

GATHERING WITH BISHOP GEOFF ROBINSON

Monday, June 9, 2008 in La Jolla, California

Reflections - Thomas Doyle

1. Geoff Robinson's US speaking tour presented an opportunity for a meeting with some of the attorneys who have been deeply involved in the clergy sex abuse crisis in the U.S. as well as some of the experts who have been part of the overall response to this crisis.

Some of us originally hoped that we would be able to provide Geoff with significant factual information on the U.S. bishops' response to the crisis. We hoped he might be able to take this information and share it with higher ranking officials in the Vatican curia. This hope was born from our realization that the Vatican's information sources are limited for the most part to bishops whose reports are understandably subjective and inaccurate.

We began with this hope, however our expectations were changed once we had conversed with Geoff and had realized that he is clearly not an "insider" in the hierarchy and certainly not the Vatican. The U.S. papal nuncio had asked Geoff to cancel his tour. The prefect of the Congregation for the Bishops, Cardinal Giovanni Re, had initiated the move to try to convince Geoff not to speak. The archbishops and bishops of every diocese where Geoff was scheduled to speak sent letters which were made public. These letters were consistent in saying the same thing: a) Geoff was not allowed to speak in any Catholic building in the diocese, b) He should cancel his entire speaking tour, c) His book is causing confusion among the laity and disunity.

Geoff did not cancel his tour. He maintained the original speaking schedule with the talks being given in venues that were not controlled by the Catholic Church. In the west the secular press provided excellent coverage however their primary interest was the "dispute" as they saw it, between Bishop Robinson and Cardinal Mahony. Geoff took the "high road" and did not respond directly to any invitations by media to escalate the "dispute." Geoff expressed it thus: he is here to speak about clerical sexual abuse and the need to explore two areas of systemic causality: the exercise of power by Church authorities and the official teaching on sex and sexuality. He was not here to engage in a dispute with Cardinal Mahony or any other hierarch. Throughout his visit to the U.S. his conversations with the media were consistently dignified, insightful and forthright.

In his public talks and in his remarks at the meeting with the attorneys and experts he repeated that Pope John Paul II had not shown adequate leadership in the sex abuse crisis. This assessment was a refreshingly honest affirmation for those of us who have believed that the late pope not only showed *inadequate* leadership, but no leadership at all. He also shared some of his personal experiences in getting to know victims and their families in Australia which led him to put the welfare of the victims above the image of the Church. He repeated this sentiment in his public talk by stating that he chose to stand with the victims and not with the image of the institutional church. He also revealed much of his own personal story and provided a great deal of detailed information about how the Australian Church has responded to the sexual abuse problem.

2. There are significant differences between the Australian and U.S. experience. The variance in numbers of Catholics, bishops and priests is itself impressive. Geoff said there are 42 active bishops in Australia and he believed he could speak with and communicate with 30 of them. The comparison between the two countries is striking:

	Australia	U.S.A.
Dioceses	32	194
Total priests	3115	44,000
Total bishops	55	486
Cardinals	1	17
% of total population	27%	23%

N.B. The listing of bishops includes retired bishops and auxiliary bishops. Presently Australia has 6 active auxiliary bishops and a total of 19 retired bishops.

3. The attorneys and experts shared their experiences in dealing with bishops and superiors of religious orders in the United States. There is a common element that is obvious from the remarks of all: the U.S. bishops appear to be working in concert to resist any and all attempts at monetary settlements arrived at through the civil court system. The bishops do not seem to have developed any appreciable degree of pastoral sensitivity towards the victims or towards their families and loved ones. There are numerous examples of how bishops and their attorneys have lied, manipulated the civil law system, savaged victims, their witnesses and their attorneys and mislead the public through their public statements though which they try to appear contrite, concerned and sympathetic.

In stark contrast to the image the church's public relations people are spinning, there is the harsh reality of an institution that continues to use its power and resources to thwart justice, devalue and even destroy victims and to snuff out any attempt by priests or even bishops to call for justice and pastoral sensitivity.

The civil processes have been drawn out and very costly because of the commitment of the church's attorneys to use every possible tactic to resist disclosure of pertinent documents. In the course of these processes the victims were generally treated as the enemies of the Church. In a number of cases the victims' (plaintiffs') attorneys have been subjected to both public and private slanderous attacks by Church officials and/or their attorneys. The bishops have also resorted to the use of various means of character assassination of plaintiff attorneys and witnesses. They have also tried to stir up animosity toward victims who have received settlements by insinuating or saying outright that church closures, budget cutbacks and other financial problems are due to forced payments.

4. Some of the attorneys and experts are baptized Catholics who had been involved in varying degrees with the life of the Catholic Church. The involvement with victims and the direct experiences with the institutional church have left deep spiritual scars for many. The experience of the attorneys present reflects that of many attorneys who were not present: representing victims of sexual abuse and seeing first-hand the response of bishops and cardinals has caused a serious crisis of belief. Many have simply abandoned any involvement with the institutional Church in their private lives and some have gone even further and have seriously questioned the validity of most or all of the teachings of the institutional Church. Some have also radically altered their belief in God. The spiritual devastation has extended far beyond that of the victims. It has touched persons who have had no firsthand experience with clergy sexual abuse and has certainly impacted many who have been directly involved, even if for a short time.
5. There was a general opinion among all that it is hopeless to expect the bishops to change their approach. A few bishops have met with victims and a few of the diocesan review boards have left positive impressions on victims. In general however the experience in speaking with bishops, with diocesan review boards or with victim outreach coordinators has not been positive. In a significant number of cases the victims and their attorneys have been savaged by the Church authorities and by the church lawyers.

6. The Vatican officials do not have an accurate understanding of the nature of clergy sexual abuse and the impact on victims and their families. They do not comprehend how extensive abuse is throughout the U.S. The Bishops' Conference (USCCB) has concentrated on self-protection. It has issued reports and created certain administrative structures such as the National Review Board and Office of Child Protection. These do not report to the Catholic people in general but to the bishops. It appears that their primary focus is enabling the bishops in maintaining their image.
7. Bishop Robinson shared in some detail his own experiences with victims. He was selected by the Australian Bishops to be their representative to the victims. He has met with and spent significant time with hundreds of victims and with their families. These experiences caused him to come to grips with his own experience of sexual abuse as a young boy. As he listened more and more and probed into the meaning of sexual abuse he concluded that the systemic causes required an honest and fearless look at the use of power in the Church as well as the approach to human sexuality. He is well aware that his statements have caused concern on the part of Vatican officials. He stated privately and publicly that he believes we must address the problem honestly and follow the arguments wherever they may go.
8. The discussion centered on our shared experiences with clergy sex abuse victims. We also discussed some of the financial mismanagement and duplicity perpetrated by Church officials. Bishop Robinson expressed his surprise at the extent of financial impropriety. He also admitted that he was quite surprised at the consistent problems we have encountered with U.S. bishops and their response to clergy abuse. Bishop Robinson admitted that he found it difficult to believe that the U.S. bishops have acted as they have. We assured him that we respected and understood his feelings but admitted that we found it equally difficult to believe that a group of bishops, in this case the Australians, had not acted irresponsibly and even maliciously in their response to the crisis. Our collective experiences have been quite different from his experiences in Australia. He made it clear to us that he did not disbelieve anything he had heard but was finding it difficult to assimilate it all.
9. Bishop Robinson does not believe that the Vatican will ever respond as they should. In spite of the pope's words and gestures on his recent (April) visit to the U.S., it is highly unlikely that Benedict XVI will take any action against any bishop who had either been an abuser himself or had intentionally enabled cleric-abusers. We shared in the conviction that the Vatican and the pope will never take the action that is needed. Some of us may have found the pope's recent words and gestures somewhat responsive but the real proof will be in the follow-up actions and not the words. Thus far there has been no evidence that the U.S

bishops have taken to heart the pope's admonition that the bishops do everything possible to help the victims. There also has been no evidence that the pope has taken any decisive actions to see that his words are followed by the bishops.

10. We concluded by sharing the hope that our mutual support and collaboration will serve to help us protect children and vulnerable adults from abuse in the future. We also shared the hope that our mutual support will provide some degree of hope for those who have worked long and hard for justice for victims and accountability by the bishops.
11. Bishop Robinson spoke to a full house at the University of California in San Diego Faculty Club on Tuesday, June 10. His talk was forthright, refreshing and inspiring. I had heard him in Washington D.C. at the beginning of his tour and it was obvious that he was re-shaping his remarks to reflect what he was learning along the way. He clearly repeated that he believed Pope John Paul II had not provided leadership and cited the cases of Maciel Degollado and Cardinal Groer as examples of inaction. He also clearly supported the elimination of Statues of Limitation. He is not picking fights with anyone in the U.S. hierarchy or in the Vatican because that is not his purpose. Rather, he is committed to charity and justice for the victims of clergy sex abuse and has the wisdom to realize that the root causes are systemic and the courage to stand tall in the face of Vatican and U.S. hierarchical opposition and call for the search for truth wherever that search may take us.
12. Without wanting to sound arrogant or smug, I believe that those of us who have been on the inside of the clerical world have a more painful appreciation of Geoff Robinson's witness to the victims, their supporters, Catholics and the public in general. He had been in the seminary system and therefore the clerical world since age 12. He spent over a decade of his life studying in Rome without the opportunity to return to visit his homeland. He was named a bishop in 1984 and at that time entered the inner circle of the clerical-hierarchical elite. Nearly all of his years as a bishop have been during the pontificate of John Paul II who insisted on total personal loyalty from bishops and unquestioning assent to his version of orthodoxy. Truly, the clerical world has been Geoff Robinson's past, present and future. It was profoundly instrumental in forging his identity and value system. With this contextual background his public witness is nothing short of amazing and even shocking. While many bishops have agreed with him and have privately criticized the Church's and the Vatican's response to the abuse crisis, only two have publicly spoken out clearly and unequivocally, Tom Gumbleton and Geoff Robinson. Both have incurred an official rebuke from the Vatican and both have been left to stand alone by their "brother" bishops. Geoff (and Tom as well) has stood strong in spite of the public opposition of the bishops of Australia, the U.S. and the Vatican. He has not only publicly sided with the victims but he

has called into question two of the pillars that support the hierarchical world of image and control: the exercise of power and the traditional understanding of human sexuality.

13. To fully appreciate Geoff's challenge one must understand that the hierarchical governmental system with its monarchical style and appended aristocracy is officially taught to be of divine origin. In plain English this means that the Higher Power, the creator and sustainer of the universe, had decided about 2000 years ago that "He" would communicate with humankind through a male and celibate dominated power structure that would be essentially stratified but also contradictory to the words and actions of the embodiment of this Higher Power in human history, namely Jesus Christ. Christ, on the one hand made it quite clear that he had no use for arrogant churchmen and that his Father's love extended equally to the marginalized and disenfranchised as well as to the privileged. Yet the institutional Church wishes us to believe that on the other hand Jesus decided to start up a church that would be run like monarchy with people whom God loved more in leadership positions over those whom He loved a little less, namely the "lower" clergy and the laity.
14. By calling into question the Church's use of power Geoff has challenged not only the political structure of the Church but the very belief that this structure was founded by God and therefore must be retained without question.
15. The institutional Church has consistently resisted any questioning of its interpretation of the meaning of human sexuality. There are two kinds of sex: procreational sexual intercourse by married people which is acceptable, though virginity is better, and every other conceivable kind of sexual expression, gesture or thought which is gravely sinful. The Church's sexual teaching has been controlled by male celibate clerics who are forbidden to have any experience with it yet who believe have the God-given calling to dictate to everyone else, including married people, the when, how and why of sex. With the Church's history of a distorted and misshapen philosophy of human sexuality as a backdrop, Geoff's challenge is nothing short of an astounding prophetic gesture.
16. I have found it difficult if not impossible to conceive of the office of bishop as being divinely inspired and created and equally impossible to believe that individual bishops are selected through some arcane action of the Holy Spirit of the Higher Power. I have not had an experience of bishops as pastors living and acting in the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. Yet Tom Gumbleton and Geoff Robinson have given me hope that the compassionate and courageous spirit of Jesus Christ, infused in the Church's official leaders, is not mere myth. Their witness to Christ, though they are only two, goes a long way to overcome the constant spectacle we have been subjected to in America of clerics concerned

only with their image and their power and with no remote conception of the devastation caused by the clergy sexual and spiritual abuse debacle.

17. Cardinal Re and the various U.S. bishops who wrote letters to Geoff all parroted the same baseless concern: his words were causing confusion and sowing disunity. It is clear that none of these men have had the experience Geoff has had in ministering to the victims of the Church's dysfunctional clerical system. In all probability none have taken the time to read his book. Their concerns illustrate just how far out of touch the Vatican and most of the U.S. bishops are from the faithful, whom they claim they are trying to protect and whose support they need to sustain their lifestyles. If anything, the confusion has been caused by the bishops' and the Vatican's self-serving response to the plight of people savaged by sexual abuse. Geoff may be a sign of disunity with the bishops but for many he is a sign of hope because while he may be at variance with the bishops he certainly is one with the victims of the Church's sexual and spiritual abuse. To get the point, one need only ask that simple question: What would Jesus do? It would seem that Geoff Robinson asked himself that question...and had the courage to live out the answer.