

9/5/07 - **The historical, and continuing, challenge of confronting corruption in the church itself**

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In this provocative commentary written a few weeks ago in Oxford — which takes on new relevance in the wake of Bishop Geoffrey Robinson's book* examining the recent problems of Power and Sex in the Catholic Church — Dr Andrew Thomas Kania, exposes the historical problem of corruption in the institutional Church; the constant problem of the authorities wanting to turn a blind eye to it; and the challenge all of us face in constant vigilance. Perhaps ironically he also quotes some ancient wisdom from St John Chrysostom about the qualities needed by those who are elected as leaders in the Church. The irony being that were the Church to have been more open and democratic perhaps the people might have had some say and that just may have provided some protection against the recent scandals as Professor Leonard Swidler argues with eloquence and at length in his recent book: "Making the Church our Own — How We Can Reform the Catholic Church from the Ground Up". Dr Kania's original title for this essay was: "The Two Faces of Eve (cf. 2 Corinthians 11: 2-3)" and those passages of Scripture are well worth bearing in mind as you read this commentary.

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) in *The Decameron* provides us with the tale of two friends: Jehannot de Chevigny, a devout Christian merchant and Abraham, an equally successful merchant, who is a Jew. As the story is told, Jehannot has such love in his heart for his Jewish friend, that he can hardly sleep in the knowledge that Abraham, does not believe in the same God as he, and because of this will not see Paradise when he dies. Every day Jehannot pesters Abraham about the need to convert to Catholicism, so much so that finally, quite exasperated, Abraham tells Jehannot that he will consider converting to Catholicism, after he has first travelled to Rome and seen the Vicar of Christ.

Jehannot is filled with private trepidation: "I have wasted my energies, which I felt I had used to good effect, thinking I had converted the man; for if he goes to the court of Rome and sees what foul and wicked lives the clergy lead, not only will he not become a Christian, but, if he had already turned Christian, he would become a Jew again without fail". (Boccaccio, 1995, p. 39)

So off to Rome goes Abraham. When Abraham returns a little while later, the dejected Jehannot quizzes his friend as to whether things in Rome were as bad as everyone had said they were. Abraham replies: "nobody there who was connected with the Church seemed to me to display the slightest sign of holiness, piety, charity, moral rectitude or any other virtue". (Boccaccio, 1995, p. 40)

In even greater despair now, Jehannot asks Abraham as to whether he will ever convert to Catholicism, and to his surprise Abraham answers fervently in the affirmative — he will become a Catholic and as soon as possible. Dumfounded, Abraham provides Jehannot with his intriguing rationale: that despite all the evil that exists within the hearts of some members of the Church — the Church is resilient, and continues to grow in beauty, splendour and lustre; only an Institution that has the hand of God resting over it, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, could withstand such depravity.

Yves Congar: seeking a Church "more accountable and more transparent"...

One of the chief architects of the Second Vatican Council, the great ecclesiologist, Yves Cardinal Congar (1904-1995), is said to have sought in his writings a Church that was more accountable and more transparent than it had been in the past. According to Fr. Gabriel Flynn, Congar's vision is as applicable today, as it was when he began writing prior to the Second World War. Flynn writes of the need for the Church to continue Congar's legacy into the 21st Century: "The problems confronting the Church at the present time are certainly not new. The basic problem today, as in the medieval period concerns service (pope, clergy/religious, laity and theologians) and worship (liturgy/piety), as well as the concomitant moral and social difficulties which are a direct result of the abuse of power and privilege by some of those engaged in the Church's service. These difficulties are, of course, rendered more complex, more controversial, and more costly — in the broadest sense — by a manifestly painful burden of history and by a perceptible inadequacy in the Church's excessively circumspect approach to their resolution". (Flynn, 2005, p. 116)

A firm and rightly held belief in the Sacred Magisterium's infallibility in Church teaching should in no way be confused with the personal fallibility of each of the ordained members of the Church. The Church does have a plentitude of Saintly hierarchs and clerics; heroic leaders such as: Blessed Nicholas Charnetsky (1884-1959), St. Thomas Becket (1118-1170), Metropolitan Andrii Sheptytsky (1865-1944), Archbishop Oscar Romero (1917-1980), and Blessed Theodore Romza (1911-1947); whose lives affirm the words of the prophet Daniel: "Those who instruct many others in righteousness will be like the stars for ever and ever". (Dan. 12: 3)

The darker side — corruption in the clergy...

Regretfully, the Church also has had its hierarchs and clerics whose lives and lifestyles have tarnished Her reputation. As early as the fourth century St. Jerome (347-420) declared that Bishops and clerics can regrettably sometimes be persons of poor character, hence he warned: "Do not let your deeds thwart your words. Otherwise, when you are speaking in church, your hearers will tacitly retort, 'Why do you not put your own words into practice?'" (Early Dominicans, 1982, p. 216)

Another Western Father, St. Hilary of Poitiers (300-367), even went so far as to say that: "The ears of the faithful are holier than the hearts of the bishops". (Congar, 2004, p. 75) Still another holy man, the Dominican, Blessed Humbert of Romans (1200-1277), provides us with a candid look at corruption within the Church of the 13th Century when he preaches to his audience: "Others are put off by the corruption to be found in the rulers of the church, who often put obstacles in the way of preaching, instead of fostering it as they ought to, like the scribes and Pharisees among the Jews and the priests of the temples among the pagans, who always did their best to thwart the preaching of Christ, and even persecuted his preachers fiercely, as we can see in the Acts of the Apostles and the legends of the saints". (Early Dominicans, 1982, p. 244)

That the problem of corruption in the clergy seems to be historically entrenched is also evidenced from the writings of Blessed Jordan of Saxony (1190-1237) who recounted the following tale:

"Once, when I was in a large city in Brabant called Brussels, a girl came to me, who was not very well off, but was good looking. She was crying and asked me to help her. I encouraged her to tell me what the matter was. With a lot of sobbing and sighing, she said, 'I'm in a dreadful state. A priest tried to take me by force and kissed me against my will, and I slapped him in the face and made his nose bleed. Now the clergy all tell me there is no alternative but for me to go to Rome about it.' I could hardly stop myself from bursting out laughing, but I spoke to her very seriously, putting the fear of God into her as if she had committed a grave offence. Eventually I made her swear that she would do exactly what I told her. Then I said, 'By the oath you have sworn, I command you: if he or any other priest tries to force his kisses on you or to pet you, clench your fist tight and knock his eye out if you can. Whatever his rank may be, do not let him get away with it. It is quite lawful to hit anyone to preserve your chastity, as it is to defend your bodily life.' Then I encouraged the girl herself and everybody else who was there to have a good laugh and cheer up". (Early Dominicans, 1982, p. 140)

In addition we also read how in 1383, Gerard de Groote delivered a sermon to his chapter-house in Utrecht, in which he addressed the presence of moral corruption in the Church, specifically amongst the clergy; as de Groote saw the issue: "My lords, the more august the priesthood, the more scandalous the dissoluteness therein". (Wautier D'Aygalliers, 1925, p. 28)

All these comments and anecdotes told by the honest voice of Saints and Mystics, helped feed the imagination of medieval Catholic humourists such as: Chaucer (1343-1400) and Rabelais (1494-1553), who alongside Boccaccio, honed their wit to deliver a series of stinging barbs at the divide that exists between the Apostolic goal of the Church being, "The Bride of Christ", and the actions by a number of Her clerics throughout history that has attempted to soil Her bridal garment.

Do we stay, or do we go?

In the light of a number of modern public scandals involving the Church it is only natural that many sections of the media, as well as even many of the Faithful should question the validity of the Church's mission and

possibly even Her existence. But similarly we must acknowledge both as Catholic Christians and as realists that the hearts of men are not consistent in their obedience to God, and any institution comprised of men, will have its spiritual compilation spanning the spectrum from the 'wise to the depraved', as it has with the Church throughout Her history with her gamut of 'saints to sinners'. It is not for us to desert the Church that God Himself founded, and which the Holy Spirit continues to inspire, because of the depravity and concupiscence of a number of sinful men and women, but rather it is for us, both clergy and laity, to resolve that any iniquity found in our Church is rooted out, torn up and cast aside.

Christ Himself foresaw that such scandals may be part of His Church when he taught the Parable of the darnel: "The field is the world, the good seed is the subjects of the kingdom; the darnel, the subjects of the Evil One, the enemy who sowed it, the devil". (Matthew, 13: 38 — 39, The New Jerusalem Bible)

Of Christ's original twelve disciples, one was to sell Him for pieces of silver, another was to deny even knowing Him — but this but serves to prove that the message is far greater and purer than the fallibility of the messenger. In an institutional sense, however, the Church must bear the legal responsibility for the indiscretions of those few clerics who pervert everything She stands for; and these actions although acted out by a minority of individuals, impact all Her members by affecting the standing of the Church in the broader world community (cf. Matthew 18: 6). One of the strongest findings from the Irish study, *Time to Listen: Confronting Child Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy in Ireland* (2003), quoted by Flynn, was the uniformly deep sense of sorrow felt by the laity for the great majority of good priests and bishops who have been tainted falsely and unjustly by the evil actions of a depraved few of their number.

Who should we elect as our spiritual leaders?

St. John Chrysostom (349-407) offers us some wise words as to who we should elect to lead our Church, a list of criterion equally applicable not only for clerics, but also for the lay-people who occupy positions of leadership within the Church:

"The way to judge whether a person is called by God to be a Church leader is to look first at his moral qualities. Is he generous to those in need? Is he gentle toward those who are weaker than himself? Is he patient toward those less intelligent than himself? Is he a loyal and faithful friend? Of course, there are many people who are generous, gentle, patient, and loyal, and yet who are not called to be leaders. Second, look at his spiritual qualities. Does he pray regularly and diligently? Does he read the Scriptures with care? Does he sincerely try to hear God's will and obey it? Of course, there are many people who truly love God, and yet are not called to be leaders. There is, however, one quality — or rather a combination of two qualities — which marks out the true Church leader. Is he humble about his own abilities, and at the same time can he discern the abilities of others? The most basic task of the Church leader is to discern the spiritual gifts of all those under his authority, and to encourage those gifts to be used to the full for the benefit of all. Only a person who can discern the gifts of others and can humbly rejoice at the flowering of those gifts is fit to lead the Church". (Chrysostom, 1996, p. 46)

As we enter the new millennium it is vital that both clergy and laity strive to live the message of the Church, at all levels — from the smallest Parish Council to the Sistine Chapel. If each of us truly believes that Christ was God and that the Church is His Bride, then it is a solemn and 'fearful' duty to keep a watchful eye, like the watchman for daybreak — so that nothing we do in our lives can defile the perception of the Gospel that others will read from the content of our actions. Every Catholic must therefore take ownership of their Church and demand no less of the Church, than what Christ demands of each one of us who comprise Her — laity and clergy. Perhaps then, when the Faithful realize the importance of living out the Gospel, then, the Church as a pilgrim people will be universally known and acknowledged as being Holy on the basis of Her actions — rather than, as Boccaccio wrote long ago, in spite of them (cf. John 13: 35).

Perhaps then we will have a Church fully reformed, in the words of the mystic, Rulman Merswin, by men and women who, "witness to the conviction that only real saints, true Friends of God, might be able to save a church so mired in corruption and conflict". (McGinn, 2005, p. 431)

Andrew Thomas Kania is a visiting scholar at Oxford University where he is completing a book on Dag Hammerskold. He has taken 12 months leave of absence from his position as Director of Spirituality at Aquinas College, Manning in Western Australia to complete this book. Prior to this appointment at Aquinas Dr. Kania was a lecturer for the School of Religious Education at the University of Notre Dame Australia as well as for the Catholic Institute of Western Australia at Edith Cowan and Curtin Universities. Dr. Kania belongs to the Ukrainian Church and is interested in ecumenical issues as well as contemporary problems facing religious educators.

*POST PUBLICATION NOTE: Dr Kania has contacted me to say that this essay was actually written some weeks ago before Bishop Robinson's book was published. In his note to me he writes: "I was inspired to write as I did due to the revelations that had been made public over the last few years about the former Archbishop of Milwaukee, Weakland, the former Archbishop of Poznan, Paetz, Cardinal Hermann Groer of Vienna, and the former Archbishop of Warsaw, Wiegus. I thought that it was time that an article be written discussing corruption in an open and frank manner. I feel that we lose more adherents to the Catholic Church by trying to ignore these very serious matters." —Editor