

Now we know what the bishops 'don't get'

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Sep. 3, 2010 | Bulletins from the Human Side

"The bishops," Catholics concluded of their supposed shepherds' reactions to the explosion of the sex abuse scandal a long desert of a decade ago, "they just don't get it." Laypeople were expressing their frustration that church leaders did not, or could not, see this tragedy -- even after it had been dragged kicking and screaming out of the darkness and into the light of day as a hypocritical betrayal of everything the church was supposed to stand for.

First, the bishops didn't get that it was a scandal -- that is, as the Oxford English Dictionary describes the specific religious use of the term, a "discredit to religion occasioned by the conduct of a religious person." Like the astronauts who signaled "Houston, we have a problem," they sighed "Dallas, we have a problem" as they nervously assembled in that city to see what they could do about it.

What they didn't get was that this wasn't primarily a problem for them, as they seemed to feel as they hurriedly framed slapdash and largely legalistic resolutions, from whose effects -- like congressmen who also don't get it -- they exempted themselves. The bishops then went home feeling better about themselves -- although they had done very little for or about the victims for whom sex abuse was a corrosive and unending problem that interfered with their feeling good about themselves or their lives.

The bishops also didn't get that it was a crime, the police having played ball with them in the past. Not to mention the once cooperative press whom they now blamed for the crisis.

That sex abuse was a crime was certainly not a revelation to those who had suffered the assaults but were told to keep quiet about them or, in the fashion of making the raped person into the provocateur, were rebuked for having made a story up about Father -- whom everybody knows is a good guy and you just misunderstood him when he played those games with you on those camping trips. Why do you want to make trouble for him?

Maybe we can concede a few things to the bishops who also called on a group of distinguished lay Catholics to look into the problem on their behalf, supplying the old blue ribbon committee ploy used reflexively by politicians to dodge big problems. They delegate threatening issues to a first class panel and then -- as the bishops did with their lay committee -- ignore their findings and criticize their work and motivation.

And maybe we can concede that they reacted just like other social groupings primarily interested in preserving themselves and their assets. Like Hollywood producers protecting moneymaking stars by sending them for rehab just to get a letter from the doctor allowing them to go back to work, the bishops sent their sex abusing priests for rehab and got them back to work. Yes, that was the prevailing response for all professional groups in the years before America began to understand the plight of the largely forgotten victims.

Even allowing for their high roller customs, the bishops did not get that they were not Hollywood producers, bankers, or the industrialists who solved their problem at the Bhopal, India chemical explosion but walked away from the people whose lives were permanently altered by the disaster. The bishops were and are religious leaders who have no excuse for allowing lawyers and insurers to persuade them to solve the sex abuse scandal

by fighting anybody seeking information and any victim seeking legal recompense.

Now, thanks to Belgium's once highly regarded Cardinal Godfried Danneels, we understand what bishops really don't get. The cardinal now says that he was naïve in urging the nephew of Bishop Roger Vangheluwe to remain silent about the fact that the bishop had sexually abused him from the time he was five until he was 18.

"The bishop," Danneels urged -- like a pastor who knows best rather than a prelate doing his worst -- in audio recordings from April leaked to the Belgian media this weekend, "will resign next year, so actually it would be better for you to wait. ... I don't think you'd do yourself or him a favor by shouting this from the rooftops?to drag his name through the mud."

The cardinal cannot seem to hear the victim's anguished response.

"He has dragged my whole life through the mud," the nephew said. "Why do you feel so sorry for him and not for me?"

What the bishops don't get is the human suffering that sex abusers inflict on their victims. They have missed -- with a few exceptions such as New York's Timothy Dolan when he was archbishop of Milwaukee -- the pastoral challenge to respond to the wounds beyond words. And to describe what these clerical Doctor Jekylls -- those "good guys everybody likes" -- inflicted on the innocent when, devoured by the half-developed Mr. Hydes within them, they devoured the innocents in their care.

Perhaps we are finally paying the price for the years of selecting candidates for the episcopacy who had no pastoral experience -- and spent most of their lives inside diocesan offices trying not to blot their copy paper so as not to stunt their careers. Maybe they don't get it because they haven't sat at the bedsides of enough dying people, haven't been the ones to break the news that a child has been killed, haven't embraced enough of the broken-hearted, and haven't suffered with their people through any of the other commonplace sorrows of life.

Maybe the bishops fit into the numbing human devastation of World War II described by Eric Sevareid (I wrote about his more extensively in an earlier column. See "[The church in 2010 and France in 1940](#)," [1] July 22.):

People with no idea of where they would sleep or eat, with all their future lives an uncertainty...a dust covered girl clung desperately to a heavy, squirming burlap sack. The pig inside was squealing faintly. Tears made streaks down the girl's face. No one moved to help her. ... There was too much misery, so much that no one could feel sorrow or compassion.

The problem for America is not where to store our nuclear waste but what to do with our sorrow. In the sex abuse tragedy that is the bishops only true work. But that, alas, is what they don't get.

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