

chicagotribune.com

Abuse and the Catholic Church

Can the bishops ever be trusted?

By Anne M. Burke

Anne M. Burke is a justice on the Illinois Supreme Court and former interim chairwoman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops National Review Board

April 29, 2011

Just when it appeared that the fallout over the abuse scandal in the U.S. Catholic Church could not get any worse, another shoe dropped in Philadelphia.

On Feb. 10, 2011 three veteran priests of the archdiocese of Philadelphia were charged with rape and indecent assault, accused of the abuse of minors dating back to the 1990s. Monsignor William Lynn, who served as the archdiocese's point person for investigating reports of clerical sexual abuse from 1992 to 2004, was charged with child endangerment for allegedly covering up abuse by priests.

The archdiocese has placed another 21 priests on leave while accusations of child abuse are investigated. The district attorney's office in Philadelphia says there was "a pattern of the church looking the other way when it came to investigating these charges."

It appears that even after years of investigation of child abuse by priests, the cover-up of that abuse has been further institutionalized. Some of the alleged crimes in Philadelphia transpired while the National Review Board of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, on which I served, was trying to get to the truth of the scandal. The indicted monsignor is accused of turning a blind eye to things in his chancery office. Of course, to blame a clerical official, and not his archbishop, of such deviousness presents a mistaken analysis of how the church works.

The bishops say they responded to this scandal, and hold up as evidence the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which they put into motion back in 2002. I do not denigrate that historic step. It did a lot to make children safer in our Catholic institutions. It permitted the National Review Board the opportunity to examine the causes and effects of the scandal.

But the news that more than 24 active priests in Philadelphia face abuse accusations, and that some were allowed to remain in active ministry after accusations were made against them years ago, raises new fears.

For me, these are much more than institutional nightmares. This makes me wonder what kind of people we are dealing with when we engage the bishops. How is it that they say one thing and secretly intend something else? Are they ever to be trusted?

I remember the sometimes vicious response some members of the church hierarchy gave to the National Review Board when we were doing our work some years ago. Cardinal Edward Egan, the former archbishop of New York, actually wanted to ban us from his fiefdom, as if we were coming from some rival kingdom to challenge his rule.

All the events of our investigation and audit get colored with new meaning in light of the charges in Philadelphia. Little has changed.

Thomas Jefferson put it best: Honesty is the first chapter of the book of wisdom. I'm curious: How do the cardinals of the United States view the behavior of Cardinal Justin Rigali in Philadelphia, and the behavior of his predecessor, Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua?

I traveled on St. Patrick's feast day this year to Dublin for a law conference and was refreshed by the lyrical camaraderie that is such a part of Irish life. The journey was particularly energizing and fulfilling, but there also was an element of sadness to the visit.

It was easy to spot the first morning when I made my way to daily Mass. Since it was Lent, I expected to see an enlarged congregation. I found the opposite.

My hosts told me that the abuse scandal in the church in Ireland and the poor response from the Vatican seemed to have sealed the fate of Catholicism in Ireland for some time to come. A government investigation into the horror of Irish clerical abuse — both sexual and physical — brought everything to the surface. All the usual elements were there, thanks to the Irish bishops — cover-up, lying, bullying, threats, the hiding of evidence, the sealing of witness testimony, and most of all the willingness to let the guilty clergy get away with the crime.

During the most abject period of Irish history, when the English prohibited the practice of our faith, our Irish ancestors would walk for miles in the dark and rain to find a remote field in which a brave secret priest would celebrate Mass at the risk of his life for people desperate for the nourishment of the sacraments. The people risked all to celebrate the Eucharist in spite of every physical hazard imaginable.

The faithful have not been as absent from the celebration of sacraments as they are today since the Irish religious emancipation in 1826. What has changed? You don't have to look far. You see it in the distressed faces of the faithful. You hear it in the voices of the legal profession in Ireland who find what they have learned to be heartbreaking.

What is really sad is that the Vatican's understanding of what people really need is so totally off the mark. Perhaps if the pope had taken himself to O'Connell Street in Dublin or stood along the cobbles of old Dublin and wept with those who were passing by, he might have achieved a semblance of healing.

But he issued a papal letter, which, no matter how well-intentioned, is not the stuff that brings healing. People want their trust restored. No papal letter will do that. Certainly not for people whose ancestors risked their lives for the faith.

I believe that the virtue of truthfulness has been in trouble for a long time in the Catholic Church. Who could ever see this coming? Not me. I was an obedient Catholic schoolgirl, a true believer. It is not easy for us to unlearn being Catholic. I, for one, don't want to.

But I expect truthfulness at all costs from our leadership. If that cannot be supplied then we must go back to the drawing board. Do we not have the right to truthfulness? Perhaps a Council on Truthfulness might help to expand the importance of this critical virtue. Perhaps it could be a meeting of bishops and the faithful in which they share ideas and dreams for the church. Perhaps we could let the power of the virtue of truthfulness help redefine the proportions of holiness in the church. Liberal or conservative, truthfulness is a gift to all.

As Catholics we know that we must act with wisdom — we must forgive, but not forget. We must exercise good judgment and courage — both gifts of the Holy Spirit given at the time of confirmation. This means that we must be blunt with the Holy Father and the other men who continue by either business as usual, or misguided loyalty, to permit the unspeakable to occur.

I believe that when the truth flourishes we will see the return of those who have walked away from the church. We will see people choose holy orders as a way of life for the service of others. We will have no dark places to which misguided princes can abandon reality. We will not have criminal charges brought against those who choose the commission of a felony over the mandate of the gospel to be people of truth.

Anne M. Burke is a justice on the Illinois Supreme Court and former interim chairwoman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops National Review Board.

Copyright © 2011, Chicago Tribune

www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/ct-oped-0429-burke-20110429,0,4821972.story