

Bishops walk in procession before Pope Benedict XVI celebrates Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Oct. 11, 2012, to mark the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. (CNS/Reuters/Stefano Rellandini)



by Alex Mikulich

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Recent revelations in Pennsylvania and Ireland of clerical child abuse and cover-up by the Catholic hierarchy expose grotesque patterns of sexual predation, deceit, and hypocrisy. This profound evil scandalizes, horrifies and traumatizes every member of the community of faith. Indeed, many good people of faith are abandoning an institution that they find painfully inhuman.

There is, perhaps, no way for the hierarchical church to extricate itself from the moral and spiritual morass for which it alone is responsible. If the church seeks authentic repentance and repair, it must address the historical roots of the present crisis and open itself to a long-term process of truthful remembering that is oriented to the wisdom of the survivors of clerical sexual abuse.

All kinds of crass finger pointing exacerbates open wounds and sows discord within the church, yet none of it will create the conditions of the possibility of the church recovering moral and spiritual credibility.

Time is up on the church to clean itself. Self-reporting by the church has failed. Since The Boston Globe's spotlight team opened the story of clerical sexual abuse in 2002, five attorneys general — in New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Maine, Massachusetts, and most recently, New York — have used subpoena power to obtain church records on priests accused of sexual abuse. Investigations or inquiries are opening in Florida, Illinois, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey and New Mexico, only after this latest round of increased scrutiny. If the church is truly committed to the common good, then the institution and its priests must face full accountability by state and federal prosecutors.

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Understanding the historical roots of the present crisis is a prerequisite for full accountability. As Massimo Faggioli wisely instructs, the Second Vatican Council is not the culprit for the predicament the church finds itself in. The clerical abuse crisis is rooted in the Tridentine structures of the ecclesial hierarchy. Conversely, Faggioli argues, Vatican II, "committed to the priesthood of all believers" has yet to take deep root in the structures and culture of the church.

I think the problem goes even deeper than the ecclesial structures created by Trent. The conditions that gave rise to the poisonous brew of power, patriarchy, clericalism, lack of accountability and secrecy are inextricably tied to the monarchical structure and colonialist culture of the church.

Yet as a church we cannot unearth these deep roots of sinfulness unless the hierarchy chooses the "painful path of purification." Going to the very depth of our faith, Catholic social teaching and Eucharistic practice recognize that truthful remembering is a condition of the possibility of authentic repentance and reconciliation.

The church is in a profound moral, spiritual and pastoral bind. If the church maintains its silence in relationship to its enduring complicity in clerical sexual abuse, it denies God's grace, hope and healing in the Eucharistic memory of Jesus Christ.

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On the other hand, if the church seeks holistic witness rooted in Eucharistic memory, it must recognize its own need for repentance for clerical sexual abuse. There is moral, spiritual and pastoral danger here, too. A public apology and invocation of God's forgiveness may overreach by acting unilaterally under the erroneous assumption that it is an institution of singular moral credibility. While some individual bishops recognize the need for repentance, the institution seems irretrievably bent in on itself.

In his magisterial study *Ecclesial Repentance*, Jeremy Bergen explains that truthful remembering is more than a mode of knowledge. Truthful remembering must become a practice, a way of life.

Practicing truthful remembering means that the church must become accountable to the people of God. As Stephanie Ann Puen writes in the blog Daily Theology, the church has yet to develop an adequate organizational ethic of accountability and transparency.

Puen argues that the church has overly relied upon a vertical model of accountability of the laity to priests, priests to bishops, bishops to cardinals, and cardinals to the pope. This model fails to provide accountability to the priesthood of believers and

society. There are organizational models of how the church can develop structures of accountability and transparency.



Pope Paul VI presides over a meeting of the Second Vatican Council in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in 1963. (CNS/Catholic Press photo)

For example, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse offers outstanding witness to the kind of listening the church has yet to take up to become accountable and transparent.

Bergen is clear that full scrutiny of the church's witness "cannot be done apart from the testimony of those who experience the distortion of that witness and its life-denying effects."

That means that the church cannot be in control of a listening process in terms of setting deadlines or determining outcomes. One-time expressions of sorrow and apology are wholly insufficient and may only be more damaging.

Authentic listening demands a fundamental openness to hearing the pain, suffering, anger and cries for justice of people who have suffered the spiritual, psychic and physical wounds of clerical sexual abuse.

A long-term, open-ended process of listening and truthful remembering is one way the church may begin to create conditions of the possibility of repentance and repairing the broken body of Christ.

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