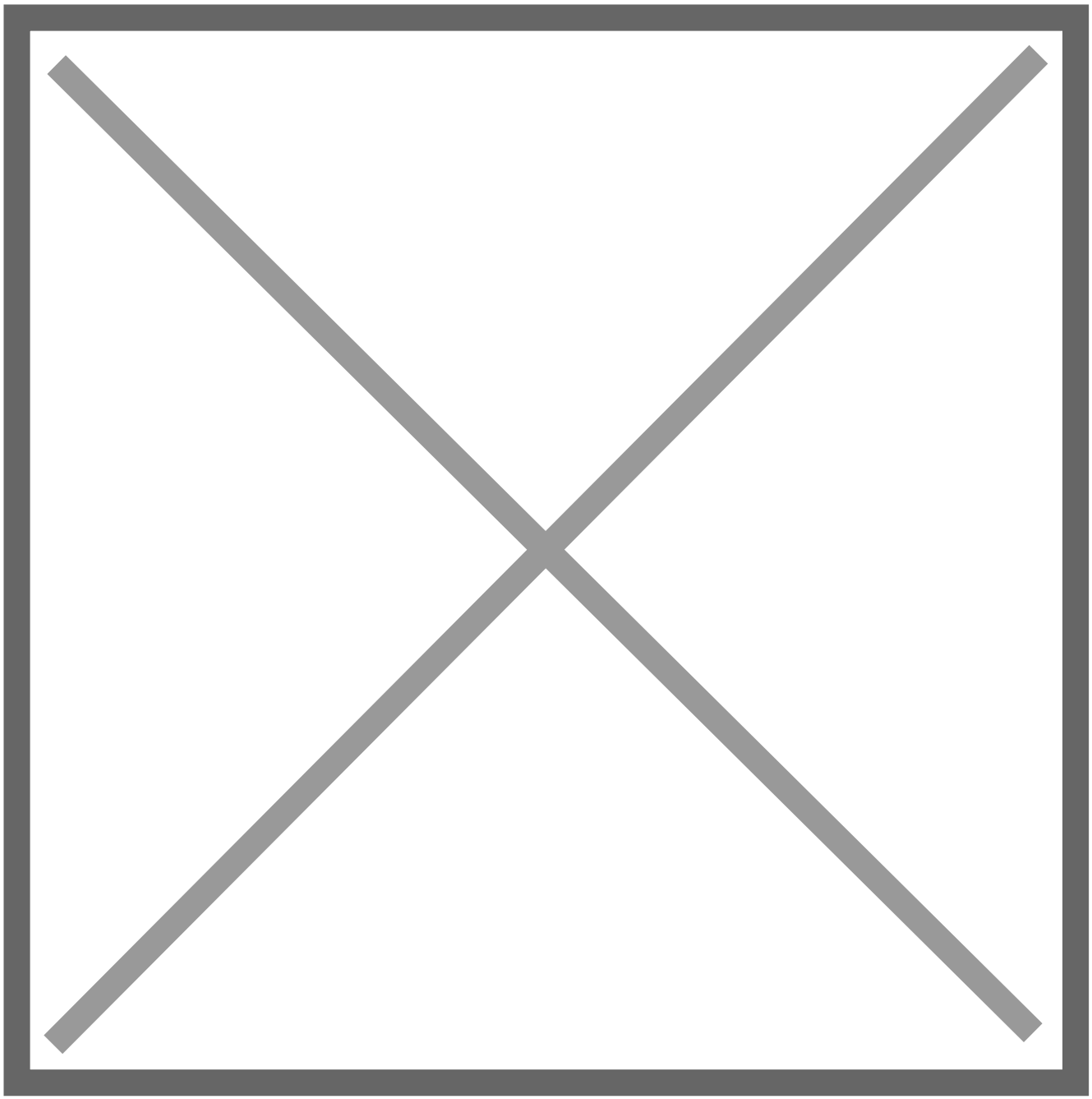
News



Patrick Hornbeck, chair of the department of religious studies at Fordham University, moderates panelists (l-r) Celia Fisher, David Gibson, Cathleen Kaveny and Bryan Massingale at an event held at the university on Oct. 29. (Marisol Diaz-Gordon)



by Peter Feuerherd

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What now?

Toward the end of a year marked by revelations about worldwide sex abuse, from Chile, Australia, Germany, Guam, as well as Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the question of how the church should emerge from crisis was the topic in two seminars at East Coast Jesuit universities within a week of each other.

At Fordham University here, as well as Georgetown University in Washington, experts in church life and psychology offered possible pathways out, after describing the depths of the issues which confront the church.

"We have lost trust," Justice Anne Burke of the Illinois Supreme Court and former chair of the U.S. Bishops' Review Board, told the Georgetown gathering Oct. 24. "There is no accountability," she said about the bishops, noting that the 2002 Dallas Charter, which created a zero-tolerance policy for priest sex abusers, never applied to them.

She said the bishops' credibility is at stake, as revelations continue, even 16 years after enacting the charter, of bishops shuffling abusive priests around and looking the other way at rumors of sexual harassment charges against former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, D.C.

"I can't look at a bishop or a cardinal and not wonder," said Burke. "I can't say about any bishop or cardinal that he didn't know."

Fr. Bryan Massingale, professor of theology at Fordham, said at that school's seminar Oct. 29 that the current crisis is a "3.0" version. In the beginning there was the early 1980s revelations about the Diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana, first reported by National Catholic Reporter, seen at the time as isolated, aberrant behavior.

Version 2.0 grew out of the revelations in the Archdiocese of Boston, highlighted by the Boston Globe in 2002. That was seen, by much of the universal church, as an American problem. Out of that grew a no tolerance policy towards allowing priest sex abusers to remain in ministry as well as extensive screening efforts in dioceses aimed at volunteer church workers.

This year, said Massingale, Version 3.0 emerged, a true international crisis, with "a growing belief among many Catholics that the church or the hierarchy cannot police itself." Across the Catholic ideological spectrum is the consensus that only civil authority and the media can effectively push for change.

"We have reached the end of piecemeal reform," he said.

Having highlighted the issues involved, experts at both seminars agreed on conclusions about how the church should move forward. They include theological, political, legal and psychological reform.

That consensus included calls for:

Increased lay involvement in all levels of church life

This is not the time to quit on Catholic life, speakers noted.

"I will not let the hierarchy ruin our church and my faith," said Burke, urging lay Catholics to stay involved at all levels, from parish to the diocese.

There will be obstacles.

The church leadership remains, said Jesuit Fr. Jerry McGlone, a psychologist and victim of sex abuse by a priest, "a good old boys' club and that's the problem."

Speaking at the Georgetown seminar, McGlone said there is a need for parents to be at the table when decisions are made about church personnel. Changes in canon law

need to be undertaken, he said, to create opportunities for lay people to have an impact on parish life. Ironically, he said, canon law which emerged after Vatican II and seen as a boost for lay involvement in the church, took away much of the canonical power of laypeople running parishes. Most real power remains in the hands of pastors and bishops.



Georgetown University hosted an evening of prayer, reflection and dialogue about the sexual abuse crisis with panelists (l-r) Jerry McGlone, Kerry Robinson, John Carr, Erica Lizza and Anne Burke. (Courtesy of Georgetown University's Office of Mission and Ministry)

"Don't be afraid to be a troublemaker," said Erica Lizza, president of Catholic Women at Georgetown. She said that women, who are more likely to have experienced sexual abuse, need to be more involved in decision making. Her generation, said the 21-year-old Georgetown student, wants change, and wants it quickly. Many younger Catholics, once on the fringe of church life, have abandoned Catholic practice entirely, she said. They are unlikely to return.

The pool of church decision makers needs to expand, Massingale said. He noted that in the case of the Diocese of Buffalo, New York, it was a woman — Siobhan O'Connor, former secretary to Bishop Richard Malone — who blew the whistle and went public on the diocese allowing sex abusing priests to continue in ministry. Her story aired on CBS' 60 Minutes on Oct. 28.

"We need a hard look at unaccountable power in the Catholic Church," said Massingale.

Kerry Robinson of the Leadership Roundtable, an organization devoted to improving church management, told the Georgetown forum that she has encouraged bishops and other church leaders to seek out the advice of lay finance experts. There used to be resistance, she said, but no longer, as bishops try to find a way through the current crisis.

An end to secrecy, and welcoming the involvement of civil authorities

In the latest version of the crisis, "law enforcement and politicians have done a 180," said David Gibson, a journalist on Catholic issues and director of the Center on Religion and Culture at Fordham.

No politician fears repercussions from going after sex abuse in the Catholic Church anymore, he said, noting the call for a massive federal subpoena of all internal church files, as well as efforts at Pennsylvania grand jury-type investigations in numerous states. That is also true internationally, as judicial bodies have become involved in countries such as Chile and Australia.

"Every reform that has happened is the result of outside forces," said Massingale.

Lizza has grown up with the impact of sex abuse in her parish life. A charismatic pastor in the parish where she was raised was relieved of his duties after being charged with abuse. The response to that parish crisis was deafening silence.

"There was a lot of secrecy," she said. "It wasn't talked about out loud." That reaction works against a value in her generation about the need for institutions to be transparent. Otherwise they risk becoming irrelevant. Among her generation, she said, there is "a desire to learn the authentic truth."

Burke urged bishops to come forward with all their files — including those set aside in secret archives — before they are forced to by the government.

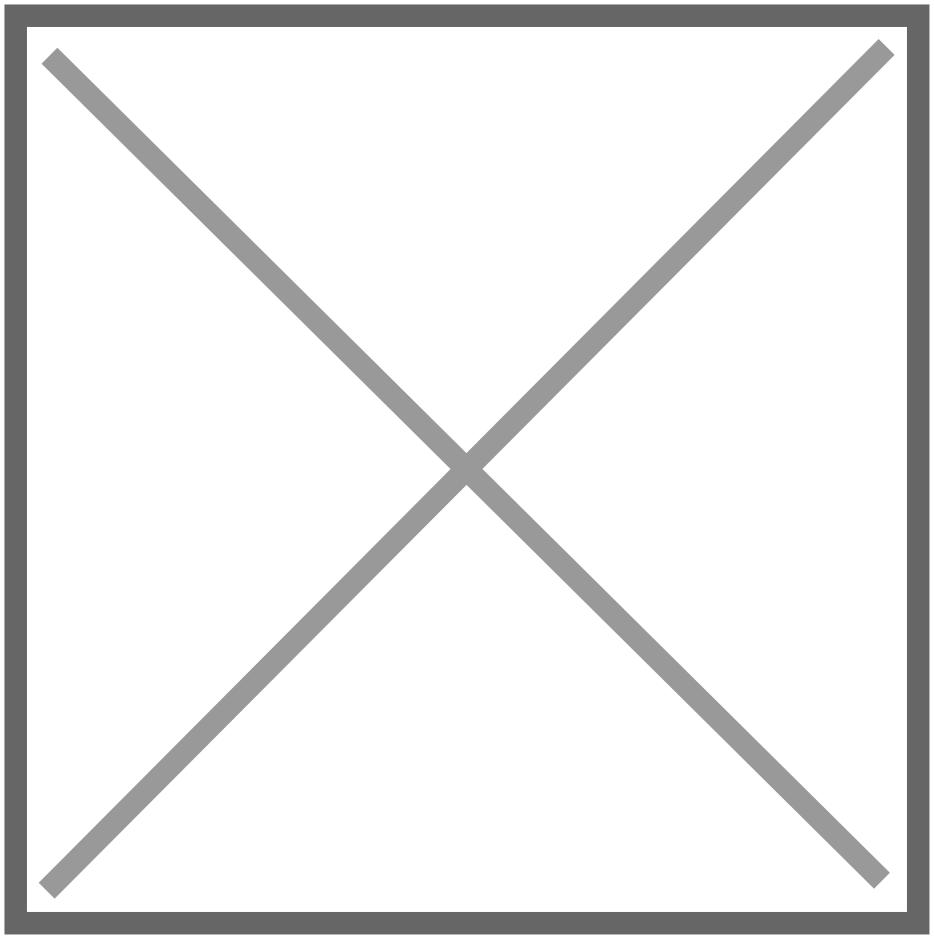
"Until you hit rock bottom, we can't heal. We can't heal unless we know what the whole story is," she said. Transparency and confession of past cover-ups is needed before effective change can happen.

Getting survivors involved

McGlone told the Georgetown forum that survivors know the dimensions of sex abuse in ways that others can't.

As the sixth of eight children, with a father who worked three jobs to support the family, McGlone recalled himself as a vulnerable young teenager.

"I needed an adult figure," he said, a need taken advantage of by his abuser, who carefully groomed his victim over years.



Cathleen Kaveny and Bryan Massingale agreed that the pool of church decision makers needs to expand. (Marisol Diaz-Gordon)

Cathleen Kaveny, author and professor of law at Boston College, at the Fordham seminar urged every diocese to listen to survivors' stories, and to have them be part of the decision-making process.

"It reminds us that we are to be particularly careful of the vulnerable," she said.

A stop to scapegoating gays

Gibson noted that Catholic traditionalists, once reluctant to address the sex abuse crisis during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, now agree there is a problem. They once argued that the accounts of sex abuse were products of anti-Catholicism. Now they are using the crisis to go after Pope Francis and to argue that the root cause of the problem are gay priests.

A number of these groups, such as the NAPA Institute, have money, and the ears of bishops, he said.

"It was not homosexuality," said Burke, citing the John Jay study commissioned by the bishops which noted that while some 80 percent of victims of clerical sex abuse in the Catholic Church were young males, many of the abusers acted out of delayed sexual development. "It was homosexual behavior," she said.

"The data does not support the scapegoating," said McGlone. He urged bishops tempted to blame gays to: "Stop it. Period."

It's a diversionary tactic, he said, akin to blaming sex abuse outside the church on the majority of malefactors, who are largely white, middle-class, heterosexual men. Getting rid of them, such as efforts to ban gay priests, would do nothing to resolve the issue, he said.

Appreciate the benefits of anger

Citing the Gospel accounts of Jesus overturning the merchant tables at the temple in Jerusalem, Lizza noted that "anger isn't actually a bad thing."

She added, "it's not wrong to follow his example and demand change."

Change formation of seminarians

Massingale said that an investigation of seminary life in the 1990s by the Vatican reinforced tendencies that fomented the abuse crisis. Among them are more separation of seminarians from lay people and nurturing a view of priesthood as a caste set apart from others in the church.

He said that efforts to wipe out homosexual expression in seminaries has driven honest discussion of sexual development underground. Too often, he said, seminarians live "under a cone of silence" when it comes to discussion of sexual issues and development.

> "We need to have a new infusion of courage in our church. We need a new Pentecost" — Bryan Massingale
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Kaveny noted that the Pennsylvania grand jury report, with stories of abusing priests going back to the 1950s, indicates that the roots of the crisis date well before Woodstock and the societal loosening of sexual mores, often blamed by traditionalists as a root cause of the crisis.

End clericalism

Massingale noted that Francis, known for his upbeat style, can be caustic when it comes to critiquing clericalism. His harshest words are often directed toward bishops and priests who live way above their parishioners and fail to, as the pope put it, have "the smell of the sheep."

Francis has acted, removing bishops, including McCarrick and Cardinal Keith O'Brien in Scotland, over sex abuse issues, as well as Bishop Martin Holley of Memphis, over governance and competence concerns.

Clericalism affects not only priests, but also parishioners, who are trained to defer to clerical authority, he said.

Others were not confident that the entrenched clericalism in the church will change anytime soon.

"We still live like bachelors in a Four Seasons hotel," said McGlone about many of his fellow clergy.

To see courage as the prime virtue, not obedience

"We need to have a new infusion of courage in our church. We need a new Pentecost," said Massingale.

The sex abuse crisis has been nurtured, he said, by the focus of obedience as a cardinal virtue, for priests as well as laypeople. The result has been a failure to question policies and actions by authority in the church. Massingale, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, said that courage should be seen as the prime virtue, not deference to authority.

Kaveny, for one, offered a word of caution. Church reform might well be needed, she said, but the crisis is too overwhelming to wait for change. Every Catholic has been impacted, survivors as well as laypeople in the pews who paid for more than $4 billion in sex abuse settlements, money that could have gone to help grow the church, improve Catholic education or help the poor.

The imperative, she said, is to act now.

"We can't wait to restructure the hierarchy of the church to solve this problem," she said.

[Peter Feuerherd is a correspondent for NCR's Field Hospital series on parish life and is a professor of journalism at St. John's University, New York.]

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