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More than a hint of hypocrisy

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

The recent interview of Bishop Leonard Blair by Terry Gross, host of NPR's "Fresh Air," provided an interesting and revealing contrast to that of Sr. Pat Farrell, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, who was interviewed the week before. A certain inevitability hangs over this bishops vs. nuns clash, occurring as it is at the end of a long, historic arc that, since the mid-'60s reform council called Vatican II, has placed these two groups on course to a collision.

Listening to the two interviews was like listening to the ecclesial version of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. Their language, what they view as important, what their lives are spent doing are so incredibly different that one has to wonder if any conversation, never mind dialogue, could be possible without an interpreter.

Many of the differences in this contretemps lie in the realm of the subjective -- regarding the role of religious life and the role of magisterium post-Vatican II, the meaning of obedience, and so on. But one segment of the interview, a portion that can be assessed against a long and established record, is worth revisiting. It is the part where the host asks the bishop about the sex abuse scandal and why, in light of the nuns' investigation, bishops should not be investigated as well.

Gross, reading from a column by Kathy Galleher that appeared in *NCR*, said, "The church has not yet been willing or able to examine its own role as an institution in concealing and enabling decades of abuse. The bishops have not taken collective responsibility for their actions and inactions, and for the enormous pain they've caused. As much as the abuse itself, it is this failure by the hierarchy to acknowledge and accept their responsibility that has angered and disillusioned so many current and now-former Catholics."

While the bishops view the nuns as in need of supervision and have accused the nuns of "betraying core

values of the church" and causing "scandal to the faithful," Gross asked if there wasn't a bit of hypocrisy in those allegations, if the same charges might apply to "the institutional church that appears not able to reform itself and to be in the need of outside supervision."

It is an obvious and fair question, given the ongoing scandal and continued revelations about how the hierarchy mishandled the crisis over decades. Blair, in his answer, attempted to relativize the enormity of the scandal, even attempting to soften the reality by referencing "the mystery of iniquity in the church," noting that even Jesus didn't get it perfect, that he had chosen Judas, the betrayer, as one of the Twelve. Noting that bishops are the successors of the apostles, he implied it would logically hold that today's bishops would be visited by the same iniquity.

That strange rationalization aside for the moment, the reality is that more than a quarter-century of evidence has accumulated. Hundreds of thousands of pages of documentation are available, much of it stored online at bishopaccountability.org, that shows bishops:

- Callously disregarded the welfare of the most vulnerable in the community as they secretly moved priests who raped and molested children from parish to parish;
- Hid records and lied about the abuse to parents, reporters and prosecutors;
- Lifted millions from diocesan coffers without informing the community to secure silence from victims and their families;
- Did whatever necessary, from declaring bankruptcy to payouts of hundreds of millions in settlements, to avoid trials, which would have exposed in great detail the depth and breadth of the scandalous behavior and bishops' roles in protecting predator priests. Five years after a settlement in Los Angeles, the archdiocese is still fighting release of documents mandated by that settlement. We haven't heard that its lawyers are working pro bono.
- Have no fear of losing their jobs no matter how irresponsibly they've acted and no matter how much scandal they've caused. The only bishop to have resigned because of the scandal was Cardinal Bernard Law, who, until his recent retirement, maintained membership on at least six of the highest level departments in the Vatican, including the one responsible for naming other bishops. Judas was distraught enough after his betrayal that he went out and hanged himself. No one wishes suicide on anyone, but bishops who have deeply betrayed the community know that in the princely circumstances of today's secretive hierarchy, one needs only wait out the scandal.

Blair went on to say, "I think we've done everything humanly possible we can, as a body, to try to deal with this problem."

It is difficult to judge, of course, what all is humanly possible. What was done, however, is not a matter of conjecture, but record. And the record of more than 25 years clearly shows that everything the bishops did -- the education programs, the national review board, the local review boards, the charter and the office for children and youth, and on and on -- was the result of a reaction to intense public pressure. It wasn't that they did all that was humanly possible. It was rather that they did all they *had* to do to try to put the scandal behind them.

Nothing they did was voluntary. In the years before the crisis exploded anew in 2002, 17 years after the first national stories ran (in *NCR*) about the scandal, they had, in fact, rejected many of those same suggestions they ultimately adopted. They had, as a body, scoffed at the warnings and vilified the messengers of bad news.

A nonreligious university, Penn State, has demanded more accountability of football coaches and administrators than the church has of its spiritual leaders.

Blair recited what have become standard episcopal talking points about the priest sex abuse scandal. The scandal is "a dark cloud" over the church. He wouldn't try to "defend the indefensible." And "there were tremendous failures." But the bishops must move on, being "teachers of the faith ... And if we have to -- if we are to continue that mission, well, that includes our responsibility for church teaching. And that's the issue here with the doctrinal assessment" levied against the nuns.

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The assessment takes issue with the nuns for not engaging more overtly in the divisive anti-abortion political tactics that the bishops have employed -- largely ineffectively and at great cost to the church's credibility -- since 1973. It argues that the nuns have not engaged as actively and vociferously as the bishops in the culture's anti-gay campaigns. It accuses the sisters of entertaining undefined "radical feminist" notions, and it takes them to task for daring, as women, to question the church's exclusion of women from the decision-making counsels of the church and from ordination. They should expunge such questions from their minds because the church has declared that such thoughts are out of bounds and not to be entertained.

The degree of accountability the bishops would require of women, then, would include a prohibition against entertaining questions that occur naturally to anyone outside the closed, all-male, celibate culture (and even many within who dare not admit publicly to such thoughts) and condemnation largely for things they haven't done.

These are the crimes, the infractions, the women will have to spend endless hours devising a response to; they will have to justify their lives, their ministries, their very being in a way no bishop would ever require of a group of priests or bishops. Declared heretics of the right are given a special papal appointee in a specially arranged office to hold their hands through their continued denunciations of the church. The nuns are given papers outlining a hostile takeover.

It is only fair to note that some bishops have gone beyond the normal recitations of talking points. Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, however imperfectly some might consider his approach, was given the impossible task not once, but three times, of cleaning up the horrible mess left by a predecessor. His last task, of course, was in Boston, where a perfect storm of scandal and financial difficulties has left the church still reeling. Whatever one might say about O'Malley's solution, he brought to the situation a humility and pastoral approach sorely lacking in Law.

More recently, we have the example of Bishop Blase Cupich of Spokane, Wash., who undertook an innovative approach -- mediation -- to deal with the results of the abuse crisis that he inherited when he took over in 2010. And all along, we have examples of bishops who have made great outreach to victims and who have conducted powerful services acknowledging the wrongs done to victims and seeking forgiveness.

But what we've not heard, not from one bishop yet in the United States, are the details we are told are essential in other circumstances to fulfilling the basics of our sacramental life when it comes to confessing sin and seeking forgiveness.

Never once has a bishop gone before his people and said, "To the best of my knowledge and after a thorough review of the record:

- This is the number of priests who I and/or my predecessors knew had sexually abused children in this diocese;
- This is the number of children who were either raped or otherwise molested by those priests;
- This is the number of times we knowingly transferred abusive priests to parishes without making the pastor or the congregation aware of his crimes;
- This is the amount of money that was taken, without your consent or knowledge, from the diocesan coffers to pay victims and their families to remain silent;
- These are the ministries that no longer exist in this diocese because, as a result of paying for the sex abuse crisis, we could no longer afford them;
- These are the buildings and properties that were sold off to pay for abuse payments.

For these things, I am sorry and ask your forgiveness."

These are the bishops who would prohibit a man or woman divorced and remarried from approaching the communion table because they had not been perfect in love and marriage; who are quick to condemn theologians for raising discomfiting questions; who wield the power to ban speakers from church property or condemn politicians for not adhering to a church-approved political strategy; who blithely declare whole segments of humankind "disordered" for sexual orientations over which the individuals have no control. The leaders place burdens of accountability on the backs of their people they are unwilling to shoulder themselves.

So the bishops will go after the nuns to assure that church teaching is upheld and the scandal to the community ceases. They should know, however, that when ordinary Catholics consider scandal in the church, their thoughts rarely turn to the divorced, or to gay people, or to errant theologians and others who ask questions, or to the liturgically imprecise. And rarely, if ever, do the terms "scandalized faithful" and "nuns" arrive in the same thought.

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