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A make-or-break moment on sex abuse and more Vatican news

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

In a polarized world, it was probably inevitable that opinion on the Catholic sex abuse crisis, like pretty much everything else, would crystallize into two opposing blocs. On one side are critics convinced the church still doesn't get it because it has failed to enact the sweeping reforms they support; on the other are apologists who believe the church has been unfairly turned into a scapegoat, and that if anything, it's overreacted.

Although there are highly distinct subgroups within each bloc, in general, both the critics and the apologists tend to be well organized and quite savvy about getting their message out. (Without comparing them in other ways, both SNAP and the Catholic League, for instance, have highly effective PR operations.)

Yet there is also a third constituency, swimming against the polarized tide, though you wouldn't really know it from media coverage or the blogosphere. Composed mostly of Catholic insiders, these are people who grasp the church's failures and who regard recovery very much as a work in progress, but who also believe the church has made important strides and could become a social pacesetter in anti-abuse efforts.

Generally, these are folks who work quietly within institutional structures, more interested in getting something done than in issuing press releases. Their effectiveness stems from their focus. Unlike the two other camps, these folks don't believe the sexual abuse crisis is primarily about something else, such as the corruption of the hierarchy or anti-Catholic media bias. They believe the core challenge is to create systems and structures that keep children safe -- and, where possible, to promote healing and reconciliation with victims.

Next week in Rome, this "Get Something Done" camp may finally have its day in the sun.

The occasion is a Feb. 6-9 symposium hosted by Rome's Jesuit-run Gregorian University, co-sponsored by several Vatican departments. Its title is "Towards Healing and Renewal," and its primary audience is officials from bishops' conferences and religious orders from around the world.

The idea is to identify best practices in abuse prevention and detection and to ensure that those practices become part of the church's standard operating procedure.

The impetus was a May 2011 directive from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith giving dioceses one year to develop "procedures suitable for assisting the victims of abuse, and also for educating the ecclesial community concerning the protection of minors." That deadline expires in three months, and officials in many dioceses, especially in the developing world, have said informally that they're waiting for the event at the Gregorian before putting pen to paper.

Voices to be heard include:

- Marie Collins, an Irish victim of clerical abuse who's been an outspoken critic of the church's failures.
- Maltese Monsignor Charles Scicluna, the Vatican's top prosecutor on sex abuse cases.
- American Monsignor Stephen Rossetti, former director of the St. Luke's Institute in Maryland and a veteran activist in anti-abuse efforts.
- Leaders of the Center for Child Protection at Germany's University of Ulm, which has worked with the German bishops in developing their policies.
- Pioneers of the "Virtus" program developed in the United States by the National Catholic Risk Retention Group. Its centerpiece is "Protecting God's Children," a program that offers training on the warning signs of abuse and ways to prevent it as well as how to make a report and how to respond to an allegation.
- Bishops from Brazil, Mexico and the Philippines -- the three largest Catholic nations on earth -- along with South Africa, discussing responses to clerical abuse in those regions.
- Vatican officials, including Cardinals William Levada of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and Marc Ouellet of the Congregation for Bishops, as well as Cardinal-designate Fernando Filoni of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. Archbishops Joseph Tobin of the Congregation for Religious and Savio Hon Tai Fai from Filoni's office will also take part.

One centerpiece will be the launch of a new Center for Child Protection in Rome, a joint project of the Greg's Institute of Psychology, the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising, and the Department for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at the University Clinic of Ulm. The idea is to develop an e-learning course in abuse prevention and detection to be offered in English, German, Italian and Spanish.

The "Towards Healing and Renewal" event looms as a crossroads for the church for at least four reasons.

First, although the "crisis" -- in the sense of lawsuits, massive media coverage, demoralization and confusion in the pews, and all the rest -- has already exploded in Europe and North America, it has yet to arrive in most of the rest of the world. That includes most of the southern hemisphere, where two-thirds of all Catholics today live. The question is whether the church will continue to follow a largely reactive pattern, waiting for a revelation to trigger an avalanche and then scrambling to catch up, or whether it will finally get ahead of the curve.

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Second, participants in this event represent a good share of the church's best and brightest minds on fighting abuse, and both the Vatican and the Gregorian have invested considerable resources in putting it together. If these four days don't produce momentum towards wider and deeper reform, it's an open question what might.

Third, both the Vatican and church leaders around the world have long complained of an imbalance in public attention with regard to the crisis. Breakdowns, such as those illustrated by the recent Grand Jury report in Philadelphia and the indictment of Bishop Robert Finn in Kansas City, Mo., generate headlines; success stories, such as the "Protecting God's Children" program, generally go untold.

That was the gist of Benedict XVI's message when he met with a group of church workers dedicated to child protection in the United Kingdom in 2010. He said: "While there are never grounds for complacency, credit should be given where it is due. The efforts of the church in this country and elsewhere, especially in the last 10 years, to guarantee the safety of children and young people ... should be acknowledged."

If there was ever a moment when imaginative communications efforts might produce such an acknowledgment, this event ought to be it.

(As a footnote, the symposium itself is off-limits to the press and the public in order to protect the free flow of discussion, organizers say. Participants, however, have been encouraged to make themselves available to the media throughout the event, and there are a couple of press conferences on the docket.)

Fourth, Catholic leaders have repeatedly stressed that the sexual exploitation of children is a broad social scourge and that the church wants to be a leader and partner with other institutions and movements in keeping children safe. As long as the perception is that the church is part of the problem rather than the solution, however, such partnerships will be tough to forge.

(Don't believe that perception is still widespread? Consider that a Philadelphia judge presiding over the criminal trial of two priests and a former priest recently said in open court, "Anybody that doesn't think there is widespread sexual abuse within the Catholic church is living on another planet.")

This summit represents a unique chance for the church to put its best foot forward, persuading at least some fair-minded people to regard it as a potential ally in child protection efforts. It is only, however, a chance -- next week will reveal how well participants take advantage of it.

For these reasons, the "Towards Healing and Renewal" symposium looms as a sort of make-or-break moment. I'll be on the ground in Rome covering it; watch the NCR Today site for my daily reports.

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As a sidebar, the symposium has already drawn a bit of criticism in Ireland, home to arguably the world's most intense Catholic sex abuse crisis. Observers there have wondered why Dublin's Archbishop Diarmuid Martin isn't among the speakers, especially given perceptions that Martin is on the Vatican's black list because of his searing candor on the crisis, including a willingness to butt heads with other bishops.

On background, organizers say that's not the deal.

First, word out of Ireland is that Martin will actually attend the symposium, along with two other Irish prelates, including Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh, the country's most senior churchman.

Second, Marie Collins is among the speakers. She's an outspoken Irish advocate of reform and someone sympathetic to much of Martin's agenda. Last year, for instance, Collins was among eight victims who took part in a foot-washing ceremony in Dublin led by Martin and Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, intended as a gesture of repentance.

Third, Martin is not the only prominent bishop with a reform record who's not on the formal agenda. O'Malley, for instance, isn't among the speakers, either. The U.S. conference will be represented by Bishop Robert Conlon of Joliet, Ill., who chairs the bishops' Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People.

The primary thrust of the event, organizers say, isn't to preach to the choir or to offer a platform to prominent voices in the hierarchy. Instead, it's to make the church's best practices systematic and institutional, and thus ensure that they outlive the personal charisma of pioneers such as Martin and O'Malley.

How all that plays out in the court of public opinion, especially in Ireland, remains to be seen.

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There are three other Vatican stories this week to which I can't give a full write-up but deserve at least a mention.

A good run for the Vatican's lawyer

Whatever the Vatican is paying Berkeley, Calif.-based attorney Jeffrey Lena, who represents the Holy See in American litigation, it must seem like money well spent. Not only has the Vatican never lost a case in the States and never paid a dime to settle one, most of the roughly 10 cases in which the Vatican has been sued dissolve, sooner or later, because Lena prevails on the issue of jurisdiction and sovereign immunity.

By the way, winning on the grounds of jurisdiction isn't a legal dodge that insulates the Vatican from scrutiny of its conduct. In virtually every case that's come up, courts have taken a close look at the alleged facts, and then asked: Even if all that's true, does it establish a pattern of institutional responsibility for actionable wrongs serious enough to overcome sovereign immunity?

Lena's had another good run of late.

On Jan. 20, he prevailed in a procedural ruling in an Oregon sex abuse case, convincing the judge to deny a request to depose an official of a religious order on the grounds that the legal standard had not been met. On Tuesday, he won another procedural ruling in a Wisconsin sex abuse case, fending off a request from plaintiffs for more time to respond to the Vatican's motions to dismiss.

The big-ticket item, however, came Wednesday.

On that day, a federal court in Mississippi finally dismissed the long-running *Dale v. Colagiovanni* case, originally filed in 2002. It pivoted on charges by the insurance commissioners of five states (Mississippi, Tennessee, Missouri, Oklahoma and Arkansas) that the Vatican had been complicit in scams perpetrated by a con artist named Martin Frankel, who's currently serving a 16-year prison sentence for looting a series of insurance companies to the tune of more than \$200 million.

The Vatican connection is this: As part of his shell game, Frankel created a bogus foundation in the Virgin Islands named after St. Francis, with the ostensible purpose of serving the poor, but whose real purpose was to buy up insurance companies and pilfer them. To provide a veneer of legitimacy, Frankel recruited an elderly minor Vatican functionary, an Italian named Monsignor Emilio Colagiovanni, to lend his name and support.

Primarily as a result of the lawsuit, the *Colagiovanni* case has become a favorite of conspiracy theorists everywhere. It's now up there with the Vatican Bank scandals of the 1970s, the death of Pope John Paul I and the kidnapping of Emanuela Orlandi in terms of favorite Vatican mysteries.

Yet from the beginning, Lena always insisted that the Vatican, as such, was never a party to Frankel's scam -- that it was actually among his "unwitting victims." He notes that when Frankel tried to go through official channels in 1998 to solicit Vatican support, he was rebuffed, and when various parties later asked the Vatican if Frankel had any official backing, the answer was always no. Now, after more than a decade of litigation, the insurance commissioners have given up their efforts to prove otherwise.

In a statement this week, Lena bluntly suggested that the insurance regulators had targeted the Vatican in order to divert attention from their own failures to stop Frankel's scam much earlier.

Lena also had a parting shot for the media, which I reproduce here in full:

"That inflammatory accusations against the Holy See and the [Vatican Bank] are easily disseminated and make good fodder for conspiracy theorists cannot be doubted," he said. "But it would inure to the public's benefit if those same journalists who enthusiastically disseminated such allegations when the cases were filed would pick up their pens to write with equal vigor upon the cases' demise. To do so would responsibly reflect the public record that each of the cases died the undignified death it deserved."

The 'Madoff of Parioli'

As papal aides this week struggled to put out a media fire ignited when an Italian TV program revealed confidential letters from the pope's ambassador in the States complaining of financial corruption in the Vatican, they simultaneously found themselves trying to keep the Vatican out of yet another scandal.

On Tuesday, Italy's leading daily newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, carried a sensational story under the headline "From the Congregation for the Causes of Saints: 1.6 million for the Madoff of Parioli." It reported that an Italian Dominican, Fr. Francesco Maria Ricci, had invested slightly more than \$2 million in a financial services operation run by financier Gianfranco Lande, who was arrested last April and charged with several counts of fraud.

Lande's Ponzi scheme is estimated to have wiped out the savings of a roster of elite Roman investors to the tune of roughly \$300 million. It's earned him the title of the "Madoff of Parioli," a reference to the Italian region from which Lande hails.

Because Ricci is a "postulator," meaning an official responsible for sainthood causes for his religious order, the story seemed to speculate that Ricci might have been acting in a quasi-official capacity on behalf of the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints when he invested in Lande's scam.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, was quick to reject that suggestion.

In a statement released the same day the *Corriere* article appeared, Lombardi insisted that Ricci is not a Vatican official. In fact, Lombardi said, people with sainthood causes to push are more akin to "clients" of the Vatican. As a result, Lombardi said, "The Congregation for the Causes of Saints and its Prefect, Cardinal Angelo Amato, have absolutely nothing to do with the events spoken of in the article in question."

The Last Exorcist

I've had occasion before to note that one of the best young Vatican writers going these days is Italian journalist Paolo Rodari. As it happens, Rodari has a new book out this week, co-authored with the world-famous exorcist of the Rome diocese, 86-year-old Italian Fr. Gabriele Amorth.

The book's sexy title is *The Last Exorcist: My Battle against Satan*.

Amorth, of course, is not literally the last exorcist of the Catholic church. He writes in the preface, however, that he embraces the book's title for its polemical value. Amorth strongly believes that exorcism and demonic combat are not taken nearly seriously enough by the church these days, including most bishops. As a result, he says, every exorcist can't help but sometimes feel like the last.

I predict the book will find its way into English translation, and will do very well. From a marketing point of view, exorcism is always a winner, and Amorth certainly delivers the goods. He speaks in colorful detail about his experiences of Satan, possession, deliverance and exorcism, and it's not hard to imagine a Hollywood screenplay in there someplace.

In terms of news value, one nugget from the book concerns Benedict XVI. As is well known, Pope John Paul II performed a handful of exorcisms during his papacy. (Or, if you prefer, prayers for deliverance, because he didn't always employ the formal liturgical rite.)

Amorth states, however, that to the best of his knowledge, Benedict XVI does not perform exorcisms.

That said, Amorth nevertheless asserts that Benedict's "entire pontificate is a great exorcism against Satan."

He tells a story to illustrate his point. One day in spring 2009, Amorth says, a group of four people attended a large public audience with Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Square. The two women in the group were Amorth's assistants, while the two young men, named Marco and Giovanni, were possessed.

The women escorted Marco and Giovanni to a spot as close as possible to the pope. As Amorth tells it, the two young men began to act strangely as soon as Benedict XVI entered the square. When one of the women told Giovanni to control himself, he responded in a slow and eerie voice: "I am not Giovanni."

When Benedict XVI made his way to the stage, Amorth says, the two young men began to scream. One of them yelled at the pope, "Holiness, Holiness, here we are!"

Benedict, according to Amorth, looked over, raised his arm and offered a blessing. Immediately afterward, according to Amorth, the two young men fell to the ground, stopped screeching and began to cry. Later, he said, Giovanni and Marco claimed to have no memory of any of these events.

Here's Amorth's summary comment: "The way in which Benedict XVI lives the liturgy, his respect for the rules, his rigor, even his posture are extremely effective against Satan. The liturgy celebrated by the pontiff is potent. Satan is wounded every time the pope celebrates the Eucharist."

"Satan highly feared the election of Ratzinger to the throne of Peter," Amorth writes, "because he saw in him the continuation of the great battle against him carried out for 26 years by John Paul II."

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