

A Crisis of Saints

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Headlines were captured in February by the tragic reports that as many as seventy priests in the Archdiocese of Boston, Massachusetts, allegedly have abused young people whom they were consecrated to serve. In the wake this news, allegations of sexual abuse by Catholic priests have sprung up nationwide. It is a huge scandal, one that many people who dislike the Catholic Church because of its moral teachings are using to claim that the Church is hypocritical and that they were right all along. Many people have come up to priests like myself to talk about it. I imagine many others have wanted to but have refrained out of respect or from not wanting to bring up bad news.

We need to tackle the issue head-on. Catholics have a right to it from their clergy. We cannot pretend it doesn't exist, and I would like to discuss what our response as faithful Catholics should be to this terrible situation.

The Judas syndrome

The first thing we need to do is to understand this scandal from the perspective of our faith in the Lord. Before he chose his first disciples, Jesus went up the mountain to pray all night (Luke 6:12). He had many followers at the time. He talked to his Father in prayer about whom he should choose to be his twelve apostles-the twelve whom he would form intimately, the twelve whom he would send out to preach the good news in his name. He gave them power to cast out demons. He gave them power to cure the sick. They watched him work countless miracles. They themselves worked countless others in his name.

Yet one of them turned out to be a traitor. One who had followed the Lord-who had seen him walk on water and raise people from the dead and forgive sinners, one whose feet the Lord had washed-betrayed him. The gospels tells us that Judas allowed Satan to enter into him and then sold the Lord for thirty pieces of silver, handing him over by faking a gesture of love. "Judas," Jesus said to him in the garden of Gethsemane, "would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 24:48).

Jesus didn't choose Judas to betray him. But Judas was always free, and he used his freedom to allow Satan to enter into him, and by his betrayal Jesus was crucified and executed. But God foresaw this evil and used it to accomplish the ultimate good: the redemption of the world.

The point is, sometimes God's chosen ones betray him. That is a fact that we have to confront. If the early Christians had focused only on the scandal caused by Judas, the Church would have been finished before it even started to grow. Instead they recognized that you don't judge a movement by those who don't live it but by those who do. Rather than focusing on the betrayer, they focused on the other eleven on account of whose work, preaching, miracles, and love for Christ we are here today. It is on account of the other eleven—all of whom except John were martyred for Christ and for the gospel they proclaimed—that we ever heard the saving word of God, that we ever received the sacraments of eternal life.

We are confronted by the same scandalous reality today. We can focus on those who have betrayed the Lord, those who abused rather than loved the people whom they were called to serve. Or we can focus, as did the early Church, on those who have remained faithful, those priests who are still offering their lives to serve Christ and you out of love. The secular media almost never focuses on the good "eleven," the ones whom Jesus has chosen who remain faithful, who live lives of quiet holiness. But we the Church must keep the terrible scandal that we are witnessing in its true and full perspective.

Great saints of scandal born

Unfortunately, scandal is nothing new for the Church. There have been many times through the ages when things were much worse off than they are now. The history of the Church is like a cosine curve with many ups and downs. At the times when the Church hits its low points God raises up tremendous saints to bring the Church back to its real mission. It's almost as if in those times of darkness the light of Christ shines ever more brightly. I would like to focus on a couple of saints whom God raised up in such difficult times, because their wisdom can guide us during our own difficult time.

Francis de Sales came along after the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was not principally about theology—although theological differences came later—but about morals. Martin Luther, an Augustinian priest, lived during the reign of perhaps the most notorious pope in history, Alexander VI. This pope never taught anything against the faith—the Holy Spirit prevented that—but he was a wicked man.

He had nine children from six different concubines. He put out contracts on the lives of those he considered his enemies.

Luther, like everyone, must have wondered how God could allow a wicked man to be the visible head of his Church. All types of moral problems confronted Luther even in his own country of Germany. Priests were living in open relationships with women. Some made exaggerated claims about indulgences. There was terrible immorality among lay Catholics. Luther was scandalized, as anyone who loved God should have been. He allowed the scandal to drive him from the Church.

Eventually God raised up many saints to combat this erroneous solution and to bring people back to the Church Christ founded. Francis de Sales was one of them. At the risk of his life he went through Switzerland, where the Calvinists were popular, preaching the gospel with truth and love. Several times on his travels he was beaten and left for dead.

Someone once asked him to address the situation of the scandal caused by so many of his brother priests. What Francis de Sales said is as important for us today as it was then. He did not pull any punches. He said, "While those who give scandal are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder [i.e., destroying other people's faith in God by their terrible example], those who take scandal-who allow scandals to destroy their faith-are guilty of spiritual suicide." They are guilty, he said, of cutting off their life with Christ by abandoning the source of life in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. He went among the people in Switzerland trying to prevent their committing spiritual suicide on account of the scandals. As a priest today I would say the same thing to you.

What should our reaction be then? Another saint who lived in a difficult time also can help us. Francis of Assisi lived in the thirteenth century, which was a time of terrible immorality in central Italy. Priests were setting horrible examples. Lay immorality was terrible, too. Francis himself while a young man gave scandal to others by his carefree ways. But eventually he was converted back to the Lord, founded the Franciscans, helped God rebuild his Church, and became one of the great saints of all time.

There is a story told of Francis of Assisi that sticks in my mind from one of the biographies I read as a seminarian. Once one of the brothers in the order of Friars Minor who was sensitive to scandal asked him, "Brother Francis, what would you do if you knew that a priest celebrating Mass had three concubines on the side?"

Francis replied, "When it came time for Holy Communion, I would go to receive the sacred body of my Lord from the priest's anointed hands."

Francis was getting at a tremendous truth of the faith and a tremendous gift of the Lord: God has made the sacraments "priest-proof." No matter how holy or wicked a priest is, provided he has the intention to do what the Church does, then Christ himself acts through the priest, just as he acted through Judas when Judas ministered as an apostle. So whether Pope John Paul II or a priest on death row for a felony consecrates the bread and wine, it is Christ himself who acts to give us his own body and blood. Francis was saying he was not going to let the wickedness or immorality of the priest lead him (Francis) to commit spiritual suicide.

Christ can work still and does work still even through the most sinful priest. And thank God! If we were dependent on the priest's personal holiness, we would be in trouble. Though they are chosen by God from among men, priests are tempted and fall into sin just like anyone else. But of course God knew that from the beginning. Eleven of the first twelve apostles scattered when Christ was arrested, but they came back.

The only authentic response

There has been a lot of talk in the media about what the response of the Church ought to be to these scandalous deeds. Does the Church have to do a better job in making sure no one with a predisposition toward pedophilia gets ordained? Absolutely. But that is not enough.

Does the Church have to do a better job in handling cases when they are reported? Absolutely. Though the Church's procedures for handling these cases are much better today than they were twenty years ago, they can always be improved. But even that is not enough.

Do we have to do more to support the victims of such abuse? Yes we do, both out of justice and out of love. But not even that is adequate. Cardinal Bernard Law has persuaded many of the medical school deans in Boston to work on establishing a center for the prevention of child abuse, which is something we should all support. But that by itself is not sufficient.

The only adequate response to this terrible scandal, the only fully Catholic response—as Francis of Assisi recognized in the 1200s, as Francis de Sales recognized in the 1600s, and as countless other saints have recognized in every century—is *holiness*. Every crisis that the Church faces, every crisis that the world

faces, is a crisis of saints. Holiness is crucial because it is the real face of the Church.

There are always people-a priest meets them regularly, and you probably know several of them-who use excuses for why they don't practice the faith, why they commit spiritual suicide. It may be that a nun was mean to them when they were nine or that they find the teaching of the Church on a particular issue too burdensome. There are many people these days who say, "Why should I practice the faith, why should I go to church? The Church can't be true if God's so-called chosen ones can do the types of things we've been reading about!"

This scandal is a scaffold on which some will try to hang their justification for not practicing the faith. That is why personal holiness is so important. Such people need to find in all of us a reason for faith, a reason for hope, a reason for responding with love to the love of the Lord. The beatitudes in Christ's Sermon on the Mount are a recipe for holiness. We all need to live them more.

Do priests have to become holier? They sure do. Do religious brothers and sisters have to become holier and give ever-greater witness to God and heaven? Absolutely. All people in the Church have the vocation to be holy, and this crisis is a wake-up call.

It's a tough time to be a priest today. It's a tough time to be a Catholic today. But it's also a great time to be a priest and a great time to be a Catholic. Jesus says, "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Matt. 5:11-12).

I have been experiencing that beatitude firsthand, as have other priests I know. Earlier this week I had finished my exercise at a local gym and was coming out of the locker room dressed in my black clerical garb. Upon seeing me, a mother hurriedly moved her children out of the way and shielded them from me as I was passing. She glared at me as I passed, and when I was far enough away she finally relaxed and let her children go-as if I would have attacked them in the middle of the afternoon at a health club!

But while we all might have to suffer such insults and even slander on account of Christ, we should indeed rejoice. It's a great time to be a Christian, because this is a time in which God really needs us to show his true face. In bygone days in America, the Church was respected. Priests were respected. The Church had a reputation for holiness and goodness. Not so at the moment.

The Church will never fail

For almost three years of my life in the early 1990s, while in my car I listened to nothing but tapes by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, one of the greatest Catholic preachers in American history. On a couple of his tapes for priests' retreats, Bishop Sheen said that he preferred to live in times when the Church has suffered rather than thrived, when the Church had to struggle, when the Church had to go against the culture. It was a time for real men and real women to stand up and be counted. "Even dead bodies can float downstream," he said, pointing that many people can coast when the Church is respected, "but it takes a real man, a real woman, to swim against the current."

How true that is. It takes a real man or a real woman to stand up against the current that is flowing against the Church. It takes a real man or a real woman to recognize that when you are resisting the flood of criticism, you are safest when you stay attached to the Rock on whom Christ built his Church. This is one of those times. It's a great time to be a Christian.

Some people are predicting that the Church is in for a rough time, and maybe it is. But the Church will survive because the Lord will make sure it survives. One of the greatest comeback lines in history was uttered two hundred years ago. As his armies were swallowing up the countries of Europe, French emperor Napoleon is reported to have said to Church officials, "*Je détruirai votre église*" ("I will destroy your Church")." When informed of the emperor's words, Ercole Cardinal Consalvi, one of the great statesmen of the papal court, replied, "He will never succeed. We have not managed to do it ourselves!" If bad popes, immoral priests, and countless sinners in the Church hadn't succeeded in destroying the Church from within, Cardinal Consalvi was saying, how did Napoleon think he was going to do it from without?

The Cardinal was pointing to a crucial truth: Christ will never allow his Church to fail. He promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against his Church (Matt. 16:18); that the barque of Peter, the Church sailing through time to its eternal port in heaven, will never capsize-not because those in the boat won't do everything sinfully possible to overturn it but because Christ, who is captain of the boat, will never allow it to happen.

The magnitude of the current scandal might be such that some will find it difficult to trust priests in the same way as in the past. That is regrettable, though it might not be a completely bad thing. Yet you must never lose trust in Christ! It is his

Church. After Judas's death the eleven apostles convened; the Holy Spirit chose Matthias to take Judas's place, and he proclaimed the gospel faithfully until he was martyred for it. In the same way today, even if some of those the Lord chose have betrayed him, he will call others who will be faithful, who will serve you with the love with which you deserve to be served.

This is a time in which all of us need to focus ever more on holiness. We are called to be saints, and how much our society needs to see this beautiful, radiant face of the Church! You are part of the solution-a crucial part. And as you go forward in Mass to receive from the priest's anointed hands the sacred body of your Lord, ask Christ to fill you with a real desire for sanctity, a real desire to show his true face.

One of the reasons I am a priest today is because when I younger I was under-impressed with some of the priests I knew. I watched them celebrate Mass and with little reverence drop the body of the Lord onto the paten, as if they were handling something of small value rather than the Creator and Savior of all, rather than *my* Creator and Savior. I remember praying, "Lord, please let me become a priest, so I can treat you like you deserve!" It kindled in me a great fire to serve the Lord.

Maybe this scandal can kindle in you the same thing. If you choose, this scandal can lead you down to the path of spiritual suicide. But it should inspire you to say finally to God, "I want to become a saint so that I and the Church can give your name the glory it deserves, so that others might find in you the love and the salvation that I have found."

Jesus is with us, as he promised, until the end of time. He is still in the boat. Just as out of Judas's betrayal he achieved the greatest victory in the universe-our salvation through his passion, death and resurrection-so out of this new scandal he may bring, *wants* to bring, a new rebirth of holiness, a new Acts of the Apostles for the twenty-first century, with each of us-and that includes *you*-playing a starring role. Now is the time for real men and women of the Church to stand up. Now is the time for saints. How will you respond?

Source: <http://www.catholic.com/documents/a-crisis-of-saints>