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A cruet and ciborium hold wine and bread that will become the Body and Blood of Christ during Mass inside the Mother of Mercy Hall at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help in Champion, Wisconsin, April 28, 2019. (CNS/The Compass/Sam Lucero)



by Sr. Christine Schenk

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I find myself again lamenting the abysmal sinfulness of the Catholic clerical system. The long-anticipated release of the McCarrick report sheds harsh light on the failure of complicit bishops and Pope John Paul II to believe then-Archbishop Theodore McCarrick's victims even after New York Cardinal John O'Connor warned the pope not to make him Cardinal Archbishop of Washington.

The painful mendacity of the clerical system was also on depressing display at FutureChurch's 30th anniversary celebration, where theologian Doris Wagner Reisinger received the organization's Young Catholic Leaders Award. Reisinger spoke about her abuse as a young nun and her efforts to bring a prominent Vatican priest to justice. In her experience, Catholic sisters have too often been entrapped in a conspiracy of silence that protects abusing priests.

In November 2018, Reisinger and two other survivors shattered that silence. They were helped by NCR's Joshua McElwee, who reported that Reisinger's abuser — Fr. Hermann Geissler — still held his high ranking position at the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Days after the story ran, Geissler resigned and Pope Francis requested the Vatican's highest court — the Apostolic Signatura — to investigate the accusations.

Unfortunately, the Signatura acquitted Geissler without ever hearing Reisinger's in-person testimony, even though, according to a written 2014 Vatican communique, he had admitted his guilt. A renowned professor of canon law, Thomas Schüller of Münster University in Germany called the Signatura ruling a "scandalous verdict."

The Catholic Church is afflicted with a rigged clerical system incapable of monitoring itself. It is tempting to despair of the "Catholic" brand, which many of us were once quite proud to claim.

It may be time to own our despair.

The clerical system isn't working anymore. Perhaps it was never meant to work, only we didn't realize it.

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With these thoughts roiling my heart, I viewed a recent recording* of Leonard Bernstein's "Mass" originally performed at the Chicago 2018 Ravinia Festival. I loved this brilliant musical theatre when it debuted in 1971. Bernstein's "Mass" was anti-war, anti-establishment, and it addressed the alienation of a generation.

For Catholics, the most unsettling part of the "Mass" is watching the priest celebrant completely unravel in a musical mix of jarring cacophony and soaring religious lyricism.

The text of the Roman liturgy, sometimes sung in Latin and sometimes in English, is juxtaposed with the congregation's anguished cries of alienation, non-belief and cynicism. As the priest dons his liturgical attire, he becomes a cool, rational, impassive, believe-at-all-costs-or-else kind of figure. The sung English lyrics expressing the disbelief, anger and despair of the worshippers build to a crescendo. Meanwhile, the sung Latin text proceeds implacably onward, seemingly oblivious to the people's cries for peace, meaning and self-respect.

Tension builds until the Agnus Dei when, amid deafening demands to "give us peace," the celebrant, in a frenzy of frustration, flings the chalice and sacred elements to the floor. Engulfed in a sudden, shocked silence he sings:

> Look ...
>
> Isn't that ...
>
> ... odd ...

...

> Glass shines ... brighter ...
>
> When it's ... broken ...

I never noticed that.

How easily things get broken.

Glass … and brown wine …

Thick … like blood …

Rich … like honey and blood …

Hey … don't you find that funny?

…

I mean, it's *supposed* to be blood …

I mean, it *is* blood …

His …

It was …

How easily things get broken …

After a lot more lines from the celebrant, there is a hushed silence. Then, a flute solo introduces two child sopranos (a boy and a girl in the version I saw) who invite the disoriented worshippers to "Sing God a secret song: *Lauda, Laude*." Ever so slowly, the previously desolate congregants join in singing and embracing one another as *lauda, laude* builds in a grand, glorious chorus of praise and peace.

From a distance of 50 years, Bernstein appears to have been amazingly prescient.

His "Mass" portrays, in one long aesthetic and (for me) religious experience, the Catholic metamorphosis from the ecclesial mindset of the Middle Ages into the modern era.

Like many metamorphoses, it is painful to watch.

From our earliest history, the priest was expected to be above and set apart from ordinary people. Bernstein's priest believes it is his responsibility to "pray them into heaven" because of his status as a divinely chosen mediator. Of course, this implies that the people cannot therefore come into God's presence except through him.

In Bernstein's inspired masterpiece, before the people could experience God for themselves, the celebrant had to relinquish his place between them and God. This happens only after both priest and people fully own the truth of their despair and alienation. In throwing down the chalice, the celebrant gives up his mediatorial role. Before the silence and introduction to the final song, he sings:

> What?
>
> Are you still waiting?
>
> Still waiting for me, me alone, to sing you into heaven?
>
> Well, you're on your own.

While it can be extraordinarily painful for those of us who grew up in a world where "Father" was a sort of magical mystery figure, such relinquishment is necessary if Catholics are to attain full maturity within a community of faith.

Watching the evident implosion of the clerical system leads me to wonder if we — the people of God — are being invited to a deeper experience of faith. Are we being asked to have greater faith in ourselves and in our capacity to know and love God within a believing community — a community that includes our priests but is neither defined by nor overly reliant on them?

Have we too often projected our own holiness/sinfulness onto our priest brothers, expecting them to always mediate God for us without accepting that struggle and failure are a necessary part of the spiritual journey for priest and people alike?

Perhaps the deepest learning from clerical implosion is that God's love is bigger than any sin we can commit, any sin our church leaders can commit, and yes, even bigger than the evil entrenched in our church's hierarchical system.

But sometimes things have to break before God's grace can shine through. The paschal mystery is, after all, a mystery. The resurrected Christ shines forth only after the brokenness of crucifixion.

"How easily things get broken ... "

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk, an NCR board member, served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. Her recent book, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity*, was awarded first place in the history category by the Catholic Press Association. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.]

* *The video from PBS's Great Performances may not be available for free in your location. Here is another performance, as an example.*

Editor's note: *We can send you an email every time Christine Schenk's column, Simply Spirit, is posted. Go here to sign up.*