

March 17, 2007 - Priest scandal: Hope of healing seems years off
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As the Roman Catholic Church - locally, nationally and globally - continues to struggle with the mess of the pedophilia scandal, most observers can do little more than shrug their shoulders, roll their eyes and ask, "Why, why . . . "

Sexual abuse of children, the helpless and defenseless, is nothing new. It dates to humankind's beginning and will last to the planet's end. It is a part of human nature's black side, whether in matters sexual or otherwise, that the powerful will take advantage of the weak.

That the experience is common and ages old does not temper its evil or excuse its perpetrators, and there is something additionally perverse that men of the cloth, to whom has been entrusted much by parishioners and congregants, would surreptitiously and selfishly abuse innocent children.

The problem is not limited to Roman Catholics, as we continue to learn. Abuse is an equal-opportunity sin shared by many. But it seems particularly egregious when it is manifested in the denomination that has for so long held itself as the original, the model, the one, the true and the chaste.

The clerics' actions were bad enough, but to have discovered in recent years what probably has been a centuries-old practice - of bishops shifting this or that priest from a parish to another one or to another diocese and in effect giving him a fresh field to plunder - has been the keenest disappointment of all. It's not (necessarily) that the prelates-administrators were directly to blame for the abuse, but they became complicit, enabling and ultimately sponsoring.

They and their dioceses, like the errant priests, are caught up in the horrible morass brought about by a few bad men.

The number of men answering the call to priesthood has diminished and pastorless parishes are being shut down and consolidated as priests who remain age, die and cannot be replaced. Dioceses are assailed by lawsuits - most, but not all, justified - as victims seek to punish the wrongdoers and their enablers in lawsuits that are costing more than a billion dollars, and forcing some dioceses to declare bankruptcy in an attempt to shield themselves from extensive and expensive settlements.

The images of the priesthood and the episcopacy have been diminished, a tragedy when one considers that the overwhelming majority of men serving parishes and dioceses are in fact of indisputable moral integrity and do not deserve the scorn earned by the evildoers.

But the situation is what it is: a church that for decades will struggle to regain its stature and recover from the enormous financial burden caused by a few; an episcopacy damaged by its inability to recognize absolute evil and deal with it honestly and effectively. Whether administrators genuinely believed - despite long-standing psychological advice that abusers probably can't be cured - that retreats, counseling and prayer could fix the problem, or whether there simply was a "good ol' boy" network that aimed to protect itself at the expense of the victims, or both, is now of little import.

The bottom line is that the church, which couldn't keep itself and its moral theology out of its members' bedrooms and sex lives, was being assailed and double-dealt by a relatively few hypocrites and sickos who also couldn't keep out of bedrooms, albeit in a different sense.

As new revelations and allegations emerge; as lawyers battle lawyers to rein in or increase settlement costs; as insurance companies and dioceses fight to determine who pays what; as victims continue to nurse the scars and nightmares of abuse; as false claims are added by nonvictims and greedy lawyers - those who simply want to cash in - the scandal rolls on, almost endlessly, always shamefully.

While faith in general thrives on hope - the assurance that better things lie ahead - that virtue is strained these days and is put to an enormous test.

It will take continued work, immense patience and both healthy and realistic reaction to eventually right the ship that came close to sinking itself over centuries, even though the disaster became newsworthy only in recent years.