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Clerics' critique brings something new to talk of abuse crisis

by Tom Roberts



Diarmuid Martin (CNS photo)

ESSAY

MILWAUKEE -- It would be reasonable to wonder why, at this stage of the priest sex abuse crisis, a major Catholic law school would bother spending two days on the subject. It is reasonable to ask if the topic, by this point, had not been wrung dry of any new news, of any insights or rationales that have not already been chewed to insignificance in the endless conferences, books, documentaries and analyses produced over the past quarter century.

I raised the question with myself before signing on for one more go-around with the topic at Marquette University Law School, which featured the discussion as part of its ongoing Restorative Justice Initiative. The April 4-5 program was titled "Harm, Hope, and Healing: International Dialogue on the Clergy Sex Abuse Scandal." (See *NCR*'s story on the conference [here](#).)

Not much new surfaced in terms of content. The difference in this conference -- indeed, the something *new* -- could be seen in two elements: Bishops and priests were speaking in a way that one rarely hears them talk about sex abuse; and in their prepared remarks, many of the clerics dared to look at themselves and what we call, for lack of a term that accommodates more nuance, clerical culture.

I have a priest friend who winces every time I use that phrase. He says culture is too broad a term; it lumps all priests in the same category and doesn't allow for those, himself included, who rail, at least privately, against the cover-up behavior that he maintains resides in the hierarchical or chancery culture.

Priests who are in the trenches keeping the church going, he argues, have already been painted with the broad brush of scandal and are now being painted with the culture of the cover-up.

Using collectives always involves risks. Historians write of a Southern white culture that perpetuated slavery and built a legacy of lynchings, often preserved in photographs. The characterization is unfair to the Southerners who thought and acted differently.

Culture by its very nature, writes Fr. Michael Papesh, "is bigger than those who comprise it and blinds them to its contradictions." In his book *Clerical Culture: Contradiction and Transformation*, he defines clerical culture as "precisely the constellation of relationships and the universe of ideas and material reality in which diocesan priests and bishops exercise their ministry and spend their lives." Within its general sameness, the culture can also be different in details from diocese to diocese and certainly from one country to another.

Clerical culture is something that most Catholics intuit and know when they see it, but that rarely gets defined.

Plain-spoken antidote

At Marquette, the international star was Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, Ireland, whose speech -- by now widely circulated -- was the plain-spoken antidote to the worst of the clerical culture's equivocations about the crisis. He said that the response to the 2009 Murphy Report, the findings of an Irish government commission investigating clergy sex abuse in the Dublin archdiocese, was not what he expected. He had expected some acknowledgement that wrong decisions had been made. Instead, he found "the responses [from church authorities] seemed to be saying that it was all due to others or at most it was due to some sort of systems fault in the diocesan administration."

The 66-year-old Martin came into the situation late, in 2004, having been in the service of the Vatican in curial and international positions most of his career. So perhaps he had the benefit of having watched this story play out in the United States and elsewhere. Whatever the reasons, from the start he's acted differently from his peers.

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When the Murphy Report was released, people in Ireland initially witnessed "ritual expressions of regret," he said, and then "a church of silence. No one was accountable. No one was saying anything anymore." Some even wanted him to challenge the report. While no report is perfect, said Martin, the Murphy findings essentially "illustrated a reality which can only be described as horrendous. It would be horrendous in any situation, but what did it say to people when this happened within the church of Jesus

Christ??

Martin gave personal expression to what Spokane, Wash., Bishop Blase Cupich, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People, described as a need to maintain a 'visceral connection' to the pain and damage done to those abused by priests. Speaking at the conference, Cupich said that bishops need to remain 'at that soul-searching level' or risk 'regression or complacency.'



U.S. bishops need to continue to recall what happened in Dallas in 2002, when they

enacted the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, he said. After hearing wrenching stories from victims and stinging critiques of their handling of the crisis, the bishops placed healing as the top priority and that was 'a public admission that an entirely new direction was needed.' As part of that new direction, Cupich said, the bishops recognized 'that we cannot respond to the crisis by ourselves; we need a community of learning.'

Expressions of episcopal anger and indignation at abuse by priests have become commonplace. What was new about Martin's speech was the element of personal experience and action. When Martin suspected earlier assessments of the crisis had been lax, he mandated a review of all archdiocesan personnel files, and not only did he read through the documentation, but he handed over 70,000 pages to the investigators. He earned the wrath of not a few fellow bishops and saw a letter go out to priests, without his knowledge, from his own diocesan administration saying he had no business doing what he was doing, and that he had been out of the country for most of it and would have acted the same way had he been there.

What he would have done, of course, is unknown. What he is doing is crystal clear, and his description of that brought an overwhelming reaction from the audience of clerics, academics and victims: Someone in the hierarchy really gets it.

'Restorative justice,' he said, 'is not cheap justice. It is not justice without recognition of wrongdoing.' It may even be about forgiveness, 'but again not about cheap forgiveness.' It can't be about hiding crimes and the wrong behavior of church authorities, and it can't be about a quick route back to ministry.

The critique of clericalism implicit through most of the text became explicit at the end when he said: 'The culture of clericalism has to be analyzed and addressed. Were there factors of a clerical culture which somehow facilitated disastrous abusive behavior to continue for so long? Was it just through bad decisions by bishops or superiors? Was there knowledge of behavior which should have given rise to concern and which went unaddressed?'

His questions ranged to what might have been going on in seminaries that abetted a culture that accommodated abusers. He wants a priesthood reformed with candidates who display a high level of maturity regarding not only human sexuality 'but in overall mature behavior and relationships.'

He is concerned by young priests who seem more interested in achieving 'some form of personal security or status' than with service and by the signs 'of renewed clericalism' among new priests. At a time when many think enhancing Catholic identity means a greater separation between clergy and laity, Martin wants his seminarians to be educated with laypeople 'so that they can establish mature relationships with men and women and do not develop any sense of their priesthood giving them a special social position.'

Space for discussion

If recent grand jury findings in Philadelphia are indications of the intransigence and arrogance of the clerical culture, another side of the crisis is producing some results that could not have been expected even several years ago. The two are not unrelated. For the worse it gets -- people leaving the church in droves in Germany as new cases of past abuse in group homes emerge, a Belgian bishop admitting, in rather creepy descriptions, his abuse of a second nephew -- the more space opens up for honest discussion.

A panel of six priests of the Milwaukee archdiocese spoke movingly of personal conversions, of moving from betrayal to new understanding, from disbelief of early reports of the scandal to a new awareness of the need for truth. "We must speak the truth, I must speak the truth, and not close our eyes to the truths that are all around us," said Fr. Howard G. Haase. "We must not pretend we don't know and convince ourselves that if we wait long enough it will all go away."

The priests' comments (too long to go into in detail here but worthy of a full hearing -- see the Web box for access information) suggest a ripening or maturing of the issue, if that's the proper way to describe it. Their conversation was itself indication of how much space has opened up, of what an adult clerical response might be to the ongoing crisis. Much of that response grew out of a visceral connection with victims that occurred, at least in part, through a series of candle vigil services that have taken place in various parts of the diocese. The decision to have the services, according to Fr. James Connell, who introduced the panel, was made by a group that included the priests as well as survivors and those who had been supporting them.

And those meetings arose in part from a simple question that Connell asked himself: "What if I had been a victim of sexual abuse by a priest?"

Since the day he asked himself that question, Connell has carefully researched the issue and has become outspoken advocate of abuse victims/survivors.

Fr. John Celichowski of Detroit, provincial minister of the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph, also raised the matter of clericalism. He described clericalism as "a form of elitism" that is "reinforced by the distinctive education and formation, dress and titles that priests and religious receive." Elitism, he said, "can lead to a distorted sense of entitlement, the assumption that one is not bound by the rules that govern everyone else, and that other people (even the vulnerable) exist to serve one's own needs." It is only through examination of this fundamental issue and the abuse of power it generates, he said, that we can make sense of the crisis. He called for a "strong and committed laity to push back" against clericalism and to demand accountability.

Fr. Jeff Haines of Milwaukee brought the discussion of culture full circle. While the clergy culture is a correct target of criticism, he said, "one must be cautious not to dismantle a healthy form of fraternal bond. Ours is a religion of redemption, and there is another side to priestly community that is wholesome and holy." He referred to the candle vigil meetings and Milwaukee pastors' efforts to reach out to survivors of abuse as an indication of "the potential of priestly community. This corporate witness can speak positively in a manner that is more bold and articulate than we could as individuals."

It was an echo of Pappas' take on the culture. "Throughout my life, before and within ordained ministry, I have been as dazzled by the clerical culture as I have been put off by it, as healed within it as I have been hurt by it. I have respect for both the great power and the enormous unused potential of it."

The call for examination and reform of the culture, startling as it might be to the ears of longtime Catholics, is not, then, a call for overthrow. It's a natural progression of the crisis, a realistic look, if Martin and the other clerics are correct, at what needs to be done. As much as it is part of the healing

everyone craves, it is also then an admission, as Cupich put it, that "an entirely new direction" is needed.

There was something new, indeed, to be said in Milwaukee about the scandal, and it might even be called hopeful.

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