

ISSUES BEHIND THE SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS

Topic: Issues behind the Sexual Abuse Crisis
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Presenter: Christopher J. Ruddy, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota
Presenter: Sharon A. Euart, Washington, DC

The scandalous situation of clerical sexual abuse of minors has posed deeper issues about ecclesial decision making, structures of communion, the authority of episcopal conferences and their relationship to local churches and the Holy See, the protection of the spiritual, physical, and psychological integrity of children and youth, the relationship between priests and bishops, and the nurturing of both justice and healing within the Church. The two presenters assisted the session participants in reflecting especially on the theological and canonical implications of a crisis that raises numerous issues not simply for the Catholic community but for all the churches.

The first presenter was Dr. Christopher Ruddy, who has recently published books on Tillard and Catholic ecclesiology and on the priesthood in the Church. His presentation addressed the deeper ecclesiological issues behind the American clerical sexual abuse crisis. Using Yves Congar's distinction between a "reform of abuses" and a "reform of a state of affairs," he examined three issues undergirding the aforementioned crisis. The first is episcopal accountability, which is both fostered and hindered by Vatican II and by practical matters such as financial transparency, bishops' administrative responsibilities, the size of dioceses, and the selection of bishops. The second is priestly identity, which was somewhat neglected at Vatican II, and depends partly on a deepened understanding of celibacy. The third is lay adulthood, which calls for liberation from passivity and greater formation of the laity who are often highly educated but catechetically unformed. Finally he proposed some general traits needed for reform of sufficiently broad scope: an ontology and ecclesiology of communion stressing the relatedness of all the baptized, truthfulness in ecclesial communication, and evangelical poverty.

The second presenter was Sister Sharon Euart, formerly associate general secretary of the United States Catholic Conference of Catholic Bishops. Her presentation focused on the canonical aspects of three topics related to the clergy sexual abuse crisis: (1) participation by the faithful in church life and governance at all levels, (2) the continuing call for greater episcopal accountability in leading the local churches, and (3) the role and authority of the episcopal conference and its relationship to the Holy See. Sharon considered broad ecclesial participation in light of its ecclesial foundation and canonical expression in various diocesan consultative structures such as the *Essential Norms*-mandated diocesan review board. She presented ecclesial accountability as a key element of church governance and highlighted the importance of the effective use of participative structures such as presbyteral, pastoral, and finance councils in fostering such accountability. Subsequently she addressed the episcopal conference-Holy See relationship and discussed the various efforts by the US bishops since the late 1980's to structure appropriate canonical provisions to deal with the clerical sexual

abuse crisis in dialogue with the Holy See. Finally she concluded with four observations on what the Church might learn from the tragic experience of the clergy sexual abuse crisis.

The subsequent discussion surfaced various significant points. For example, another key concern triggered by the sexual abuse crisis is the question of the financial accountability of bishops in diocesan governance and their (un)willingness to comply with suggested USCCB standards for financial administration even in the absence of disciplinary or penal measures for noncompliance with such standards.

While it is appropriate and necessary to highlight the imperative of lay assumption of various responsibilities especially in parishes if they are to be genuinely adults in the Church, a real problem at times is the unwillingness of pastors to create a climate of openness to such involvement. This in turn raised the issue of the necessity of ensuring the involvement of the faithful in the choice of their pastors in some fashion. This seems crucial if pastors with a properly consultative ethos are to be selected.

With all due regard for the need of structural change and further in-depth reflection on the pertinent issues, at times like Congar one must counsel a certain patient acceptance of suffering in the face of institutional inertia and at times hostility to change.

There needs to be serious theological and canonical work on different dimensions of ecclesial accountability, however valuable may be the input of the human sciences in this regard.

In discussing the scandalous situation of the sexual abuse of minors one must always realize that it is basically not an issue of sex but one of power. Hence behavior patterns conducive to such a power orientation need to be addressed, and a servant oriented style of leadership is indispensable. An emphasis on the exercise of church authority as service must be an integral part of clergy formation at all levels.

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