Opinion

News




U.S. Supreme Court nominee Judge Brett Kavanaugh is sworn in before the Senate Judiciary Committee during his Supreme Court confirmation hearing Sept. 4 on Capitol Hill in Washington. (CNS/Doug Mills, pool via Reuters)

by Michael Sean Winters

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It is not surprising that Judge Brett Kavanaugh called last week's hearing "a national disgrace." He thought the disgrace belonged to the Senate, specifically to the Democrats on the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Sen. Orrin Hatch agreed with the verdict that the hearings were a disgrace, as did Sen. Lindsey Graham. The South Carolina Republican also called the tactics of his Democratic colleagues "the most unethical sham." And, it wasn't only Republicans who worried that the country was slouching towards some ugly new low. Trevor Noah, host of Comedy Central's "The Daily Show," said, "It was gripping. But that doesn't mean today was a fun day. Emotionally, it was taxing. If anything, it was like a sad Super Bowl." On the cable news shows, moderate voices fretted that that nation had never been in such dire straits.

Bosh.

What we are watching, first in the riveting testimony of Christine Blasey Ford last Thursday, then in Sen. Jeff Flake's anguished face when confronted in an elevator by two victims of sexual violence, and in the many, indeed countless, conversations around kitchen tables and at the water fountains in the office, is not a national disgrace but a moral reckoning.

Yes, it was riveting but not enjoyable watching Ford recall the fear and degradation she experienced so long ago. Yes, it was pathetic watching Kavanaugh defend his honor, no doubt convinced that grinding, then as now, did not count as sex, so he could convince himself that he was being truthful when he say he did not sexually assault Ford. We all wish we did not have to discuss such things. But, the alternative to discussing such things is making yet another generation of young women put up with sexual violence and harassment with no more of an excuse than "boys will be boys."

And it is time, it is past time, for young women to not have to put up with that.

Moral reckonings are never pretty. Going to confession is a grace-filled experience of God's mercy, but only if you have been brutally candid about your own sinfulness, and that candor is not uplifting or ennobling. We have to cut through all of the little

lies we tell ourselves to minimize our sense of our own sinfulness. We have to look clearly, without the rose-colored glasses, at our behavior and our motivations, our unspoken thoughts or darkest desires. It is not pretty.

When sin is also a cultural norm, what we Catholics call social sin, those same tendencies to justify, minimize or evade the sinfulness itself are even more elaborate. There have been biological and psychological explanations for the bad behavior of young men towards young women. There have been attempts to shame the victim: "She should never have worn that short skirt!" There have been tales told, some tall and some not, by fathers to sons about their youthful exploits, tales told with pride, or at least intended to justify sinful behavior. There have been fatalistic, and deceitful, excuses told by mothers to daughters, an acquiescence in the social sin: "The hurt will go away:" "Like it or not, boys will be boys." Breaking through those norms, those lies, those cultural deceits and diversions, that is not going to be pretty.

A wise friend compares what we are going through culturally to a medical procedure: incision and drainage. You cut into the abscess to drain out the infected pus. It is smelly and gross, but it is the first step in healing.

The Kavanaugh hearings and all the commentary and conversation surrounding them are a disgrace the way that the Battle of Antietam was a disgrace. The Civil War was also a moral reckoning — with the sin of slavery. It was ugly. There were mass casualties. There were innocent civilians killed and maimed. There was brutality all around. But, in the end, slavery was extinguished. Not racism mind you — and on the morrow of the Kavanaugh vote, misogyny will still persist — but slavery was ended.

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"Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away," said Abraham Lincoln in his storied Second Inaugural Address. "Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

Let that be our attitude today. If every drop of humiliation and fear and degradation that has been visited upon women through the centuries must now be visited upon men embarrassed to be discussing in public their brutish teenage behavior, men unable to advance in their careers because they got drunk and abused a woman, men, even famous and beloved men like Bill Cosby, sent to jail because they could not and did not control their sexual urges, let it be said again that the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

Moral reckonings are not pretty. They are necessary. This is no disgrace. The centuries of degrading women sexually was the disgrace.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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