on for myself, to be a work in progress, a sham in fervent search of integrity. I am a true believer in the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the sacraments, I cannot survive long without the Eucharist, and I feel privileged to be in the same boat with Pope Benedict XVI and all his defenders, including some whom I think have done serious damage to the church and to the Gospel.

All of this as context and premise, let me now say that power is ruining the church I love. And by this I do not mean authority, which is what holds us together in unity and keeps us tied to the sources of the church?s apostolic legitimacy, the Bible and Tradition. What I mean by power is what Jesus so masterfully dodged in the desert when Satan tried to guarantee his success as messiah by getting him to use political ascendancy, the option to work miracles of bread and spectacle in order to ensure the respect and fear all leaders need if they expect to stay in office longer than one term.

This power for good or evil comes with a price, hidden like a coiled adder in a basket of lush fruit. Each time an idealistic leader exercises special privilege, accepts automatic respect, even guarded adulation for his holy role among sincere but lesser folks, stained by the world, the flesh and the minor devils of food, sport, sleeping in and marital lust, each time a young priest sees himself as set apart and possessing mystic insight and ontological superiority, he is within the seduction of power.

I know this because I once shared in the clerical state, part of a proud tradition that has given the church brilliant religious communities of saints and scholars. Of the almost 20 years I spent with an order, 10 years were in ordained ministry, and I wouldn?t trade the formation and fraternity these men gave me and continue to affirm in me as a former priest, now a husband and father, a practicing Catholic and the editor of a very good worship resource that promotes the vision of Vatican II.

It is because of this experience that I know that when it comes to pedophilia, celibacy is not the issue, nor is homosexuality, nor clerical bachelorism per se. I have known too many successfully chaste servants of the gospel, creative and productive gay pastors, brilliant eccentrics, shy but loving recluses and scatterbrained martyrs of too many meetings, alcohol, cigarettes and sunburn on the links to ever doubt what grace can do with a good man?s best intentions and perseverance.

But power corrupts. Isolation and lack of human affection, the absence of real friendship with both men and women, all profiles at one time or another for the ideal priest, can produce trouble in a person. Loneliness, thwarted desire and a structure of obedience that renders a man impotent before his superiors to his own responsibility to choose his life at every stage, all of these dynamics can and do converge on a priest to force the question: Who am I? Who loves me? Why am I so angry and frustrated on the one hand, and so compulsive in my personal needs on the other?

None of this makes a pedophile, any more than marriage makes a man mature (Ha!). But the institutional template will attract and incubate those who seek the refuge of automatic respect and a façade of maturity without the painful work of growing up and getting beyond adolescent fixation and fantasy, the eroticizing of others close at hand, easily dominated, innocent and vulnerable to special people who offer special situations of attention and secret play. The diagnosis is not unknown, nor help impossible, but the failure to recognize the problem has created monsters, and institutional denial and secrecy have, it seems clear now, let criminals and serial child rapists move freely and repeatedly in the flock to victimize its most precious and innocent members.

Power is the aphrodisiac, the hidden cause of this tragedy; everything else is symptom, and when the people up the line who should have been alert to abuses are themselves men of power, serving and protecting the image of a powerful institution that represents God, it produces collective lock-step silence among smart and sensitive bishops who see more clearly now what went wrong but cannot be pastoral without legal counsel at their sides, to protect the church, its assets, to protect the conference, the apostolic succession, the belief that the Holy Spirit would never have let the church go this far astray. A church, in other words, that simply cannot admit it made mistakes.

The rules have never changed. We reap what we sow. No one escapes the long loneliness except by love, love in community. No man ever came to terms with his sexuality, his spirituality, his personality, without the help of a woman, even if it is only his mother. Intimacy, with or without genital expression, is life?s deepest prize; whoever misses it has thwarted God?s efforts to save him from suffering that was never part of the plan. Perfection without compassion produces pharisees, blind legalism and leadership patterns protected by pathological pride and the will to power. Adler once called this the true original sin, the source of violence throughout history from the beginning.

Jesus was and is the answer. Read the gospels and find the model of servant leadership, humility and self-emptying that many priests do understand and practice, and many beloved bishops do desire and emulate personally. It is this Jesus who is alive and well in the church, especially in its many women prophets, its married servants and amazing young people who want justice more than anything in a brutal, callous world. This vast *sensus fidelium* that makes up an experienced web of holiness and human suffering is the safety net now spread to catch a falling papacy, a tortured hierarchy forced to look in the mirror and then begin anew the

work hard to set things right.

William Allen White?s editorial, ?What?s the Matter with Kansas?? predated L. Frank Baum?s *The Wonderful World of Oz* by just four years, but White would have cheered this redemptive parable of a man trapped behind the curtain who was set free of the burdens of absolute power by a scarecrow, a tin man, a cowardly lion and a little girl who asked only for brains, a heart, courage and a chance to go home.

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