

2-1-08 - Book Review – THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED (Paved with the Skulls of Bishops)

By Richard John Neuhaus, First Things

That's a grim metaphor, maybe too grim. It's from an endorsement of Philip F. Lawler's book, to be published next week, *The Faithful Departed: The Collapse of Boston's Catholic Culture* (Encounter). The endorsement is by Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz of Lincoln, Nebraska, who says: "Lawler's masterful analysis is sobering and provides an urgent incentive for authentic renewal. If St. John Chrysostom is correct when he says that the road to hell is paved with the skulls of bishops, it would be a mistake for any bishop or priest to miss this book." Bishop Bruskewitz and Philip Lawler obviously think that Chrysostom was correct.

One might suggest that the book is really two books, one about what has happened to Catholicism in Boston and the other about the sex abuse scandal in the Church in America. Boston is the synecdoche for the telling of the much larger story. It is admittedly a very big synecdoche, but much of the book takes leave of Boston altogether in order to examine what happened and is still happening in dioceses around the country.

The account offered is devastating and the blame is clearly laid at the door of the American bishops. Lawler is outraged, but, to his credit, his outrage is controlled. His judgments are sometimes harsh, but, in view of the evidence, they could hardly be otherwise. Throughout, one senses his palpable love for the Church, his solid orthodoxy, and his yearning for spiritual and moral renewal. Lawler was long the editor of *Catholic World Report* and for several years, under Bernard Cardinal Law, editor of the archdiocesan newspaper *The Pilot*. His treatment of Law, who was compelled to resign as Archbishop of Boston in December 2002, strikes one as an exemplary exercise in trying to put the best possible construction on the indisputably indefensible.

"The thesis of this book," writes Lawler, "is that the sex abuse scandal in American Catholicism was not only aggravated but actually caused by the willingness of church leaders to sacrifice the essential for the inessential; to build up the human institution even to the detriment of the divine mandate." Bishops again and again responded to the crisis as institutional managers, employing public relations stratagems to evade, deceive, and distract attention from their own responsibility. Lawler several times invokes the terse observation of St. Augustine, "God does not need my lie." The bishops lied, says Lawler, and many of them are still lying. This is offered not as an accusation but as a conclusion that he believes is compelled by the evidence.

"The first aspect of the scandal, the sexual abuse of children, has been acknowledged and addressed," Lawler writes. "The second aspect, the rampant homosexuality among Catholic priests, has been acknowledged but not addressed, and later even denied. . . . The third aspect of the scandal has never even been acknowledged by American church leaders." The third aspect, the malfeasance of bishops, "is today the most serious of all."

Over 80 percent of reported cases of abuse were with teenage boys. That does not include, of course, uncounted instances of sex with men who are of age, since those cases, as several bishops have opined, constitute no problem for the Church, meaning no legal or financial problem. Spiritual and moral problems apparently do not enter the equation. The name for this is corruption. Lawler quotes at length an article, published in 2000, before the scandal in Boston made national headlines, by Father Paul Shaughnessy:

If we examine any trust-invested agency at any given point in its history, whether that agency be a police force, a military unit, or a religious community, we might find that, say, out of every hundred men, five are scoundrels, five are heroes, and the rest are neither one nor the other: ordinarily upright men who live with a mixture of moral timidity and moral courage. When the institution is healthy, the gutsier few set the overall tone, and the less courageous but tractable majority works along with these men to minimize misbehavior; more importantly, the healthy institution is able to identify its own rotten apples and remove them before the institution itself is enfeebled. However, when an institution becomes corrupt, its guiding spirit mysteriously shifts away from the morally intrepid few, and with that shift the institution becomes more interested in protecting itself against outside critics than in tackling the problem members that subvert its mission. For example, when we say a certain police force is corrupt, we don't usually mean that every policeman is on the take—perhaps only five out of a hundred actually accept bribes—rather we mean that this police force can no

longer diagnose and cure its own problems, and consequently, if reform is to take place, an outside agency has to be brought in to make the changes.

Lawler adds: “Homosexual influence within the American clergy was not in itself the cause of the sex abuse crisis. The corruption wrought by that influence was a more important factor.” He very gingerly addresses a theory proposed by a number of commentators on the crisis, namely, that bishops engaged in cover-ups and other deceptions because they were threatened with homosexual blackmail. He cites a number of instances in which this appears to be the case and bishops were permitted to resign when their misdeeds could no longer be denied. “The blackmail hypothesis,” he writes, “provides a logical explanation for behavior that is otherwise inexplicable: the bishops’ willingness to risk the welfare of the faithful and their own reputations in order to protect abusive priests.”

The subject of the sex abuse crisis lends itself to sensationalism, but Lawler strives to resist that temptation. His is a generally sober account of a crisis that brought to light a larger pattern of episcopal fecklessness in the Church’s accommodation to, and complicity in, the forces of cultural decadence. As readers know, the sex abuse crisis—its sources and ramifications—is a subject regularly addressed in *First Things*. And I will likely be returning to *The Faithful Departed* in the magazine.

I differ with Philip Lawler on a number of points in his telling of the story. For instance, his treatment of the 1940s conflict between Father Leonard Feeney and Cardinal Cushing is, I think, too uncritical of Father Feeney. Feeney was out of line in the way he pressed the claim that only Catholics can be saved. And, despite his critique of cultural accommodationism, Lawler betrays a nostalgia for the old Boston Catholicism that has “collapsed,” even though it was, in its way, a massive instance of cultural accommodation, albeit an institutionally successful instance.

Those and other caveats aside, *The Faithful Departed* is the best book-length treatment of the sex abuse crisis, its origins and larger implications, published to date.