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O'Malley on the crisis, the visitation of women's orders, and Fatima

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Few Catholic bishops anywhere in the world have spent more time coping with the fallout from the sexual abuse crisis — pastoral, political, legal, and spiritual — than Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston. When he became bishop of Fall River, Massachusetts, in 1992, he inherited the infamous James Porter case, and ten years later he took over an archdiocese in virtual meltdown when he succeeded Cardinal Bernard Law in Boston.

O'Malley sat down with *NCR* on May 13 in Fatima, Portugal, where he's participating in the visit of Pope Benedict XVI. He discussed the pope's comments on the crisis en route to Portugal — insisting that the real problem is not attacks from the outside, but the reality of sin within the church — and other matters.

Highlights from the interview include:

- O'Malley said he "definitely" agrees with a recent statement from one of his brother cardinals, effectively rebuking another for insensitivity on the sexual abuse crisis. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, told reporters in late April that comments comparing criticism of Pope Benedict to "petty gossip" by Cardinal Angelo Sodano — who was John Paul II's Secretary of State for fifteen years, and still the dean of the College of Cardinals — did "massive harm" to victims. Schönborn also faulted Sodano for his role in blocking an investigation of sex abuse charges against his predecessor in Vienna, Cardinal Hans Hermann Gröer. O'Malley agreed, saying Schönborn has had a deep "pastoral experience" of the crisis.
- O'Malley said the church shouldn't be threatened by a critical analysis of how the crisis was

handled by officials such as Sodano during the John Paul years, conceding that some Vatican officials "didn't understand the seriousness of the problem or all its implications." O'Malley insisted, however, that it would be unfair to impugn John Paul himself, since the crisis didn't erupt until his health was already compromised and there was a tendency to "shelter" him from the worst of it.

- O'Malley said Pope Benedict's words aboard the papal plane were "very helpful," but expressed doubt that it will immediately halt a tendency to point fingers at outside forces "saying that trying to get senior officials on the same page is sometimes akin to 'herding cats.'"
- O'Malley said that going forward, any bishop who knowingly transfers a priest facing credible charges of sexual abuse "should be removed."

On other subjects, O'Malley, a Capuchin Franciscan who sits on the Congregation for Religious in Rome, struck a reassuring note about the current visitation of women's religious communities in the United States: "For a lot of the sisters, the big fears have been that we're going to come in and say, 'Put the habits back on, and give us all your money,?' he said. "Neither is going to happen!"

O'Malley also explained that he has a longstanding devotion to Our Lady of Fatima, but it's not focused on the apocalyptic speculation associated with the famous "secrets" of Fatima, but rather the simplicity implied in Mary appearing to three simple shepherd children. As a Capuchin Franciscan, O'Malley said, that preference for ordinary people, as opposed to the high-and-mighty, strikes him as "something beautiful."

The following are excerpts from the May 13 interview with O'Malley, which took place shortly after an open-air Mass celebrated by Pope Benedict for a crowd estimated at a half-million people.

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What brings you to Fatima?

I come to Fatima regularly, and I have for many years. I've always been in ministry to Portuguese-speaking people, for twenty years in Washington and then as bishop in Fall River, where the majority of the Catholics are Portuguese. "I've come to Portugal often over the years, and I have a lot of friends here. Actually, I just published a book here. (The Portuguese title is *Anel e sandálias*, "Ring and Sandals.")

Do you have a particular devotion to Fatima?

I do, I always have. I've always been struck by the simplicity of the message "conversion and prayer. I think too it's a devotion of the little people, and as a Franciscan, that excites me. This is where the anawim are. I think there's something beautiful about that.

I'm intrigued at how extensive the devotion is beyond the Portuguese community. It's enormous. In some ways in the States, I think it's much bigger than Lourdes. Maybe the secrets were part of it, because a lot of people are fascinated by them. When I was a child, people used to talk about that a lot. Of course, that was in the Cold War days, with a fascination about Russia, the possibility of a nuclear war, and all that loomed very large. After the Cold War died off, I think the focus became different. It became more about Marian devotion and the message of prayer, conversion and penance.

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With the Portuguese, I never saw the apocalyptic undertones. With the Irish Catholics in the States, it was a lot closer to the surface.

We were a lot more invested in the Cold War in the States ...

I think that's it. With the Portuguese, that wasn't the focus at all. I've been coming here for forty years or more, and there was never any emphasis on the secrets. It was always kind of marginal to what Fatima was about. It focused much more on God's love for the little people, beginning with these three illiterate children.

Is there anything special about this trip of Benedict XVI to Fatima, in comparison to other times you've been here?

I think it's very encouraging that at this time of crisis in the church, that the Holy Father would experience the support he has here. The crowds have been big and enthusiastic.

On the way to Portugal, the pope made some striking comments on the papal plane about the sexual abuse crisis. In effect, he said the problem isn't so much outside attacks but rather the reality of sin inside the church. What did you think of that?

I think it's very helpful that the Holy Father wants us to focus on the cause of the crisis, which is not anti-Catholicism. That's always there, and people will always find things to criticize. Fundamentally, however, this is a problem that is of our own making. In great part, it's due to our sinfulness, our human frailty, cowardice, many different failings that contributed to the crisis. It was helpful for him to articulate that, particularly because while we were getting beat up constantly in the Times, you did kind of want to strike back. But it begs the question as to why this happened in the first place.

There had been a fair bit of striking back, from some voices in the Vatican especially. Did you find that unhelpful?

It was not helpful. I was happy for some of the push-back that dealt with the facts, because many of the facts were distorted to put us in the very worst light. But our basic message has to be that we are repentant, that we are resolved to do everything to try to redress the wrongs of the past, as much as we can, and to make sure that these situations don't happen in the future. That requires a very definite policy, a strategy, which will need to be for the universal church, not just for the United States. For the longest time, this was kind of dismissed as an American problem. Now we see it's a human problem, and in the church it's become universal because the same deficiencies in dealing with the problem existed not just in the United States but in other places.

Is it your hope that in the wake of what the pope said on the plane, the finger-pointing is over?

I'm afraid it's not. I wouldn't be so optimistic. I think the Holy Father has shown himself to be aware of the dimensions of this problem and how serious it is for the church, and has been our closest ally in trying to correct it. But trying to bring everybody onto the same page is like trying to herd cats. I'm hoping that he will be able to assemble the kind of advisors he needs to come up with a very clear policy and message that could be put out there.

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna recently said that Cardinal Angelo Sodano's language at the Easter Sunday Mass, referring to "petty gossip," did "massive harm" to victims of sexual abuse. Were you glad to see that?

Yes, definitely. Of course, he has had a very first-hand experience pastorally of the damage that's done by pedophilia in the church.

I've suggested that part of the reason the Vatican hasn't told Benedict XVI's story on the crisis is that to defend him, you have to identify the opposition he faced, which included some senior people such as Sodano ? and that could end up tainting John Paul's record. Do you share that concern?

I think it's unfair to be projecting onto John Paul II. This crisis really blossomed at the end of his pontificate, when he was in very bad shape. Had he been younger, for example, he would have come to Boston. He wasn't afraid of a problem. I think he was sheltered from a lot of this, by people who were trying to protect him.

Do you think it's fair to critically examine the roles that senior aides to the pope such as Sodano and Cardinal Dario Castillon Hoyos played on this issue?

I think it would be helpful to study and find out exactly what happened. These officials often were far removed from what was happening in the States, so they were looking at this through a European prism. They didn't understand the seriousness of the problem or all its implications. When Cardinal Ratzinger was exposed to all this, it was like an eye-opener. In general, those who became aware of the impact this was having on people's lives were the ones who responded. I think the problem was often ignorance rather than malice, and I don't think we should be threatened by an honest look at the record.

Benedict XVI had his fourth meeting with victims in Malta. Some in the Vatican worry about creating an expectation that he'll do it on virtually every trip. What do you think?

If it's going to be helpful to the local church, why not do it? I was so happy that the Holy Father consented back in 2008. First he was supposed to come to Boston, and that got nixed. I'm sure it was by people who were trying to distance him from the crisis. Then we contacted him, and we were very glad it happened. In many ways, it worked out better than if had come to Boston, because it wasn't just a Boston event. Also, we were able to bring them in discreetly without having a media circus beforehand.

American bishops have to be feeling some vindication these days. Eight years ago when you first proposed your norms, there was resistance in Rome. Now you come off as the great pioneers. Do you have a sense that experience has proved you right?

Oh, I think so. Hopefully, we'll be able to make a contribution to the universal church in this area.

You mean making the American norms universal?

In some form, yes. Also, we can give local churches a sense of how to deal with the crisis. When you're in the throes of the first explosion, it's very disconcerting and things move very fast. We made a very quick response. Of course, some people would say we were too quick, too draconian, but I think in retrospect what we did was very important. The fact that we were able to do it with such speed was a blessing.

Eight years later, are you still convinced that ?one strike and you're out? was the right way to go?

I am. As I tell my priests, if you're in a parish or a ministry, that's the Good Housekeeping seal of approval. Every Catholic can say, "This priest serving for us has never had a credible accusation against him." I think that's comforting to our people, and also to the priests.

I'm really convinced that we have made the safety of children the priority in the United States. Our church agencies, schools, and programs are the safest place in the world for kids, because of the training and the screening that nobody else does as extensively as we do. Hopefully other churches and organizations will follow suit. I'm always disappointed that people aren't more willing to contextualize the problem, seeing that the Catholic church really has dealt with it and tried to create programs to protect children. Why not extrapolate and do that in other areas where the abuse of children is far more prevalent?

What about accountability for bishops? Some would say that we now have strong accountability for priests who abused, but what about bishops who covered it up?

That's something only the Holy See can determine. The Holy Father has begun to accept resignations. In Boston, the cardinal did resign. In Massachusetts, we now have laws that if I transfer a pedophile priest, they'd put me in jail. You can't get much more accountable than that.

Did the crisis reveal a problem with episcopal accountability?

Yes and no. The bishops who acted the way they did probably did so thinking that was what they were supposed to do, and of course it wasn't. There was a lot of ignorance in that. Part of the problem too is that when most of these bad decisions were being made, the focus was exclusively on the perpetrator and not on the child. There wasn't an awareness of the damage that was done to the youngster. If people had even suspected the extent of the damage, they would have taken steps to make sure that these people didn't have access to children, but it just wasn't on the radar screen. Even the psychologists and the psychiatrists were telling bishops that people like Porter were ready to go back to work.

Let's talk about accountability looking forward. Right now you have to have approval from a finance council before you sell off property above a certain dollar amount. What about getting approval from a pastoral council or review board before making certain personnel decisions?

Look, if a bishop has a cavalier attitude about ordaining someone who has a questionable background or reassigning someone, that bishop should be removed. Going forward, there shouldn't be any doubt about what should be done.

You mean removed by the Holy See?

By the Holy See, exactly. They wouldn't have the credibility to be able to govern if they had such bad judgment. I think that will happen. If a bishop now were irresponsible in dealing with this, I think the nuncio and the bishops in that conference would demand it.

You're saying that even without new structural accountability, we have a new culture of accountability?

Exactly.

What about cooperation with civil authorities?

I think we should always have been dealing with the civil authorities. This is a crime, and it should have been reported as any other serious crime.

What about releasing documents to reveal what the church knew and when it knew it?

If it's needed for the investigation, we should do it. I'm talking about giving documents to the Attorney

General, not to the press. Sometimes the courts have forced the church to turn over all of their records, and then opened them up to the press. I think that's not necessarily the right way to do things. Basically, however, I think there needs to be transparency and cooperation with the civil authorities, giving them all the help they need to do a serious investigation.

Our problem is that we didn't report these cases, and so much time has elapsed that now everyone looks to the church to be the investigator, judge, jury and executioner for things that happened decades ago. We don't have the resources to do that. We can't issue subpoenas, we don't have investigators or courts in the civil sense. We've had to do the best we could. The review boards have been a great blessing for us, and the people who have served on them have been extraordinary. They've faced some very difficult cases, and I think they've handled them with a great sense of responsibility to the victims, to society, and to the church. But it's not the way these things should be done, because we're playing catch-up and trying to invent a judicial system to make up for the fact that these men never had to defend themselves in a court of law.

You sit on the Congregation for Religious, and you have an obvious interest in religious life. What are your hopes for the visitation of women religious in the United States?

I'm very concerned that it's being received so negatively. My hope had been that it would be like the seminary visitation: It gave people an opportunity to look at themselves in preparation for the visitation, what they're doing right and what they're doing wrong, and how they could do things better. I got together with all the major superiors in Boston and tried to encourage them. I wrote them a letter and listened to their questions and fears.

The end result is not going to be devastating for women religious in America?

I've been saying that over and over. For a lot of the sisters, the big fears have been that we're going to come in and say, "Put the habits back on, and give us all your money." Neither is going to happen! If that's what you're worried about, relax.

Hopefully, it will help us to understand what's happened to religious life in the last thirty to forty years, and where religious life needs to be headed in the future. All of the studies that have been done about young people coming into religious life today tell us they're looking for more traditional, stronger communities, with corporate ministries, shared prayer, and external signs of identity such as a habit.

After the Second Vatican Council, a lot of our religious communities, I think, evolved into something like secular institutes. People might have a lay job, living in an apartment. They live the vows, they live good lives, but it's something different from traditional religious life with its stress on community and a common spiritual life. The secular institutes have never had many vocations. It's always been a very small cohort in the church. I think that some of our religious communities went that way, and they lost the ability to recruit a lot of young women who are really looking for community. You see it in the movements - the Focolare, the Memores Domini in Communion and Liberation, the numeraries in Opus Dei. It wasn't just the habit, it was community, shared spirituality, and so on. I hope when all of the dust settles, people will use this as a moment of grace to ask where we've come from and where we're going.

The trick is to make the best of it. It's like the new translation of the Missal. I tell the priests, you can be up there hand-wringing and apologizing for it, or you can use it as an opportunity to reintroduce people to liturgical spirituality and the centrality of the Sunday Eucharist. Which is it going to be?

Does some of the suspicion out there reflect the fact that bishops and women's religious have grown apart over the last forty years?

That may be, though on the side of the bishops part of the reason for that has been to respect the autonomy of the communities. I hear all of these horror stories about my predecessor, Cardinal O'Connell, who used to choose the names for the nuns and tell them how long their veil could be, all this kind of nonsense. I think we've gone to the other extreme, where the sisters are estranged from the hierarchy. In the past there was too much interference in the internal life of the communities, and we reacted against that by emphasizing their autonomy. In practice, that probably means that sometimes we don't know one another as well as we should.

It's easier for suspicion to grow up in that kind of environment.

Exactly, I think you've hit the nail on the head.

Could one of the fruits of the visitation be to create opportunities for those relationships to develop?

I hope so, because that's what we desperately need.

Did some of the momentum for the visitation come out of the symposium on religious life in which you were involved at Stonehill College in 2009?

I think you're right. The dynamic at that meeting was interesting, because at Stonehill the sisters who spoke all came from LCWR communities, and they were somewhat critical of the LCWR's way of doing things. [Note: The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, or LCWR, is the major umbrella group for women's communities in the United States. It's popularly perceived as having a fairly liberal orientation.] Afterwards, some sisters came up to me and said, "Why didn't you have someone from some of the more progressive communities?" But there wasn't anyone from the Conference of Major Superiors of Women [another umbrella group, perceived as more conservative.] They were all from LCWR communities. I think that had a big impact on Rodé [Cardinal Franc Rodé, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Religious, who attended the Stonehill symposium]. It seemed to show that within these communities, which can seem so monolithic, there are other voices that aren't being heard.

I was actually translating for Rodé, and one of the questions he got was about a visitation. At the time, he seemed to dismiss it as being too difficult because of the sheer numbers involved and so forth. Obviously, though, it got him thinking.

Were you consulted prior to the decision to launch the visitation?

No.

Had you been consulted, would you have recommended for or against it?

I don't know. Being an optimist, I probably would have thought that the visitation would be easier than it's proving to be. I'm just glad I'm not running it! Mother Clare Millea, by the way, who is running it, is a lovely person. I keep telling the sisters that: "You know, they're not sending Godzilla!"

I do think they kind of rushed it. I think there could have been more build-up and better preparation, better consultation beforehand. This is so complicated, and there's such a spectrum within religious life.

[John Allen is *NCR* senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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