

7-24-08 - THE DISHONORING OF MY REGIMENT!

By Msgr Harry Byrne, J.C.D., <http://www.harryjbyrne.blogspot.com/>

My formerly honored regiment of Catholic priests has been disgraced by an infiltration of pedophiles into its ranks. I and my colleagues bear that dark shadow to this day. It's cause: the failure of many bishops to obey Canon 1395. Yes, it's that simple! The canon orders punishment for a priest who sexually abuses a minor. Punishment, not therapy! Much less secret reassignment with damage to more children! Furthermore, no bishop has been punished by his superiors, as required by Canon 1389, for failure to enforce Canon 1395. Regardless of good intentions, bishops and their superiors are responsible for the effects of what they do or fail to do under their job descriptions. A tiny minority of priests abused children; an estimated two thirds of the nation's bishops secretly reassigned abusers.

Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessor, John Paul II have, on their visits here, apologized for this shameful abuse. But neither has shown that he understands the problem. If a problem is not understood, it cannot be solved. Both popes see the problem residing in individual priests. No finger is pointed at a bishop. Benedict in Australia recently declared, "I ask all of you to support and assist your bishops in combating this evil". Sorry! Benedict has it backwards. He should ask the bishops to listen to and work with the laity. They understand the source of the problem; our bishops, for the most part, do not! In his trip to the US, Benedict on April 15, 2008 apologized for the pain caused by the sexual abuse phenomenon. He declared that it had "been badly handled". Use of the passive voice enabled him to avoid saying by whom it had been badly handled.

John Paul II also seems to have had it backwards. On April 23, 2002, addressing the US cardinals, who had been summoned to Rome, he spoke of "how the Church will help society to understand and deal with the crisis". Its arrogance, unintended as it may be, betrays the depth of his misunderstanding: it was society through its media, district attorneys, and trial lawyers that had forced the Church to face its own problem! Later he would reward Cardinal Bernard Law, driven from Boston by his priests and people as poster-boy for those bishops reassigning abusers, to a prestigious church in Rome, with a six-figure salary, and seats on nine governing commissions!

John Paul spoke of "the great harm done by some priests...". Regarding their superiors, he said, "...many are offended at the way in which the Church's leaders ARE PERCEIVED to have acted...". In the Pope's mind, in the clericalism cast of mind, he and bishops are immunized from direct criticism. John Paul then proceeded to call for "a purification of the entire Catholic community". Pardon me, please! Do not dare to try to deflect blame on the Catholic community. It belongs on the few miscreant priests and the many miscreant bishops. It is these latter who have been judged responsible, not just by the press, but by our civil courts and judicial system to the tune of \$2 billion, not the bishops' own money, but the contributions of the faithful!

The clerical mentality - trying constantly to project an ideal, even if false, image of Church - is the underlying cause of thousands of young people damaged, \$2 billion shot,

three dioceses bankrupted, and now, in the latest phase, innocent priests becoming victims of allegations of incidents two or three decades past, inadequately investigated by their bishops.

The US Bishops' Dallas Charter has been a great success in its programs to protect children by vetting personnel and developing educational and awareness programs. As to its provisions to remove allegedly abusive priests, it has been severely criticized by the bishops' own National Review Board, Cardinal Avery Dulles, SJ and eminent canonists for its lack of proportionality - a pat on the bottom treated equally as serial rape, the "one strike, you're out" rule, and the abandonment of any statute of limitations. The bishop is constituted arresting officer, prosecutor, judge, and appellant bench - an unworkable combination of conflicting roles. Many instances of innocent priests being removed from ministry are now surfacing. Appeals to the US Conference of Bishops have been made, without success, to revisit and amend the Charter's flawed, purportedly judicial structure. Do the bishops fear that the Church would appear to victims' groups and the public as backing off its initial determination to reform? If so, here again, clericalism's cast of mind puts a desirable Church image ahead of the reality of truth and justice.

The Church will begin to solve its problems and resolve its tensions, when, and only when, clericalism and its adherents reverse priorities and place truth and justice ahead of institutional image.

Monsignor Harry J. Byrne J.C.D., a retired priest, is a former Chancellor of the Archdiocese of New York.