

By Russell Shaw, Inside Catholic

Inside Catholic contributor Russell Shaw's 20th book, *Nothing To Hide: Secrecy, Communication, and Communion in the Catholic Church* (Ignatius Press), takes a candid and sometimes surprising look at the abuse of secrecy in an ecclesiastical context. In this interview, Shaw, former information director of the Catholic bishops' conference and the Knights of Columbus, explains the book's genesis and the nature of the problem it examines. *Nothing To Hide* is available from Amazon.com, BarnesandNoble.com, and other outlets.

Inside Catholic: What moved you to write a book about secrecy in the Church?

Russell Shaw: I guess I first became conscious of the problem in 1969, when I went to work for the bishops' conference as director of information. At the time, the bishops' relations with the press were in terrible shape, and much of the tension focused on the bishops' general meetings. They were entirely in executive session, with no reporters and observers allowed in. Yet the bishops invited reporters to come to the meeting and cover it -- which they did, partly by means of briefings and partly by means of leaks. Needless to say, there was no good reason for all that secrecy. The situation was a mess and very harmful to the bishops' own best interests.

I was one of those who helped get them to open the meetings, starting in 1972. That arrangement worked well for the next 20 years, but starting in the mid-1990s, when I was no longer with the bishops' conference but was covering the bishops as a journalist, I realized that, without any announcement or explanation, they were spending more and more of their meeting time in secret session behind closed doors. Once again, there was no good reason for so much secrecy. So I started writing about that and about secrecy in the Church in general.

Then came 2002 and the sex-abuse scandal. The cover-ups were a big part of it. Now it was clear that the abuse of secrecy wasn't just counterproductive -- it was capable of doing very serious harm in a very serious matter. I concluded that to do justice to the problem would take a book. *Nothing To Hide* is the result.

Don't you think there's a place for secrecy and confidentiality in the Church?

Of course there is. As a matter of fact, I make the case for secrecy in the book. The seal of the confessional is the strongest example of strictly obligatory secrecy, but the duty to preserve privacy pertains in pastoral counseling situations. Furthermore, the Church has the same right to confidentiality to protect its legitimate interests that any other group has, along with the common obligation to respect people's privacy rights.

My point isn't that there has to be total disclosure of everything. It's that the assumption in doing the Church's business should be in favor of openness and accountability, with the burden of proof resting on those who favor secrecy in any particular case.

The Catholic Church isn't the only institution to abuse secrecy. Don't a lot of groups also do that?

Sure. The problem is common in government, the military, and the private sector -- wherever the people in charge use secrecy to cover up their mistakes or to control the people under them or just because they find it convenient. A study last year by the Associated Press found that sex abuse was widespread in public schools, and that a culture of secrecy was operative among public educators and legislatures to keep the story under wraps.

Then is there anything special about the abuse of secrecy in the Church?

Yes, there is. The clergy are the management class in the Church, and in that context the abuse of secrecy becomes a typical tool of the clericalist culture. It's clericalism at work.

Furthermore, abusing secrecy is contrary to the Church's nature as communion -- a communion or hierarchically structured community of faith in which all the members, as Vatican II taught, are fundamentally equal in dignity and rights. But you can't have real equality in dignity and rights in a community in which a large body of members are routinely denied information that they need to function as full, equal members. That's how things are now.

Can you give some examples?

The sexual abuse of children and the cover-up that accompanied it was the great horrible example. The financial scandals that erupt now and then in dioceses and parishes and church institutions are another instance. If transparency were the rule, con men and crooks would have a harder time making off with or misusing church funds. Then there's decision-making in the Church, which often takes place behind closed doors -- chancery doors, parish doors -- and is done by a small group of insiders. There is no consultation, and the people are simply presented with the decisions as accomplished facts: "Here's how it's going to be."

The Church is still the Church, of course, with the gospel, the Eucharist, the sacraments. And there are many admirable people in the Church, both clerics and non-clerics. But the abuse of secrecy does have bad results in terms of people's attitudes, ranging from anger and alienation to apathy and indifference or a kind of childishness in relation to the Church.

But ever since Vatican II haven't we had structures and processes of consultation to prevent what you're talking about -- pastoral councils, finance councils, things like that?

On paper, yes. But in many places, if not most, they don't seem to be working very well. What did diocesan and parish councils do to detect and prevent sex abuse? Nothing -- evidently they were frozen out, kept in the dark. In lots of parishes and dioceses, nobody knows who the council members are or when they meet or what their agenda is or what they do. There's a common impression that very often -- there are exceptions, of course -- the main role of these bodies is to be a sounding-board and rubber-stamp decisions by the authorities.

Isn't the problem larger than secrecy?

Yes, it is. As I say in the book, the abuse of secrecy has a number of cousins -- stonewalling, happy talk, spin, deception, failure to consult, rejection of accountability, things like that. The family resemblance is that, like secrecy, these are all breakdowns in the open, honest communication that ought to be the rule in the communio of the Church.

Has the Church officially taken a position on this question?

Well, it hasn't said a whole lot. But you will find some excellent statements of principle in *Communio et Progressio*, a pastoral instruction on communications published by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in 1971. It calls for a "steady, two-way flow of information" between Church authorities and the faithful, and says people have a right to "all the information they need to play their active role in the life of the Church," while secrecy should be limited to cases of necessity.

This Vatican agency has returned to the same subject several times in documents it's published since then, and Pope John Paul II touched on the theme in his last public document before he died, *Il Rapido Sviluppo* (The Rapid Development). Pope Benedict laid down the basic principle of internal communication in the Church several years ago. "We cannot communicate with the Lord if we do not communicate with one another" is how he put it.

What do you suggest be done?

My book ends with some practical recommendations. For instance: adopt policies that guarantee openness in conducting the business of dioceses and parishes and religious institutes; make a fresh start with pastoral councils and finance councils by giving them a real say in decisions and making their proceedings public; give qualified lay Catholics a consultative voice in the choice of their bishops and pastors; put freedom-of-information policies in place in Church institutions; allow diocesan newspapers to be more than house organs and operate as reliable sources of information and vehicles for public opinion. We have to revive the ideal of shared responsibility, too -- not as part of a power struggle, but so that we can all work together for the welfare of the Church.

Basically, what's needed is a new way of thinking -- a commitment to the proposition that openness and accountability really are the way to go because they're expressions of what the Church is and how it's meant to operate. When people grasp that, the abuse of secrecy ought to fade away. But I'm realistic enough to recognize that, human nature being what it is, the temptation to go behind closed doors and practice secrecy will always exist.

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Russell Shaw is a writer and journalist in Washington, D.C. His books include *To Hunt, To Shoot, To Entertain: Clericalism and the Catholic Laity*, *Personal Vocation: God Calls Everyone By Name* (with Germain Grisez), and *Nothing To Hide: Secrecy, Communication, and Communion in the Catholic Church* (forthcoming from Ignatius Press).