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Opinion



Thomas Doyle is seen in an August 2018 photo. (AP Photo/PA Wire/Niall Carson)



by Tom Roberts

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I have thought recently that one way to understand the revived interest in the priest sexual abuse scandal, post-Theodore McCarrick and the Pennsylvania grand jury report of little more than a year ago, is in the context of the Kübler-Ross stages of grief. You know: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

I think certain of us in the Catholic community have gone through several of those cycles, depending on when we were introduced to the crisis, how deeply we were involved in it, and whether it involved anyone we knew either as victim or perpetrator. No doubt the cycles will go on.

But in one peculiar and important sense, regarding the hierarchical culture at the heart of the scandal, perhaps we can now say with some certainty that significant portions of the community have arrived at acceptance of the death of the clerical/hierarchical culture.

That may appear a grand statement, but I think it safe to say that the culture is finished as we've known it. It no longer enjoys automatic deference as it once did from the wider culture; it has lost most of its credibility and influence in that wider culture; it has lost much of its credibility among Catholics; and, in Francis, it encounters a pope whose blistering criticism of the culture leaves no doubt that the old form is on its way out.

Watching the disintegration of a culture, however, is not understanding what caused it to crumble, how to rebuild it, or what will replace it. I'd like to end the year considering two important voices from inside the culture who have distinct insights into what went wrong and what will be necessary in the future.

The first up is Thomas Doyle, a canon lawyer, inactive priest and former member of the Dominican order. Regular readers of NCR are familiar with him; he was that extremely rare cleric who, from the very beginning, took a different approach from most in the clerical culture. Once deep inside the culture, in recent decades he has been largely on the outside, an unflagging advocate for victims of abuse and an itinerant expert for lawyers throughout the United States and in many other corners of the globe bringing cases against the church.

He recently gave a talk at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. It was a significant event, for despite the wealth of insight he brings to the subject, he is rarely invited to Catholic campuses to share his views.

The title of the talk, "The Phenomenon of Systemic Sexual Violation by Catholic Clerics and Religious: The Reality of a Church Transformed" engages the history, ancient and recent, and the deep institutional contradictions that formed the seedbed for the current crisis. The entire talk is available here.

Such abuse is not new in the church, writes Doyle. "The oldest prohibition against sex between adult men and young boys is found in the *Didache* which dates from the end of the first century." Between then and Pope Francis' 2019 document *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, which deals with accused bishops, "are several hundred official documents on the matter issued by popes or gatherings of bishops."

The current manifestation "is evidence of a profound contradiction that reaches to the foundational core of the institutional church," he said.

Doyle's bona fides stem from his personal experience of the crisis, which dates to the early 1980s when he began to see the first reports of the scandal, particularly the Gilbert Gauthe case in Louisiana, while working in the nuncio's office in Washington, D.C.

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After decades of reading through endless details in depositions, chancery correspondence and other documents, and speaking with victims and their families, he has come to some big-picture conclusions. And the first is that fundamental contradiction:

> The Church, described as the Mystical Body of Christ, the People of God, the source of our earthly happiness and our hope for eternal life, has given its people one of history's most stringent and restrictive codes of sexual conduct and taught them that even slight violations can result in eternal damnation.

> At the same time, those who have taught and enforced this path to God's favor have committed and systemically enabled the commission of acts against the most vulnerable in our midst that are deemed by most, if not all, societies as the most horrific and disgusting that can be perpetrated on another human being. ... It is a profound spiritual damage that can only be described as the murder of the soul.

There's no longer any denying, given exhaustive studies and investigations during the past three decades, that "the common element of causality" in the abuse crisis, he writes, "has been the role of the bishops and the inadequacy of the response."

In that regard, he begins at the top to "not only include but highlight" Pope John Paul II's failed efforts "to deny, minimize, and shift the blame."

Doyle lists five points illustrating "a harsh reality" revealed by the scandal and attempted cover-up:

- Sexual violation and other forms of corruption are entrenched in clerical culture, which protects the clerics rather than the victims.
- The hierarchy's obsession "with protecting its image, stature and power at the expense of the victims has had the opposite effect and has in fact, produced an erosion of respect and trust."
- "This reality has revealed a much different 'church' than that of *Lumen Gentium* , the Catechism, or the Code of Canon Law."
- The history of abuse, denial and cover-up has been "embedded in the clerical culture that not only protected but enabled it, and this culture is no longer capable of hiding, controlling, minimizing or eradicating it. Nor is it capable of continuing to sustain the myth of clerical superiority based on magical thinking about the nature of sacred orders."
- "This complex phenomenon is far more than the physical violation of minors by clerics and the fumbling response of church leadership."

Doyle's talk rings with an authenticity earned through his own painful experience in dealing with the church and with countless victims over the decades. There is probably a reason he's not a regular on the college circuit or asked to advise the hierarchy. His conclusions — which actually lead to a glimmer of hope in the future — are unvarnished.

> The horrific history of sexual violation and the systemic, destructive response, now out in the open, has acknowledged what the hierarchy does not want to face: The People of God and the Hierarchical Governmental structure are not one and the same and the hierarchical structure we have lived with can hardly be blamed on Christ as its author.

I recommend sitting with this talk. Few on the planet bring Doyle's level of experience, understanding and bare truth to the matter. His words carry both the diagnosis and prognosis that can lead to the acceptance necessary for moving on.

Next up, Jesuit theologian Fr. James Keenan, who has developed a paper that explores "hierarchicalism" and the missing element he says is essential to reform of the hierarchical culture.

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