

Sexual Scandals Reveal A Problem of Belief

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Sooner or later, in some way or another, there will be an investigation as a result of the revelations concerning Cardinal McCarrick. The idea seems to be to discover what, within the structure of the Church, went wrong to allow for the abuse scandal to happen.

I'm not certain that's the problem. The problem, to me, is not one of structure, but of belief, or the lack thereof. In other words, we could replace every bishop and set up any number of "oversight committees" composed of any combination of laity and clergy you want, but, in the end, that won't solve the problem unless the persons involved—from pope to parishioner—believe what we profess. And by "believe" I mean honestly trying to live one's life and perform one's duties in accordance with the teachings of the Church. I am not saying that the Church should be comprised only of saints. From the time of Judas that has never been and never will be. We are all sinners and we all fall short, and so, in a way, this has always been "the problem." But each person in the Church needs to ask himself, "Do I believe what the Church teaches, all of it? If I don't, why am I here?"

It brings to mind a conversation I had some twenty-five years ago with a priest about what I saw as problems in the Church: so many Catholics contracepting, and so many supporting abortion. (At the time I had no idea what was coming down the pike.) He said that the problem was not, primarily, one of Church discipline, but of ecclesiology. He meant that so many have an incorrect idea of what the Church is. We see it as a some kind of social organization or political party where we each lobby for certain positions. We accept some, reject others,

while all the time trying to push the “organization” in the direction we think it should go. We’re wrong if we think that. The Catholic Church is a belief. It defines how we think, and, from that, how we live (or, at least, try to). At Mass we pray the *Credo*—I believe, not a *Cupio*—I want.

It is almost too much of a coincidence—whether of diabolic or divine origin—that the scandal concerning Cardinal McCarrick broke exactly fifty years (almost to the day) of the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae*. The Sexual Revolution was the greatest revolution in human history; it was greater than any technological or political revolution because it concerned not things relating to persons, but the human person itself. Wherever one falls on the line of accepting or rejecting *Humanae Vitae*, one cannot argue that where one falls fundamentally shapes how one views the human person, i.e., what a person is, and how he or she should act. The Church took one side. Many—including many of the clergy, publicly or privately, took another. That is, the Church said, “This is what we believe about the human person.” The others said, “We believe something else.” Now, Venerable Fulton Sheen once said words to the effect that, “If you don’t behave as you believe, you end up by believing as you behave.” That’s it in a nutshell. Many Catholics, again including many clergy, for some time, either deliberately or not, have not wanted to behave as they have professed to believe, and so they now believe as, in fact, they behave.

I need to make some qualifications here. I am not saying that those who don’t believe what the Catholic Church teaches are damned. That is a discussion for another time. Nor am I saying that the “many Catholics” deliberately said, “I am going to flout the Church’s teachings, and I don’t care what they are.” I’m trying to tie together these ideas of what the Church is, and what it is not, and how it has played out in the wake of the Sexual Revolution.

It is a fact that most Catholics reject the Church’s teaching on contraception. Many would say this, while most just act on it. This includes clergy, for if you

truly believed that close to ninety percent of your married parishioners were regularly engaging in a grave sin (which is what the Church calls contraception), wouldn't you at least try to persuade them otherwise? (In all my life, I've heard no more than five homilies on *Humanae Vitae*.) Many Catholics reject, by their actions if not by their words, what the Church teaches about abortion. It seems difficult for me to believe that one can say, "I believe that an innocent human being is being killed (which is what the Church teaches), but it is a personal choice." I know some people do, but most, in my experience, try some song and dance about not knowing when life begins or "balancing interests" or "living in a pluralistic society." No; if you saw three thousand innocent people a day lined up in the streets and shot you wouldn't be saying that. Nor would you be giving Communion and awards and degrees and teaching positions to those who support it. The fact is, you really don't believe what the Church teaches. Finally, it seems that most Catholics (including clergy) do not believe what the Church teaches about homosexuality—that it is intrinsically disordered. If you really believed someone had an intrinsically disordered inclination, you would help him to refrain from it, to repent of actions giving into it, and perhaps, if possible, be healed of it. You certainly wouldn't "celebrate" it, have "pride" Masses for it, or tolerate the promotion or acceptance of it, much less cooperate in allowing others to indulge in it. Again, it seems to me the fact is you really don't believe what the Church believes.

The Problem of Ecclesiology

In a sense, that's fine; you can believe what you want. But then we run up against what the Church is and the problem of ecclesiology. At the end of the day the Church is a belief, and if one doesn't believe what the Catholic Church teaches, one shouldn't be a Catholic. There is nothing—for the sake of this argument—wrong with that. For fifty plus years now, though, we have had many—including clergy—trying to live with a type of "ecclesiological cognitive dissonance," i.e.,

wanting to be *called* Catholic, but not wanting to *be* Catholic. And I say “wanting to be Catholic” because, again, even those of us who believe all the Church teaches frequently fall short. The intent, though, is to reconcile our lives with the teaching, not the teaching with our lives. (That’s why we also believe in and practice the sacrament of Confession.) I am sure this has always existed in the Church. I wonder, though, if the percentage has ever been as large, or reach as high up, as it has been since *Humanae Vitae*.

Ideas and beliefs have consequences. Different ideas on the human person will lead to different ways of acting toward human persons. Paul VI was prophetically clear on this in *Humanae Vitae*; if anything, he understated the case. The secular culture, though, has been aggressively logical in their illogic. Read the Supreme Court opinions in *Griswold vs. Connecticut* (allowing contraception), *Roe vs. Wade* (allowing abortion), *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey* (which defined liberty as “the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life”), and *Obergefell vs. Hodges* (allowing for homosexual “marriage”). They follow like dominoes.

And so those, including clergy, who accept (and by “accept” I mean not doing everything in their power to combat the idea) that contraception is a personal matter will accept that abortion is a personal matter and will accept that homosexuality is a personal matter. These same people, saddled with the idea that the Church is a social institution and not a belief, do not inquire into “personal matters.” (No one in the Republican or Democratic party cares what you do with your personal life as long as you give money and keep them in power.)

As I said before, I’m sure there have always been those in the Church who didn’t believe what they professed, and we’ve always had scandals. This idea, too, that one can pick and choose beliefs has roots going deeper than the 1960s. So why harp on *Humanae Vitae*? For two reasons. One is that *Humanae Vitae* was the

Church's great schism with modern culture; it was an official declaration (restatement, really) that it—modern culture—was wrong on a fundamental point concerning human nature. It was a fork in the road; the Church went right and the culture left. The second reason is that, till then, many Catholics had identified the Church with the culture and had identified themselves with the culture. They now had to choose. Instead, most blinked. The blinking became a habit, i.e., a settled matter of the Church at all levels to look the other way regarding “personal matters.” It was a tacit agreement to be tacit. Quite unintendedly, I believe it has led us to where we are now.

Intellectual Honesty is Required

All of which brings me back to the issue of commissions and investigations. I'm sure—I hope—it will help. Even if, however, we discover everybody who knew anything, and all those culpable are disciplined as severely as possible, I'm afraid we've just pulled out the tops of the weeds but let the roots alone. What is needed is for those—of whatever state—who don't believe what the Church believes to have the intellectual honesty to find another church. There are plenty out there that are much more in tune with your thought. I, for one, won't believe any the worse of you. I won't say you can't get to Heaven or can't have a relationship with Jesus Christ. I won't say you can't come to Mass. (I would say you can't receive Communion.) I may even be more civil to you. (On a personal note, I have a brother who some years ago left the Church because he disagreed with her teachings. While I thought his reasoning flawed, I nevertheless appreciated his intellectual honesty and integrity.)

Before they leave, however, I should suggest two things. One, read and pray about the teachings of the Church. Again, Venerable Fulton Sheen: “There are not one hundred people in the United States who hate the Catholic Church, but there are millions who hate what they wrongly perceive the Catholic Church to be.” He may be exaggerating, but he's close to the point. I've met few people who have left the Church who really know what the Church teaches and why. When you do, you

must be patient and honest. You may have been drinking the Kool-Aid so long you can't appreciate the wine. Two, look at the fruits. What has the Sexual Revolution brought us? Look around. Does our culture seem happy or healthy? Are families joyful? Even a train wreck may have a few survivors, but to me the answer is obvious.

Well, that is all well and good, you may say, but how is the pruning to be brought about? That is, how are we to make sure that Catholics—at all levels—really believe what the Catholic Church teaches? To a certain extent, we can't. We have no "windows into a man's soul." Although something along the lines of the Oath Against Modernism of Pius X may be helpful, it wouldn't be a cure-all. Some men lie under oath. We have to remember, too, that most of the clergy of the 1960s and '70s swore that oath, and then went on to become the bishops and rectors of seminaries of later years. It seems to me that the best way to ensure that Catholics believe what the Church teaches is to tell them bluntly what the Church teaches. It would be akin to choosing a major in college. You go to college intending to major in "X" because it sounds nice, or your parents did, or something like that. Then you start taking courses in that subject, given by men and women who really know and care about the subject, who "believe" in it. The deeper you get, the sooner one of two things happens. You either say, "This is for me," or, "How do I switch majors?" The same is needed in the Church.

Bishops and priests must give homilies centered on Church doctrine, the sort that would cause the man in the pew to say either, "This is for me," or, "When are the services at Good Shepherd Episcopal?" I am not trying to be "anti-ecumenical"; there is much about the Gospel that can be said in either a Catholic or Protestant homily. There is, however, also much that can't. And, again without meaning to be "anti-ecumenical," I submit that what can't be said in a Protestant homily must be stressed to strengthen Catholicism. The only way to get someone to buy

“Brand X” is to tell him what makes it different from “Brand Y,” especially when “Brand Y” costs a lot less.

The Dog that Won’t Bark

But what if—as may be the case—the bishop or priest doesn’t believe? We can’t force him to give those homilies. Then it’s a case of the “dog who didn’t bark.” The silence tells. Those higher up must ask—require—such bishops and priests to look elsewhere.

And here is the hard part. I’m afraid that now, and for some time to come, this stress should, and must, center around matters of the human person, i.e., sexuality, if you will. Why? Because that is where the problem lies and that is the main difference between “brands.” You don’t cure cancer by stressing hygiene. Different periods in the Church’s history have stressed different messages depending upon the danger facing the Church. It may have been the divinity of Our Lord, the need for poverty, or the danger of worldliness. (All of these, by the way, are still good fodder.)

As I said before, though, I believe the main disease in the Church, and in the world, has been, is, and will be for a while, matters of the human person, namely those “personal matters” that make us all uncomfortable. This is also where the Church presents a radically different “cure” than just about all of Protestantism. Some Protestant denominations may still believe that sexual relations outside of marriage are wrong; all have countenanced birth control; most have turned a blind eye to, if not sanctioned, abortion; and just about all have accepted homosexual relations as “normal.” Why should I be Catholic, and why should I pursue a vocation in the Catholic Church, when, frankly, for a lot less cost, I can be something else? Because we have the cure for the disease.

This may strike some as not being “pastoral.” Yet it seems to me that the first priority of a pastor is to protect the flock. Then, yes, he should seek after the lost

sheep *but bring them back to the flock*, not leave them in the wilderness and tell them it's fine to be where they are. (And getting lost himself in the process.) Also, this will seem to many to be “negative.” It need not, and, for the most part, should not, be so. To a cancer patient, radiation seems “negative” and is often painful. An alcoholic cringes at the “Twelve Steps,” and rightly so, for they are humbling and painful. But it's the path to health. From the cellar to the attic, we are all in for a lot of pain and humiliation. It's either that, or wait another ten or fifteen years for the next commission.

Editor's note: Pictured above is an image of Paul VI's prophetic encyclical from the new documentary [Sexual Revolution: 50 Years Since Humanae Vitae](#).

(Photo credit: filmmaker Daniel di Silva)