

July 17, 2007 - Keeping Secrets: The Laity, the Latin Mass and the LA Settlement

Posted by Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite

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The timing of the re-introduction of the Latin Mass at this time is very instructive, especially in regard to the U.S. Catholic Church. At a time when the Catholic Church in the U.S. needs to be working on becoming more open and more accountable to its laity to prevent more child sexual abuse, the re-introduction of the Latin Mass signals that the Catholic Church as a whole is moving in a reactionary direction, becoming more closed rather than more open.

The Latin Mass was developed during one of the most reactionary periods in the history of the Catholic Church, the "Counter-Reformation". This was a time in the 16th century when the Church, perceiving itself to be besieged by criticism from within and without by both laity and clergy about its practices, circled the wagons and roundly rejected engaging the new ideas about human autonomy and reason of the European Enlightenment. The so-called "Latin Mass" developed in this period was designed to standardize the form and prevent the introduction of new ideas into the liturgy, especially in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. This is a worship practice where the ordinary people could not understand the language and the clergy become remote figures, conducting mysteries in secret on the altar.

Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of the Los Angeles archdiocese of the Catholic Church announced Sunday that a record \$660-million settlement would be awarded to 508 claimants who alleged clergy sexual abuse by priests. Once again the Catholic Church is besieged by criticism and is circling the wagons. This large financial settlement, and especially its timing, is not an effort to achieve some modicum of justice for victims, but an attempt to keep the cover-up from coming out in court. After 4½ years of protracted negotiations, the settlement was announced just as the Cardinal was slated to testify in the first trial. "He avoided the No. 1 thing he fears, which is disclosing under oath how much he knew and how little he did about predatory priests," said David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of those abused by priests.

It has been Catholic lay people who, with attorneys and the legal system, have for the most part been the ones who have uncovered the cover-up of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests. I have been a domestic violence counselor, both as a professional and as a volunteer, for 30 years and I can tell you for a fact that victimization of the vulnerable thrives in a climate of secrecy and a lack of accountability. Victims are always told by perpetrators, "Don't tell, don't tell, don't tell." The way to stop abuse child sexual abuse is to develop a church that is not secretive in its hierarchy and held accountable by its laity.

To me, the symbol of the Latin Mass being reintroduced in this time when the struggle to stop child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is still going on is very instructive. The Latin Mass was a product of a reactionary time in the Catholic Church where it rejected many very necessary reforms and consolidated its power in the hierarchy. Today the re-introduction of the Latin Mass signals to me that far from becoming open to the kinds of changes needed to protect children from abuse, the Catholic Church is once again circling the wagons, rejecting necessary reforms and consolidating its power in the hierarchy.

It saddens me to write these words, but the sexual abuse of children by religious professionals who should be held to the highest standards of trust is a much greater tragedy.
