

“Taking Action Amid Crisis for the Catholic Church”

Remarks for Georgetown Campus Ministry

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Thanks to Dr. Jim Wickman, Fr. Greg Schenden and all at Georgetown Campus Ministry for inviting me to share reflections with you on the current crisis in the Church and what we might do in response. Let me be clear at the outset: I’m no theologian. I’m an administrator, a pragmatist, someone who looks for ways to fix broken things, to address dysfunction, to build more workable systems. So, my comments this evening might run to the mundane rather than lofty, but I hope they can spark dialogue and I’m eager to get to that part of the program.

To frame the discussion, let’s reflect on four questions about the clergy sex abuse crisis in the Catholic Church:

How could this have happened?

How does it impact me? Others?

Should I stay in this Church?

What are we going to do about it?

How could this have happened?

To come up with solutions, we have to think about causes.

I’m old enough to have at least a dim memory of priests saying Mass with their backs to the people, the intonation of mysterious Latin prayers and incense --- a great deal of incense. This was in the 1950’s and ‘60’s, a time when, apparently, many of the sex abuse cases occurred. I remember being jealous of my brothers who got to be altar boys --- I’m so old that I was out of grade school by the time they let girls be altar servers, too. I grew up in the old parish culture of Philadelphia suburbs where priests were distant, revered figures, and seemingly ancient men.

I remember just one young priest, I’ll call him Father Smith, and there was a memorable evening when he came to our house for dinner. We wore our best clothes and Mom set out the good china and Dad drank sherry from a proper sherry glass. Father Smith was friendly, and he took good care of my brothers. He even took some of them on trips down the shore (that’s Philadelphian for “to the beach”). Years later, my mother wondered aloud and with genuine

anguish about whether anything ‘had happened’ on those trips. My brothers hastened to assure her it was all just good fun; but she could not let go of her suspicions.

The clergy child abuse crisis has wreaked considerable damage --- on the victims, of course, and their families, but also considerable collateral damage among faithful Catholics more generally. The betrayal of trust, the hypocrisy coming from those who did not hesitate to tell others how to live, the sins of men who were supposed to be the confessors for the rest of us, the criminal acts covered-up by bishops playing chess with parish assignments.

We thought that Boston and *Spotlight*, the Dallas Charter and dozens of investigations and settlements in dioceses across the country would have purged the ecclesial system by now. But then the scandalous story of former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick came out, followed quickly by the Pennsylvania grand jury report, and suddenly the wounds tore open again.

How could this have happened?

So many learned analyses have emerged about the clergy child abuse scandal, I can hardly add much to that body of reflection. The themes are well known: clericalism, yes, as even Pope Francis has acknowledged in his *Letter to the People of God*; the challenge of celibacy, most certainly, and a life spent denying some of the most fundamental human needs and instincts.

But along with these well-examined themes, I think there also has been a rather significant dimension of what I can only call a somewhat naïve arrogance on the part of the people whose jobs supposedly made them specialists in the idea of sin --- somehow they thought that they could be immune from sin, from the frailties and temptations that they heard ordinary people confess to them in whispers, the belief that ordination somehow could be a shield against fundamental human physical and emotional needs.

This kind of naïve arrogance created a way of life with no safety nets, believing in its own goodness and saintliness to such an extent that the idea of failure --- breaking the vow of celibacy, harming a child, taking advantage of vulnerable persons --- the idea was simply unthinkable for those who believed in the perfection of their way of life.

So far as I know, in the decades when the most cases were occurring, there were few, if any, sources of assistance for priests who suffered weaknesses --- whether emotional control issues or drinking or other psycho/social problems --- for those who could have been helped to avoid these awful acts before they committed them if only the Catholic Church had realized the need for a more human and humane form of organization and range of social services for the priesthood. Rather than admit the need for a more human organization, they treated the abusers as anomalies, as the occasional problem men who could be “fixed” with new assignments.

It is truly shocking, when you think of it, that an organization staffed by personnel who spent years in advanced study and learning could be so naïve, truly clueless, about some of the most fundamental aspects of human nature. And it’s equally shocking to realize that once the bishops learned that they had abusive priests, rather than getting to the root of the problem they simply moved the men around with some kind of hope that the perpetrators would cure themselves and

sin no more. In that willful movement of abusive priests from parish to parish, we see the naïve arrogance turning into shameful, deliberate and premeditated cover-ups of criminal activity. It is simply inexcusable for a well-educated man, as most bishops are, to say that he was only following the advice he received from psychologists and lawyers; surely even decades ago bishops knew, or should have known, that child abuse is a serious crime, not just a lapse in vows.

How does this impact me? How does it impact others?

I've thought about this question a lot because I think in order to understand what we have to do about this crisis, we have to understand the impact on each one of us --- Each of you has to answer the first part of this question for yourself.

Speaking just very personally for myself for a minute, the crisis has made me realize that it's actually important for me as a lay leader of a Catholic institution to speak out about the problems that the Church is facing today, and to be less afraid to say some things that might be critical but essential to put on the table. I'll talk more about that when I get to "solutions."

How does it impact others? I think the greatest danger we face is the cynicism the scandal is creating among Catholics, and contempt among those who are not Catholic or who have simply chosen to walk away from the Church. To read the comments appended to any media outlet story about the crisis is to see the entire ugly vat of vituperation and anti-Catholic hatred exposed.

Other consequences are becoming clearer each day. The Church's ability to be a strong, clear voice in the public square on a range of important social justice issues --- immigration, Dreamers, healthcare, racism, poverty, the protection of life, to name just a few --- this voice is muted and less likely to carry the same weight as in the past.

At the same time, the sex abuse crisis has unleashed some powerful, destructive internal forces that threaten years of turmoil, and possibly real harm, to the internal coherence and collegiality of the Church leadership. The letter of Archbishop Vigano publicly hurling so many unproven accusations against other bishops, including Pope Francis, has fueled many conservative lay groups who hate the current Pope, who want to roll back the clock to a time before Vatican II, to stamp out the teachings on social justice, to create a narrowly authoritarian and rigidly orthodox sect that will have fewer members by far, but will be more elitist and controlling. The emergence of something called the "red hat" group, some wealthy conservative Catholics intending to investigate the members of the College of Cardinals, is one example. The last thing the Church needs right now are factions of self-appointed inspectors general!

Should I stay with the Church? Or should I find something else for my spiritual life?

This is another question that each one of us has to answer personally; I certainly cannot tell you what to do. But I can point out why I'm sticking with the Church despite the scandal, the bad judgment of bishops, the sniping among the curia.

I accept the fact that the Catholic Church, while the steward of our divine faith tradition, is also a very human institution. I believe this current crisis exposes the Church's humanity – yes, in painful ways, showing the evil parts of humanity, along with the weak and flawed parts, but also the parts that are about resilience, fortitude, forgiveness, hope and love. I believe the crisis can make the Church a far better, more humane and more accessible organization, and this will strengthen our faith in many ways.

I do not believe, at all, that this is the end of the Church, or that schism is inevitable, although there are those who would seem to welcome that result.

The good work that the Church does in this world must and will continue, perhaps with even greater fervor among the leaders and staffs of the ministries that do the real work of the Church on the ground, among the communities we engage each day in schools, colleges and universities, in Catholic Charities, the hospitals and so many social service agencies.

I say this with all of the caveats that come with posing the next question: none of this will work unless the Church seriously, constructively and deeply engages in profound organizational change.

What are WE going to do about it?

Here's the place where we should now spend most of our time going forward: let's start with the old mantra: WE are the Church! WE are the Church. If we are going to make constructive contributions to solutions, we have to believe that we have a voice, that we can be effective agents of change.

To have a voice, we have to stay engaged with the work of the Church. If anything, rather than walking away, now would be a good time to step up engagement whether through Campus Ministry or Jesuit Volunteers or Notre Dame Mission Volunteers or Catholic Charities or other pathways to engagement and service.

We also must become better educated about the structures and dynamics of the Church organization. I admit that I've been involved with Church institutions my entire life, and yet, when I read Archbishop Vigano's letter, for example, I felt rather dizzy as if the many doors down a long corridor kept opening and closing as he rambled through the various layers of hierarchy and privilege and curial powers. I have no clue about the "inside baseball" accusations of Vigano and now the response from Cardinal Ouellette, it's all fascinating but disturbing to have such a public airing of venom among the hierarchy. At the same time, however, it's an opportunity for learning and instruction --- what is this organization, how would we re-engineer its many bureaucracies to become more open, more honest, less myopic, more relevant to contemporary principles of good management and communication with important constituencies?

We have to be willing to speak up, to communicate our concerns and positions on reform directly to the bishops and cardinals. I do believe several components of reform are essential to restore trust and improve the health and functionality of the Church structure for modern life.

First, bishops whose credibility has been compromised by their failure to hold sex abusers accountable must step down from their leadership positions. I include Cardinal Wuerl in that group, and he is perhaps the most prominent of the group. [Note: two days after this address, Pope Francis announced that he has now accepted the resignation that Cardinal Wuerl submitted when he turned 75, upon the request of the Cardinal.] I don't say this lightly, I believe he has been a good bishop for Washington. I do not see this as any admission of guilt or act of punishment, but rather, on the part of the bishops, an expression of atonement, an acknowledgement that leaders must accept full responsibility for this crisis ---- that is what leaders do. It is also an act of leadership to step down, to acknowledge the impossibility of continuing in a governance role when trust is gone, when accountability must be clear. Changing leadership is one of the first critical steps toward the kind of reform that must come. [Note: Cardinal Wuerl's letter about his resignation expresses exactly this kind of leadership sensitivity to help the Archdiocese move forward.]

Second, the hierarchical governance structure of the Church must change, starting with the creation of councils in every diocese that include lay men and women as well as personnel who work in the parishes, schools, hospitals, colleges and other ministries of the diocese. The councils, meeting regularly and led by elected chairs who should preferably be lay persons, would be a place for robust and open discussion of Church issues with the bishop, not just about the abuse crisis but all issues, as well as review of finances, consultation about major initiatives, and discussion of crisis management.

Third, to address the problem of clericalism directly, the Church should move on several fronts, including making a concerted effort to include women at every possible level of Church activity, not as mere observers but as real participants. I think the Vatican missed an opportunity to do this with the Synod on Young People where an all-male committee is writing a document dealing with "...the need to address the child sexual abuse scandals in Catholicism, migration, women, the difficulties of conveying the faith in a secular world, various challenges related to living in a digital world and the challenge of communicating the Church's teaching on sexuality." (John Allen, Crux, 10/10/2018) No women, no lay people, are engaged in the writing process, apparently and that is clericalism writ large.

At the same time, priests and bishops should adopt a more modest lifestyle, living among the people where possible, reducing the regalia and increasing the appearance of essential humanity, being with the people as true companions and not as exalted hierarchs. Pope Francis set the tone when he chose to live in more modest quarters at the Vatican, to eat with the staff, to reduce some of the elaborate culture around the person of the pope.

Finally, let's be clear in all of the discussions about clergy sex abuse that the problem is not about being a priest, or celibate, or gay --- the problem of sexual violence is rampant throughout our society, and what the Church is experiencing is repeated every day in every kind of institution, from Hollywood and corporate executives to politicians and universities, we all are dealing with the problem of those who abuse others as a statement of power and control, perhaps for self-gratification, but also as a weapon of intimidation and oppression of those who are

vulnerable. #MeToo is a global movement for a reason, it represents a reaction to a profound social disorder.

In recent weeks, as we have seen this problem play out once more in a bitter drama on the national stage, we have to ask ourselves how we will find a collective solution to this terrible affliction that leaves so many victims shattered. We have to insist that our leaders --- in the Church, in the White House, in Congress, in universities, in all walks of life --- that they demonstrate more serious and sustained efforts to eradicate sexual violence. Sadly, some of those leaders seem to think it's no big deal, or that it's not really a problem at all. Leaders who diminish the problem cannot continue to lead; we need to hold them accountable and insist that a fundamental qualification for leadership in any position in our society must be a genuine commitment to respect for human dignity for every single person.

Ultimately, sexual violence is an offense against the dignity of human life. For all who profess to be pro-life, eradicating sexual violence must be a central concern for advocacy and action; to recover from the clergy sex abuse crisis, eradicating sexual violence not only in the Church but throughout our society must be a central concern of the Catholic community.

Thanks for listening!