

A Crisis—but Not of Faith

Catholics must not let scandals in the Church overshadow their trust in Christian teaching

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In the ancient creed recited at Mass on Sundays, Catholics affirm their belief in “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” It’s not difficult to imagine hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Catholics in the U.S. choking on that second adjective over the past several months.

Grisly allegations of sexually abusive clergy in Chile, Honduras, Ireland, Great Britain, Australia and the U.S.; the former cardinal-archbishop of Washington unmasked as a serial sexual predator specializing in the degradation of seminarians under his authority; clueless and bureaucratic responses to these crimes from some bishops seemingly incapable of sharing the rage being expressed by their people; unprecedented charges of inattention to sexual abuse against a sitting pope, first leveled by furious lay Catholics in Chile and then by a retired Vatican diplomat; stonewalling in Rome; unhinged polemics across the spectrum of Catholic opinion: Where is the holiness of the Church in all of this?

Little wonder, then, that some of my fellow-Catholics have taken to the internet and the op-ed pages, not just to condemn gross failures of Catholic leadership but to confess to a crisis of faith. In this summer of nightmare, with the bad news by no means all out, the gag reflex of many Catholics is entirely understandable.

But that doesn’t, or shouldn’t, make it a crisis of faith.

The Catholic Church is such a large, fascinating, complex and storied institution, and Catholic life is so focused on institutions like parishes, schools and hospitals, that it's easy for serious Catholics to lose sight of something quite basic: Catholics aren't—or shouldn't be—at Mass on Sunday because they admire the pope of the day, or their local bishop, or their pastor. Catholics come to Mass on Sunday to hear what we believe to be the Word of God in Scripture and to enter into what we believe to be communion with God because of Jesus Christ.

Friendship with Jesus Christ is where Christianity begins. To learn from Christ and to be fed by him in holy communion is the primary reason for Catholic worship. If Catholics lose sight of that, the awfulness that has come to light about some of the people of the Church, at all levels of Catholic life, can cause what might seem at first blush a crisis of faith.

Yet much as I share the anger and disgust of my fellow Catholics over what has surfaced these past months, I'd suggest to those imagining themselves in a crisis of faith that they're experiencing something different: a challenge to understanding what the Church really is. As the Second Vatican Council taught in the first sentence of its most important document, the Church, first and foremost, is about Jesus Christ, the "light of the nations." Catholics trust Jesus Christ; trust in the institutions of the Church follows from that. And when trust in the Church as an institution is broken—as it has been so many times over two millennia—it's important to refocus on the basis of Catholic faith, which is trust in Jesus Christ.

This is, in fact, a very old story. Catholics at Mass on Aug. 26 were reminded of it in the Gospel reading they heard. Although it was prescribed for that Sunday by an accident of the Church's triennial cycle of scripture readings, it seemed remarkably germane to the present moment.

At the end of the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus has caused a furor among his first followers by declaring himself the "bread of life," on which his friends and disciples must feed. Many found this a "hard saying," left the itinerant rabbi from Nazareth and "returned to their former way of life." Jesus then turns to his closest companions, the Twelve, and asks, "Do you also want to leave?" Peter answers in two sentences that every outraged or embittered Catholic today should pause and ponder: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

That conviction is the reason to be a Catholic, the reason to stay a Catholic and the reason to bend every effort to reform the Church as an institution, so that it can be a credible witness to the Lord who offers communion with God and words of eternal life.

Fifteen years ago, during another shattering crisis of Catholic credibility, I was signing copies of my new book after giving a lecture at a Catholic parish in rural Indiana when a young couple approached me. They were much less dour than the figures in Grant Wood's "American Gothic" but were remarkably similar otherwise: honest, hardworking, uncomplicated farm folk. They said, quite casually, that reading the book's candid description of ecclesiastical corruption and fecklessness, and my proposals for reform, had finally convinced them, after years of indecision, to enter the Catholic Church during what was then the worst crisis in U.S. Catholic history. Why, I asked? Because, they said, any Church that could be this honest about what's wrong with it had to be based on the truth and on Jesus Christ.

I've thought about that couple many times these past months. Their testimony has not only helped sustain me during this *annus horribilis*. It has, I hope, given me a deeper insight into the nature of the current crisis and what is required for its resolution.

Those of us who believe in God's providential guidance of the Church must wrestle with the questions, why is this awfulness going on and what are we supposed to do about it?

My answer, inspired in part by those Indiana farmers in 2003, is that the Church is being called to a great purification through far more radical fidelity to Christ, to Catholic teaching and to Catholic mission. Bishops who have failed in their responsibilities as teachers, shepherds and stewards have typically done so because they put institutional maintenance ahead of evangelical mission. Keeping the institutional Catholic machinery ticking as smoothly as possible, by compromises with truth and discipline if necessary, was deemed more important than offering others friendship with Jesus Christ and the sometimes hard truths the Church learns from Christ.

All that institutional-maintenance Catholicism must now end. There is little holiness there. Throughout the world today, the living parts of the Catholic Church are those where people have embraced Catholic teaching in full and have grasped that being a faithful Catholic means offering others the gift they have been given—friendship with Jesus Christ. These Catholics, who have been stirred to protest but have not been shaken in their faith, are those who will effect the reform the Church needs. They include those bishops, priests and lay men and women who have squarely faced the present wretchedness, who are determined to get answers to the questions that must be answered and who will not settle for that form of institutional maintenance called stonewalling—whether it comes from their local bishop in the U.S. or from Rome.

Happily, those Catholics exist in considerable numbers. This is their moment.

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