

An 11th-Century Scandal

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Mark Twain said that history does not repeat itself, but it rhymes. The sexual abuse scandal that continues to echo throughout the church in America, as evidenced by the recent controversy over the decision to allow Cardinal Bernard Law to preside at one of the memorial Masses for Pope John Paul II in Rome after his death on April 2, bears a striking resemblance to a series of crises that roiled the church in the Middle Ages, particularly in the 11th century. Then, as now, the higher clergy seemed to be completely unaware of the damage that scandalous sexual behavior was causing to both the victims and the community as a whole.

Problems in the 11th century were much more widespread than in our own. Priests and bishops were unaccountable to secular law, and abusive behavior extended beyond children to include adults. Many had concubines, or live-in prostitutes, who were completely at the mercy of their clerical patrons. Some bishops used their authority over the clergy to compel priests into acts of sodomy, as well.

But one cardinal, Peter Damian, was willing to address the abuse publicly, and he legitimated initiatives on the part of the laity to punish clerical offenders. Much of Damian's analysis of the root causes of sexual abuse by members of the clergy is applicable to our own situation.

Peter Damian (1007-72), later canonized and declared a doctor of the church, learned about the destructive power of evil early in his life. Because his mother thought her family could not support another child, she refused to feed him as an infant. Only the intervention of the concubine of the local priest saved the baby's life.

As a child in Ravenna, Italy, Peter Damian lost both of his parents. His medieval biographer claimed that he spent time with an abusive older brother before another brother, who was archpriest of Ravenna, took him in and saw to his education. In the diocesan cathedral school he attended, Damian became increasingly scandalized by the behavior of both students and professors. Rather than pursue a lucrative career as a professor and cleric, he chose to enter monastic life and devoted himself to the work of reforming the church. His accomplishments eventually included the creation of the process for electing popes.

Complaints from Damian about the church's unwillingness to confront the sexual behavior of the clergy, however, met with inaction. In 1049 Damian wrote to Pope Leo IX (1048-54) about the cancer of sexual abuse that was spreading through the church: boys and adolescents were being forced and seduced into performing acts of sodomy by priests and bishops; there were problems with sexual harassment among higher clergy; and many members of the clergy were keeping concubines.

Peter Damian warned the pope that bishops were contributing to the growth of the problem by their failure to enforce church discipline. Members of the clergy who sexually abused others demonstrated by their actions that they had no fear of God, Damian argued. Such men were afraid only of being despised by the people and of losing their positions; they would do anything to avoid being stripped of their clerical status and identity. Knowing that their bishop would not remove them from their office and ministry gave such men license to continue in their wickedness. Thus in failing to discipline abusive members of the clergy, the bishops stood as guilty as the men who committed the crimes.

Convinced that it was the lack of episcopal leadership that was causing the sexual abuse scandal in his day, Damian offered this admonition:

Listen, you do-nothing superiors of clerics and priests. Listen, and even though you feel sure of yourselves, tremble at the thought that you are partners in the guilt of others; those, I mean, who wink at the sins of their subjects that need correction and who by ill-considered silence allow them license to sin. Listen, I say, and be shrewd enough to understand that all of you alike "are deserving of death, that is, not only those who do such things, but also they who approve those who practice them" (Rom 1:32).

Drawing on the model that the bishop or priest is married to the church, Damian accused both those who sexually abused the people under their care and those who allowed such abuse to take place with the crime of spiritual incest. But whereas biological parents who committed incest were subject in the Middle Ages to excommunication and exile, Damian felt that bishops who betrayed their spiritual children deserved a harsher penalty. Their betrayal ran deeper.

Unfortunately, Pope Leo IX disagreed with Peter Damian's analysis of the problem of clerical sexual abuse. He was willing to punish clerics who committed acts of anal intercourse with boys and adolescents, but he minimized the punishment of clerics who performed other sexual acts with children and adults of both sexes.

Shortly after the election of Pope Nicholas II (1058-61), Damian called attention to the issue again. His complaint to the new pope has a modern sound: "Indeed, in our day the genuine custom of the Roman Church seems to be observed in this way, that regarding other practices of ecclesiastical discipline, a proper investigation is held; but a prudent silence is maintained concerning clerical sexuality for fear of insults from the laity." Damian urged the pope to bring the issue out into the open and to punish both the sexual offenders and the bishops who failed in their duty to punish and to depose sexual predators. He complained that occasionally priests were disciplined, "but with bishops we pay our reverence with silent tolerance, which is totally absurd."

According to Damian, punishing those who hold positions of authority and oversight is the only way to restore credibility in times of scandal. Damian recounted the story of the Old Testament priest Phinehas. Finding one of the most prominent Israelite chiefs having sex with a Midianite prostitute, Phinehas exposed the pair to the people as they were having sex and skewered them with a spear. By this action Phinehas imitated God's justice and sent the message that the laws would be enforced.

Damian notes that most of the Israelite men around Phinehas were consorting with prostitutes. Yet Phinehas struck down only the most powerful and socially prominent offenders. The conclusion to be drawn is that the powerful should be held to a higher standard. Thus in Nm 25:4, when Eli failed to punish his son, God struck him down. His inaction brought the priesthood into disrepute. Likewise, Damian asserted, when the magisterial hierarchy fails to enforce discipline, they undermine the legitimacy of the ecclesiastical office.

Eli was stripped of his power, privileges and wealth. Damian believed the bishops should also lose the trappings of episcopal office. He predicted that God's agents for stripping the bishops of the wealth and privileges they had taken for granted would be the laity. The laity had granted the clergy temporal authority and wealth; so when the clergy failed in their spiritual mission, it was the laity that had the duty to take these things back, in collaboration with reformers in the clergy and religious orders.

Women held the lowest place in the church during the 11th century, but Damian believed that they too had a duty to correct the clergy. Their inclusion by him in the process of reforming even the highest members of the clergy illustrates Damian's view that all in the church have the duty to correct their "superiors" publicly when they see serious sin or deviations from tradition. Virtue and power were not determined by a person's sex. Rather, virtue is a gift from God.

So in 1064 Damian wrote to Duchess Adelaide of Turin, urging her to use her political power to address problems related to clerical sexual abuse. Using language that may seem offensive to us, he praised God for making Adelaide as strong as a man and drew upon a host of biblical citations, including the examples of Deborah, Jael, Judith, Esther, Abigail and other women who corrected and punished weak, evil or fearful men, to justify her action in reforming the male members of the clergy. The scriptural stories proved that God sometimes chooses women to be instruments of “a more glorious triumph.”

At the very least, Damian’s story calls into question the practice of covering up sins as a means to avoid scandal. It also provides a road map for church leaders to recover credibility by disciplining the bishops who have enabled sexual predators to damage the most vulnerable members of the people of God. And if the magisterial hierarchy proves unable to reform itself on these matters, St. Peter Damian offers a Catholic model of collaborative reform that includes the laity, religious, deacons and priests. Most important, his story shows that we have overcome sexual abuse scandals in the past by upholding faithfulness to our tradition and maintaining vigilance against corruption.

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