

5-9-08 - Church as an institution must be more open

By Thomas Aquinas Kennedy, YOUR VIEW, SouthCoast Today (MA)

Upon review of the news articles covering the papal visit, I couldn't help but notice something was missing. The truly solemn prayers at ground zero were moving, as was the historical meeting with abuse victims arranged by Cardinal O'Malley. The throngs of jubilant crowds both in our nation's capital and in New York City were appropriate for a head of state and spiritual leader of the world's Catholic population.

We all can recognize and attest to the Christian work of Catholic Social Services in our community and all the good priests that do God's work. However, there have been many attempts to sanitize the abuse scandal with comparative statistical analysis of pedophiles in secular society versus the priesthood. Let us rewind!

The institution's commitment to secrecy (I distinguish the institution as a separate entity vis-a-vis the church) was used as a kind of inoculation for any scandal that might arise. The protection of "Holy Mother Church" proved to not only be a misplaced priority destroying thousands of lives, it fails to recognize that we were the church and that which they were instructed to protect was an institution. One would think the responsibility and stewardship entrusted to them, as they lay claim to apostolic succession, would be clear. It was not.

The institution absconded from the cloak of common morality that traditionally has been used as an invitation to their message of the Gospel. Throughout the ages this dutiful display as bearers of the truth has given the institution privilege. The defenders of the institution held rank, held formation, held privilege. By doing so, they did serious harm to those of us who expected a Christian response to our plea!

Secrecy builds mistrust, and mistrust is not an attribute of Christianity. In our case, the level of secrecy exposed by the local District Attorney Paul Walsh and his staff of investigators and prosecutors, with timely reporting by the media (the folks with the pens), showed how a succession of bishops dating back into the 1960s knew they were harboring pedophile priests.

It is interesting to note that other than death, most were elevated or transferred. The current request to hold these clerics accountable for their truly sinful behavior in this scandal, I suppose, will be left to those ferocious theological minds residing in the Vatican. Can we wait for that glacial response?

The need for profound openness is still lacking from the institution. Perhaps some form of treatment is warranted for the elevated clerics so that they could discern the difference between loyalty to Rome through the vow of obedience in the sacrament of Holy Orders vs. common sense. This culture of protecting "Holy Mother Church" at all costs will always be met by American jurisprudence when it clashes with the protection of children.

The Fall River diocese has in fact implemented policies to address the protection of children as has the state Legislature through its support of reporting laws. The silent mitres and Latin pens of the Vatican need to do the same canonically.

Any attempt to pivot from the impetus of the cover-up with words like they "didn't know" or "swept under the rug" will be met with the disclosure of further information. For example, what happened to the minutes of the priestly Senate meetings of 1965, 1966 and 1967? These meetings were designed so that local clerics could air gripes to the diocese without fear of reprisal.

We know of one of the local clerics, Father Duffy (he was the priest that annually brought the Boston Celtics to our city for intramural exhibition games at the C.Y.O), who railed at the presence of James Porter and asked for his removal, to no avail. Further, what of the settlements reached with families in the 1960s, with the provisions of silence so as not to harm "Holy Mother Church" — documents that would give a clearer account of the mind-set of the hierarchy? Censored, you say? Sinful, I say!

This cover-up took my time, my life. The assaults committed against me did not have to happen. Their effect sent me into places where depth and reason are not defined, where love and kindness turn to murderous rage, where shame and guilt drip over every identifiable emotion. It's where notions of suicide are spawned, where disharmony and disorder leach and shackle your soul. It's where you believe in death.

In my attempts to recover, I found my petition for justice clashed with my notion of forgiveness. My concept of forgiveness had to change. Forgiveness is something we do for ourselves! (I learned that from Oprah.) From the Lord's Prayer, I learned that in order to forgive us our trespasses, we must forgive those who trespass against us. (There is a degree here, and it is proportional.)

Forgiveness was not confined to the use of clerics in the confessional but is universally available. I had to take an unvarnished look at myself so as to look at the source of my pain. Again, it was where guilt and shame dwell, where justifiable anger and bitterness live, where despair can fester and poison our lives. In utilizing forgiveness, this unvarnished look gave me glimpses of where love and happiness thrive, where joy is, where peace of mind could grow, where hope and acceptance could come into balance. It is where grace is!

To date, grace has been the experience of being released from the experience. It is ongoing, and while my damage is considered permanent with certain diminished capacities in life, it was great to discover that forgiveness of sin and God's grace is not confined to the machinations of clerics or sacraments.