

June 16, 2007 - Open Letter to US Bishops

Father Lasch, Personal website

The following letter was addressed to the bishops of the United States and hand delivered on Thursday, June 13th by Buddy Cotton to Archbishop Harry Flynn, Chair of the bishops' draft committee on the policy for dealing with the abuse crisis. To date, no acknowledgment has been forthcoming.

Dear Fellow Servants:

I hope you will not be offended by this egalitarian salutation. Although you enjoy a higher rank in our Church and surely a greater canonical authority than I among our Catholic brothers and sisters 'in the pew,' I do believe that we enjoy a mutual mission through our common baptism as do all Catholics.

I am just an ordinary priest. I am not a 'celebrity' priest. I have written no books. I have never taught at a university. I am writing as a pastor on behalf of many of my sisters and brothers 'in the pew,' as it were, a title which I hope you will accept as referring to mainstream Roman Catholics. As you know, despite how many people of other religious traditions and even those of no religious tradition view our church, we are a very mixed breed. I believe it is through God's favor that we have maintained external unity and even a high degree of internal unity through the years, despite the revolutionary changes stimulated by Vatican II almost forty years ago.

Although the current crisis is certain to effect significant change in the governance of our Church in the future, I hope that you do not limit your response to a change in policy dealing with sexual misconduct. Most of us believe that your draft proposal is an honest attempt to respond to the horrors of the past by adopting preventative measures that will reduce the possibility of these offenses happening ever again in the future. Despite this noble goal, we know that guarantees are impossible. As you listen to the stories of victims and reflect on the insights of experts of every persuasion, please do not limit your deliberations to a political, legal and yes, even morally correct measures to prevent sexual abuse. Assure us that you are courageous enough to accept responsibility for the failures of the past by naming them. Be brave enough to challenge those among you who out of culpable ignorance or worse, allowed and in some cases, sanctioned the public and private ministry of pedophiles, ephebophiles and other sexually dysfunctional persons, to step down from office as a sign of true compunction and compassion.

Please view this issue as only a door-opener to other issues that we Catholics have been pondering for years, issues that touch the hearts of people who love their faith tradition. I'm thinking about those people 'in the pew' who are not always 'in the pew' because they feel excluded by canonical barriers that keep them from the Eucharist table: divorced Catholics unable to secure an annulment, priests whose vocation to marriage remains conditioned on their willingness to return to the lay state and now forbidden to serve in any capacity in active ministry and gay people attempting to find acceptance for their orientation. These are only a few of the categories of those for whom our Catholic discipline has become an obstacle to grace.

There are other Catholics for whom these issues are volatile. In their opinion, your laxity toward and lack of clarity about these issues as well as your failure to take a stronger stand against irregularities in these areas of pastoral concern are the very reasons for the current scandal. Let them speak and listen to their stories. Though I do not agree with their restrictive attitude on these issues, please hear them out. Many of their criticisms about the hypocrisy that has crept into Catholic attitudes and pastoral practices are justified.

Please do not treat us like children. Open your hearts as well as your minds to our concerns. Was it not St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, who said, "In addition to the fact that I am a Christian and must give God an account of my life, as a leader, I must give God an account of my stewardship as well." Part of your stewardship is to listen to the faithful—and the unfaithful, too, I might add. Despite what some people say, there are no born listeners. As in the art of leadership, listening is a learned skill—a discipline. We do not always have the impression that you are listening to us. You seem to be more intent on teaching us how we should think than in engaging us in dialogue. We know that the Church is not a pure democracy but you should know by now that it

is not a monarchy either. We are a hierarchical communion—all of us are leaders to one another. Yes, some are called to exercise greater responsibilities for the sake of all the members, but all of us are co-responsible for the entire body with Christ as our Shepherd.

As a start and as a clear signal that you understand and accept this unique moment in the life of the Catholic Church in America, I offer this revision of your preamble to the draft document on prevention which you circulated earlier this week:

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

We stand naked before you and before the world. Never in our lifetime, have we been so conscious of what it must have been like to have been crucified with Christ as one of the thieves. We cry out to you, “We are justly condemned but this man has done no wrong.” We identify strongly with the penitent thief. We are saddened that it has taken a crisis as grave as this to awaken us to the fact that, in the words of our young parishioners, “we have not been there for you!” In the course of time, we have assumed the role of administrators and fiscal managers instead of shepherds. We have been more concerned about our titles of honor than about your entitlements to respect and acceptance as co-workers in the Lord. We are ashamed that we have listened to those who tried to exempt us of the responsibility to care for those who were so brutally exposed to wolves in sheep’s clothing.

We accept this crisis as an opportunity, indeed, as a most serious challenge to open the door of our hearts to you, especially to those who have been wounded by the sins of our brothers in ministry. Beyond this, we want to confess our negligence in turning a deaf ear to so many other areas of concern to you and promise that we will put aside our preoccupation with structures and institutions so that we may concentrate on the pure work of the gospel. We state this in the awareness that the mundane and the other practical aspects of maintaining the institutional life of the Church can be handled by those more competent than we.

We believe the document which follows will be a significant step toward healing. It is the result of an intense collaborative effort which included the victims of those who suffered abuse at the hands of priests and religious. We know that it is only a first step in a series of overtures that must lead to concrete actions and activities that will assure you that we are sincere in our determination to lead as servants, not as masters.

Please accept our efforts as they are offered—with humble and contrite hearts.

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