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More on Weakland: The perks of office

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NCR Today

Archbishop Rembert Weakland, throughout his memoir, *‘A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church,’* is unrelentingly critical of the church’s hierarchical structure -- its lack of humanity in applying rules, its refusal to foster a consultative model of governance, and its distance from the experience of ordinary people. He had firsthand experience of hierarchical pettiness and, in many instances, church leaders’ deep opposition to any of the reforms of Vatican II.

Yet Weakland took advantage of the perks of office when his position was threatened, and in the book he mounts a defense of the system in his analysis of the sex abuse crisis.

Weakland, who is the only bishop I know of to openly speak of his homosexuality (and one of the valuable elements of the book is his honest discussion of sex, his own orientation and the church’s attitudes on the subject), had a brief liaison in the late 1970s with a 30-something young man named Paul Marcoux. His love interest, it turns out, was a gold-digger of sorts who wanted Weakland to finance a project he was involved with. Twenty years later Marcoux essentially held up Weakland for a \$450,000 payment for silence, a silence Marcoux broke in 2002 on national television.

It is difficult to think of another arena in which the head guy could quietly take \$450,000 out of the treasury and walk away unscathed, with no one noticing, no further investigation, no prosecution for theft. That’s because the hierarchy is isolated from many of the rules and expectations most of the rest of us live by.

When Marcoux went public in 2002, and Weakland had to admit to the ‘inappropriate relationship’ and the payout, he had already reached the mandatory retirement age of 75. The Vatican immediately acted on his letter of resignation and removed him from Milwaukee.

In his analysis of the sex abuse crisis, Weakland spends considerable time eliciting the reader's understanding of the peculiarities of the era in which the sex abuse crisis developed and came to bishops' attention. He correctly speaks of some of the significant processes put in place in Milwaukee to stem the crisis much earlier than other dioceses had attended to such matters (though advocates of victims in his diocese would have a less generous take on what he advances as a rather enlightened approach to the issue).

It was a time of ambivalence about how to handle the matter, he suggests: From the chancery office to the psychiatrist's evaluation, no one was certain how this should be approached. One wonders (and I don't think the lack of ambivalence here benefits greatly from either hindsight or biblical literalism) what was so perplexing about confronting the evil of children being molested. For starters, it's a crime and always has been. Further, it would seem the biblical sanctions against such behavior are far clearer, the language more pointed and severe, than that cited for so many other issues with which the Christian community wrestles.

Weakland himself moves from great empathy to the usual pragmatic arguments: We didn't know; when we did know, we weren't certain how to proceed; Rome wouldn't allow us to easily get rid of priests; and, finally, who's responsible and how do you keep track of such men.

At the same time he recognizes that from 1985 on the bishops had far less claim than earlier to not understanding the nature of the illness and crimes they were dealing with. He also several times takes to task the "East Coast" bishops who, in his estimation, failed to understand the seriousness of the situation and its implications.

For some unexplained reason, he deems it necessary to take dismissive swipes at both SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests), which he characterizes as an angry and irrational group, and Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, dismissed with a rather snarky assessment as a "light weight" canon lawyer. Weakland said he heard that assessment from some of Doyle's colleagues.

On the Catholic landscape at the time, these were the two forces that did understand the nature of the problem and tried unsuccessfully to bring church leaders to greater awareness.

One might argue with some SNAP practices and wonder, as I sometimes do, whether members doubly endanger themselves by retaining a certain victim's posture for so long. But those are rather hair-splitting debates compared with the enormity of dealing both with the individual experience of sex abuse and the early intransigence of an impenetrable institution and hierarchical culture that refused to even admit there was a problem. Is there anyone who wouldn't understand or consider justified a great deal of anger?

One further suspects that since Doyle was, to my knowledge, one of a very few priests who from the earliest days of the scandal refused to buy the institutional rationale and strategy, he might be viewed as odd or out of step by peers who were seeking a less dangerous course.

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They knew ? and Doyle became exhibit A in confirming their hunches ? that to stand against the hierarchical culture on this issue would mean sacrificing a career. Certainly Weakland would have known to factor in such considerations given his own experience of the culture.

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