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Journalist probes church's murky finances

by Bruce Nolan by The Times Picayune

NEW ORLEANS -- Jason Berry, the muckraking journalist who in two prior books laid bare clerical sexual abuse of children and its cover-up in the Catholic Church, is touring the country in support of a third book investigating the church's management of its finances, which he describes as chaotic, opaque and occasionally corrupt.

Berry argues that the church's core problem is the lack of accountability for cardinals and bishops, whether for protecting criminal priests or mismanaging church treasuries.

"The church does not have, and desperately needs, a coherent system of justice," Berry said in an interview. "The oversight one would expect to see layered into the world's largest organization is simply not there."

In the early 1990s, Berry published the first extensive investigation of the clergy sexual abuse scandal that exploded publicly a decade later.

In 2004, with co-author Gerald Renner, he uncovered evidence that the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the charismatic founder of the Legionaries of Christ, had molested his own seminarians but cultivated popularity with the Vatican hierarchy with his fundraising prowess.

At first, the order condemned Berry and Renner, but later learned the charges were true and that Maciel had secretly fathered several children as well.

In his new book, "Render Unto Rome," Berry, a practicing Catholic, acknowledged the church's vast charitable works, its force for good among the world's poor, and the spiritual nourishment it provides to millions at the level of parish life.

But he looks critically from several angles at how the church hierarchy handles money and power. For instance:

• Globally, money given to Peter's Pence, the annual Vatican collection done nominally for the pope's charitable use, is veiled from donors' view and in past years propped up Vatican operating expenses, Berry charges.

• Fewer than two dozen of the 195 U.S. dioceses publish annual audited financial statements that fully describe income and expenses.

• In cities like Boston and Cleveland, Berry charges that church leaders closed financially stable parishes to seize their assets and prop up diocesan budgets, over the protests of parishioners.

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Berry writes that in Rome, former Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano watched an American real estate company that prominently employed his nephew trumpet its ties to the Vatican, implying that it had inside knowledge on closed church properties coming on the market. The company's president, Raffaello Follieri, pleaded guilty to federal charges of cheating investors in 2008. Berry said that the FBI found that before his fall, Follieri paid two Vatican employees \$800,000 for their assistance. No Vatican employee was charged by civil authorities, nor were any disciplined by the church.

Finally, Berry claims that for years Maciel, the abusive Legionaries founder, cultivated Sodano with gifts. In turn, Sodano spiked a Vatican inquiry into allegations about Maciel, until they were finally confirmed under Pope Benedict XVI.

In his associations with Maciel and his nephew's real estate company, "I think (Sodano has) betrayed the church egregiously," Berry said. "It's appalling to me that he's the dean of the College of Cardinals and has suffered no loss of esteem in his position."

Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has read Berry's book but disagreed with his conclusions.

"The church shows fiscal responsibility with guidelines on responsible investment, recommended accounting procedures and canon laws governing finance," she said. "As in every large organization, there are rules of accountability that a church group must follow. As in every organization, there are times when people ignore or flout the rules. When that happens, there are penalties to pay."

In the Catholic Church, bishops and archbishops are accountable only to the pope, who rarely removes them.

American bishops who collectively pledged reforms after the sexual abuse scandal have no mechanism to enforce them on each other, relying instead on peer pressure or "fraternal correction."

But recently a grand jury in Philadelphia found evidence that more than three dozen credibly accused priests were still in ministry in that city in violation of the reforms.

"Fraternal correction is a myth. It will never work," Berry said. "There has got to be a basic structure for justice to ensure accountability. We see that not only in the abuse crisis but also in these financial

convulsions.?

Berry credits Benedict XVI for dealing more aggressively with the sexual abuse scandal than his predecessor, John Paul II.

?And yet (Benedict) could not go far enough in dealing with the central problem, which is that bishops and cardinals are immune from punishment under the doctrine of apostolic succession,? the tradition that each bishop can trace his authority in an unbroken line back to Jesus? original 12 apostles.

But, Berry said, ?We have amnesia on the story of Judas, the apostle who was a betrayer.?

[Bruce Nolan writes for *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans. Lauren Markoe contributed to this report.]

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