



Patrick McIlheran: What went wrong in the Catholic Church? Not what some want us to believe

By Patrick McIlheran

Updated: 04/29/2010 07:04:39 PM CDT

In the current dredge-up of old sexual abuse cases involving Catholic priests, one feels sorriest for these men in their 50s who once were the prey.

Not so much because of the awfulness of what was done to them, though it was awful. Rather, it's that they're seeking a temporal justice they never can get.

"Somebody should be punished," said one of the victims of Father Lawrence Murphy, who molested some 200 deaf boys in St. Francis from the 1950s to the 1970s. It can't be Murphy, long since dead, as are the two archbishops who oversaw him. The district attorney who took a pass is retired, so the victims' recourse is to sue the current pope, whose only involvement, decades after Murphy molested anyone, was on the question of whether the monster would wear a Roman collar in his coffin.

One wishes the victims the peace that law cannot give them.

Then there are other players, all with causes to advance. This is where trouble lies. We're told the lawsuits are about forcing Catholicism to change.

Yet the changes proposed grow out of flawed explanations.

We're told, for instance, that the abuse resulted from the Catholic Church's authoritarianism.

Wrong: Abuse flourished when no one would exert authority. Bishops did not expel molesters but shuffled them off. Tellingly, claims that Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, didn't do enough all date from the era before his Vatican office took control of the crisis away from dithering bishops.

Moreover,

molestation peaked in precisely that era when the church shrank from the idea of authority. In the 1970s, priests put on jeans and became friends to the faithful rather than stern fathers. The era of shalt-not gave way to days of we-understand. In hindsight, this opened a path for predators.

We're told the church erred in seeing abuse as sin, not crime.

But facts belie this. The church didn't see it as sin but as a psychiatric disorder, which is why abusers were sent to ultimately ineffective treatment. Had bishops seen it as sin, the inescapable condition of man on Earth, they would have grasped that offenders, even if repentant, had to be kept away from the occasions of further sin, such as boys' dorms.

By the church's own understanding, sin tears the soul from God with eternal, hellish consequences. It is an emergency that one combats with moral rules. A psychiatric disorder, however, is treated and managed, which is what the church tried, disastrously.

Advertisement



Save \$26 a month
and lock in your price for ONE YEAR!
Switch today! 1-877-866-8603

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™



We're told it's celibacy to blame — except that most of the abuse was of boys. Not that homosexuality causes pedophilia any more than priesthood does, but it's absurd to claim that the love of a wife would have made abusers switch sexual preferences.

Was the church too medieval? Only if you suppose the Middle Ages were sexually indulgent. This was a letting go of the medieval idea that man could, by reason and spiritual diligence, rise above his immoral nature. The bishops' toleration of abuse grew from seeing abusers as pawns of biology and genes. They traded St. Augustine for Freud, and disaster ensued.

Correct understanding is critical because the sexual abuse of children is a human failing, not a particularly Catholic one. If the crisis is blamed on parts of Catholicism that people want to change, the lessons won't translate to other risky venues.

The one authoritative study of sexual abuse in schools, for instance, warned that a tenth of children suffer some sort of sexual misconduct by staff. Six years later, a former teacher, Ryan Zellner, sits jailed in Manitowoc on 12 felony accusations of sex with students, while authorities at other districts that once employed him are re-examining accusations that earlier had been discounted. Plainly, celibacy and the papacy did not cause this.

Catholicism in America has changed its rules remarkably in response to its abuse crisis. This is why new accusations have plummeted and lawyers are fishing through the 1960s for work. That's not of much use to people harnessing the crisis to forward other causes, but for men seeking justice against abusers who are mainly now beyond the reach of earthly courts, it may, one hopes, bring some comfort.

Patrick McIlheran is a columnist for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel editorial columnist. His e-mail address is pmcilheran@journalsentinel.com

Advertisement



Save \$26 a month
and lock in your price for ONE YEAR!
Switch today! 1-877-866-8603

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™