

Fix the church in the name of hope
By James E. Post, 2/28/2004

THE PUBLICATION of the study of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church by the National Review Board, a group of Catholic lay leaders appointed by the nation's bishops, is a staggering indictment of a cancerous culture. The cost of the clericalism that characterizes the modern Catholic Church has now been measured in the lives of children who were abused (10,667), in the perpetrators of abuse (more than 4,392), and in the dollars spent to settle cases and conceal the facts (three-quarters of a billion dollars). In the face of these statistics, we are right to ask whether reform of the Catholic Church is still possible or whether it is a lost cause?

Being a hope-filled people, we are inclined to view our bishops as a group of shellshocked men, who are now resolved to do the right thing by cleaning up the mess they created and perpetuated. But hope is not a method, and a method to fix the Catholic Church is desperately needed.

Ultimately, the Vatican must be called to account for the sins of "our fathers," as author David France has so aptly named them in his new book. There are ample signs that Vatican officials have known and tolerated such scandal. The Vatican must act now.

The Catholic Church is a lost cause if the pope or his successor fails to act on this issue. What, then, is to be done?

The pope must meet with an international delegation of survivors of sexual abuse. Clergy sexual abuse is found throughout the universal church; it must be acknowledged by the pontiff, as he has acknowledged other "sins of the church" regarding intolerance toward Jews. Nothing less than a face-to-face meeting with abuse victims will send the message that the church is ready to atone for its past sins.

Bishops must be removed and resignations accepted. The Vatican has never issued a public reprimand of those bishops who engaged in sexual misconduct (Archbishop Weakland of Milwaukee, Bishop O'Connell of Palm Beach) or those bishops who covered up -- sometimes through outright lies -- the truth.

Even plea bargains with public prosecutors (Bishop O'Brien in Arizona, Bishop McCormack in New Hampshire, Archbishop Pilarczyk in Cincinnati) have not produced action by the Vatican. It is time for the Vatican to act on the information it possesses and use its deep knowledge of what has transpired to press for meaningful and substantial change in a near-criminal culture.

Atonement is called for. Words without acts are not sufficient. In the Charter enacted in 2002, the bishops apologized for their role in the scandal and took full responsibility for it. However, their actions since have not lived up to their words -- survivors are discouraged and lay Catholics are dispirited. The bishops must demonstrate their vocation's humility by atoning in substantive ways for their failed leadership.

One of those ways is to authorize an independent study that documents the bishops' complicity in the transfer of known abusive priests or those who had credible allegations against them. This report would fill the gaping hole of the John Jay study and would acknowledge their responsibility in one of the most preventable and infamous tragedies of our time.

An international truth and reconciliation commission must be established. Truth and reconciliation processes have helped to bring healing to people across the world by shining a light on past abuses. Catholics across the world deserve no less from their leaders.

When is a cause truly lost? When there is no hope, no energy to act, no people who believe that the truth must be told.

Fortunately, that is not the case with Catholicism -- there are individuals in the laity and in the survivor community who are fighting for the truth and to take responsibility for their church. Lay Catholics have found their voice in Voice of the Faithful and they are using that voice to call for accountability and transparency from church leadership. We are also calling for meaningful lay involvement in our church.

We call on all Catholics to be a witness to hope. Act now. Do not let another day go by without saying -- through words and deeds -- that the Catholic Church is not a lost cause. We can and must do better. This is our moment and we are its keepers. Each of us must ask, "How will I answer?"

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