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Cardinal Bernardin, clerical culture, nuns and homosexuals.

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today

I have always had respect for the late Archbishop Joseph Bernardin. In so many ways he was an exemplary leader. But it is also clear he had a blind spot, one shared seemingly with nearly all the other U.S. bishops of his time and far more than any one might imagine possible today.

I am speaking about the way he shuffled and coddled sex abusing priests in his archdiocese. When having to choose between what seemed a compassionate act for a child, parents or family, on the one hand, or the continued functioning of his archdiocese, on the other, the latter got the nod, time after time after time.

Many church observers today write commonly about a "clerical culture." The dimensions and functioning of this culture come to light in the exchanges which follow.

What leads me to this conclusion are letters uncovered recently in Chicago, as a result of court orders, and reported in a recent column by a Chicago writer Chuck Goudie.

Here is what Goudie writes .

In the file are letters from Cardinal Bernardin to several priests who had been accused of sexually molesting young Catholics.

Bernardin uses the code word "sabbatical" to refer to the five months of paid time off awarded to suspected pedophiles. He describes how the pastor will return to his parish position after the sabbatical.

"May I take this opportunity to thank you for your fine work," he writes to one horrendous violator who was later imprisoned. "As you look forward to this important transition in your priesthood, please know that you have my support and prayers."

Transition in your priesthood.

Such wordplay and manipulation of reality was the normal.

Cardinal Bernardin saw life as a "seamless garment" where human existence was wrapped in purity and blessedness from conception to death.

I wish he was still alive so I could ask him where the seam was ripped and why so many young lives were left hanging on a thread.

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Honestly, what I find especially disturbing today is that these isolated men, seemingly so cut off from reality for so many years, are part of the very group, through the same time period, that have been so suspect and judgmental about the women religious, who for the most part, have been carrying on doing the works of mercy throughout the church.

Considering one of the investigations of U.S. women religious sponsored by the Vatican, against the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, one of the areas of stated Vatican concern is the women's teachings on "homosexuality." It appears the women have not been judgmental enough, have not taught openly that, according to the bishops, homosexuality is a "intrinsically disordered" state.

Teach that to your son or daughter.

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