

Repairing the broken church

by Phyllis Zagano

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The heartbreak is that nobody in the Vatican seems to be in the dot-connecting business. No matter how many official reports or media exposés, no matter how many *ad limina* visits or episcopal memoirs, the bureaucracy just does not get it.

The Irish church is on the verge of total collapse. A third of the theologians in Germany are calling for reform. The US church suffers a scandal a day.

I am sick of it. You are too. Let's talk.

But let me set some parameters. For starters, I don't think there is anything wrong with vowed celibacy. Hundreds of thousands of men and women have lived contemplative or active lives dedicated to God and to the church -- the people of God. Many have lived in religious institutes and orders. Some have lived as consecrated virgins or as hermits.

Then there is the other celibacy, the celibacy required of most secular priests and all bishops in the Western church. That's fine too, up to a point. Too many secular priests cannot hack it. Some are infantilized by its requirements.

Why does it have to be this way? There are 153 fish in the apostles' net. Most are lay men and women. Then there are sisters and nuns, monks and friars, hermits, virgins, and lots of healthy single men who belong to the diocesan clergy. Of course there are dented, broken ones in the catch, but the bottom line is diversity of vocations. So what's wrong with a married priesthood?

That's the question at the heart of the complaints and many of the scandals. What married pastor, or his wife, would allow some weirdo to cultivate underage boys or girls? Not one. You know it. I know it.

Now bishops and chancery staff who looked the other way are having their comeuppance, and the whole church is paying for it.

Irish mothers are not hoping for a son to become a priest anymore. German theologians have had enough of the erosion of belief and practice. Americans from coast to coast are staggering under the weight of unending news reports about one crackpot situation or another.

Lately it's been Philadelphia (head of priest personnel arrested for moving pederasts); Los Angeles (a religious priest phones up a 61-year-old woman abused by him as a teenager); Louisville (a whistleblower alleges retaliation); and priests are jailed or headed that way in Albany and around the world.

Then of course there are the allegations of financial shenanigans in Milwaukee, civil suits against the current and former archbishops of Philadelphia, and the recurring memories of so many ordinary Catholics. Some of these latter came up at lunch this week: the teacher-priest in Phoenix whom all the boys knew was "handsy" and the priest-professor in New York who gave the football players "A's" so long as they gave him what he wanted.

The stories, no matter how many times they're told, are both painful and incredible in their repeating. They will not go away.

Here's one of mine. On the bus ride to my first day of Catholic high school, the sophomores warned the freshmen about Father Mott, who "liked" teenage girls.

Years later the diocese settled with a few of them. I cannot get it out of my head. If every girl on the bus knew, how come the bishop didn't? And if the bishop knew -- as I suspect he did -- why did he do nothing?

I mentioned this to a big shot priest of Mott's vintage years ago. "Oh, ho, ho, dirty old Jack Mott" he laughed. I can't forget that either.

You have your stories, too. The memories join the constant, nauseating drip. What's next? Another story from The Netherlands? Another lawsuit in Belgium? Another thirty-year-old cover-up letter from a Curial office?

Those German theologians and the hundreds of others who've joined them have a lot of items in their reform agenda. Some are easy. Some are hard.

Let's stick with the easy one: married priests.

A wider married priesthood -- one not restricted to a few disaffected Anglican clergy -- would be a giant step toward regaining the confidence of the huge percentages of Catholics watching, waiting, hoping for some meaningful renewal of what is rapidly becoming a moribund church.

Are the details a problem? Start by ordaining married men who have, or who can get, full-time paying jobs, as hospital or military chaplains, as professors and teachers, as social workers and canon lawyers. That way nothing -- and everything -- changes.

It's not that hard. It boils down to getting the bureaucracy, and by extension the many malformed celibate priests around the world, to grow up.

Loreto Sr. Luke Tobin often spoke of overhearing two bishops returning from a coffee break at the Second Vatican Council, where she was an observer.

“Why do they want to get married,” one Council father said to the other, “Let them have their women on the side.”

It’s got to stop. As the church rumbles along, all aboard are carsick from the bumps and fumes along the way. It needs to get repaired. Otherwise, each week’s church bulletin will have to include coupons for anti-depressants.

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