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'Civility' is political tool, mask for church cover-ups

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

As Norman Mailer once suggested that *ego* was the word of the 20th century, so *civility* is fast becoming the word of at least this year of the 21st century.

That we all want to be civil should not make us less suspicious of any substance used in excess, and any word that politicians suddenly start using as if they practice it or believed in it. We have many reasons to be cautious about civility as the style of -- as well as the accustomed mask for -- cover-ups.

Civility is the trademark M.O. of an ecclesiastical culture of striving and power seeking behind which sex abuse and financial scandals have been concealed like contraband in the sealed hold of a cargo ship. The more silken the civility you observe, the more certain you can be that a cover-up is in progress.

Surface civility is not without its benefits, of course, and motivates the good manners that allow us to show respect and consideration for each other. Insincere or manipulative civility comes closer to describing the elements in the oxygen supply used by the climbers whose goal is to reach the Everest of clerical culture.

Clergy with their eyes focused upward are quick to acquire *Romanita*, the ultra-political manner and cosmopolitan ennui that enable a man to stay in shape for climbing by learning to survive a daily swim with the sharks in the Tiber.

Romanita is the smooth stroke of the salmon-like cleric who knows that he must swim upstream until he catches the eye of some Vatican mentor who will catch and release him in an ecclesiastical pool higher up the slopes. Saint Peter was a fisherman, too, they say, using the *rationalization* that is a major characteristic of clerical civility.

The young priest with his eyes on the mountains and his feet in the Tiber is also schooled in the rough equivalence of being a life-guard. He must master what is termed the *stylus curiae*, the way things are said inside Vatican's bureaucratic congregations and the way they talk to each other. This is *civility* as pure and as intoxicating as high class heroin.

As lovers develop private languages that define their own worlds and their exclusive commitment to each other, so bureaucrats enamored of rising in the church culture must become fluent in its private and exclusive language. This is the mother tongue of the superficial civility of the band of brothers that want not to fulfill a vocation but rather, as the Romans express it with civil deftness, "to make a career in the Church."

That explains the extravagant and slightly amusing dialogues in ceremonies that are the exercise of rubrics rather than the celebration of a true liturgy. "May it please your eminence," they say, along with a dictionary of other code phrases that are the passwords to promotion in the clerical culture.

This *insincere* but powerful *civility* marks the reactions to and discussions of the sex abuse scandal. It is the verbal style of the lawyers and insurers who advised bishops on the preservation of their property assets and of how to deal with victims whose claims threatened to reveal the sordid underside of clerical culture as well as its bank accounts and buildings.

The lawyers seeking to keep the Titanic of clericalism from sinking after it slit its hull open on the ice floe of sexual abuse resorted to hardball tactics that were anointed with the chrism of hypocritical civility -- that ritual politeness by which they cover up not only the sex abuse charges, but their efforts to smother the victims before the public can hear their anguished cries.

The zenith of this ecclesiastical sincerity was reached by the then president of the U.S. bishops who, on the day that a report was published by the lay committee appointed by the bishops themselves to investigate the sex abuse scandal, announced that "The sex abuse scandal is history."

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It is not now, nor has it ever been, history except to those who think that civility -- as highly polished as the black shoes predators placed under the beds of their victims and as finely pressed as the suit coats they draped over a nearby chair -- is anything but the very energy and style of the cover-ups that have left untreated the wounds inflicted by this and other crises.

Perhaps, therefore, it is not surprising that in the great family of language, the ancient stem of civility, *kwei*, also emerges in many other associations. It is the root of household as in the household of the faith. It shows up in *haunt*, not a bad word for the dark places in clerical culture. In old Dutch it is found in *a covering*. So, too, in Latin, it leads us to *cradle*, and the notion of *to put to sleep*, as in *cemetery*.

That's the excess of civility that is killing the Church that household with clerical haunts and a covering -- as in cover-up -- and even cradles from which so many victims were taken.

This scandal has not been put to sleep, despite the anesthetizing effects of excess civility that also preserves it outside the cemetery in which it should be buried for good.

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