

The Bishops' Fundamental Problem

Celibacy Makes Heartless Shepherds

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To understand how a number of Catholic bishops could have failed to protect children from abusive priests, and even have covered up such abuse, we must understand that for centuries Catholic hierarchy have kept themselves isolated from, have felt superior to, and have refused to listen to the Catholic laity. A significant part of the bishops' disregard for the laity and consequent heartless tolerance of child abuse is mandatory celibacy.

I must clarify that I am not considering effects of celibacy on either pedophilia nor on the shortage of priests. I must also clarify that good caring priests have made great contributions to so many people's lives.

The main focus here is how celibacy contributes to Catholic hierarchy not having as their highest priority the physical and moral safety of children and how celibacy contributed to their consequent cover-up of clergy sexual abuses for decades. How could this have happened in a Christian institution?

Catholic hierarchy picture themselves as "shepherds leading their sheep." By Webster's definition a shepherd "tends and guards" his sheep. Biblically, a good shepherd "knows his sheep" and "will lay down his life for his sheep." There are, in fact, a large number of good honest dedicated and caring priests.

Then what happened to the bishops' shepherding role in the long existing molestation of children by some priests... with ongoing knowledge of many Catholic bishops? One bishop said about his transferring abusing priests to new parishes and new victims, "I gave little thought to [it]." It is inconceivable that any dedicated parent would be so thoughtless and heartless to neglect the physical, psychological and moral safety of anyone's children.

But [arch]bishops have spent decades trying to overlook, deny, cover up, bully and buy themselves out of the problem of priests sexually abusing children. Lately, forced by the U.S. legal system, some in the hierarchy have finally become a bit more forthright... hardly a willing shepherdly concern. Now in deep legal and financial problems over their insensitivity to children, bishops have been making some very strange statements, foreign to Catholic ears. For the first time in perhaps two thousand years, some bishops are now saying they are "seeking forgiveness" of the laity, "turning to the Catholic people for their help," begging the "laity to be understanding," and trusting "the peoples' faith will not be shaken."

What is peculiar is that the hierarchy has never 'trusted in the faith' nor believed in the 'understanding of the laity,' nor sought the 'help' and certainly not the 'forgiveness' of the laity. In these paradoxes lie reasons why these 'shepherds' have not guarded our children.

Since the hierarchy sees itself as a God-appointed, nearly infallible authority, it feels it must ignore concerns and religious experiences of mere laity, "the simple faithful." Laity, viewed as "sheep" who are mundane and worldly, must be told what to do but are not to be trusted to have valid religious insights, even in matters of love, marriage, or family life. Bishops have steadfastly disallowed consultation with laity, "the simple faithful." Thus, unlike shepherds, the hierarchy hardly "knows their sheep" and has insisted on keeping it that way.

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The hierarchy has consistently discounted input from their laity as evidenced by their:

1) dismissal of responsible laity views in the Papal Birth Control Commission's recommendations, one of the few times laity, married couples and women were asked to contribute. 2) proclaiming that funerals done without a priest are invalid, not to be 'trusted' to the bereaved laity; 3) viewing Archbishop Weekland (Milwaukee) as disloyal because he consulted Catholic women on matters of family and reproduction; 4) stating that "lack of faith" of the laity is the main reason for lack of priests; 5) not consulting parishioners before pastors are moved into or out of a parish; 6) viewing Deacons as second class clergy because they are married; and 7) closing parishes due to a "lack of priests" when thousands of married priests and deacons would willingly serve and most laity would accept a married priesthood but are ignored. These examples are the norm, not the exception.

To understand some bishops' indifference to child molestations, one realizes that mandatory celibacy seems to be a principal cause for the hierarchy's indifference to Catholic laity and insensitivity to children. Celibacy necessarily separates priests from laity, women, families and real life. Celibacy is seen as elevating a priest to be 'closer to God.' The hierarchy views laity, who love each other, marry, and have marital relations and children, as inferior to priests. Faithful dedicated self-sacrificing married people are seen as somehow adulterated because they are not celibate. Likewise, priests who are married are unacceptable because they fell in love and thus "violated their vocation", i.e., celibacy. Thus, celibacy makes some priests and bishops into heartless shepherds.

Jesus never mandated celibacy. Most of his disciples, and large numbers of priests for 2000 years, were married. Justification of mandatory celibacy is based on a Manichean heresy that claims human bodies are evil. Consequently, celibacy is viewed as spiritual, pure and "dedicated to God's service" whereas marriage is deemed "in the flesh," worldly and dedicated to selfishness. Priestly purity arises from avoiding love, women and marital relations. This seems to arise from the Manichean heresy that holds that earthly things are dirty, impure, tainted and unworthy.

In contrast to the hierarchy's view, marriage, not celibacy, is the first vocation instituted by God. In Genesis, as we know, "... the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him... a partner'." [Gen. 2:18] "God created humankind, in his image... male and female he created them." [Gen. 1:27] "Therefore a man... clings to his wife... and they become one flesh" [Gen. 2:24]. Nowhere in scriptures is there any such explicit mandate for celibacy as there is for marriage.

Notwithstanding, hierarchical devaluing of sacramental marital life is essential to justifying mandatory celibacy as a more 'perfect life.' Virtually all persons designated as Catholic saints were celibate. Of the few married saints, many are honored for *abstaining* from marital relations and others for founding celibate religious orders after their spouses died or they abandoned their spouses. Virtually no saints are honored for leading loving and caring marital lives.

The hierarchy has even less respect for women, who are seen as "temptresses" who would "steal a priest's vocation." This "vocation" is interpreted, not as ministry to God's people, but rather as celibacy.

However, what if there were *married* auxiliary bishops in a chancellery office? When he came home to a good wife, it is very hard to believe that he would be long enjoying bed and board having told her that the Bishop had again transferred Fr. John, the-child-abuser, to yet another unsuspecting parish and her husband had done nothing to protect the children.

The institutional church protects its perception that celibacy is superior to marriage and promotes the illusion of celibate perfection by covering up hierarchical and priestly transgressions. Sadly, this is done by sacrificing honesty, trust, justice, and children's safety and innocence.

Laity's trust has been badly betrayed by the hierarchy's debacles in ignoring child abuse, shunning married priests, and condemning birth control. Sadly, I do not foresee the institutional church regaining respect from most Catholic laity until it finally truly values married life as equal to the priesthood and starts to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking through its laity, its women, its parents.

This is very unlikely to happen until celibacy is no longer required for priesthood.

The sad reality is that you can't have bishops protecting children from priests' molestation when their highest priority is promoting the illusion of celibate superiority.

Good shepherds do not tell their sheep that wolves are good for them as some bishops have done.

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