

The worse sin: Powerful who look other way

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The abuse of power in high office is infinitely more immoral and ultimately more dangerous than the torture of prisoners or even the abuse of children.

The reality that those who so abuse power often escape responsibility for the suffering caused on their watch is even more immoral and far more dangerous.

Sadly, both church and state have that in common. The latest grim illustration is the prisoner abuse scandal in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and the official "opinions" from on high that all but legalize it. Alberto Gonzales, at the time White House counsel, together with former Attorney General and devout Christian John Ashcroft are at the heart of that moral quagmire.

They decided that Geneva Convention protections did not apply to those waging a war of terror. That inhumane decision opened the gates to the abuse of prisoners and the violation of their fundamental human rights. The decision made a mockery of common decency.

To be sure, people "on the ground" who commit atrocities should be held accountable. The powerful men who make it possible, however, are the greater culprits. They have been rewarded. Gonzales was sworn in as attorney general last week.

There is a familiar ring to this.

Bernard Cardinal Law was never held responsible for the sexual predators he knowingly foisted on his people in the Archdiocese of Boston. He became the dubious icon of those irresponsible bishops who knew pedophiles haunted their dioceses and did little to stop them. Recently convicted child molester and priest Paul Shanley is exhibit A.

Public outrage finally brought about a reform movement. The church is trying to prevent further abuse and be responsible to victims. Abusing priests have been disciplined. Few, if any, bishops have been held accountable. Law did resign, but moved to Rome and continues as a trusted counselor to the pope.

Jesus quickly forgave the common people who erred, but he railed relentlessly against those in authority who abused their power.

Both Law and Gonzales may be able men. Still, each one stumbled badly over the intoxicating aroma of power and the arrogance it spawns. One allowed sexual abuse of youngsters to flourish. The other allowed human beings to be treated maliciously. They are far more culpable than the priests and soldiers who committed the crimes.

Institutions lose all authenticity and trust when their leaders are not held accountable.

Both church and state face that sad dilemma.