

Scandals in the Church Today–Don't they Negate It's Authority to Teach the World on Matters of Faith and Morals?

Lets be clear right from the start. I am in no way trying to defend, condone or minimize the clerical sexual abuse scandals that have occurred in the Catholic Church, or the occasions where others may have imprudently (or even worse in some cases) tried to “cover up” particular situations.

Normally I wouldn't tackle this sort of an issue in this column, as I generally try to focus on explaining the teachings of the Church from Sacred Scripture and the writings of the Early Church. But the clerical abuses we have seen, especially those of recent times, have seriously shaken some people's faith in the Church itself -to the point where many are asking: if the Church's own ordained leaders can't live up to the standards that the Church itself holds up to the world, what right does the Church have to tell us anything, especially about morality? It all seems to ring of massive hypocrisy.

At first, this seems like a reasonable argument, but we must consider several important things.

Firstly, consider the role of a parent, which is not unlike the role of the Church. If we had to be perfect to teach morality, wrong and right, to our children, most of us could probably teach very little to nothing. How many have been asked, “Dad, did you ever do that when you were younger?” I remember a lady relating that very question to me regarding teaching her daughter about the morality of premarital sex. Her reasoning went along the lines of, “if I did it, what right do I have, and how hypocritical it would be, for me to counsel my daughter to live up to a standard that I couldn't live up to myself.”

Well, the short answer here is that, if we are the moral yardsticks against which we will measure what we teach and do not teach our children, this world is in more trouble than we all first thought! We learn from our mistakes, we grow in grace and wisdom. We can absolutely proclaim the things we know to be good and true, whether we have been able to live them ourselves or not -Jesus calls us to this [see Mat 18:15-18, “If your brother sins... tell him his fault”]. And we can certainly teach our children to unequivocally follow the way of truth that Jesus has revealed to us through His Church and His Word, despite our own failings and weaknesses.

But secondly, and more importantly to the particular point, the Church is not just a human institution. Jesus Himself founded the Church –**HIS** Church -and left it behind for the purpose of faithfully teaching His truths and administering His Sacraments.

As the wisest of builders, He built His Church, His House, on rock, [Mat 7:4-27, Mat 16:15-19, Eph 2:19-20), and promised “*the gates of Hell would not prevail against it*”

[i.e. it will never fall], and then left it His truths [1 Tim 3:15, the Church is “the pillar and foundation of truth”). He then endowed the Church with the very authority that the Father had given Him [cf. John 17:18, Jn 20:21-23, Mat 28:18-20), and left it “*the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven*”.

He then promised to send the Holy Spirit to guard the Church and guide it “*into all truth*” (John 16:13), and to “*teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you*” (John 14:26), and to “*declare to you the things that are to come*” (John 16:13).

In 2 Timothy, St Paul then further explains how this truth will be passed on in a living way through the Church: “*Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us... and what you have heard from me before many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.*” [2 Tim 1:13-14 and 2:2].

And finally, Jesus commissioned His disciples to go out, make disciples of **ALL** nations, teaching them to **observe all that He has commanded** (Matt 28:19-20), and promising that He would be with them “*always, to the end of the age*” (Mat 28:20, John 14:18).

This Church Jesus founded and commissioned is historically and unarguably the Catholic Church, and it still speaks today with exactly the same authority that Jesus gave it from the beginning. It has no authority to change or “adapt” the teachings that Jesus and the Apostles left it, only authority to interpret and proclaim them. It is a divine institution, founded by Jesus himself, and is guarded from teaching error by the Holy Spirit. That is why we listen to it –despite the fallenness of its members.

So yes, the Church is a divine institution -but made up of weak, sinful human beings. And we cannot necessarily expect the same perfection from its members in their daily lives as we do from the doctrinal teaching of the Church itself. Jesus handpicked 12 apostles as the foundation for His Church (cf. Eph 2:19-20, Rev 21:14), yet one of them was Judas. And when Jesus told parables of what the Kingdom of Heaven (essentially, the Church) was like, one such parable (Mat 13:24-30) described weeds sown by an enemy among the wheat. The weeds were permitted to grow up amongst the wheat, and then separated at the harvest. We see a similar situation in the Church today –and for the last 2000 years.

It is desperately saddening to hear of the scandals that have occurred in the Catholic Church –and in any organization for that matter. It may shake our faith in humanity, but we shouldn’t let it shake our faith in God’s ability to work through the Church He founded and sent the Holy Spirit to guard and guide. He promised the gates of Hell would not prevail against it and that is exactly what He will do. Even when its members fail in their personal lives, the Church itself will never fail in faithfully teaching what Jesus handed on to it.

Ultimately, what we must keep clearly in mind is that it is **personal sin that is involved here** in these scandals we are seeing, and **not the infallibility** of the Church or the reliability of its teaching -or it's God-given role to be the "pillar and foundation of the truth" (**1 Tim 3:15**). God can work through fallen human beings to accomplish His plan, and there is no doubt of that.

When Jesus spoke of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in Mat 23:1-3, he certainly scolded them for their scandalous behavior, but He also admonished His followers to still follow their teachings –because they taught with the authority that God Himself had given to them: *"Jesus spoke to the crowds... saying, 'The scribes and the Pharisees have taken **their seat on the chair of Moses**. Therefore, **do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example**. For they preach but they do not practice.'"*

This is the Scripture we must keep ever before our hearts when we are tempted to discouragement at the poor example that some in the Church have given, without doubting for a moment that God can still work through them and in spite of them. Then we must get down on our knees and pray for every one of them like we have never prayed before, because, "except for the grace of God, there go I..."

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