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Keeping the collar through the crisis  
By The Rev. James Martin, SJ  
March 8, 2004

NEW YORK - Lately, being a Catholic has grown increasingly difficult. So has being a priest.

The recent release of the long-awaited report on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church made for especially grim reading. The first independent investigation of abuse in the American church, supervised by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, concluded that 4 percent of U.S. priests - that is, 4,392 clergy members - were accused of abuse between 1950 and 2002. In the ordination class of 1970, one of every 10 priests faced at least one accusation.

While the data represent only those accused (the number of substantiated claims is lower) and are difficult to compare with other populations (the Catholic Church is the only major organization or profession to release such figures), the extent of the crimes is nonetheless appalling.

Since the crisis exploded in January 2002, I often have been asked how I can represent an institution that is so obviously flawed. It is a fair challenge, recalling the Rev. Andrew Greeley's trenchant observation that the question today is not why so many Catholics leave the church, but why they stay.

I stay in the priesthood for a host of reasons.

The first is that I freely made a vow to God to remain a priest for the rest of my life.

The second reason is that, like anyone who reads church history, I am not surprised by the presence of scandal and even grave sin in the church. The church, while giving the world figures such as Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Ávila, Pope John XXIII and Mother Teresa, has also served up its share of fools and villains, some of whom held high offices.

St. Peter, by tradition the first pope, sinned famously - denying Jesus three times before the crucifixion. Centuries later, Renaissance popes such as Alexander VI (of the rapacious Borgia family) and Paul III were widely known to have granted ecclesiastical offices to their illegitimate children and grandchildren.

While historical precedent does not excuse the contemporary crimes of abusive priests or the sins of those bishops who reassigned them, it stands as a stark reminder that the institutional church is made up of sinful men and women, and is therefore constantly in need of change and reform. This theological model of the church was underlined by the Second Vatican Council in its 1963 "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," a key document of the reforming council: "The Church ... at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal."

Yet it is insufficient simply to admit sinfulness. Catholic theology has long held that a penitent also needs to show a "firm purpose of amendment" and willingness to undergo penance.

There are some signs that penance and reconciliation in the American Catholic Church have already begun.

In July, the newly appointed archbishop of Boston, Sean P. O'Malley, declared his desire to work for reconciliation, regardless of the cost. "People's lives are more important than money," he said simply.

Archbishop O'Malley's subsequent swift resolution of legal settlements, his willingness to sell the archbishop's palatial residence and his outreach to victims of clerical abuse demonstrate that it is possible to work for reconciliation with compassion, intelligence and even speed. January's report from the National Review Board, which showed that 90 percent of all dioceses are now fully compliant with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People implemented by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, was also a largely positive sign.

In other words, I remain hopeful. Still, even if I failed to discern signs of hope, I could no more leave the priesthood or the church in a time of crisis than I could abandon my own family during a difficult time.

Finally, I remain in the priesthood for a simpler reason. I love being a priest and believe that it is where I am meant to be. It is a privilege to celebrate Mass, hear confessions, marry couples, baptize children and anoint the sick. As the Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote around the time of his ordination in 1949, I feel that the priesthood is "the one great secret for which I had been born."

During the ordination Mass for priests, the presiding bishop addresses the newly ordained. "Let the example of your life," he says, "attract the followers of Christ, so that by words and actions you may build up the house which is God's church."

That's a good goal for priests during this painful period in church history, and over the next few decades I hope to help rebuild a church desperately in need of repair.

The Rev. James Martin is a Jesuit priest and associate editor of *America*, a national Catholic magazine.