

1-1-08 - Slow healing in the Catholic church

BOSTON GLOBE, By Robert C. Bordone and Robert J. Bowers

AS THE CATHOLIC community continues the difficult process of healing and reconciliation in the wake of abuse scandals, church closings, and critical social issues, the decision by Pope Benedict XVI to avoid Boston on his US visit next spring is a missed opportunity. A face-to-face meeting with Catholics in Boston would have signaled a desire to begin honest and open dialogue on the hurt, anger, separation, and alienation many still feel.

If history teaches us anything, it is that avoidance of conflict rarely leads to reconciliation or healing. Failing to face those on the opposite side of the breach tends to breed more resentment, bitterness, and misunderstanding. The resulting alienation poisons people's hearts, stunting generosity and feeding cynicism that leads to hopelessness.

Years after the revelation of clergy sexual abuse, the Catholic community struggles to understand how such crimes could have happened - and been tolerated by the church hierarchy. In the wake of the Boston Archdiocese's church closings and hurtful statements made during the gay-marriage debate, the Roman Catholic Church finds itself at a crossroads. The leadership of the church and those aggrieved by it can continue down the current path - a slow but constant parting of ways. They can pretend that the hurt never happened, clinging desperately to the fallacious notion that "time heals all wounds."

There is another way. Church leaders and Catholics on all sides of the divide can choose to engage with each other openly, honestly, and courageously.

They can examine the hurt and listen to the aggrieved, in order to begin the too-long-delayed process of healing and reparation. It is the only way to mend the breach.

Examples abound of people coming together across bitter divides through such a deliberate, difficult, but liberating process. After the brutal injustice of apartheid, the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa brought the victims and perpetrators of that evil system together to find ways to move forward.

Closer to home, criminals and victims are brought together by groups such as the Restorative Circles in Concord and the peacemaking circles led by ROCA Inc. in Chelsea. These gatherings convene criminal offenders, their victims, and members of the community to examine what can be done to repair the harm. The Public Conversations Project of Watertown enables conversation among conflicting groups over tough social issues, including facilitating dialogue between pro-life and pro-choice forces.

The Catholic Church should look to these examples and take similar steps to heal its own deep rifts.

Over the past 18 months, we have worked to develop a model for genuine listening, open dialogue, and honest exchange that can help Catholics move from bitterness and resentment to renewed understanding, from pain and separation toward peace and reconciliation. The Office of Outreach and Reconciliation at the Paulist Center has worked with teams of students at the Harvard Law School Negotiation and Mediation Clinical Program to bring together church leaders and disaffected Catholics to discuss the hurt, broken trust, and intense disappointment felt by many of the faithful.

The project aims to combine the solutions-oriented approach of truth commissions with the best spirit of open, facilitated dialogue. Participants agree to be respectful of each other, while at the same time vowing to speak truths that can be hard for others to hear. The project presents a hopeful path forward, and has already enjoyed the support of a cross-section of Catholic constituencies, including the vicar general of the Boston Archdiocese, Father Richard Erikson, and other members of Cardinal Sean O'Malley's cabinet.

The creation of this reconciliation program is a valuable first step toward reconciliation. The leadership of the church - including the cardinal - along with Catholics who feel the most alienated, should take the next step and join in these dialogues.

Hope is found in active listening and active participation, not in avoidance and recrimination. Only when we can engage one another, unafraid of what needs to be said and must be heard, can we open the pathway to peace and reconciliation. Then, perhaps one day, we all might approach true forgiveness, and live the peace and justice sought by all of us who call ourselves Catholic.

Robert C. Bordone is the Thaddeus R. Beal Assistant Clinical Professor of Law at Harvard Law School and director of the Harvard Negotiation and Mediation Clinical Program. The Rev. Robert J. Bowers serves as consultant for Outreach and Reconciliation at the Paulist Center of Boston.
