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The consequences of warnings ignored

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

The situation in the Catholic church is similar to the situation we find today in U.S. politics. In both realms, there is a significant group that is disaffected.

The difference is that seriously disaffected Catholics tend to be somewhere left of center, while seriously disaffected Americans tend to be on the right. What they have in common is a deep sense of alienation from those in power, whether in the church or in the nation.

Catholics who had invested their hopes in the renewal and reforms brought about by the Second Vatican Council are discouraged and demoralized because those hopes seemed to have been dashed by two consecutive, aggressively conservative papacies and the bishops they have appointed and promoted.

Largely white, Republican-leaning American citizens, such as the Tea Partiers, cannot accept a Democrat in the White House -- and a Democrat of color at that -- nor Democratic control of both houses of Congress.

They feel that their country has been taken away from them, unaware of, or in denial about, the inexorable demographic trends that have long been underway. Soon whites like them will be a minority within the United States of America.

They place their hopes on repeal of this or that piece of legislation, especially the recently passed health-care reform bill, and in the next election. In the meantime, they shout epithets and carry signs comparing President Obama to Adolf Hitler and predict the nation's slide into socialism or worse under the current Administration.

Demoralized Catholics, on the other hand, follow a very different course. They tend not to shake their

fists in anger, but simply to drift away from their church, as the Pew Study of religions in the United States reported almost exactly two years ago.

If ex-Catholics constituted a church unto themselves, they would be the second largest denomination today -- second only to the Catholic church itself, which would be a lot smaller were it not for the constant stream of immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America, Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world.

The leadership of the Catholic church has thus far tended to ignore this trend. It's almost as if they never heard of the Pew Study, much less studied and discussed it seriously.

The same is true of their response to the greatest crisis ever to hit the Catholic church in the United States, and the greatest crisis to hit the universal church since the 16th-century Reformation itself, namely, the sexual-abuse scandal in the priesthood.

The initial reaction, at the highest levels of church governance, was to deny the reality of the crisis and to accuse the media (sometimes even identified as "Jewish-controlled") of creating the crisis in order to do damage to the Catholic church.

The hierarchy's default mode was to protect the church and its priesthood at all costs. Concern for the victims of sexual abuse was an entirely secondary matter. Indeed, bishops sometimes scolded lay persons for allegedly making up "sordid tales" about Father, or imposing a vow of silence, with threats of hellfire to insure enforcement of the vow.

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The hierarchy in the United States ignored warnings from well-informed observers like Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle that if they did not effectively address this problem, they would expose the Catholic church to lawsuits totaling over one billion dollars. His unheeded warning has been fulfilled, and then some.

Bishops in other countries, including the Vatican itself, presumed to lecture American Catholics, insisting that the crisis was confined to America and was the product of corrupt American values.

Now that the crisis has spread to Europe and other parts of the Catholic world, reaching even the highest office in the church, it is no longer possible for Catholic leaders in other countries to look down their noses at the Catholic church in the United States.

The sexual-abuse crisis is global in scope.

As a result of its spread to other parts of the world, the sense of discouragement and demoralization among Catholics has become even more intense.

What is to be done about it? First, church officials must make it clear that their greatest concern is for the victims of sexual abuse, not for the reputation of the institutional church and its priesthood.

Second, bishops must be completely open and truthful about what sins of omission or commission they may have committed in hiding the problem or, worse, in lying about it and in keeping predatory priests in pastoral ministry.

Third, the Vatican must not only defrock guilty priests, but also begin finally to remove bishops who covered up for these priests.

Truthful and decisive leadership is the only effective antidote to demoralization.

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