

## **The Present Crisis through the Lens of the Laity**

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"The gates of hell will not prevail against it." A dramatic and comforting idea to a child growing up in the 1940s and 1950s. And what were the gates of hell?

In that Cold War era, they were the forces of persecution. Out there. Confronting us. In Eastern Europe. In Communist China. These were the successors to the Roman emperors, creating modern martyrs.

I grew older. I went to Catholic schools, good Catholic schools, Chicago Catholics schools. In addition to learning many admirable things (like, I learned to love the church), I learned about bad popes. I learned about the sale of indulgences. I learned, from the sisters, about Joan of Arc, tried by a church court and burned alive for heresy and witchcraft. Eventually I learned about full-scale persecutions that we, not they, had conducted. The gates of hell, it turned out, were not only "out there," but also "in here."

And though the church taught, and I believed, that the gates of hell would not prevail, I also learned that the church could do grievous damage to itself, so that in nations, long Catholic, and among people, long Christianized, the gospel no longer was heard and the sacraments were no longer received.

I grew still older, and I learned that the gates of hell were not necessarily the despair-inducing gateway of Dante's Inferno [abandon all hope, ye who enter here], nor the fire encircled, monster-guarded gates of Milton's imagination. The gates of hell could also be more modest, undramatic, everyday passages, through which we as easily slip by a furtive act of accommodation, cowardice, silence or sloth, as by some bold act of rebellion. I discovered the gates of hell not only in the bad popes but in the good but righteous and narrow-minded ones, not only in corrupt Catholics but in evasive and conformist ones. I discovered, as we all eventually do, the gates of hell in my own acts of commission and omission.

The current scandal, though overwhelming, is not then a novelty in the history of God's people. Faced with the daunting task of speaking to you at a time like this, I turned to a book I admire, written in the late forties by the French theologian, Henri De Lubac. *The Splendor of the Church* is a book that foreshadowed much of Vatican II, and by its unflinching honesty made clear why a Vatican II was so necessary.

We are all human, De Lubac begins one passage – actually he wrote "we are all men," but I made this one slight adjustment – "and there is none of us but is aware of his own wretchedness and incapacity; for after all we keep on having our noses rubbed in our own limitations. We have all, at some time or other, caught ourselves red-handed...trying to serve a holy cause by dubious means. . . . So that there are scanty grounds for making exceptional cases of ourselves; and none at all for the withdrawal implied in a grimly-judging eye. If we behave in that way, we fall into

an illusion like that of the misanthrope, who takes a dislike to humankind, for all the world as if he himself were not a part of it:..."

It is when we cease to hold ourselves apart with "a grimly judging eye," De Lubac writes, that "the staring contrast between the human wretchedness of those who make up the Church, and the greatness of her divine mission, will no longer be a scandal to us; for we shall first have become painfully aware of [that wretchedness] in ourselves. Rather, it will become a stimulus. We shall understand how a certain sort of [self-]criticism which is always directed outwards may be nothing more than a search for an alibi designed to enable us to dodge the examination of our consciences. And a humble acceptance of Catholic solidarity will perhaps be more profitable to us in the matter of shaking us out of some of our illusions."

You can understand why I found that passage so appropriate. We come here aware of our wretchedness, having had our noses rubbed in our limitations, knowing that we have served a holy cause by dubious means, hoping that the very contrast between our wretchedness and the church's mission may guard us against forms of [self-]criticism that are only a search for alibis.

But it is De Lubac's presiding note of "humble acceptance of Catholic solidarity" that captured me above all. That solidarity has been brought home day after day to millions of Catholics as—with dread—we pick up the newspaper. In the best of times, the news is excruciatingly full of victims – but these are the church's victims, our victims, and the church's victimizers, our victimizers. Solidarity has seldom been so painful, or so difficult to sustain, or so humbling, or, in the end, so important. Certainly, responsibility for the present crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States rests squarely on some shoulders more than others—and responsibility for responding to it does as well. But, with De Lubac's help, I come fighting the temptation to separate myself, to address "you others" rather than us, to employ the grimly judging eye so congenial to editors.

That is not the only temptation that we must fight:

We are tempted, for example, to imagine this crisis is going to be swiftly and conclusively resolved by decisive action at this meeting. Decisive action is, of course, essential. It means that the church will not be in worse shape when you leave than when you arrived. But we know that even the best policy on paper must be implemented. We know that there remains a backlog of abuse cases to be addressed. We know that wounds have been opened, anger provoked, suspicions planted, and questions raised that cannot be dealt with here and now—but must be dealt with over time, conscientiously and purposefully.

What if we left here having really absorbed the idea that the Catholic Church in the United States will never be the same? We would know then that what is done here today and tomorrow can only be a down payment on what you—and what all of us—must do over years to come.

We are also tempted to imagine that this scandal has not touched our faith. Do you find grim comfort in polls showing that between 75 and 80 percent of the Catholic population merely blame you bishops rather than question their faith? But what about the one in ten who does question it? But would that even be all! We know that faith can be challenged by tragedy and

personal crisis, weakened by mobility, and rendered complicated by intermarriage. It will be at moments of distress, despair, dissatisfaction, and disagreement – when faith is already under strain– that the legacy of this scandal will be felt, another source of doubt, a ready source of disgust, an easy source of cynicism.

Think for a moment of what a central event Vatican II was in most our lives—eye opening, mind shaping, formative in multiple ways. Historian John McGreevy has pointed out that especially this generation of young Catholics already tending toward detachment, this scandal is, in effect, their Vatican II. How crucial, then, the ending of this story.

A third temptation is to blame outside forces rather than examine our own consciences. The media. Anti-Catholicism. Political groups working to discredit the voice of the Catholic Church in public life. Plaintiffs' lawyers. Insurance companies. Blaming others is a natural impulse—an impulse most American church officials thankfully have resisted. The problem, of course, is that outside forces have played a role in making this scandal what it has become, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for dubious ones. No honest chronicle could avoid noting that. But no honest appraisal of responsibility would let that become an alibi.

Finally, we are tempted to view this crisis only in institutional terms. What are the consequences for parishes, seminaries, hospitals, soup kitchens, and shelters? For numbers, and finances, for vocations and benefactors? We should worry, of course, that is pastorally responsible. But we must recognize what has happened is a terrible blow to the church's witness in the culture, a blow to its credibility in proclaiming the good news, a blow to its ability in the public square to assist the poor, to protect the vulnerable, to help the immigrant. Who will listen when Catholics offer their well-developed theological and philosophical vocabulary to our civic debates over war and peace, debt relief, the economy, welfare reform, stem cell research?

Whatever is accomplished, then, at this meeting can only be a beginning.

In thinking about what must yet be done, I keep coming back to two central topics: truth and trust. Obviously they are related. Today lay people lack trust because they lack truth. And they cannot find the truth because they no longer have trust in their bishops.

The truth is that we don't know the truth, the full truth, about this sex abuse scandal. Despite the endless reports, sometimes because of the endless reports, we don't know the truth. Yes, we know some truths—and they are horrifying and overwhelming. So overwhelming that we can scarcely keep track of times and places and numbers. But these facts we do know leave many questions unanswered, even unasked. Having read more of these accounts than I wish I had to, I know that the puzzle doesn't fit together. And I believe many of you feel that way, too.

We need to pursue the question: How did we get into this mess? Given the efforts in many dioceses over the last ten to fifteen years, why are so many people convinced that children are still in danger? Why are people so ready to believe that nothing has been done? People are saddened, even heart-broken, and angered by the violation of children, of course, but also by the violation of the trust they had in their shepherds. Anger seems to increase by the day. And a sense of outrage is almost everywhere accompanied by a sense of utter helplessness.

For beyond the puzzle of what transpired in church decision making, there are the larger questions about deeper causes. There are no end of explanations offered: celibacy; homosexuality; emotional and sexual immaturity; the permissive sixties; the repressive fifties; dissidents; lack of priests; lack of accountability; a clerical club protecting its own; the loss of collegiality. The current crisis has put these topics before us – sometimes glibly, sometimes thoughtfully. Some are controversial, some involve the global church, all are more complicated than most proponents admit, and none can be resolved quickly.

But whatever the causes of the scandal, the fact is that the dam has broken. A reservoir of trust among Catholics has run dry. This scandal has brought home to lay people how essentially powerless they are to affect its outcome—and virtually anything else to do with the church. When we ask, "What can I do?" what lay person isn't brought up short in realizing, forty years after Vatican II with its promise of consultation and collaboration, that our only serious leverage is money? That in itself is a scandal.

The dam has broken. Will we ever know the truth? Can trust really be restored? There are many matters that must be discussed: not here, not today—but very soon. Let me be clear: What you must do at this meeting today and tomorrow must not be overwhelmed by these related matters. But clearly the level of mistrust, loss of confidence, and anger flows from more than this scandal.

Bishops are among other things, guardians of truth. Today you are badly handicapped in this role. How much has been due to an active intent to obscure or deceive, how much to responses made without adequate preparation, the fact remains that, in too many instances, some of you have said things that later proved to be contradicted by the facts, you said things that were not true. But not all of you did that. And yet, like the undifferentiated blur of dark deeds, all of you are subject to the same undifferentiated suspicion, the same loss of trust.

Everyone speaks of the loss of trust that this scandal has caused. But what about the loss of trust that preceded it – a loss expressed by both liberals and conservatives, across the spectrum of Catholic views. Why, in other words, had the reservoir of trust run so low?

The causes are many. Secrecy is one. Careerism another. Silent and passive acquiescence in Vatican edicts and understandings that you know to be contrary to your own pastoral experience. Another is a widespread sense of double standards. One standard for what is said publicly and officially, another standard for what is held and said privately. One standard for the baptized, another for the ordained. One standard for priests, another for bishops. One standard for men, another standard for women. One standard the ordination of heterosexuals and what now threatens to become another standard for homosexuals. One standard for justice and dialogue outside the church, another for justice and dialogue within.

We all know there are deep differences in the church and in your ranks about the sources and solutions of the different crisis. In fact, one side sees as solutions precisely what another sees as sources of the crisis. I know that different groups of Catholics would fill in the specifics in different and often contradictory ways. Still, what all are feeling is a lack of candor, honesty, integrity.

Much has been said and written about the laity's growing distrust of bishops. Let me take note of something else: the hierarchy's distrust of the laity. (I will pass on the issue of your distrust of one another).

When there is no genuine effort to build accountability and transparency into diocesan and parish governance; when we hear those rote phrases about the church not being a democracy, as if it were a system only of majority vote, and not also of checks and balances and of consultation; when we are unilaterally admonished against discussing some topics; when we know that so many bishops and priests cannot or will not say publicly what they really think, especially now when people long to hear an honest word of explanation, when the Vatican appears to place hopes for priestly vocations in the strict liturgical separation of the ordained and the lay, what conclusion can be drawn except that you don't trust us?

If the laity were trusted, why would so little real, institutionalized role have developed in parochial and diocesan decision-making? Of course, such a role would reflect genuine trust, not blind trust. The wisdom of the scriptures, Hebrew and Christian, the wisdom of the church instructs against blind trust. The laity should not have blind trust; nor should bishops, not toward the laity, not toward the clergy, and not toward your fellow bishops.

We can restore trust in the church and in church leadership only if church leadership begins to trust the church – the 99 percent of the church that is the laity. As Newman observed, "the church would look foolish without them."

We can no longer indulge the slothful habit of postponing the church that we need until the next papacy, until the seminaries are full, until the controversies are resolved, until some faithful remnant rules the church. We need to breathe new life into the project of church renewal that we have neglected for too long. There is much that we must begin to talk about together.

De Lubac in the passage I quote urged, "A humble acceptance of Catholic solidarity." "It will," he concluded, "help us to fall in love once more, from a new standpoint, with those elements in the wisdom and the institutions and the traditions and the demands of our Church which we were coming near to understanding no longer."

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