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THE CATHOLIC WORLD REPORT

The emergent #MeToo clerical movement

Priests too frequently live in fear of the power of their bishop over their lives. It's time that bishops understand that they cannot afford to abuse their own power without consequences.

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Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, listens during a Nov. 12 presentation in Baltimore on the centenary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, held the day before the bishops opened their Nov. 13-14 fall general assembly. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

Sounding the alarm

In Catholic circles, the news cycle has been dominated by recent news of several high profile bishops, [Cardinal McCarrick](#) and [Bishop Pineda](#) foremost among them, who are being publically and forcibly called out for their abuse, sexually and otherwise, of seminarians and others in their charge throughout the years. In the case of Cardinal McCarrick especially, the abuse was an open secret among both clergy and lay faithful. Unfortunately, no one in the clergy felt they were capable of resisting and calling out these powerful figures. They were the first victims of these powerful men, and their nascent revolt continues to emerge. Cardinal McCarrick's case is specifically egregious because of his predation on minors, which is what began the deluge of accusations against him, which cover virtually his entire priestly ministry.

These accusations have laid bare simultaneously the corruption of morals, along with what I would call a general "nepotism of vice," that is, promotion within the institution of people who share the same evil character traits as their superior, whether that be avarice, lust, gluttony, careerism, etc. This sort of practice in all organizations is as old as Adam and Eve, but it is especially jarring in Catholic ones, where currently prelates have virtually absolute power over their priests. These

prelates frequently and routinely violate both civil and canon law in order to punish good priests, and promote compromised ones. We simply cannot understand the current crisis (a word that is frequently overused in today's sensationalistic media, yet I think applies here), without understanding the near total breakdown of the relationship of trust between priests and their bishops.

For almost two decades since the abuse scandal hit Boston and started the worldwide reforms, commentators have frequently remarked that the cure of the problem will not come as long as bishops continue to be exempt from the rules they have crafted (with the help of lawyers) for their priests. Now finally, the seed sown two decades ago is starting to reap its bitter fruit, and priests everywhere may yet awaken and rediscover their strength.

Punishing the innocent, sparing the guilty

Priests of the past fifty years are very aware of the near universal problem of trying to maintain a modicum of sanity, spirituality and leadership in an age of dissolving public morals and increasing litigiousness (the two phenomena are related). Very many priests are familiar with the "problem" of a priest who wants to evangelize, promote a reverent celebration of Holy Mass and the other liturgies of the Church, and support their faithful in these difficult times, yet face constant suspicion and even direct persecution from their bishops and other officials in their diocesan curiae. All too often, it appears that the norm is that fidelity is punished, while bishops, even good ones, are fearful of making necessary reforms in the intellectual, spiritual, moral and human dimensions of their clerical culture.

The irony of all this is that the average "good priest," who lives out the promises of sacred ordination, also tends to have a strong sacramental vision, and so along with it a firm grasp of the *potestas sacra*, or "sacred power" which priests possess, which includes, especially in the case of a bishop, the power of governing. And because these priests take such power seriously, they are the least likely to be disobedient, and more likely to doubt their own judgment on matters. They are thus the most likely to be abused, since, in the words of the old proverb, the willing horse gets beaten the most. On the opposite side, a priest who habitually lives a worldly, sinful and egocentric life, rarely feels any need to show his bishop any respect or obedience except when it strictly benefits him to do so: hence, these priests often tend to be either sycophants or libertines. They either become careerists seeking promotion and advancement, or rogue actors who run their affairs unmoored from Church doctrine or discipline.

This causes a double problem then: good priests, because of their very goodness, are the least likely to fight the very powers that oppress them, while the worst priests, because of their very corruption, are the least likely to care about authority in general, and on the contrary, will try to ingratiate themselves to those authorities, and ensure that the *status quo* be maintained.

Is there a need for a priestly ombudsman?

Although the Church has journeyed through many different processes for the selection and/or deposition of bishops, one cannot help but think that today, as bishops continue to remain unaccountable and structurally immune from challenges to their authority, priests and even lay faithful need some sort of canonical mechanism by which bishops can be held accountable for their malfeasance, especially if that malfeasance is habitual and public. In theory, priests and lay faithful can have recourse to the Holy See and the pope for their problems, but in practice, Rome has very little coercive power to make bishops obey canon law.

I doubt likewise that the diocesan curia, which is often stacked with people who are tied directly to the bishop's leadership, much like an ecclesiastical 'deep state', possesses the necessary power to act against a bishop who acts immorally or illegally. Anecdotes abound of vicars for clergy, judicial vicars, and vicars general who routinely have abused their power in 'obedience' (which isn't truly obedience because it is immoral and illegal) to their superior.

I wonder whether a solution may be a sort of "constitutional convention" of clergy in times of public crisis, at which priests have the ability to declare a sort of "no confidence" vote in their superior. I think this may be justified theologically for several reasons.

Theological reasons for clerical defiance

Firstly, clergy frequently forget that their promises of obedience are conditioned by both the moral law, as well as ecclesiastical law. If their superior does or commands something immoral or illegal, a cleric is obliged in conscience to resist, like any good Christian in a like situation. Secondly, theologians and historians believe that in the Latin Rite especially, the body language and terminology of the Ordination Rite itself is one taken from vassalage arrangements in the Middle Ages, by which both the liege and the vassal contract obligations and receive rights by mutual agreement. This can also be seen in the Oaths of Fidelity and petitions for Orders. Thirdly, priests have a "sacerdotal genealogy" in that they are spiritually linked to their bishop in a filial relationship. It is expected that children be obedient to their parents as a lawful authority, yet this does not stop us from unequivocally condemning abusive parenting. Finally and practically, bishops need to remember that they *need* their priests to carry out their initiatives and help their respective dioceses run. Priests, if they only understood their power in numbers, could easily oppose and even paralyze their bishop, especially if they galvanized the lay faithful.

What could this look like in a possible reform of canon law? Perhaps the pope as Supreme Legislator could introduce the possibility that, when a critical mass of priests complain about their bishop, that he be *ipso facto* suspended until he be investigated by the apostolic nuncio and the Holy See. Perhaps if something like 40 percent of priests declare a *non placet* in regard to the leadership of the bishop, said bishop is suspended pending canonical trial. Perhaps if something like 80-90 percent of priests declare their bishop unfit for office, such a bishop is *ipso facto* deposed as bishop of their diocese. Each public vote would have a stated reason for it, and only convened for violations of faith, morals, or the discipline of the Church as stipulated in the Canons.

Moving from “jus” to “munus”

Priests too frequently live in fear of the power of their bishop over their lives. It's time that bishops understand that they cannot afford to abuse their own power without like consequences. At the same time, many of these crises, which are homegrown and contagious in nature, could easily be nipped in the bud on a local level, way before complaints reach the ears of the Pope, often because of journalistic scandal or public outrage. No faithful Catholic will deny that a bishop has *potestas sacra* and the right to govern his own diocese. Yet we must remember that the *munus gubernandi* is not a *jus gubernandi*. The power of governance is a *munus*, which in the rich and multivalent Latin means both “gift” and “burden.” The power of governance is not called, like in the language of civil government, a *jus* or “right.” Thus, implicit in our own theological and canonical language, is the idea that the bishop cannot and must not rule as a Persian prince or Byzantine emperor, but as a man who acts humbly and lovingly as *Servus Servorum Dei*, most principally as father and servant of his priests, who in turn offer him loving and integral obedience.

Doing this in my opinion will promote more of a relationship of trust and respect, because the rights of both priests and bishops will be respected, and their mutual obligations reinforced. Although I admit in some dioceses this may initially cause discontent between the clergy and their bishops, and that ‘toxic’ presbyterates do exist, I do think the alternative we have now, with record low morale among the clergy, cannot stand for long. Clergy who are depressed, unjustly persecuted and unhappy are in spiritual danger, and their parishes, schools and other ministries will be impacted, as they are right now. It is thus a spiritual and moral imperative to see to the welfare of priests, because they set the tone for much of the reality of the local Church, down to the parish level.

In closing, I want to state that none of my thoughts are absolutely complete or absolutely necessary, but I do think something must be done, because the whirlwind is coming for the world's bishops, and they must rise to the same standards which they expect of their spiritual sons, or else be swept away by revolt, not born of principle directed toward reform, but of spite, directed toward schism and dissolution.

[This essay originally appeared on [the *Scutum et Lorica* site](#) and is reprinted here by kind permission of the author.]

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Is it a Church or a country club with a cross on top?

The Church today is a victim of mixed signals from her clergy. Clarity is not only lacking; it is often studiously avoided.

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Christ Pantocrator, National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, DC. (Image: commons.wikimedia.org)

For the past several weeks, we have been inundated with more stories about clerical sex abuse, this time emanating from the College of Cardinals. On several blogs, I weighed in to say that, as regrettable as that phenomenon is, I have not encountered a single Catholic who has left the Church over that issue (not that that is the ultimate criterion for dealing with the matter, but it is not infrequently put forth as the major cause for the ongoing hemorrhaging of Catholics). I proceeded to say, however, that I do know hundreds of people who have left the Church for other weighty reasons—and reliable statistics tell us that their number is actually in the hundreds of thousands.

The present crisis

First, though, let me reflect ever so briefly on sexual abuse in the Church. Prescinding from what caused the disgraceful behavior (that's a topic for another moment), I believe that the bishops as a group grossly mishandled the crisis. By presenting it as an example of pedophilia, they were not being honest; the vast majority of the cases did not involve prepubescent boys but late-adolescent young men. Therefore, we were dealing with homosexual activity; ironically, I suspect the media would have given very little coverage to it if that had been the label due to their own proclivities. Following the "professional" counsel of mental health personnel, most bishops—often acting against their own better instincts—"recycled" offending priests. Of course, had they not accepted the recommendations of these "professionals," they would have been deemed anti-science and stuck in a medieval mindset.

Violating the ancient Roman legal principle of *testis unus, testis nullus* (one witness is no witness), most bishops took the word of an alleged victim, without supporting evidence. Which, in turn,

generally led to out-of-court settlements—this time at the urging of lawyers and insurance companies. This had the effect of draining diocesan patrimonies but also throwing priests under the bus; after all, wouldn't any thinking person presume that a diocese wouldn't shell out a million dollars if it didn't really believe the alleged victim? The pattern was thus set back in 2002 with the Dallas Charter. Could any reasonable individual not suppose that after lawyers and others had exhausted the pool of "foot soldiers," they would not then be emboldened to go after the "capos"? But, as I said, the loss of parishioners, amazingly and to the immense credit of their faith, has been infinitesimal.

So, in my estimation, why have as many as half of adult Catholics left the Church? Horrific abuse of the Sacred Liturgy for over fifty years. Toleration—and in some instances—even encouragement of aberrant theology in the classroom, especially in the universities, and from the pulpit. The evisceration of the Catholic school system (with some notable exceptions). The promotion of "Catholicism Lite" by training at least two generations of priests to "lead from behind." So, if a bishop is interested in genuine reform and renewal, these are the areas demanding his attention.

I shall now offer some specific prescriptions—none of which is "retrograde" or "anti-Vatican II"; indeed, they are all completely consonant with the documents of the Council.

Liturgy

Eliminate altar girls, Communion-in-the-hand and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. All of these practices entered the mainstream in direct violation of liturgical law, were winked at by bishops, and then codified as normative, thus rewarding disobedience. In keeping with the recommendations of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict and Cardinal Robert Sarah, re-introduce celebrations of Holy Mass *ad orientem*, which would have a major effect on the atmosphere of worship and the mentality of the priest. Needless to say, a healthy dose of Latin and Gregorian chant is likewise in order.

The vast majority of priests under the age of forty would move in this direction tomorrow. However, they are inhibited from doing so by pastors still living in the 1960s and by chancery bureaucrats who are similarly enmired. Fidelity to the rubrics, truly sacred liturgical music, and a deep sense of the sacred are essential if we are to bring back those who have been scandalized by abuses over the long haul, abuses which have been deeply ingrained, institutionalized and normalized. That's the "zero tolerance" that is needed. Not a few good bishops are supportive of these liturgical changes but are cowed by their own bureaucracy and/or by their fellow bishops.

Catholic education

One of the most distressing disasters has been the virtual loss of two or even three generations of Catholics because of the decimation of our schools. Most of the bishops of the nineteenth century realized that without the schools, the Church would be at sea. For this reason, Pope Paul VI in 1975 **declared** that "the strength of the Church [in America] is in her schools." At the elementary and secondary level, genuine improvements have been made since the 1960s and 1970s; indeed, one

would be hard-pressed to find a Catholic school today in which outright heresy is being taught. The problem more often is a less-than-full-throated and challenging presentation of Catholic truth in all its splendor. As my own work demonstrates, there is also a renewed interest in promoting Catholic identity. So, although, in many areas, new schools are opening, why are so many others still closing?

The big elephant in the middle of the living room is that we lack children. Fifty years of either open dissent from *Humanae Vitae* or, minimally, a failure on the part of bishops and priests to teach its principles has resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of Catholic children—and schools need children to operate!

Another taboo topic is the evil of so-called public education. The public schools of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century were anti-Catholic, but they were not anti-Christian or anti-religious. We have witnessed a quantum leap in aggressive and hateful secularization. When was the last time you heard a priest or bishop state publicly that the government schools endanger the souls of children every day?

The clergy are afraid to make such a declaration for two reasons. First, because they are afraid to alienate parents who use the state schools or teachers who work in those institutions. A few years back, I was invited to preach at a parish about the importance of its school. Half-way through my homily, an entire pew got up and walked out. “Who were those people?” I asked the pastor after Mass. “The family of the local public school principal!”

The second reason for timidity in telling the truth about the government schools is clerical fear of the entrenched religious education lobby within the Church. The average DRE has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo; in all too many dioceses, their salary is commensurate with that of a Catholic school principal. Furthermore, all too many clergy—when praising Catholic schools (on all too few occasions)—feel compelled to conclude by saying, “Now, none of this should be interpreted as a critique of our wonderful religious education program!” If the religious education program is so wonderful (and none can deal adequately with the massive doses of godlessness fed to its children thirty to forty hours a week), then why should any sensible, prudent parent “waste” thousands of dollars to send a child to a Catholic school?

And how can we forget the near-total abandonment of the Hispanics in regard to our schools? That realization has made Cardinal Sean O’Malley to comment frequently that there are more black Baptists in our schools than Hispanic Catholics. For the first time in American Catholic history, a new immigrant group has not been given a Catholic education—and some can foolishly ask why more than half the Hispanic population has left the Church and why Hispanic vocations are almost as rare as hen’s teeth.

Which leads us to the financial question. In too many places, tuition is beyond the reach of the average, middle-class Catholic family. The maintenance of our schools is not the responsibility of parents who use the schools, or of parishes that have a school on their property; it is the

responsibility of the entire diocesan community. Hence, Catholic elementary and secondary schools ought to be tuition-free—as was largely the case up to the 1950s. I love to ask a very embarrassing question: How is it that most of our Catholic institutions were built by penniless immigrants but cannot be maintained by the most affluent Catholic population in the history of the Church? Our problem is not financial; it is faith—actually, the lack thereof. Even though the financial issue can be a block for some parents, we must also observe that all too many families have priorities that are out of whack. And so, once again, where is the bishop or priest who challenges parental priorities? The silence is deafening.

If the relatively small Diocese of Wichita can sponsor tuition-free schools, what is the problem with everyone else? What is stopping priests or bishops from adopting the stewardship model that has been so successful there? Is it worth pointing out that one of the effects of the Wichita school system is priestly ordinations in abundance—ten men for several years in a row? Conversely, three contiguous dioceses in the Northeast with a combined Catholic population of nearly seven million had only twelve ordinations among them this year.

Perhaps the most damning piece of data is the suburban parishes that have hundreds and even thousands of children in religious education programs but have no school (or a school that is under-subscribed). Where is the bishop to demand that the pastor open a school? In the final years of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth, Philadelphia Archbishop Patrick Ryan removed any pastor who refused to open and maintain a school; by the time of his death, he had doubled the number of schools. The current reality is an example of nonfeasance in a major key. Interestingly enough, tiny Lefebvrist parishes or small Fundamentalist Protestant communities do sponsor schools, with minuscule resources, compared to the average Catholic parish.

Clerical leadership

A mantra in the business world informs us that “personnel is policy.” The current crisis in Catholicism is precisely one of leadership, a problem that begins in priestly formation programs. It is a most unusual seminary that trains its young men to be leaders; in point of fact, instead of raising shepherds, most seminaries raise weak, little sheep—who can be “controlled” for life. Seminarians are discouraged from “thinking outside the box” because that is perceived as a threat to the institutional model. Zeal is frowned upon, confusing zealous young men with zealots. Priests are educated to cause no offense; and if they do, they face serious repercussions from the diocesan rulers or worse, get sent for “re-education” to clerical gulags.

It seems to be forgotten that Jesus didn’t end up on the cross because He made people happy; on the contrary, He landed there because He made many people very unhappy. The model for the priest (and bishop) ought not to be the Pillsbury Dough Boy or even the Infant of Prague. If you’re looking for an image of Jesus to inspire, give a glance to the *Pantokrator* in the apse of the Sistine Chapel or the **Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception**. A Jesus without the Cross is a false Jesus, producing “Catholicism Lite,” which is flaccid, ineffectual, and off-putting.

Seminarians not given leadership skills become priests without leadership skills, some of whom then become bishops without leadership skills. That results in the sad phenomenon of “sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:36). Wasn’t that why St. Paul could ask what he thought was a rhetorical question: “If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?” (1 Cor 14:8). The Church today is a victim of mixed signals from her clergy. Clarity is not only lacking; it is often studiously avoided. Cardinal Newman warned more than a century ago that no one is willing to give his life for an opinion. Yet we are awash in just that kind of “leadership—one which refuses to believe the Christian life to be a battle and warfare—and thus to present it as such.

One final difficulty in this area: Not infrequently, when a pastor does attempt to exercise his charism of governance, he is slapped down either by diocesan bureaucrats or by laity who have “stole-envy”. Is it any wonder that many priests now regularly reject pastorates? And, oh, there is one other matter: Unequal enforcement of policy. It is not unusual that when left-leaning priests do something wrong, nothing happens. On the other hand, when “conservative” priests do something that is even permitted (but not “mainstream”), they are hounded and even threatened with removal. Authority figures often exercise authority only with those they know or suppose will obey them. This incarnates the Irish proverb: “The willing horse gets flogged the most.” Which, in turn, breeds gross discontent.

Of course, a fundamental problem is the episcopate itself. No true reform of the Church can occur without a reform of the episcopate. The appointment process is terribly flawed as members of “the club” bring like-minded men into “the club.” The career path is always the same, even though Pope Francis promised a different approach: A young priest becomes a bishop’s secretary, is sent for further studies, comes back as either a seminary or chancery official. Having learned not to “rock the boat” as a seminarian, he makes that a life plan, so that when he is offered a diocese, he informs the media at his requisite initial press conference that, in fact, he has no plan—he is merely here to listen and learn. Imagine that line coming from the CEO of IBM? The board of directors would fire him on the spot. It is also disturbing to have to say that it is nearly impossible to identify a bishop who, as a priest, distinguished himself for efforts at reform of the liturgy, catechesis, priestly life or Catholic education. “Safe” candidates are the ones who “make it.” With such criteria, no Father of the Church would have been admitted to the episcopal college.

Another problematic dimension of the episcopate is the transfer of bishops from diocese to diocese. This aids and abets careerism, whereby a bishop can regard his present diocese as a mere stepping stone to something “bigger and better.” Aside from being a distinctly unevangelical mindset, it also causes him to decide to do little to effect change or allows for clergy and laity to “wait out” the bishop, resisting any program he might promote.

A sadly humorous development over the past half-century is bishops (and by extension, pastors) who present themselves as CEOs, rather than successors of the apostles. Adopting that model is not only anti-theological; it is laughable. Most bishops don’t have a clue about how to be CEOs, and that is demonstrated on a regular basis by bad business decisions and even worse personnel decisions.

Given the sad statistics of the plummeting of “market share” and the concomitant loss of income, they would be handed a “no-confidence” vote by a corporate board and invited to hand in their resignations. That applies equally to pastors, who waste untold hours on useless meetings with lay hangers-on, who garner out-of-control salaries.

Bishops of courage and vision (unconcerned about public opinion within the Church or society) will foster such virtues in their priests; they will also seek out young men to form into priests after their mind and heart, which is to say, priests after the mind and heart of the Great High Priest.

Faith and conviction

These are the weighty matters which have been neglected and which are most responsible for the loss of Catholics to other denominations or to no faith at all. If the clergy attended to these matters, a clear and attractive signal would be given that we are not simply a country club with a cross on top. Nothing of what I have suggested endangers faith or morals, nor any change of church law; indeed, everything I have highlighted enforces faith, morals and existing church law.

Bishops and priests need to be encouraged to move in the direction of faith and conviction. The laity need to “step up” and take a mature role in the life of the Church, cognizant of the fact that no reform in the history of the Church has ever taken place from the top down; it has always been from the bottom up. Thus, Canon 212. §3 explicitly speaks about an important task of the lay faithful:

According to the knowledge, competence, and prestige which they possess, they have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals, with reverence toward their pastors, and attentive to common advantage and the dignity of persons.

When the Church’s pastors—bishops and priests alike—fail to fulfill their responsibilities, even after issues are brought to their attention, the laity should vote with their feet (go to parishes and other Catholic institutions that are faithful) and with their pocketbooks (don’t support weak or unfaithful projects and ministers). This should not be taken as a call to a revival of the lay trusteeism of a former sad era in American Catholicism; on the contrary, it is a summons for clergy and laity to take a strong, hard look at the mess of the past fifty years and to join forces to bring about the renewal envisioned by the Second Vatican Council but which died aborning.

About Peter M.J. Stravinskis > [73 Articles](#)

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