

Pentecost Sunday: Where is the Spirit?

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It has been over a month since my abrupt dismissal from the Air Force chaplaincy was made known through the secular media. Since that time I have received hundreds of messages of support by mail, email and phone from people throughout the US and in other countries as well. It has been impossible for me to respond to each message with a personal expression of my gratitude. I deeply regret this and hope to be able to accomplish this task some day in the near future. In the meantime I want everyone to know how deeply grateful I am for this incredible support. More than any other experience I can remember, it has fortified my faith in the goodness and integrity of the true foundation of Christianity.

More important than support for me however, is the clear recognition and support of the message I have tried to proclaim and the thousands of people I have tried to call attention to: first and foremost, the many men and women who have been sexually abused and spiritually devastated by the Catholic clergy and the institutional church. Second and no less important are the thousands of Catholics who have experienced the callous injustice and lack of genuine pastoral concern by the same institution and its clergy. In the course of the past few months I have had the good fortune to be at a number of VOTF, Call to Action and Survivors' meetings. These experiences have done more to invigorate my faith than anything else could possibly have achieved. Like so many of you, I have regularly wondered if the Holy Spirit really is present, or on a long, long vacation in some other galaxy. Hearing the outrage, the concern and the hopes of so many has convinced me that this Spirit is with God's people. The problem is that the men, and some women, who claim to be professionally attuned to this Spirit, are either deaf or ignoring the message.

Many people have expressed concern, anger and disbelief at what has happened to me. I can assure you that my experiences are very minor compared to the deep spiritual harm that has been inflicted on the clergy abuse victims and so many others, by members of the Church's official leadership. I know that in past decades people suffered such injustices and abuse silently, with little or no support. It is far different today and for this we are blessed with the fact that people are emerging from ecclesiastical control in ever increasing numbers and loudly expressing their outrage over the horrendous sexual abuse that has ruined the lives of thousands, the dishonesty that fostered this abuse and the myopic narcissism that continues to fuel the defensiveness and denial on the part of Church leadership.

The events of the past few weeks have been incredible. The hierarchy, from the Vatican on down to local bishops, seems intent on bringing more ridicule on itself and more alienation from faithful Catholics. The British author Hilaire Belloc once said "*If any man should deny the divine origin of the Roman Church, let it be known that no mere human institution, conducted with such knavish imbecility, would have lasted a fortnight.*"

Belloc's conviction eloquently expressed what so many of us feel, especially after these past few months. If many questioned the sincerity of the hierarchy's expressions of concern for the clergy sex abuse victims, recent events should have erased any doubt that the governmental levels of the Catholic church care little if anything for the feelings of victims and laity alike. The move by a group of American Bishops to sabotage the work of the National Review Board was devoid of any shred of integrity or concern for the millions harmed directly or indirectly through this twenty year debacle. To add narcissistic insult to the injury, several bishops had the audacity to complain that they were being "beaten up on" over the sex abuse scandal. In all of the letters sent by the bishops to Justice Anne Burke, not one mentioned the victims. What greater proof of the assertion voiced by Dr. Gene Kennedy in a recent column that its "all about them."

If the never-ending saga of the episcopal bungling of the sex abuse nightmare weren't bad enough, we have the spectacle of a few bishops using the Eucharist as a political weapon, reverting back to a dead age when the bishops presumed the people were too stupid to know how to vote. The surface excuse is defense of the Church's teaching on the sanctity of life but one wonders if the real agenda isn't regaining the illusory control they thought they once had over the minds and hearts of believers. Were they consistent they'd be denying each other the Eucharist. If life is sacred in all its forms, what about those lives that have been physically and spiritually maimed by the clergy's own breed of sexual abusers who were consistently enabled by shepherds more concerned about their image and power than about human moral and spiritual life?

On May 28 the pope told a group of American bishops that the Catholic Church (translation, The Bishops), is called upon to respond to the religious needs of a country "*increasingly in danger of forgetting its spiritual roots and yielding to a purely materialistic and soulless vision of the world.*" I for one felt a sense of outrage when I read that statement. If truth were to be told, the pope should have scolded the bishops for their incisive role in promoting a vision of the *Church* and not our society, as materialistic and soulless. He would have won back immense credibility for this wobbly institutional church by demanding that the bishops stop worshipping their own pomposity and start spending the bulk of their time sitting in the homes of the thousands of victims of clergy sexual and spiritual abuse, listening to their pain, absorbing their anger and trying to make a small step forward in the healing process.

Needless to say such a hope is not even worthy of the status of a papal pipedream. Instead, the latest act in this *Theater of the Absurd* is the celebration of Bernard Law's rehabilitation from "poor pummeled cardinal" to Vatican Prince. Some Vatican insiders claim the appointment reflects sympathy for the disgraced archbishop whom some believe was unjustly treated as a scapegoat. Lunacy at its worst! The appointment is a gross insult and a revictimization of the hundreds of victims from Boston whose abuse was enabled by Law's support for the culture of clerical abuse. It is an insult to millions of lay men and women and hopefully thousands of clerics who are struggling to live the vision of Vatican II of the church as a "people of God."

This bizarre appointment causes us to rightly question the pope. Either he still doesn't

get it or worse still, he does get it and he doesn't really care. Yet perhaps there is a third possibility shared by the pope and his bishops: not that they *don't* get it, or *won't* get it but they *can't* get it. Why? Perhaps because they can't see beyond the titanium strength shield of clericalism to the reality that their vision of Church is an anachronism long since boxed up and relegated to the storage room of the museum of life.

While thousands continue to hope, pray and work at pumping life into the contemporary tragedy of organized Catholicism, the minuscule minority, mostly from the clerical elite, who dream of a Catholic Restoration to the Golden Age, seem much more like crazed crew members of the sinking Titanic, boring holes in the hull to let the water out.