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Surely Rome can do better

by James Ewens

Examining the Crisis

Let me take you into a situation that illustrates the church institution's instinctive reaction to cover-up scandal. It was a workshop in 2000 for new Jesuit superiors. The presenter, a former provincial, was discussing the circumstances when a superior could break the bond of confidentiality between himself and the men he was in charge of. He said something could be shared with the provincial "If it was a matter of danger for the individual or to others."

I asked, "What do you mean by others?" His response was concise and immediate: "The Jesuit order." (Not, as I expected, "students, parishioners, those we are counseling, etc.")

I was stunned by his answer, and the fact that none of the other 40 participants expressed any disagreement with it. That same evening we heard a talk by a newly installed bishop. He had worked in another diocese prior to his current post and said he often appeared in court to defend priests facing charges.

He described how, as he was walking into court, he would recite to himself, "I'm sorry, Your Honor, but I do not remember." Those attending the dinner laughed loudly. One wonders if either of these revelations would have occurred if "outsiders" (lay people, the parents and victims of sexual abuse by priests) had been present. I strongly doubt it.

I am, however, convinced that the two interlocking issues that contribute to sex crimes against young victims are precisely this misuse of confidentiality and power in the insular clerical culture, and the Vatican's fixation on celibacy.

The church's fixation on celibacy became obvious eight years ago when I decided to implement my decision to leave the priesthood. The process is complex and little known, even by clerics.

To obtain permission to leave the Jesuits I had to write a letter to the general of the order in Rome, stating my reasons. I had to write a similar letter to the pope, asking to become an "inactive priest." (I imagine it as having my hands tied behind my back, with the church saying I still possess the powers of a priest but without authorization to use them "unless there is a state of emergency or someone is in imminent danger of dying.") I was told the process would be completed within 6-8 weeks.

Writing the two letters seemed simple enough. However, there was one hitch: if I also wanted to be released from my vow of celibacy I would have to go through a series of steps, similar to those required for couples who seek an annulment from their marriage. I would need to have individuals who knew me before I was ordained to testify as to my freedom and maturity when I made this choice in 1970. The theory is that evidence will be found indicating I was not truly free and mature to choose celibacy in the first place. If, indeed, this can be found, then I could be released -- just as some married couples qualify to have their marriages annulled due to a lack of mature free choice.

This is how the church works diligently to protect the bond of marriage and the bond of celibacy -- but then I learned there was one additional hurdle: seeking this permission would take a minimum of two years and neither of the other two requests could be granted until -- and if -- it was successfully approved. Wow! Three superiors encouraged me to only apply for the first two permissions, saying that if I did get married "things could be worked out later without much difficulty."

Of course. It is eight years later, I did get married, and now I'm told that my marriage will only be "regularized" by the Vatican if I respond favorably to a five-page questionnaire that focuses primarily on my sexual history over the past 45 years. I have chosen not to complete the document because I am unable to answer the one question in it that I think is valid: "Why is it that you are seeking this special favor?"

In short, after being released from my vows as a Jesuit and being approved, by the Vatican, to become an inactive priest, I feel no need to obtain a further permission to have my marriage "regularized" -- especially since it can only be obtained by completing an onerous questionnaire fixating on my personal sexual history. Surely Rome can do better than that.

[James Ewens has worked as a chaplain in hospice care and with the mentally ill during his 30 years as a priest. He is retired and lives in North Lake, Wis.]

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Editor's Note: As we were preparing this commentary for publication, Mr. Ewens recalled a news story he read in NCR last year: Congregation can more easily laicize priests. Mr. Ewens said, "Church leaders could take care of this situation with a simple solution, if they would just carry out the actions outlined in this document. But as the document says, the officials must take the initiative."

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