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20 February 2019

Recovery and Reform: The Tasks of Leadership

The Catholic Church in the U.S. is faced with twin crises—one is the sexual abuse crisis, the other a crisis of leadership—and they are interrelated. Just as recovery from an illness is unlikely by treating symptoms alone, recovering from the sexual abuse crisis is not possible without also addressing the root causes in the culture that permitted the crisis and allowed its cover up for so long. Church leaders cannot ignore either of the crises or deny their connectivity, for the faithful see both clearly.

These twin, interrelated crises call for twin, interrelated solutions: this is the complex reality the Catholic Church in the U.S. faces, and more than anything else this reality cries out for leadership. So far, the discussion around the sexual abuse crisis and the required actions to recover from it has been fairly robust. Not so with the crisis of leadership and the actions necessary to reform the culture and practices that have produced what some see as the greatest threat faced by the Catholic Church in the U.S. and elsewhere in modern times. Responsibility for this wider discussion about reform must broaden, and church leaders—bishops, leaders of religious communities, and lay leaders alike—must lead this discussion and the reforms that will result from it.

The expectations of the faithful in the U.S. were high in 2002-2004 when the first major sexual abuse crisis emerged. In a sense, America is ahead of the rest of the world with respect to

our experience with this crisis. Fifteen years later, the one crisis has morphed into twin, interrelated crises. Frustration has grown and expectations are even higher now. The visible lack of a cross-diocese, national approach suggests that at least some church leaders are resistant to the changes necessary for recovery and reform. Lowering expectations, denying the realities of both crises, diminishing the importance of both recovery and reform, or any other form of “sugar coating” or half-measures risks a fracture in the Body of Christ in the U.S. In some parts of the Catholic community in the U.S., morale is already low and impatience for action is correspondingly high.

Without doubt, there are many reasons to be fearful as the church faces this complex reality. Each one of us shrinks from examining our own conscience and facing the corresponding duty to change our lives based upon that examination. So much more fear, then, when the reality is a communal examination of conscience that demands changes in communal behavior. Saint John Paul II, however, reminds us in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, that “we should not fear the truth about ourselves.” This reminder is not just about our personal truths as sinners. Rather, the Holy Father also addresses our communal truth: that the systems human beings create are always imperfect. In fact, he goes on to say, the more imperfect they are, the more we seem sure of them. “Our hearts may be anxious” in facing this fear, John Paul II tells his readers, but “in our anxiety, our hope and trust is in the Lord, in his presence, and in the belief that He is here working in our midst.”

Fear is not all that we have to anticipate. The communal examination of conscience and the corresponding behavior changes will produce its fair share of suffering. The primary source of suffering, of course, is among the victims and families. These are our brothers and sisters who

have been subject to abuse, unjustly treated for years, and sometimes feeling humiliated by the cover up. Only a fellow survivor can understand the depths of their suffering. The Body of Christ *writ large*, however, is also suffering and will continue to suffer until recovery and reform provide the Catholic community in the U.S. full healing. As St. Paul has said, “If one member suffers, all suffer together.” Finally, in leading the Body of Christ through both the examination of conscience associated with both crises as well as the changes demanded of recovery and reform, church leaders—lay, religious, and ordained—must look forward to some degree of suffering. But Fr. Henri Nouwen reminds us that, “suffering with one another will uncover nothing less than the presence of a God whose consolation keeps us going.”

From suffering can come healing. Pope Francis himself acknowledges in his letter to Catholic bishops that “The Church’s credibility has been seriously undercut and diminished by these sins and crimes [of sexual abuse], but even more by the efforts to deny and cover them up. This has led to a growing sense of uncertainty, distrust, and vulnerability among the faithful.... This loss of credibility raises painful questions about the way we relate to one another. Clearly, a living fabric has come undone, and we, like weavers, are called to repair it.” In saying “we are called to repair,” the Holy Father refers to an observation Thomas Merton made years ago in his essay “Contemplation in a World of Action”: the prayer, meditation, and contemplation that deepen our faith form the foundation of the actions we take in the world. The two realms, contemplation and action, go together.

What will such repair look like?

Part has already begun. More bishops and leaders of religious communities, of their own accord and in coordination with one another, are rendering a full accounting of both the abuse and the cover up in their dioceses. They are moving toward extending the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Charter on the Protection of Children and Young People to cover episcopal behavior. They have also begun describing what the Church owes survivors: recognition, justice, and meaningful support. More bishops and religious leaders are holding offenders and enablers accountable, and they are establishing reporting, investigatory, and adjudicating procedures that will increase trust as they become more widely understood and enacted. The number of bishops and community leaders who have begun this work is increasing; their actions have put the Catholic Church in the U.S. on the road to recovery. Much more work is ahead, but some momentum in a positive direction is forming. Whether this momentum will continue, however, remains an open question.

Also an open question is whether the USCCB, as a body, will develop the same sense of urgency that one feels exists among the faithful. The twin crises the Church faces is not a local crisis; the USCCB must create a more national approach—even if executing it is left to individual bishops. The need is clearly apparent: although more Church leaders are acting within their own dioceses and religious communities, all that good becomes disheartening upon the new revelations in other places. The good being done by some is cancelled by the lethargy and resistance of others. Catholics in the pew, as well as the general American public, want a comprehensive solution. Individual bishops or religious leaders acting locally do not “count” as communal or institutional action.

In sum, without a national approach, each new revelation becomes an example of the Catholic Church in the U.S.'s inability and negligence which contributes to the perception of a powerful, wealthy, resistant hierarchy—not the community of Christ on earth. Such a perception damages the Church's ability to speak with moral authority—to itself or to the society it hopes to evangelize. Furthermore, whatever comes from the upcoming meeting of the heads of Bishops Conferences in Rome, the meeting is already historic. The global Church must address issues through a complexity of cultures and legal systems. The global Church represents different stages of understanding of the crises and are at different levels of readiness to address them.

All that said, however, the experiences of the Catholic community in the U.S. is what it is. Here, the knowledge of our experiences is clear: the sexual abuse crisis has its roots in a culture and a set of leadership and management practices that first allowed, then covered up the abuse—and did this over decades. Taking action to recover from the sexual abuse crisis alone, therefore, will not be enough for full healing within the Body of Christ in the U.S.. Reform of the root causes is also necessary, and this too requires a national approach, for the twin crises are manifestations of the behaviors the Catholic Church in the U.S. has fostered, developed, and promoted over generations.

Reform means that the Catholic Church in the U.S. must replace a culture of privilege and secrecy—clericalism, as Pope Francis has called it in his August 2018 letter to the people of God—with one of transparency, responsibility, and accountability. That is, the spirit of clericalism must be replaced by the spirit of humble, servant leadership—a conversion born of prayer, imploring the Lord to send forth his Spirit to make all things new. Only such a conversion of heart will ensure that the reforms the Church takes are not merely stern-but-hollow

decrees, superficial tweaks of organizations and procedures, or simply new flow charts representing new administrative functions. These kinds of actions would confirm what many believe: that the Catholic Church in the U.S. is merely one more powerful, hierarchical bureaucracy protecting itself at all costs. “That kind of vision,” the Holy Father says in his recent letter to the bishops of the United States, “ends up reducing the mission of the bishop and that of the Church to a mere administrative or organizational function in the ‘evangelization business.’”

A conversion to servant leadership is the absolute necessary first step on the road to reform. But while conversion is the first step, the Holy Father says in the same letter, that it is not the only step. “Let me be clear,” he continued in his letter to the U.S. bishops, “many of these things [leadership, managerial, and administrative actions] are necessary,” even if they alone cannot grasp and deal with the full reality in its complexity. Bishops and the leaders of religious communities are well-qualified to conduct the prayers, penance, spiritual readings, retreats, and other forms of fraternal communion that will be a necessary, as the Holy Father puts it, “to free our hearts of compromises and false certainties, in order to hear what the Lord asks of us in the mission he has given us.” They are less qualified, however, for the leadership, managerial, and administrative actions that must accompany the spiritual conversion. The expertise, however, does reside among the faithful. So an authentic dialogue among church and lay leaders will produce the kind of co-learning that will contribute to better understanding as well as the kind of co-responsibility that will improve performance and increase trust and confidence.

Pope Francis seems to agree with this approach when he explained in his August 2018 letter to the people of God that the shift from a culture of clericalism must include the “active

participation of all the members of God's people...[to generate] the necessary dynamics for sound and realistic change." Reform, led by conversion and carried out by both lay and ordained leaders, can change the leadership and management culture of the church and can help restore trust and confidence in Church leadership.

Unlike the robust, though not yet complete, discussion of the actions necessary to recover from the sexual abuse crisis, the discussion about what is necessary to reform the clerical culture and the leadership and management practices that flow from it is much less robust. Yes, the Holy Father has begun the conversation with his remarks on clericalism, but much more needs to be said.

The examination of the collective conscience of the Catholic Church in the U.S., when it is turned to root cause, will naturally lead to conversations about the following five areas at a minimum.

- What are the right methods of checks, balances, and oversight necessary in the Church's governance processes—within parishes and dioceses, between parishes and dioceses, and within religious communities? A strong hierarchy without explicit and equally strong checks and balances is a petri dish for excess and abuse.
- How should the church shift its *ad hoc* leader selection processes as well as the ways in which it conducts initial and continued formation for ordained, religious, and lay leaders to a more rigorous methodology? The way priests and religious are educated into the clerical culture of privilege and secrecy matters. And the way too many of the faithful are expected to become deferent and passive recipients of religion also contributes to

the clerical culture. An unchanged formation curriculum will not produce a new culture. Formation—initial and continuing—can be part of the solution.

- What standardized procedures might parishes, dioceses, and religious communities adopt to make its files—whether those of human resources, finances, project management, logistics, facility management, or maintenance—more complete and useful for “best practice” check and balance processes? Isolated organizations that control information coming in as well as intra-organizational information flow create conditions that erode trust and resist learning and improving. Those dioceses and religious communities that have already adopted the Standards for Excellence can attest to their utility.
- How can parish, diocesan, and religious community adapt their financial management and investment processes to be made more consistent and transparent? Inconsistent and opaque leadership and managerial practices are an anathema to healthy organizations of integrity—of any type.
- What is necessary to create a Catholic Church in the U.S. communications system that will increase the ease of intra-diocesan, cross-diocesan, and religious community communications and facilitate better sharing of best practices and learning? Broad, free-flowing communications enhance learning within organizations and among leaders, increases cohesion among those in the organization, as well as trust and confidence in the organization’s leadership.

These are difficult discussions to have, and the tasks that emanate from them will be difficult as well. But hard does not mean impossible, nor does it mitigate necessity. Rather, hard is the demand of leadership.

Culture change is a product of behavior changes sustained over time. Change of this magnitude does not happen by itself. Leaders change cultures. Certainly, this change must begin with the conversion Pope Francis calls for. Equally certain, however is this: conversion without subsequent systemic action will fail. Both conversion and the subsequent, systemic actions will take time. Progress will not be linear, and leaders must set the direction and guide the process over time. Nothing will be easy, but without these kinds of sustained behavioral changes, the recovery from the sexual abuse crisis is likely to be short lived because of the root causes of the crisis of confidence in and credibility of Church leadership—the very practices that permitted, then covered up the abuse—will remain.

Allowing the crises to drag on unresolved, addressing one but not the other, or arriving at half measure should not be options for the Body of Christ. The health of the Catholic Church in the U.S. has practical consequences. First, to the mission of the Church: to be the Light of Christ in the world, to spread the joy of the Gospel to all the “peripheries,” and help build God’s Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. None of this can be accomplished by a Church that lacks credibility because it cannot keep its own house in order. Second, to the faithful. Already the Catholic Church in the U.S. has lost over a generation of believers. In many places around the country, parochial schools are failing. And the financial health of the Church is at risk throughout the country. The Catholic Church in the U.S must recover and reform in order to retrieve and reignite the faith of our young people as well as replenish the gene pool of committed and capable ordained, religious, and lay leadership. Last, to the secular society which we hope to evangelize. We are living in an America where many are cynical about leaders and institutions.

The twin crises have fueled even more cynicism. Simply put, the Catholic Church in the U.S. must regain its moral authority in order to influence the public discourse.

Church leaders—ordained, religious, and lay—should not be afraid of the challenges before us. Rather, we should all take hope from the gospel story of Lazarus. After acknowledging Lazarus’ death, Jesus wept, mourned, then brought forth new life. Christ is here with us now. We need only open our hearts to his word, listen to the Spirit and to each other, and allow the unique gifts resident in the Body of Christ to work in furthering God’s Kingdom on earth. The Catholic Church in the U.S. is carrying a heavy cross, but there are many Simons and Veronicas ready and able to help.

Leadership Roundtable has been a committed and trusted partner to Church leaders from 2004 when it convened hundreds of senior leaders from all walks of life to respond to the first sexual abuse crisis. Its track record in humble support of the Church is well-established. Members of Leadership Roundtable were part of the team that wrote the initial USCCB charter for the protection of children and young people. Beyond that—and in collaboration with bishops, pastors, leaders of religious communities, administrators of Catholic organizations, and lay executive leaders from all walks of life—Leadership Roundtable has helped identify and apply best leadership and management practices that manifest servant leadership and are grounded in Church teaching and Canon Law. The best practices that emerged from this collaboration—in human resource management, formation and development, finance, and communications—have been codified into a set of services and programs that, taken together, help transform the Church’s temporal management affairs. Already twenty-five dioceses are using Leadership

Roundtable's Mission Management Model to guide their long-term temporal management processes.

Leadership Roundtable is proud to be the Church's trusted partner. We are proud of how far Church leaders have come since 2002, but we are clear eyed about how much more work has to be done. Should the leaders of the Catholic Church in the U.S. want to structure a national approach consistent with servant leadership, collegiality, and a proper integration of lay expertise, Leadership Roundtable stands ready to assist. Members of Leadership Roundtable, like many committed Catholics in the U.S., take our baptismal duties seriously. And we listen to Christ's words in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus said to Peter, James, and John, "Rise, let us be on our way." The twin, interrelated crises before us demand twin, interrelated resolutions. Recovery and reform are equally necessary to heal the Catholic Church in the U.S. Neither will happen by themselves. Both require a properly-articulated national approach. Both demand that leaders lead.