

Do scandals in the Church mean that the Church has no authority to teach morality?

By Graham Osborne

The new wave of clerical sexual abuse reports we are seeing is saddening to all of us. Our priests and bishops are called to be lights to the world, and representatives of Jesus on earth – moral leaders and sound teachers of the Faith. When they betray these important roles, especially when it involves children, it can shake our faith, in both the priesthood and in the Church itself.

The effects have been so serious that some have even left the Church over this, or have dismissed it as not possibly being the church that Jesus established on earth. Many are understandably asking: if the Church's own ordained leaders can't live up to the standards the Church 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.

So I felt it important to revisit this issue and address some of these legitimate questions.

But let me be absolutely clear. My intention is not to defend, condone or minimize any clerical sexual abuse that has occurred in the Catholic Church, or occasions where some have tried to “cover up” particular situations. My intention is to provide some context and perspective from which to view this current situation. Let me look at this from four different angles.

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. 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 can certainly teach our children to unequivocally follow the truths that Jesus has revealed to us through his Church and his Word, whether we have been able to live them ourselves or not [see Mat 18:15-18, “If your brother sins,.. tell him his fault”]. And so it is with those in the Church as well.

But secondly, and more importantly to our particular point, the Church is not just a human institution. It is a divine institution, the 'body of Christ', founded by Jesus himself to faithfully teach his truths and administer his Sacraments here on earth.

As the wisest of builders, Jesus built his Church, his House, on rock, [Mat 7:4-27, Mat 16:15-19, Eph 2:19-20), promised “*the gates of Hell would not prevail against it*” [ie. it will never fall], and then left it His truths [1 Tim 3:15]. He then endowed the Church with the very authority that the Father had given him [cf Jn 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*” (Jn 16:13), and to “teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (Jn 14:26), and to “declare to you the things that are to come” (Jn 16:13).

This Church Jesus commissioned is historically and unarguably the Catholic Church. And it still speaks today with exactly the same authority and protection from error by the Holy Spirit that Jesus gave it from the beginning. It is a divine institution, built upon rock by Jesus himself, but made up of weak, sinful human beings. 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. Remember that Jesus hand-picked twelve apostles as the foundation for his Church (ct. Eph 2:19-20, Rev 21:14), yet one of them was Judas. And when Jesus told parables of what the Kingdom (essentially, the Church) was like, one such parable (Matt 13:24-30) described weeds sown by an enemy among 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 the past 2000 years!

Ultimately, what we must keep clearly in mind is that *it is personal sin that is involved* in these abuse cases we are seeing today, and *not the infallibility of the Church, the legitimacy of its authority, or the reliability of its teaching* – or its God-given role to be “the pillar and foundation of the truth”, as St Paul teaches in 1 Tim 3:15. To leave or reject this church because of the individual failings of some of its members would be a grave mistake.

All of us are fallen in some way. But God can still work through fallen human beings to accomplish his plan. When Jesus spoke of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in Matt 12:1-3, he certainly scolded them for their scandalous behaviour. But he also exhorted his followers to still follow their teachings. *Why?* Because they taught with the authority that God himself had given them: “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 us when we are tempted to discouragement by the poor example that some priests have given. God can still work through his Church in spite of them.

But finally, I want to give some scale to this abuse issue. And again, *not to excuse anyone*, but to make sure we are seeing things in the proper perspective.

Listening to the news, one might get the feeling that this problem is virtually everywhere you turn. But US studies have shown that less than 0.5% of priests have been involved [see Catholic Answers’ published report on www.Catholic.com]. That’s 1 in 200, though this number can vary up or down regionally, and has been as high as two percent in some areas. And very few of these were actual “pedophiles”, involving children - not that that should make things any better.

Most priests are good holy men. They have committed their lives to Jesus and his Church, and have left everything to follow him and share the Gospel. Rather than being coloured by a few that have broken their vows, they need our prayers, admiration and love. The finest human beings I have ever met in my life – next to my saintly Catholic Grandma – have been Catholic priests.

And there is a related side note to consider in all of this as well. Many contend that the abuse scandal is largely the result of the discipline of celibacy. But this cannot be. Why? Because Jesus clearly calls for it in Matthew 19:12 above. Recall, “Some.... have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.” And St Paul, celibate himself, appeals strongly for the same in 1 Corinthians 7:7--38: “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God.... he who marries his betrothed does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better” [note that St Paul refers to celibacy here as a “gift”!]

When we examine the research (and space permits only a cursory overview here), in fact, it shows that sexual abuse has a much higher percentage of occurrence in Protestant churches than within celibate Catholic clergy --and this according to Protestant research! (cf Christian Ministry Resource's 9-year U.S. study; also "Pedophiles and Priests", Philip Jenkins). When we look to the secular world, again, research shows that the percentage of abuse is much higher among non--celibates than among celibate Catholic clergy. If celibacy were at the root of things, we would expect the opposite. Jesus picks 12 as his first priests, and one is Judas. We should expect difficulties and temptations to come --and some, sadly will fall in this area.

And secular research also bears this out. Studies show that sexual abuse is much more common in the general population than in the celibate Catholic priesthood - as much as ten times higher according to some research. For example, Charol Shakeshaft, the lead researcher in a 2004 study prepared for the U.S. Department of Education, concluded that, "the physical sexual abuse of students in schools is likely **more than 100 times the abuse by priests**."

And sexual abuse also appears to have a much higher occurrence in Protestant denominations than in the Catholic Church as well, contrary to what we hear reported in the media - and this according to Protestant research! [see Christian Ministry Resource's 9 year U.S. Study]. When a situation involves a "non-denominational church" down the road, it may only make the local news, if it makes the news at all. But when it involves a local Catholic parish, it can quickly become international news, and everybody hears about it.

Now none of this excuses the issue. Just because this abuse is happening more in other groups than in the Catholic Church is certainly no reason to celebrate. Every single case of sexual abuse - in the Catholic Church or elsewhere - is heart wrenching and indefensible. But these studies do provide some perspective to the sometimes less than balanced media coverage on this issue we see today.

My point is that, in some cases, the scale that this abuse is happening on has been made out to be much greater that it really is. And at times, there has been a decided media bias against the Catholic Church, when compared to other groups, leading to potential misperceptions. This does not make this abuse scandal any more tolerable, but it does give us a proper vantage point to view and assess it from. Sexual abuse is an issue of personal sin, but does not touch on the legitimacy or authority of the Church Jesus founded. We should expect weeds and wheat.

But I want to conclude with a final thought. If you were the Devil, where would you focus your efforts? Wouldn't your primary target be the Church that Jesus founded? And while you could certainly attack individual members of that church, if you could take out a priest or a bishop and scandalize thousands, wouldn't that be exactly what you would do? I have no doubt our priests and bishops are under intense spiritual attack. 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."