

Father Lasch

personal website

"There are no cheap graces."

Saturday October 20, 2007

This is a statement of my formal acceptance of the 'Priest of Integrity Award' that is to be conferred on three priest, I among the three, at the Annual National Conference of the Voice of the Faithful at Providence, RI on Saturday, October 21st. It will be delivered in my absence by Ginny Hoehne, whose sone was abused by a priest in the Diocese of Cleveland.

On March 21st, 1985, my life as a Roman Catholic priest, pastor and human being changed forever. It was the day on which Mark Serrano revealed that he had been molested and raped by one of my predecessors, James Hanley, in the very same rooms I then occupied as the pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Mendham, New Jersey. James Hanley also sexually abused at least 18 other young boys and men that we know of. I suspect there are still others who have yet to come forward.

Shortly after Mark's disclosure, I made a preferential option for victims of sexual abuse by clergy or religious. In essence, I made a commitment to Mark and through Mark to all victims of sexual abuse that I would stand with them publicly and privately and would never act in their name or on their behalf without consulting them.

Moreover, I committed myself to data-based decisions as opposed to power-based decisions. By that I mean that all my decisions and actions would be based on hard and soft data rather than on force or fear or power. Church leaders tend to use force, fear and power rather than data and positive affirmation to enforce their teachings and decisions about the spiritual wellbeing of Catholics. But even when they accompany their decisions with data, they limit dialogue in such manner that stifles the pursuit of truth. In effect, truth is what they define as truth regardless of the facts. They have deleted the ancient notion of 'sensus fidelium' from their theological lexicon.

My experience as vice chancellor and bishop's secretary and then as executive secretary for pastoral ministry in the Diocese of Paterson for almost thirteen years opened my eyes to the vagaries of the clerical lifestyle including clandestine sexual relationships and allegations of sexual assaults against minors and adults. However, it was not until Mark's disclosure and my subsequent experience as a victims' advocate that my eyes were opened to the depth of deceit, manipulation of facts and legal maneuverings by many bishops and their 'advisors' that ultimately led to the most notorious cover-up of crime by a religious institution in modern history. Incidentally, may I suggest that had more women been involved in deliberative decision-making at the highest level of church governance, this tragic scandal of sexual abuse would have had a very different history and in the words of the psalmist, justice and compassion would have been the overriding mix that would have brought this terrible chapter to closure years ago.

I would be addressing these words to you in person today but for the fact that I myself at the tender age of 70 have found it necessary to be engaged in therapy for what I will call sub-post traumatic stress syndrome. Twenty-two years is a long time even for someone as experienced and defiant as I to face a wall of silence interrupted only by periodic stonewalling and excuses by those who had the power to heal but chose instead to use that power to re-victimize those whose wounds were still raw by prevarication

and equivocation.

The first general clergy meeting in our diocese following the now historic disclosures of sexual abuse in Boston was convened not to condemn the horror of sexual abuse but to inform priests of their canonical and civil rights if they should be accused. In that assembly were priests who did indeed sexually abuse young men after plying them with alcohol but because their victims were over 16 years of age at the time of the assault, they were considered 'consenting adults.'

In a subsequent dialogue with priests at their tri-annual convocation, the bishop referred to incidents of clerical abuse as allegations or in cases of proven abuse, moral lapses. The bishop was careful to distinguish between sin and proven criminal misconduct. Priests were invited to reach out to their brother priests against whom allegations had been made as an act of charity. No mention was made of their victims.

In a confidential report addressed to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on June 9, 1985, Father Tom Doyle, OP, JCD, noted canonist and former secretary to the Apostolic Nuncio, Ray Mouton, Esquire, and Father Michael Peterson, M.D., warned the bishops that the Church in the United States could suffer losses in excess of one billion dollars if they did not address the issue of sexual abuse by clergy with integrity and transparency.

The report was 'deep sixed' (buried) by Cardinal Bernard Law despite his promise to introduce it at a general meeting of the bishops.

Notwithstanding the often-expressed opinion among some including bishops' attorneys, editorial writers in the Catholic and secular press, who continue to state that victims are interested more in money than in justice, let them be reminded that from the earliest allegations until the present, victims sought an acknowledgement of the crimes perpetrated against them, a sincere apology, a full accounting of their handling of the allegations and a firm commitment that no child or young adult or any man or woman would ever be subject to any sexual assault by a priest. It was the bishops who turned immediately to their attorneys and after protracted and painful negotiations that included stonewalling and endless delays came to financial settlements that were protected by legal gag orders, ostensibly for the protection of the victims when in fact they were for the protection the Church. And of course, the bishops have disclosed little about church attorney fees.

Some may say this is all history and I say it is still the modus operandi of many American bishops and their advisors. The bishops may have followed the letter of the law in the implementation of the Dallas Charter but they have fallen far short of the spirit of the law and surely of the Gospel. As late as six months ago when I asked to speak with my bishop, his attorney said it was not in his best interest to speak with me. To which I replied, "Indeed it is not in his best interest, but it is in the best interests of the Church."

I have used the term 'many' in my references to bishops because I do not want to assume that every bishop should be painted with the same brush. However, where are the 'good bishops' who should be holding their brothers accountable? Who are they? Where are they?

Please be clear that the majority of men and women sexually abused by priests were 16 years or older. The canonical age of majority was not raised to 18 years of age until the mid-eighties. In as much as many of the allegations were made by adults whose abuse took place prior to the mid-eighties, they do not come under the Dallas Charter and Norms. Therefore, know that there are priests who have been guilty of sexual misconduct who are still functioning as "priests in good standing!"

In the meantime, bishops issue edicts about how to wear the stole and limit the role of lay ministers at

Eucharist. The world is burning and bishops are piddling in the pond.

Now that I have gotten that off my chest, again—I want to turn briefly to the positive.

I want to praise victim/survivors of sexual abuse by clergy and religious for their undying courage and say to them once more from the depth of my heart, “I am so very sorry for what you have endured and continue to endure. The pain that I have endured as an advocate does come close to what your and your families have suffered. I am so very, very sorry!”

To my brother and sister advocates, do take care of yourselves. Do not resort in anger to hateful epithets or to vindictive language in your pursuit of justice. Hold our bishops and their advisors accountable but do not bash them. Remember, data-based processes are more effective than power-based processes. Do your homework. Keep abreast of the latest studies on child abuse and the most recent insights of experts in psychology. Continue to lobby your elected officials providing them with solid information on sexual abuse and arm yourselves with examples of miscarriages of justice by both church and civil officials.

To my brother priests: I know there are more of you who have stood with victims even though for whatever reason, you declined to speak publicly. While I do not question your decision to remain silent, I ask you to search your heart and soul and ask you to at least speak in private to your bishop to let him know what you know and to assure him that your loyalty depends on his accountability as well as yours.

To my brother priests who knew and still know who’s doing what with whom, it’s never too late to take a courageous stand for justice and integrity even at the risk of a loss of a few perks or worse. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoffer, “There are no cheap graces.” The clerical system is broken and clerical privilege is on the way out.

To members of the VOICE of the FAITHFUL, take the words of Bill Casey and David O’Brien in their recent article, *Shared Burden*, to heart: “VOTF, it is our conviction, provides [the] opportunity at a particularly critical moment in U.S. Catholic history. Since the sexual- abuse crisis exploded in 2002, the bishops have taken some significant steps to prevent future abuse, but they have failed to address what we think are the underlying causes of the worst scandal in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States. Bishops are unlikely to open up the decision-making process unless there are strong, independent Catholic organizations working to make the church’s pastoral planning, personnel policies, and financial operations more transparent, honest and accountable.” [Commonweal, October 12, 2007] (*For the full text of the article, click ‘Notes, Quotes & Comments’ on my website.*)

I dream of that day when our bishops will speak as vehemently against the slaughter of the innocent souls of those who have been sexually abused by a priest or religious as they do about the death of a child in the womb.

I dream of that day when bishops, priests, deacons, religious and lay people will once again consider their common baptismal call to be one people of God, sharing in the joys and pains of the entire Body of Christ, indeed of the world, as the most significant sign that Christ is indeed alive. I dream of that day when transparency will replace secrecy, when truth will be honored not by exception but by rule, when integrity will be the umbrella virtue that authenticates the gospel without equivocation.

Until that day, my words remain firm: “There will be no forgiveness and healing until there is justice; no justice until there is the full disclosure of truth; no disclosure of truth until there is full accountability.”

We are not there yet but we must not let hope die.

I am deeply grateful for and humbled by the honor you have conferred on me.

Kenneth E. Lasch
Diocese of Paterson

The following is the acceptance speech of Carolyn Disco whose involvement in Church reform issues vis-a-vis the sexual abuse scandal has won her the St. Catherine of Siena Award at the general meeting of VOTF.

Hope in truth and justice, not damage control

Catherine of Siena Award
VOTF Convention, Providence, RI
October 20, 2007

I am both deeply moved and humbled even to be nominated, for this is an extraordinary honor. I just assumed someone of the national prominence of Justice Anne Burke would be selected. To follow in her footsteps as the second recipient of this Award was a stunning surprise. I thank the committee for naming me.

I am here because I have come to know survivors of clergy sexual abuse, both personally and through the documents from diocesan secret archives. Like many who joined Voice of the Faithful, I am repulsed by the betrayal of bishops who protected the institutional church at the expense of vulnerable children. So many survivors do not know God's love, how precious they are in His eyes. That is what was stolen from them. The destruction of a child's trusting relationship with God, his spiritual heritage, is especially cutting.

William D'Antonio and Anthony Pogorelc conclude accurately in their new book, *Voices of the Faithful: Loyal Catholics Striving for Change* that "revelations of the underbelly of the church were a surprise to (VOTF members, who) were not in possession of the 'cynical knowledge' of insiders who knew the church bureaucracy and of what it was capable."

Catherine of Siena, in her day, had that cynical knowledge and set a course for doing something about it. Her voluminous letters to popes, kings, cardinals, clergy, and laity circulated widely, not being meant solely for the recipient. I believed they functioned as the medieval equivalent of op-eds, letters to the editor, commentaries, and press conferences. I imagine she might be a prominent blogger today.

Catherine's writing largely focused on God's love for us as the ultimate reality. So she reached out in love to those she rebuked. This did not restrain her sharp vocabulary about corruption in the Church, but it did leaven her appeals to show of what goodness her correspondents were capable – if only they opened their eyes.

Whether through inability or choice, the denial of reality, or refusal to see what is before us, is the source of inexhaustible evil. Perpetrators rationalize the true nature of their abuse; bishops deny their role in enabling it; and the laity too often turns a blind eye to the bishops' denials. The danger though is to assume that everyone is blind except me, and so Christ's admonition to remove the plank in one's own eye is cautionary.

Nonetheless, the reality I see is that the scandal is not history, but history in the making. The removal of over 700 priests from ministry is a very significant step, however reluctantly bishops adopted zero tolerance. Yes, surveys, studies, policies, procedures, Review Boards, audits, background checks, training and financial settlements are ongoing, thank God. And the recognition of sexual abuse throughout society is a huge advance triggered by the Church's exposure.

My concern though is that among the administrative measures, there are signs that damage control overrides transparency. Why did the bishops' survey exclude mentally handicapped victims, if their abuse did not begin before their 18th birthdays? Is that not an offensive restriction? Why were the victims of seminarians who did not go on to ordination likewise excluded?

Someone in my parish was apparently not counted under that limitation. Why in my state are there vastly divergent findings between truly independent attorney general audits, and the bishops' audits? Ultimately, the spirit in which something is done determines the integrity of the outcome.

Justice Burke spoke at our conference in Indianapolis about her three years on the National Review Board. She said she learned to second-guess what bishops told her, to look for hidden agendas, and to count her fingers and toes after dealing with officialdom. As soon as the pressure was off, some bishops tried to neuter accountability. I find the same, after five years of prodigious research.

So, where does hope lie? As it must, in keeping our eyes on Christ. This is about the incomparable love of God, embraced in and through His Church, and to which we must respond with all our heart and soul and strength. Reform is hard work, but the symbol of the Church is the cross of redemption, not a happy face.

I have a vision for reconciliation among the People of God, a term that includes the hierarchy as well as the laity: 1) expeditious negotiation of settlements with survivors, 2), public release of documents about sexual abuse and 3) the admission by bishops of their true culpability in the scandal. Wishful thinking perhaps, but hopeful.

One impediment in settlement negotiations is bishops' continuing use of the first amendment defense, an unnecessary, hurtful delay tactic. Since the guiding principle is to glorify God in all we do, bishops should forego them in response to survivor lawsuits. By distorting the church autonomy doctrine, bishops in effect claim the right to be negligent in supervising predator priests, and exempt themselves from neutral principles of law to protect children. Why? In order to freely exercise our Catholic faith. That twisting of reality does not advance the Kingdom.

Understand, survivors seek justice in the courts because the criminal statutes of limitation have run out. Filing a civil lawsuit is the only way to publicly identify their abusers, and learn the truth about what bishops knew, when – the basis of a just outcome, and of preventing future abuse. And, yes, compensation is long overdue.

But bishops have a precious opportunity here to reconcile with survivors. Instead, prelates often leave them bleeding, as they hand out checks. Survivors appreciate when it does not take the immediate threat – and I mean a day or so – of bishops being cross-examined in open court, before settlements are concluded. The impression, valid or not, is unavoidable: pay whatever is necessary to keep bishops off the stand and hide evidence. The many millions dioceses can really find when cornered reinforce this judgment.

Far better to follow the Gospel willingly, not under the legal gun. What is the profit really in putting survivors through the judicial meat grinder for four, five, or even 10 years as in Providence? Bishops can and should grant some measure of justice before their last legal maneuver expires. Engage the better angels of your nature and do so, in the Lord's name; make it as much a pastoral as a business decision.

Settlements will be paid in the end anyhow. As to concerns about financial impact, sin and crime have consequences, and we all as the Body of Christ share in them. Jesus rejected notions like "it's not my fault," and so should we. Child sex abuse survivors stand as victims of the Church herself, and as such,

have a special claim on our conscience. Let's pay the price in justice, not in charity, and then move on together with heads held high.

Settlements have concentrated the minds of all institutions, not just the Catholic Church, to the penalties of failing to put children first. They are a powerful deterrent to future recklessness and negligence. Money is not an inconsequential concern.

My second wish, the public release of documents by dioceses and religious orders, holds an important key to healing and prevention: Documents offer survivors the validation they so desperately need. Surely, that is a grace in keeping with the Scriptural truth, that what is done in darkness will be revealed in the light. Moreover, with documents public, bishops have no excuse for scorched earth tactics just to keep secrets. Negotiations are free to proceed based on genuine transparency.

My last dream for reconciliation, the admission by bishops of their real culpability, finds resonance in the writing of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian executed by the Nazis. He said, "Communicating truthfully means more than factual accuracy... There is a way of speaking which is... entirely correct and unexceptionable, but which is, nevertheless, a lie... When an apparently correct statement contains some deliberate ambiguity, or deliberately omits the essential part of the truth... it does not express the real as it exists in God."

The reality that exists in God is honored when bishops own the truth of their conduct. It sets them free, even if it is incriminating. They must admit the particulars of what they did and did not do – not in passive euphemisms like "mistakes were made" or "some persons experienced harm."

Reject the bleached generalities and spin of public relations – what Bonhoeffer calls lies. Embrace authentic humility, another word for truth, and acknowledge, "I lied to survivors, covered up sexual abuse and criminally endangered children." That confession, that penance would be a gift to survivors and the Church of astounding proportions. Thousands of documents on www.BishopAccountability.org provide all the evidence needed, what my attorney general called, for example, a "willful blindness... and conscious course of deliberate ignorance," in criminal violation of child endangerment statutes.

Let me speak directly to survivors and their families as friends and fellow advocates: Will all of you who feel comfortable doing so, please stand for half a minute while I recognize you as our distinguished guests?

I thank you from my heart for coming forward. Because of your courage, innocent children are being protected, dangerous molesters are being removed, and negligent enablers are being exposed. What an extraordinary legacy you bring in forcing our Church to face the truth! As innocents yourselves, who suffered at the sinful hands of priests, bishops, cardinals, abbots, seminarians, deacons; religious sisters and brothers; lay volunteers, teachers, coaches, and employees; your experience is the impetus for reform and purification. Look what you are achieving by bringing us to a new day of truth. Thank you, thank you.

My time must be more than up, and as Catherine often plainly and directly ended her letters, "I say no more."

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