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A hierarchy deeply damaged from within

by NCR Editorial Staff



Pope Benedict XVI celebrates the pallium Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican June 29. The pope bestowed the pallium on 38 archbishops from around the world. (CNS/Paul Haring)

An NCR Editorial

The first half of 2010 has been a particularly bumpy patch for the papacy of Benedict XVI. It wasn't supposed to be this way. This pope had as goals to sharpen the teaching of the world's largest Christian denomination, to do battle with secularism and relativism, and to convince the world, Catholic and otherwise, that Christianity authentically lived is more about possibilities and new freedom than about "thou shalt nots" and other restrictions.

His program has been seriously sidelined by the lingering effects of the sex abuse scandal in the United States; the explosion of the scandal in Ireland, Germany, Italy and now Belgium; and the diminishment of the episcopal office, particularly in those countries most affected by the scandal.

Are we witnessing the ecclesial equivalent of one of those slow-motion depictions of implosion, the kind where a seemingly invulnerable structure falls in upon itself, laid waste by some well-placed explosives?

Perhaps.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that what is imploding is the church. The church is, in many ways, just fine. What is imploding, rather, is a culture of clericalism, especially the hierarchical layer of that culture, which has become so disconnected in many of its expressions from the core mandates of Christian scripture that it seems to barely function at all.

The authority that has been slowly leaking from the structure for decades is now gushing out as bishops contort themselves in attempts to convince the world of their good intentions and transparency while simultaneously railing against those within the church and without who are working to reveal the truth.

The shocking raid of a bishops' meeting in Belgium is but the latest indication of the degree to which the old protections and privileges enjoyed by the clerical culture are disintegrating. It stands as a clear symbol that an age is ending. The disintegration could be seen occurring during the past quarter century in the United States under the grinding weight of revelations that the Catholic hierarchy had repeatedly protected those who had sexually molested children and had hidden the crimes from the church and the wider community.

It continued in Catholic Ireland, where the deep betrayal of the community caused a serious exodus from the church amid lingering anger. In one of the greater absurdities of this period of crisis, church leaders in Rome have decided to send bishops from the United States to determine what happened in the Irish church.

The erosion goes on, at a quicker pace, ugly in details that keep heaping up for the world to see. The pope's brother admits to slapping choir students who didn't perform properly -- a human imperfection made all the more perceptible in an arena long wrapped in a façade of seeming perfection.

Meanwhile, the world outside this favored culture is beginning to realize that one of the most powerful men within it during Pope John Paul II's papacy, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, once secretary of state and now dean of the College of Cardinals, took money from the likes of the late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legion of Christ. Maciel was a favorite of the former pope, and a man who abused his young seminarians and is accused of fathering children, including a son, whom he also allegedly repeatedly abused.

Sodano was one of Maciel's most ardent backers.

That Sodano should be nowhere near any level of control at the Vatican is apparent to most everyone who has given this scandal the slightest thought. But there he is, still posturing, offering paeans to a beleaguered pope during liturgies, and dismissing the growing chorus of charges against fellow bishops as petty gossip.

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And when one of those fellow bishops, Cardinal Cristoph Schönborn of Austria, dares to call him out, as someone should, in one of the more rational comments that anyone inside the culture has yet made, Sodano is able to manipulate a meeting with Schönborn and the pope. The world is subsequently informed that such criticism is not to occur cardinal to cardinal. Such power is reserved for the pope alone. The pope remains silent and Sodano remains influential.

The protection from scrutiny previously enjoyed by the culture, a reflection more than anything of royal prerogatives and palace behavior, has disintegrated to the point where the U.S. Supreme Court gave approval for a suit that seeks to hold the Vatican responsible for the transfer of pedophile priests from place to place, transfers that occurred without warning to law enforcement bodies or to the communities involved.

The sex abuse crisis, as we've said in this space before, is a crisis of the clerical culture, a crisis of authority and ecclesiology. The sex abuse crisis is the awful symptom of much deeper problems.

Projection is occurring on a global scale as the bishops grasp for ways to explain how so much has gone so wrong so quickly. Relativism! Secularism! Cultural influences! All those bad things out there, they reason, are influencing the people to revolt, to backslide, to not believe as they should, to disregard the hierarchy's rulings and pronouncements. It is the bishops who fail to recognize that they, themselves, are the best living examples of the relativism and secularism they decry.

The great irony in all of this, of course, is that the hierarchy need not thrash about wondering how to adjust their culture and lives to the demands of an educated church in the 21st century.

The great questions of this age -- and its demands for accountability and transparency -- were anticipated by the church, which began to deal with them during the Second Vatican Council, the reform gathering of the mid-1960s.

There was reason -- perhaps the Spirit responds when so many openly seek its guidance -- why the texts of that council's documents were different from any before, why those texts are filled with notions of dialogue, of acceptance, of restraint in judgment and punishment, of the new description of church as the people of God.

Perhaps those at the council anticipated that the hierarchy of the future would have to structure itself differently, lead differently, and see the world differently.

What seems clear at this moment is that the hierarchy as it has evolved in the past half millennium is deeply damaged from within. And there is little evidence of the imagination, the creativity, the spirit, necessary to repair or rethink the structure.

The second half of 2010, it seems, may be just as disheartening to the Holy Father, just as bumpy, as the first.

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