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Examination of the hierarchy continues

Tom Roberts | Aug. 3, 2010 NCR Today

Sr. Fran Ferder and Fr. John Heagle add to the growing examination [1]of the culture of hierarchy in the Catholic Church, an examination occasioned by the horrific and ongoing tales of child abuse by clergy.

I doubt that people like Ferder and Heagle -- not to mention Fr. Tom Doyle or Richard Sipe or Mary Gail Frawley O?Dea or Eugene Kennedy or Fr. Donald Cozzens or the leaders of SNAP or any of the host of other long-time church observers, some schooled in the psychological disciplines, others deeply familiar with the workings of the hierarchy -- will be asked any time soon to a meeting in Rome to present their best insights into the abuse crisis.

But NCR retains a record of their insights and those of others over the long decades of the church?s nightmare, and the record continues to accumulate in efforts such as the online series Examining the Crisis [2].

The thread of thought that has become common to all of those explorations is the realization that the crisis, while immediately caused by priests who engaged in unspeakable crimes with children of all ages, is actually about a much deeper malady within the clerical culture, particularly at the hierarchical level.

What has broken out all around that culture ? and in a few instances recently from within ? is a degree of scrutiny and frank assessment of the culture that would have been unthinkable a decade ago.

The crisis -- primarily as outlined by endless victim testimony and even more damningly in the chancery files that have been forced into the open by the media and the courts ? has put the lie to layers of Catholic presumptions about the hierarchy. Its pretensions and sometimes bizarre behavior has been bared. The secret and often unspoken rules of the club, the all-male and supposedly celibate club, have slowly leaked out. The protections of privilege, the accommodation by the secular culture of perpetrators and their superiors, all of it has eroded and left the culture increasingly exposed and vulnerable to the scrutiny of those looking in from the outside.

Whether those inside the culture will allow it to continue to slowly erode, one embarrassing episode or revelation after another, or take hold of the matter and do the kind of deep, painful and honest self examination that is so urgently needed, remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, the truth of the matter continues to pile up, a counterweight to fraud and deception. It could eventually tip things in the direction of renewal.

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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/inner-workings-hierarchy-sex-offender-mentality

[2] http://ncronline.org/blogs/examining-the-crisis