

Church must protect youth if it wants to attract more

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Chicago Sun Times

April 14, 2005

<http://www.suntimes.com/output/greeley/cst-nws-greeley14.html>

"Sex abuse, as terrible as it is," an American priest said here the other day, "ought not to be part of the media coverage of the conclave. It's an American issue and only a small part of the problems of the universal church."

I figured my ears must be playing tricks again. Sexual abuse of one sort or another is, alas, a universal problem. It has existed always and everywhere. Sexual abuse of children by priests happens wherever there are priests and children. It has become a public problem in the United States (and other countries like Britain and Ireland where common law prevails) only because the American media and the American legal system have forced the church to stop hiding it. For which I say thank God.

The crisis in the United States has revealed dangerous weaknesses in the structure and culture of the Catholic Church which exist everywhere and to which the next pope must pay serious attention (not that I expect that he will). How can the cardinal electors speak about finding a pope who will appeal to young people if the pope is unwilling to impose those reforms that will protect young people from abuse?

The current structures of Catholicism do not provide a system of responsibility and accountability for bishops -- save for the ad hoc system existing now in the United States. Only the hapless Cardinal Bernard Law has been forced out of office (and is viewed here as a victim of the American media and activist laity) for reassigning abusive priests. The existing clerical culture insists on the need to protect priests, almost at all costs. If the founder of the Legionaries of Christ were an American priest he would have been removed from active duty, given the strength of the allegations against him. Here he was a personal friend of the late pope and immune from serious investigation.

#### Priorities skewed

A very stern Catholic dictum says *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda*: The church must always be reformed. It is an absolutely essential rule for an organization that claims a divine mission but is made up of frail, limited, weak human beings, none more frail, limited or weak than its leaders. Reforms of secrecy, accountability and clerical culture that permit the abuse of women and children all over the world ought to be near the top of the list in the current reform agenda.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the head of the Congregation for the Defense of the Faith and dean of the College of Cardinals (and apparently the one who imposed secrecy on the cardinals even before the conclave began) has spoken of the "avalanche of clerical decadence" after Vatican Council II. He meant the resignation of priests to marry. There is far greater decadence in the sexual abuse of children by priests (abuse that is not caused by celibacy and exists in all denominations). I have not heard that Cardinal Ratzinger has fulminated against it. Yet it has done far more harm to the church than all the heretical books that he has condemned.

Unfortunately reform, however theoretically unarguable and practically essential, always encounters opposition from the vested interests of those who are powerful and have the most to lose. Reform of secrecy and accountability threatens to limit the power of both bishops and priests. The cardinal electors are bishops and priests. With the exception of some Americans who have had to cope with the abuse problem, I doubt that this kind of reform will be on the minds of many who go into conclave on Monday afternoon.

Not going away

The pathetic demonstration outside St. Peter's by members of the activist group SNAP against Cardinal Law earlier this week ought to be a warning to the electors. It was a small sign on the horizon that will eventually turn into a perfect storm unless drastic reform begins immediately. The SNAP people are very angry, as they have reason to be. The anger of American Catholics on abuse is not just another crazy American fad. It could sweep the world like a forest fire before there is another conclave.

At least spare us the hypocrisy of voting for a pope who will appeal to young people unless you are willing to elect a pope who will protect young people.