News
Opinion
Editorial



(Dreamstime/Kts)

by NCR Editorial Staff

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

November 9, 2018
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Dear brothers in Christ, shepherds, fellow pilgrims,

We address you as you approach this year's national meeting in Baltimore because we know there is nowhere left to hide.

It's over.

All the manipulations and contortions of the past 33 years, all the attempts to deflect and equivocate — all of it has brought the church, but especially you, to this moment.

It's over.

Even the feds are now on the trail. They've ordered that you not destroy any documents. The Department of Justice is conducting a national criminal investigation of how you've handled the clergy sex abuse scandal. It is a point in our history without precedent. We want you to know that you aren't alone in this moment, you've not been abandoned. But this time it must be different. This time it won't be easy.

From fable to sacred text, we know how this goes. The point is reached where all realize the king wears no clothes, the righteous accusers read the writing in the sand and fade away, the religious authorities receive the Master's most stinging rebukes. As a class of religious rulers, the loudest among you have become quite good at applying the law and claiming divine authority in marginalizing those who transgress the statutes. The prolonged abuse scandal would suggest, however, that you've not done very well taking stock of yourselves.

We have no special insight into why this moment — the Pennsylvania grand jury report, the downfall of Theodore McCarrick — has so captured the public imagination and pushed the church to this outer limit of exposure and vulnerability. There are theories, not least of which is that the opportunists among us are attempting to use this moment to bring down the only pope who has actually dethroned bishops and a cardinal for their crimes and indiscretions.

But that's an issue for another time.

The reality, we all know, is that it has been going on for a long time. The first national story appeared across four pages of this publication in the summer of 1985. The worst of it occurred during the pontificate of the hastily sainted John Paul II, a giant on the world stage, but a pastor who let wolves roam his own flock. His

idealized concept of heroic priesthood apparently left him incapable of hearing the truth from credible witnesses, including the few bishops who dared disturb that idealized world with troubling reports. He promoted to the end Marciel Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legion of Christ, and a persona who came to represent the worst of the abuse scandal. Maciel, an accomplished sycophant, kept scrutiny at bay with his ability to spread a lot of young priests and a lot of money around the Vatican.

> This is about a rot at the heart of the culture entrusted with leadership of the Catholic community.
>
> Tweet this

The point beyond dispute is that we are at a moment in U.S. church history — and perhaps in the history of the global church — without precedent. This is not about debatable matters — celibacy or the filioque clause, or the primacy of Scripture or whether the Earth is the center of the universe or whether women should be allowed ordination or any of the hot button issues that have kept us roiling and at each others' throats these past decades. This, instead, is about a rot at the heart of the culture entrusted with leadership of the Catholic community. A rot so pervasive that it has touched every aspect of the community's life, disrupting all of the certainties and presumptions about who we are and who you are that helped hold this community together.

Those who worked so ardently in the past to enable you — the faithful, so betrayed, who just couldn't believe you would engage in such a deliberate cover up; the likes of George Weigel and his blind, uncritical hagiography of Pope John Paul II; Dr. Mary Ann Glendon and the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus and their naive celebration and defense of Maciel; the rest of the chorus at First Things and like publications; the telling silence of so many other Catholic outlets; the absurdity of charlatan William Donohue and his silly "Catholic" League — they helped sustain your weak narrative as many of them denigrated those who raised the tough questions and pursued the truth.

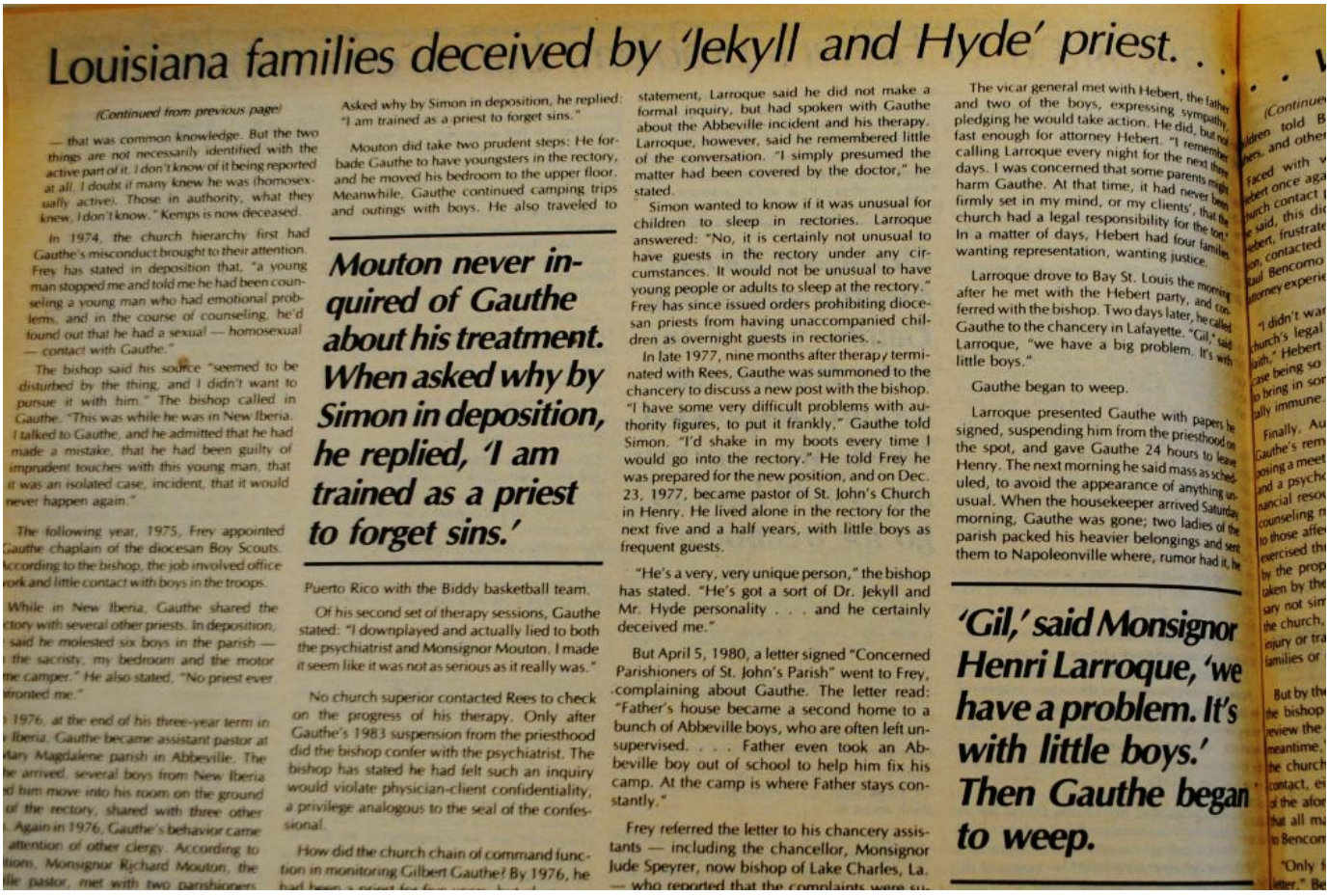
It's over.

None of them any longer has a persuasive case to make. Some of them now try to blame the crisis on gay priests. You might be tempted to latch onto that diversion, but it will only prolong the already intolerably long agony.

Gay priests and bishops are certainly among us — probably a greater percentage of gays in the Catholic clergy, if anecdotal evidence and the private chatter of seminary rectors and heads of orders is to be believed, than one would find in the general population.

The clergy culture is in deep need of serious conversation and education about that issue and much more regarding sexuality. That discussion is unlikely on any significant scale because too many bishops and too many priests, if they were honest, would have to admit to an orientation that the church still calls "disordered." Unless the preponderance of credible experts has suddenly flipped its understanding of things, however, sexual orientation is not one of the topics that match with sexual abuse.

Advertisement



Louisiana families deceived by 'Jekyll and Hyde' priest. . .

(Continued from previous page)

— that was common knowledge. But the two things are not necessarily identified with the active part of it. I don't know of it being reported at all. I doubt if many knew he was (homosexually active). Those in authority, what they knew, I don't know." Kemps is now deceased.

In 1974, the church hierarchy first had Gauthe's misconduct brought to their attention. Frey has stated in deposition that, "a young man stopped me and told me he had been counseling a young man who had emotional problems, and in the course of counseling, he'd found out that he had a sexual — homosexual — contact with Gauthe."

The bishop said his source "seemed to be disturbed by the thing, and I didn't want to pursue it with him." The bishop called in Gauthe. "This was while he was in New Iberia. I talked to Gauthe, and he admitted that he had made a mistake, that he had been guilty of imprudent touches with this young man, that it was an isolated case, incident, that it would never happen again."

The following year, 1975, Frey appointed Gauthe chaplain of the diocesan Boy Scouts. According to the bishop, the job involved office work and little contact with boys in the troops.

While in New Iberia, Gauthe shared the rectory with several other priests. In deposition, he said he molested six boys in the parish — in the sacristy, my bedroom and the motor home camper." He also stated, "No priest ever confronted me."

In 1976, at the end of his three-year term in New Iberia, Gauthe became assistant pastor at Mary Magdalene parish in Abbeville. The year he arrived, several boys from New Iberia moved into his room on the ground floor of the rectory, shared with three other priests. Again in 1976, Gauthe's behavior came to the attention of other clergy. According to depositions, Monsignor Richard Mouton, the Abbeville pastor, met with two parishioners.

Asked why by Simon in deposition, he replied: "I am trained as a priest to forget sins."

Mouton did take two prudent steps: He forbade Gauthe to have youngsters in the rectory, and he moved his bedroom to the upper floor. Meanwhile, Gauthe continued camping trips and outings with boys. He also traveled to

Mouton never inquired of Gauthe about his treatment. When asked why by Simon in deposition, he replied, 'I am trained as a priest to forget sins.'

Puerto Rico with the Biddy basketball team.

Of his second set of therapy sessions, Gauthe stated: "I downplayed and actually lied to both the psychiatrist and Monsignor Mouton. I made it seem like it was not as serious as it really was."

No church superior contacted Rees to check on the progress of his therapy. Only after Gauthe's 1983 suspension from the priesthood did the bishop confer with the psychiatrist. The bishop has stated he had felt such an inquiry would violate physician-client confidentiality, a privilege analogous to the seal of the confessional.

How did the church chain of command function in monitoring Gilbert Gauthe? By 1976, he had been a priest for five years, had

statement, Larroque said he did not make a formal inquiry, but had spoken with Gauthe about the Abbeville incident and his therapy. Larroque, however, said he remembered little of the conversation. "I simply presumed the matter had been covered by the doctor," he stated.

Simon wanted to know if it was unusual for children to sleep in rectories. Larroque answered: "No, it is certainly not unusual to have guests in the rectory under any circumstances. It would not be unusual to have young people or adults to sleep at the rectory." Frey has since issued orders prohibiting diocesan priests from having unaccompanied children as overnight guests in rectories.

In late 1977, nine months after therapy terminated with Rees, Gauthe was summoned to the chancery to discuss a new post with the bishop. "I have some very difficult problems with authority figures, to put it frankly," Gauthe told Simon. "I'd shake in my boots every time I would go into the rectory." He told Frey he was prepared for the new position, and on Dec. 23, 1977, became pastor of St. John's Church in Henry. He lived alone in the rectory for the next five and a half years, with little boys as frequent guests.

"He's a very, very unique person," the bishop has stated. "He's got a sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality . . . and he certainly deceived me."

But April 5, 1980, a letter signed "Concerned Parishioners of St. John's Parish" went to Frey, complaining about Gauthe. The letter read: "Father's house became a second home to a bunch of Abbeville boys, who are often left unsupervised. . . . Father even took an Abbeville boy out of school to help him fix his camp. At the camp is where Father stays constantly."

Frey referred the letter to his chancery assistants — including the chancellor, Monsignor Jude Speyrer, now bishop of Lake Charles, La. — who reported that the complaints were su-

The vicar general met with Hebert, the father and two of the boys, expressing sympathy, pledging he would take action. He did, but not fast enough for attorney Hebert. "I remember calling Larroque every night for the next three days. I was concerned that some parents might harm Gauthe. At that time, it had never been firmly set in my mind, or my clients', that the church had a legal responsibility for the tort." In a matter of days, Hebert had four families wanting representation, wanting justice.

Larroque drove to Bay St. Louis the morning after he met with the Hebert party, and conferred with the bishop. Two days later, he called Gauthe to the chancery in Lafayette. "Gil," said Larroque, "we have a big problem. It's with little boys."

Gauthe began to weep.

Larroque presented Gauthe with papers he signed, suspending him from the priesthood on the spot, and gave Gauthe 24 hours to leave Henry. The next morning he said mass as scheduled, to avoid the appearance of anything unusual. When the housekeeper arrived Saturday morning, Gauthe was gone; two ladies of the parish packed his heavier belongings and sent them to Napoleonville where, rumor had it, he

'Gil,' said Monsignor Henri Larroque, 'we have a problem. It's with little boys.' Then Gauthe began to weep.

Detail of Page 20 of National Catholic Reporter issue date June 7, 1985, jump page of Jason Berry's article "Pedophile priest: study in inept church response"

Orientation is not a determining factor in abuse of children. If it were, we'd have to be investigating heterosexual orientation as a cause because a lot of abuse is perpetrated by heterosexual men upon boys and girls. So, take that path if you'd like, but be prepared to lose whatever bit of credibility might be left in the tank.

It's over.

You've been ensconced in a culture that has for too long protected you from the consequences of your worst instincts. The boundaries that once kept your culture safe from scrutiny have become as irrelevant today as the moats and walls of previous centuries. There is no hiding any longer. You've been imbibing the excesses of power, authority and privilege that have accrued over centuries and, like the addict who hits bottom, a fundamental decision for recovery is essential to your survival.

It's over.

You've hit bottom not because the latest gush of bad news resulted from a resolve to come clean and tell the truth. It resulted from yet another investigation. In short, you were moved to words of contrition because you were, once again, caught. Yes, most of it is old news. Yes, the coverup was engineered mostly by bishops who are no longer in office or have died. News organizations once reluctant to take you on for fear of being labeled anti-Catholic are no longer reticent.

You've become certain clickbait. And you will continue to be as, in diocese after diocese, more documents are released and revealed and more grand juries look into the inner workings of this institution over the past 50 years or so. It is self-inflicted pain.

> Bishops, you were certain enough about what was going on and its potential consequences that you employed individually and corporately legions of lawyers.
>
> Tweet this

And please stop asserting that you did not know what was going on before 2002. If the scandal exploded in 2002, it was because a long fuse had already set off explosions in city after city and state after state and been chronicled widely for 17 years before the spark hit Boston. In the aftermath of those explosions, you were certain enough about what was going on and its potential consequences that you employed individually and corporately legions of lawyers. You knew enough to keep secret files under lock and key. You knew it was evil enough that you had to hide it.

It's over.

There is no denying you've done a lot of adjusting to the bad news. You put together a charter to protect youth. (Fair to note that it's taken you 16 years to get around to considering including yourselves among those to be held accountable.) You've instituted a national office, paid for elaborate studies, instituted national and local review boards, held reconciliation services and required child protection training and background checks, and paid billions in settlements. The church is indisputably a safer place for kids for all of that effort. But it was all done in reaction to outside forces.

The only thing you can't be forced to do is what you would say our sacramental tradition requires: a deep personal examination, telling the truth, begging forgiveness and a resolve to amend.

The examination begins with the question that only you can answer, individually and as a group: How did we and our brothers in the past, as leaders of this clerical culture, reach the point where we could rationalize turning our backs on children who had been sexually tortured by our priests to protect those priests and our culture? One of your brothers, Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich, has already laid out some appropriate steps. Bishops must "cede authority," he said, to allow for greater accountability to outside authority. He also said that "privilege, power and protection of a clerical culture" have to be "eradicated from the life of the church" or "everything else is a sideshow."

Those are worthy points to consider. The retreat you've scheduled for January would be the perfect place to do just that as a body. A suggestion: attend in mufti and leave all the trappings, the collars and black suits, all the silk and lace and pectoral crosses at home. God will recognize you. Take that little step in humility and actually meet as brothers. Seek out those among you who have suffered, who have known

what it means to come through pain or addiction or illness. Ask them to help lead you out of this dark moment. They would know the way.

When it is over, and here we make a suggestion that runs contrary to journalistic interest: Be quiet. No grand pronouncements.

In the months to follow, as the federal investigation likely forces out more documents and that burning fuse continues to set off explosions, some of you may pay dearly for what you have or have not done in the past. We'll know how your retreat went by how you act in those moments.

We'll know whether you've really hit bottom and are on the mend with the best interests of the community at heart or whether you're still in search of cheap grace and the easy way out.

It's over.

In the name of the child victims, the families torn apart, the parents who know no end to their agony, the body of Christ subjected to relentless humiliation for decades, it has to be over. This time has to be different.

We pray for you,

Your sisters and brothers, your fellow pilgrims, the church.