

To the US Bishops: A (Friendly) Call to Repentance and Reform

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on www.catholicvote.org

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

Not only the US bishops but a significant portion of lay Catholics are discussing and pondering – almost obsessively – what can be done to address the sexual abuse crisis. A vast array of “solutions” has been proposed for dealing with who knew what, when, and who did what in respect to Archbishop McCarrick and how accusations of abuse of minors against bishops should be handled. Most involve requests for investigations, new policies or codes.

A problem that is not sufficiently on the bishops’ radar screen (at least publicly) is that of priestly sexual misconduct in seminaries, dioceses, and religious orders, and the presence of gay networks throughout the Church. No More Victims, a group I work with, has published online and sent to all bishops “What We, the Laity, are Reading that has Shaken Us to the Core”, a reader of excerpts from articles published in just the last few months that are exposing the extent of priestly sexual misconduct. Or perhaps I should say “re-expose” since there were many books written to expose those scandals decades ago. Had those exposés been heeded, we would not be assailed with the problems that are devastating the Church and threatening to destroy it today (though it shall prevail against the gates of hell!).

The only ones who can take action that will truly reform the Church and restore trust to the episcopacy are the bishops. Most of them likely are not in any immediate way responsible for the presence and corrosive influence of unchaste priests. They have inherited dioceses with priest populations of which between 5% and 60% are sexually active with males or have been so in the past; they have inherited a culture in which it is more important to protect the institutional Church than to put a premium on the morality of their priests or even the protection of others. They understandably fear losing many priests were they to address the problem, for they would have an even harder time making sure the sacraments are readily available than they do now. Moreover, many of the laity would prefer to have corrupt priests than to make the sacrifice of attending Mass in an unfamiliar parish or one at a distance.

This proposal is directed to bishops.

The problem is so wide and deep and the diocesan culture so ill equipped to handle the problem that reform requires unprecedented and radical measures. While it is foolish to be truly optimistic, I believe the measures laid out below could work. It requires, though, that the bishops be humble and courageous in ways that have been expected of few people ever.

What I am proposing is that bishops admit to the mistakes they have made — indeed, the sins they have committed — in the governance of the Church in respect to priestly sexual misconduct. (I

apologize for the boldness and even presumptuousness in making this proposal but we laity love our Church and our bishops, so in these desperate times we must be willing to take unusual steps.)

It may be some small comfort that likely there are very few bishops who have not been complicit in some way in respect to the sexual abuse crisis; thus bishops can take strength from the fact that large numbers of them should be subjecting themselves to this penitential exercise. I do not propose that bishops resign unless they themselves are engaged in sexual misconduct and unwilling to reform. I do not propose that those who have failed in their duties resign, unless their failure is of such a magnitude that trust cannot possibly be restored.

It is my hope that bishops will do an honest accounting of their behavior, ask pardon of God and forgiveness from those whom they have offended, do appropriate penance and resolve to change course (suggestions for suitable changes, below).

Examination of Conscience

Among the questions the bishops should ask themselves before the Lord, in a sincere examination of conscience, are these.

Have I

failed to act upon a serious charge against a priest because there were only rumors and “no evidence,” and failed to make reasonable attempts to verify or refute the charge?

failed to act upon a serious charge against a priest because a man’s “private life is his private life” and “we are all sinners”?

failed to act upon a serious charge against a priest because of fear that I may lose a priest?

failed to act upon a serious charge against male or female religious in my diocese?

failed to report to the public subsequent credible accusations against already credibly accused perpetrators?

given misleading or imprecise reasons for having removed a priest from a parish for a temporary period, for having transferred a priest, or for having removed a priest from active ministry?

recommended for advancement to the episcopacy someone I knew to have a history of sexual misconduct or who was currently engaging in sexual misconduct, with no evidence that he had sincerely repented and reformed? Have I failed to oppose the advancement of such a priest?

failed to give a truly sympathetic hearing to a victim and to act as a loving father to the victim?

failed to offer pastoral and/or psychological counseling to a victim?

- failed to meet with the parish or community affected by the abuse and to act like a father to them? Have I required subordinates to do so in order to protect my own reputation and distance myself from the problem?
- failed to offer pastoral counseling to a priest falsely or truly accused and to act as a father to him?
- failed to meet personally with the perpetrator and call him to account for his actions?
- attempted to remain uninformed about or aloof from accusations of sexual misconduct and related issues, and delegated them to staff?
- failed to confront a fellow bishop about his own sexual misconduct or his poor handling of sexual misconduct matters?
- failed to urge other bishops to speak with a fellow bishop about his sexual misconduct or his poor handling of sexual misconduct matters?
- failed to acknowledge the presence of a network or the undue influence of priests who have sex with males in my diocese, in seminaries, and in the Church at large, either in the past or presently?
- failed to ensure that the seminaries to which I send my seminarians are free from a subculture of priest faculty or other seminarians who have sex with males?
- sent for psychological counseling or engaged in a smear campaign of a victim who reported abuse?
- failed to support my seminarians who have been ill-treated by seminaries when they reported abuse?
- failed to keep accurate records of abuse, or worked to hide abuse from legal authorities?
- failed to report activities that may violate civil laws?
- ignored my conscience or failed to form my conscience?

Making a public accounting of these failures would be an excellent way to clear the board.

Practical Purifying Action

But then, action corresponding to those admissions must be undertaken, action that would purify the presbyterate.

Bishops should make it known to their priests that those who are living unchaste lives by engaging in sexual relations with either males or females, and/or who are viewing pornography, and

who are not willing to reform, should leave active ministry and request laicization. Bishops should offer to help such men find employment in the secular world and to provide funding at a reasonable level to help them during the transition period gain the education or training needed.

Bishops should offer to those living unchaste lives but who want to repent and reform, help in doing so, whether that involves counseling, effective modes of accountability, a lengthy retreat, or training in acquiring the virtue of chastity.

Bishops should invite their priests to approach them voluntarily to pursue either of the above paths. In every way the bishops should deal with their priests as a father would.

Bishops should review all priests' files. If there are priests charged with sexual misconduct but who have not admitted to such, the bishops should have the priests' church-owned computers and phones seized and searched as a way of verifying charges made. Bishops should ask trusted lay organizations to recommend responsible lay leaders who would assist the bishop in reviewing their priest's files and help with difficult decisions. Laity assistance would help restore the confidence in the bishops. Bishops should set up lay boards to assist them in this fashion for the future.

Common sense measures should also be taken to ensure that seminaries are safe places for their seminarians and that they are formed in the virtue of chastity.

Promoting a Year of Chastity

"What We Laity are Reading that has Shaken Us to the Core" recommends "A Year of Promoting Chastity" as a way of changing the culture of the diocesan priesthood:

We recommend that bishops initiate a year dedicated to recommitting their presbyterate to chaste celibacy in order to help their priests achieve intimacy with Jesus and be the priests Jesus wants them to be. One such program could be based upon the recommendations in the *book In Sinu Jesu: When Heart Speaks to Heart — The Journal of a Priest at Prayer* (the bishop might want to give a copy of this book to all his priests). This book is a record of private locutions to a Benedictine priest by Jesus and the Blessed Mother who implore the author and other priests to do reparation for impure priests. Here is a typical passage:

I am about to renew the priesthood of My Church in holiness. I am very close to cleansing My priests of the impurities that defile them. Soon, very soon, I will pour out graces of spiritual healing upon all My priests. I will separate those who will accept the gift of My divine friendship from those who will harden their hearts against me. To the first I will give a radiant holiness like that of John and of My apostles in the beginning. From the others I will take away even what they think they have. It must be so. I want the priests of My Church clean in heart and faithful in responding to the immense love with which I have loved each one of them and chosen each one for Myself and for the realization of the designs of My Heart. Those who do not live in My friendship betray Me and impede My work. They detract from the beauty of holiness that I would see shine in my Church. I weep over the hardness of heart, and My Immaculate Mother, their sorrowing Mother weeps with Me over them. (p. 49)

Here is the plan proposed in *In Sinu Jesu* (p. 78):

1. All priests meet on Thursday evening (in the Cathedral with the bishop if possible, or at several churches in accessible locations with the bishop rotating between them).
2. They pray vespers together.
3. They have time for confessions.
4. They have mass and an hour of adoration with some passages read from In Sinu Jesu.
5. They share a simple meal together.

Bishops should also consider modifying their living arrangements and life-styles and to ask their priests to do the same in order to model more truly the way of the Lord Jesus.

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false
and does not swear deceitfully.
He will receive blessing from the LORD
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.
Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.[b]

(Psalm 24:3-6 ESV)

**Laity: Please send a copy of this by email or snail mail to your bishop
and also a copy of or a link to the document:
“What We, the Laity, are Reading
that has Shaken Us to the Core”
(www.normorevictimsmi.org)**

The views expressed here are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of CatholicVote.org

ABOUT AUTHOR

PROF. JANET E. SMITH Website

Prof Janet E. Smith teaches moral theology at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. She has a webpage at www.janetesmith.org