

The Catholic Crisis

Tikkun Daily Blog: (te-kun) to mend, repair and transform the world

First, the Catholic Crisis:

Writing from the perspective of a dedicated lay Catholic, Sylvester debunks the way the popular culture reports the story but at the same story recognizes a genuine challenge to the faith of the laity.

In Part I on "How pop culture gets it wrong and distorts the truth," he examines press reports on the recent Vatican norms. If you read these press reports "at face value," he concludes that: "you would think that the Church must be run by people who are either overtly evil or mentally ill."

After investigating the reports in depth, he concludes that the real culprit is what he calls "the spiritual virus of our times: the partial truth." These are simplistic, morally black-and-white "meta-stories" that suppress the human complexity of the truth.

At the same time, in Part II: "When faith is challenged, Catholics must grow up," he recognizes that the recent scandals are a challenge to lay Catholics to face the truth and questions without "the quick and easy explanations." This involves a painful struggle with doubts and difficult questions but that struggle has led him to a deeper and more mature faith-relationship to the Church.

We think you'll find David Sylvester's vision is prophetic and powerful, showing how these difficult times can lead to renewed spiritual bonds between laity and Church in the future.

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The Catholic Crisis: Part I: How pop culture gets it wrong and distorts the truth

by: David A. Sylvester on July 26th, 2010

If you have followed the latest news, you might think that the Catholic Church has just made changes to "equate" the sexual abuse of children with ordaining women as priests.

That's what the *New York Times* told us over a week ago:

VATICAN CITY – The Vatican issued revisions to its internal laws on Thursday making it easier to discipline sex-abuser priests, but caused confusion by also stating that ordaining women as priests was as grave an offense as pedophilia.

The decision to link the issues appears to reflect the determination of embattled Vatican leaders to resist any suggestion that pedophilia within the priesthood can be addressed by ending the celibacy requirement or by allowing women to become priests.

Naturally, if you take this report at face value, as I did and many others have, including some on Tikkun Daily, you would think that the Church must be run by people who are either overtly evil or mentally ill. So I started looking into this episode. The more I looked, the more complicated it became.

After investigating it this week, as a veteran journalist and a Catholic, I think I found the real culprit in this story. The real culprit is a spiritual virus of our times: the partial truth.

The partial truth has two lives. In its first life, it is a partial lie. It creates a false frame for the debate, makes moralistic dichotomies and leads to simplistic, destructive decisions. In its second life, it also contains some truth. The truthful side of a partial truth needs to be confronted honestly in its true depth

so that understanding can develop and real solutions sought. But the lying quality of the partial truth has so confused and distorted the debate that an honest search for a solution has become all the more difficult and even derailed.

The difference between the two is spiritual. The lying side of a partial truth demonizes, condemns the Other, seduces us into feelings of moral superiority and incites us to destroy. The truthful side of a partial truth comes from compassion and understanding. It leads us to grieve while we seek justice and to move forward into a new, healed reality.

In what follows, I hope to put this incident under a spiritual magnifying glass and show the difference between the two, although it may sound, at this stage of the abuse crisis, like heresy. In Part I, we will look at the false side of the partial truth that distorts our understanding of the crisis. In Part II, we will look at the true side, the side that does reflect a genuine spiritual crisis within the Catholic Church.

At the outset, it's important to recognize that we are shifting the examination away from the level of practical day-to-day events to the level of the meaning of these events. It's easy to think this evades the actions necessary for responding to a social pathology as horrific as the sexual abuse of children by priests. But in my opinion, the source of the practical actions lies in this invisible realm of meaning.

Before we act, we usually draw conclusions about what an event means, perhaps even unconsciously. This conclusion then points us in the direction of action. If we find the meaning of the event is different than what we think, we may find we've been feverishly working in the wrong direction, looking for answers to the wrong questions.

That's why the meaning-level of events is so important to examine first. To begin this with the recent episodes, one place to begin is with looking again at the lead of that *New York Times*' story of July 15:

VATICAN CITY – The Vatican issued revisions to its internal laws on Thursday making it easier to discipline sex-abuser priests, but caused confusion by also stating that ordaining women as priests was as grave an offense as pedophilia.

The decision to link the issues appears to reflect the determination of embattled Vatican leaders to resist any suggestion that pedophilia within the priesthood can be addressed by ending the celibacy requirement or by allowing women to become priests.

At first, it's impossible to see what's wrong — unless you read the original documents more closely. It is true that the Vatican issued new procedural rules that shift a group of violations that it calls "crimes against the faith" into the jurisdiction of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith so they can be decided more quickly.

Among these new violations: sexual abuse, ordaining women, defending heresies that distort Church teachings, provoking schisms, apostasy in rejecting the Church entirely, recording and broadcasting confessions that go on between priest and penitent.

Called "norms," these new guidelines are something like Congress deciding that any legislation on a range of subjects will now be fast-tracked and bypass some of the usual procedural machinery.

In his report in the National Catholic Reporter, John Allen tried to make the distinctions clear.

Unrelated to the sexual abuse crisis, the revisions also add several other offenses to the list of "grave crimes" subject to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (and thus to the expedited penalties the congregation can hand out). They include crimes against the faith, such as heresy, apostasy and schism; recording or broadcast of the sacrament of confession; and the attempted ordination of women.

The last point ratifies a December 2007 decree from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which stipulated that anyone attempting to ordain a woman, as well as women who claim ordination, are

subject to excommunication. That decree appeared in the wake of several events around the world in which organizers claimed to ordain women priests in defiance of church authorities.

Fr. John Zuhlsdorf, a guest blogger at the Washington Post, also had a clear explanation of the facts:

At a Vatican briefing this morning, Maltese Monsignor Charles Scicluna, an official at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, denied that the Vatican equates women's ordination with the sexual abuse of children. An illicit ordination, Scicluna said, is a "sacramental" crime, while abuse is a "moral" crime.

Like many modern states, and like other Christian churches and denominations, the Catholic Church has a variety of tribunals or courts for dealing with all sorts of cases and persons. A court can simultaneously deal with crimes involving different degrees of moral wrongdoing. Courts in the United States hear cases about crimes ranging from peddling without a license to murder. The fact that a court deals with various crimes does not imply that every crime they handle is equally grave, shocking, or scandalous.

Similarly, no one in the Vatican is saying that the attempted ordination of women does the same kind of damage as the horrific harm sexual abuse inflicts on a minor or a person who is vulnerable.

The problem with the *New York Times* report, and the dozens of repetitions of it in media around the country, is that the Times reporter subtly combined fact with deduction and presented the composite as fact. It is incorrect, strictly speaking, to say the Vatican "stated" that it is now treating the ordination of women on a par with the abuse children. One might decide that is what the procedural shift means. After all, in the world of business, one of the best signs that a corporation is in a financial crisis is that it makes procedural changes in its accounting methods.

But there is a difference between the facts of what has happened and deductions from the facts. In the second sentence, the reporter does the same thing in bolder fashion. She makes a sweeping statement that purports to explain what she calls "the decision to link the issues." Again, she is confusing her own deduction with the actual facts, presenting her thought as if it was the fact.

Although this might appear to be Jesuitical hair-splitting, this process of looking for these subtle confections is very interesting, because they reveal what we might call the "meta-story." During my many years in the corporate media, I learned that the popular press operates on a set of ongoing culturally popular assumptions about what is true and what is not.

These meta-stories use popular assumptions of the moment to construct a theological background to see the meaning of the events in the foreground. But they often rely on slippery partial truths, not entirely wrong, but highly simplistic, morally black and white, melodramatic and rarely stated in writing. They suppress nuance, paradox and moral complexities. They are the frame within which you see the picture, but like the frame, they are not intended to be noticed.

What also goes unnoticed is the subtle but corrosive spiritual impact that they have on the readers. They can easily stir up harsh judgments in the heart and turn people away from deeper understanding and compassion.

Look back on old newspapers, and the meta-stories are much more obvious. In World War II, the war mentality made it acceptable to refer to Japanese as "Japs," and during the Cold War, to call both the Russians and Chinese the "Reds."

You may have noticed how the meta-story about a new president shifts in an entirely predictable way over time. At first the new president is a hero, then there are "questions about his political abilities" and finally, he "can't do anything right."

The same thing has happened obviously with the Middle East. In the 1960s, it was the "good, moral and embattled Israel" fighting the "terrorist Palestinians of the PLO;" now it's the "colonizing oppressive Israel" tyrannizing the "poor, suffering embattled Palestinians." In the 1960s, no one mentioned the

massacre in Deir Yassin, just as the fact that Hamas has fired thousands of rockets into Israel from Gaza does not fit into the conventional meta-story.

In this way, the meta-story forces complex facts into the simple frame in a predictable way, like a Procrustean bed. It highlights the facts that fit and cuts out facts that don't. Anyone who has tried to talk to a mainstream reporter about something that does not fit the meta-story of the moment knows what it is like to hit a blank wall of incomprehension.

In the *New York Times* report on the Vatican, the reporter could only think what she thought and write what she wrote because she was operating within a current meta-story that the "Catholic Church is a crazy mess and morally suspect." She could not conflate the facts with her deductions in the way she did, and her editors would not have accepted her story, if it did not fit the current cultural accepted groove. When the meta-story changes, you'll see facts conflated with a different set of deductions to fit the new groove.

Once the meta-story takes shape, much of the analysis stays within this frame, perhaps without even knowing it. Even the thoughtful responses, such as this from Mary E. Hunt, a feminist theologian writing on Religion Dispatches, accepted the popular frame.

It's hard to see past the PR aspect of this to the theological. Mixing the two issues, even under the same legal umbrella, is a profoundly perverse proposition. Either these gentlemen are more ethically tone deaf than one can imagine, or they are sly beyond the dreams of foxes in an effort to redirect attention from the criminal behavior of clergy against children to their wrath over the ordination of women. Neither option is terribly appealing.

Here at Tikkun Daily, Amanda Udis-Kessler discusses a "pro-lives ethic" as a solution to the crisis, an interesting and worthwhile thought, but she also accepts the conventional frame as a starting point. She writes:

As part of its announcement about new laws disciplining child-abuser priests, the Vatican revealed yesterday that it would treat child abuse by priests and the ordination of women to the priesthood as equally grievous offenses against the Catholic Church. Also included in the list of offenses at this level, by the way, are heresy, apostasy and schism.

Many of the responses to these writers have been much less reasonable. After Fr. Zuhlsdorf's blog in the Washington Post, there was a deluge of screaming and yelling in the public comments about "this disgusting antique religion", "anti-church/religion liberals," "utter nonsense", "a worldwide cabal of priests," "oh-poor-us-you-bigoted-Catholic bashers" etc. And then comments like: "Do you hate the NFL? Do you insist they use female players?" and "Christianity is based on proven myths, (many of them plagiarized from other tribes) of a tiny Semitic tribe" and of course, the traditional accusation that "the catholic church is very anti-Christ."

In such comments, instead of an honest discussion of the issues, we get a drunken barroom shouting match. People yell at each other, drunk with rage, drunk with self-righteousness, drunk from demonizing someone or something else as the "Other."

If these blog comments look extreme, I invite you to look at your own emotional and spiritual journey while experiencing this tempest. For myself, I was at first shocked and outraged at the Catholic Church when I read the *New York Times*, then full of shame and anger for the Church when I read the attacks online, aware that some were justified.

As I looked into the issue more deeply, I became disgusted and bemused by the distortions and simplifications. In the end, where did this whole emotional journey get me? I was emotionally drained, more passive, less willing to see any hope for change except to tear down this "wicked Babylon", this "Other," in this case, the Catholic Church.

Did this happen to you? When you read the news, do you go through a roller-coaster of anger, condemnation, judgment and end up feeling somewhat self-righteous about your own points of view? Are you led to hate and want vengeance? Or does it feel good in some secret way to be so right and know the "Others" are so wrong?

Where does this emotional binge get us? Does all the anger and blame help move us toward a spiritually healthy form of justice? Or does it invite us to mistake vengeance for justice? Have we lost an understanding of the difference? Could we recognize a lynch-mob mentality when we are a part of it?

Or at the other extreme, has all the emotion left us empty and depressed? Do we wind up doubting the value of action, thinking nothing will ever change, that the world is hopelessly evil?

If so, then something has gone wrong. And it's no accident. There is a clear and predictable process at work, like cancer. These distorted meta-stories are the natural product of the commerciality of the mass media. They are easy to read. In a black-and-white melodrama, the world becomes understandable. You quickly see who is right and who is wrong. You're glad you're not one of "them."

It's easy to think "How stupid can they be!" You get a quick shot of self-righteousness and twinge of superiority – like the false energy of sugar. In fact, I knew an editor once who referred to the stories in his magazine as "candy for the mind."

The next day, the news presents a new morality play, a new episode in the meta-story, and we get another shot of judgment and self-righteousness. So we keep coming back – and getting exposed to the sponsors of this news, the advertisers. It's another chance to notice the ads, be tempted by the products and stay within the commercial loop of consumerism.

Wait! you might think. Are you telling me that the whole problem with the Catholic Church comes from the distortions of a commercial news media? Are you trying to excuse this entrenched criminality of abusive priests and the institutions that protected them? Or that something isn't wrong with a Church that denies women a role as priests? Are you saying there isn't really a crisis in the Catholic Church and it's all in our mind?

No, of course not.

In [Part II](#) of examining this crisis, we turn to the truthful side of a partial truth.

The Catholic Crisis: Part II: When faith is challenged, Catholics must grow up

by: David A. Sylvester on July 27th, 2010 |

Many years ago, when I was struggling to understand the smoke-and-mirrors world of corporate journalism, a Washington, D.C., veteran passed on to me a bit of wisdom:

When I was a reporter, an old PR pro once told me something. He said 'You come to the press conferences and you listen, and the first mistake you make is that you think we're lying. You discover we're not lying. Then you make a greater mistake. You think we're telling the truth.' (1)

In [Part I of examining the Catholic Crisis](#), I tried to point out the problem with this greater mistake. We examined the falsity within the partial truths of the meta-stories in pop culture, these simplistic, black-and-white constructs that make the world safe and understandable. We picked apart the assumptions blended with facts in one of last week's news story that made it seem the Vatican thinks the ordaining of women is as bad as priests who sexually abuse children.

Now, we turn to a more difficult side of the partial truth: the way in which it is true. The truth within the partial truth poses a challenge to human understanding, because it is so difficult to face that our mind wants nothing more than to jump to quick and easy explanations, to construct meta-stories of some kind. But if we do this, we avoid the paradox that can, with struggle, force us to mature.

To see how this works, we can leave the constructed stories of the pop media and look directly at two events:

The first is the case of Fr. Roy Bourgeois:

On August 9, 2008, Fr. Roy Bourgeois, one of the best known Catholic activists for social justice, attended and delivered the homily at the ordination of Janice Sevre-Duszynska as a Catholic priest in a ceremony held by Roman Catholic women trying to change the Church.

It took his Maryknoll religious order nine days to request and hold a meeting with him to investigate his actions. Within ten weeks, the Vatican had issued a letter threatening excommunication if he didn't recant. On December 10, 2008, four months after the event, the Vatican excommunicated him and ended his 36-year career as a Maryknoll priest.

In so doing, the Roman leadership rejected a priest who has led one of the most important witnesses to Catholic Christian values in opposition to U.S. militarism. Since 1990, Fr. Roy has developed an annual vigil for the victims of U.S.-trained counterinsurgency campaigns in Central and Latin America at the gates of the army base where the military forces were trained.

Each November, this School of Americas Watch protest has grown to attract 10,000 to 15,000, including college and high school students, in what I think is the largest and most successful, sustained anti-militarism protest in the U.S. It took only four months for the Church leadership to cast out Fr. Roy and marginalize all his efforts for social justice.

The second: the case of Stephen Kiesle.

In 1981, Kiesle, a priest in the Diocese of Oakland, asked for permission to leave the priesthood. His request came three years after he had been arrested for molesting children at the parish where he was serving. He had been convicted of tying up and molesting two boys, aged 11 and 12 years old and had finished serving three years' probation.

In early 1982, Oakland Bishop John Cummins sent the request to the Vatican to approve Kiesle's request to leave the priesthood. No response. Cummins sent two more letters. No response. He spoke with Vatican officials directly during a visit. The response: The paperwork had been lost, please send again.

In 1985, four years after Kiesle's request, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger wrote back to ask Cummins to "consider the good of the Universal Church together with that of the petitioner (Kiesle)." Cardinal Ratzinger wrote that the case needed "very careful consideration" and "a longer period of time" since Kiesle was still young. It wasn't until 1987 that the Vatican finally defrocked Kiesle.

This didn't do much good. By then, Kiesle had become a youth minister at another church where he abused more children before he left in 1988. No longer a priest, he molested two girls in his mobile home in 1995 and was sentenced to six years in state prison in 2004. During his 15 years as a priest, Kiesle had molested at least 15 children. From his initial request to his defrocking, the Vatican took six years to act.

Four months vs. six years. What in heaven's name is going on? What does this mean?

At this point, the cultural meta-story becomes tempting. Maybe the *New York Times* report didn't go far enough. Perhaps the Catholic hierarchy sees ordaining women as worse than sexual abuse. Maybe it is true that "the Catholic Church is a crazy mess" and it is run by rigid European men, "bitter old queens" as one blog put it, as a kind of religious Mafia, as another said.

We might conclude that Catholics, like myself, have been badly misled, our credulity manipulated by the clever seductions of con men. Perhaps this idea of being "a faithful Catholic" is nothing but a slogan, a way of belonging. Could it be that 1.2 billion people are caught up in a global trance, terrified by visions of hell deliberately conjured up to turn them into sheep?

Perhaps you might even agree with some of this.

Yet deep inside, something feels amiss. A slight twinge, an intuition tells me that this meta-story is not what it seems, that it is hiding an ulterior motive. What is this? I'm not sure, at least not yet.

Something is amiss because I have my interior experience that I cannot deny. In the Catholic Church, I encounter something large, invisible and magnificent. It comes through the Mass, the prayers and most of all, that moment when I take the Eucharist, the body and blood, and I feel my body absorb it like a flower feeling the flush of fertilizer.

I also see the exterior evidence of the Church's witness in the world, the way it has been a "light unto the nations." It has taken, at times, courageous and counter-cultural stands against profit-driven global capitalism, against American militarism in Iraq, against the ego-centric selfishness and materialism that underlie many secular attitudes. It showed its own ability to change in the amazing transformation of Vatican II, initiated at the top of the hierarchy, and in Pope John Paul II's efforts at forging a new relationship with the Jewish community and Judaism.

I know without any doubt that this is a Church I can trust. I also know without any doubt that it is a Church I can *not* trust – not in the way I would like. The two events above are only small examples of a long history of chaos and catastrophe within the Church stretching back centuries. The sexual abuse scandal is bad, but how about the Crusades, the Inquisition and silence during the Holocaust?

How about the pope who came to power by murdering his predecessor, or the popes who slept with their sisters and other men's wives, or the pope who funded the Sistine Chapel by levying a tax on prostitutes as well as the priests who kept lovers? Or the pope who had eight illegitimate children and inaugurated what was called at the time the "Golden Age of Bastards"? Or the pope who held orgies and gave prizes to those who had the most sex?

How about the more than three dozen "anti-popes" who rejected the Roman pope and the Western schism when two popes competed for legitimacy? If you want to look into a chamber of horrors, look into [Catholic Church history](#). Like other Catholics, I'm caught between my love for the Catholic witness to the world, through the centuries, and my pain for the victims, all of them, also through the centuries.

My faith is challenged; it cannot remain as it was. It must change. But in what direction?

So I called Fr. Roy and presented him with these two cases and the Vatican's overall response to abuse. He feels the same way I do: "I've been struggling with this," he said. "I've been asking, 'What does this say?'"

Of course he is. We Catholics should be struggling. Thousands of children were hurt by men acting in our name. Their emotional and spiritual lives were crushed. By our Church. By our priests and our bishops. We would have to be doorposts not to be in a lot of pain over what has happened.

About five years ago, Fr. Roy told me he faced challenge to his faith in the Church. He was so disturbed by the sin of sexism and the refusal of the hierarchy to allow discussion of the ordination of women that he considered leaving. Some of his Catholic friends did leave and became happily adjusted to other denominations.

Then something clicked in me. I thought, why should I leave? This is my church too. They'd be happy if I left. They'd get rid of this trouble-maker.

Now, he has developed a different faith-relationship to the Church. He sees two churches, one of the people, one of the hierarchy. He says:

Our church leaders in Rome are not the owners of the Church. We, as a faith community are the owners of the church. As Catholics, we are taught the primacy of conscience. It's our life-line to God. Conscience enables us to discern right from wrong. When we don't follow our conscience, we are tormented."

Even Pope Benedict XVI once said, Fr. Roy quotes:

Over the pope, there still stands one's own conscience which must be obeyed before all else.

Philip S. Kaufman, a Benedictine monk, wrote:

"Obedience, even to the Pope, was always ruled by conscience. The great 13th century canonist Hostiensis wrote: "If the subject cannot bring his conscience into conformity with his prelate's (which implicitly included the Pope), then he should follow his conscience and not obey... even if his conscience is wrong."

Official Catholic teaching affirms this "primacy of conscience." But it also says it must be a well-formed conscience. To form conscience properly, a person must seriously study the official Church teachings and give them the benefit of the doubt, the way you would take the opinion of a medical doctor seriously before seeking a second opinion. Then you study the Scriptures, take your question to prayer and then confer with a confessor and priest. After honestly undergoing this process of study and reflection, the Church recognizes that one is duty-bound to follow one's sincere conscience.

The problem is that many people don't do this. It's easy to be tempted by two types of errors. In one, we reject the Church teachings we dislike out of hand, without reading them, thinking about them or discussing them with dedicated teachers. In doing this, we seem to confer on ourselves the infallibility that many would reject in the Pope.

On the other hand, we can also defer to the Church teachings without facing our own inner doubts and thoughts. We become like dutiful children who don't want to go through the trouble of thinking for ourselves. This second error of slavish deference concerns Fr. Roy.

Many of us as Catholics never grow up to be adults. We remain as children. It's always a struggle to grow up.

In fact, this kind of passive submission to domination is not genuine, and it violates the code of Catholic canon law regulating the operations of the Church:

Canon Law 748.1: "All are bound to seek the truth in the matters which concern God and his Church; when they have found it, then by divine law, they are bound, and they have the right, to embrace it and keep it."

However, this search for the truth is not just a private affair. It depends also on a dialogue with the whole Church community, the world community. If the lay members of the Catholic Church convened a group of 100 representing the world's laity, only 6 would come from the United States, perhaps only two or three would be liberal left-wing American Catholics.

The lay members of the Church include the agricultural workers in Mexico, the urban slum-dwellers of Brazil, the former monarchists in France and supporters of Franco in Spain, the pre-Vatican II pensioners in Ireland, the rural villagers in Africa or Asia. Every voice deserves a hearing, not just the voice of liberal Americans.

We might decry the Americanization of the world when it comes to the spread of McDonald's and Starbucks but there's more than a whiff of cultural imperialism in the assumption that the world should

instantly adopt the latest ideas from modern liberal America. John L. Allen Jr., writes about “the complexities of setting policy in a global church” in the *National Catholic Reporter*, pointing out that:

the 67 million Catholics in the United States represent just six percent of the total Catholic population of almost 1.2 billion, meaning that 94 percent of Catholics in the world don’t automatically see things through American eyes.

At the center of this world church are the Pope and the bishops who have what is called the teaching authority of the magisterium. They are responsible for listening to and shaping the global dialogue over the presence of God through the risen Jesus among Catholics today. If anyone has attempted to hear, let alone follow God’s will, you know this is no small task. We might not agree, or even respect, how they are operating, but are we so sure we would do a better job?

You might object and say that the problem is in the job itself. The abuse of the Pope and bishops comes from the nature of hierarchy and the power that they derive from it. Maybe the thing to do is change the whole structure of the Church, democratize it the way the Protestant Reformation did and producing the ultimate democratic structure at the individual church-level like the Congregationalists in early America.

Here again, this easy solution short-circuits some realities. The loss of any central structure produces not just the endless fragmentation of the Protestant churches, but destroys the focal point for gathering together the dialogue of the world community. The Catholic Church believes God speaks through the whole community of the faithful, not through sub-communities or individuals by themselves.

Richard Gula, a well-known professor of moral theology at the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, contrasts the disadvantages with the advantages of this centralization during a discussion of Church moral teachings.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the magisterium (the Pope AND bishops conferring together) is an institutionalized authority in matters of faith and morals. The great disadvantage of having an institutionalized authority in the church is that, if it does not function well in a cooperative and collaborative fashion, it can obscure the human character of the process of formulating a moral teaching.

The guidance of the Holy Spirit does not exempt the magisterium from the human process of gathering data, consulting, reflecting on the data, making a proposal, entertaining counter-proposals, doing more research and so on. Rather, the Spirit guides the learning-teaching process in the church in and through these fallible human efforts.

To obscure this process can result in creating an “extrinsic” authority for teachings. “Extrinsic” authority fails to recognize that a teaching is as strong as the thoroughness of the homework which produced it and the cogency of the arguments which support it.

However, the great advantage of having an “institutionalized” authority in the magisterium is that it provides a structure which can bring together, in a cooperative and complementary way, the experience and insights of various perspectives so as to reach as complete an expression of truth about the moral life as possible.

When the collaborative function of teaching is working well in the church, we reap the fruits of this advantage. We have known this in the documents of Vatican II and in the wide acclaim given to the American bishops’ pastoral letters in the 1980s.”

Where does this leave us in our search for a way to understand – and have faith in – this troubled church? On a spiritual level, I think we are witnessing the very human conflict between king and priest on one side and prophet on the other. This conflict lies at the heart of much Jewish and Christian tradition. One might say Jesus lived out the tradition of the Jewish prophet, challenging the religious kings and priests of his day as the prophet Nathan challenged King David over his murder of Uriah for the sake of taking Bathsheba as a wife.

One way of seeing Jesus' death – and there are many – is that he suffered the prophet's death at the hands of the priests, just as Jewish prophets suffered throughout their history, just as today's prophets, such as Fr. Roy Bourgeois, suffer at the hands of today's priests, such as his persecutors in the Catholic hierarchy.

In my opinion, there would be a great advance in inter-religious relations between Christians and Jews, and an advance in Christian understanding of Jesus' truth, if we Christians recognized that the tension of Jesus' life had nothing to do with Jewish priests or Judaism at a particular time in history. Instead, Jesus died from the war between the world as it is and the world that is emerging, the tension between what the Jewish sages called *ha'olam hazeh vha'olam haba*. (הבא. מלועה הזה מלועה)

So far we've been talking about other people. How about ourselves? Don't you find this same conflict between the priestly and prophetic in your own life? Have you ever been in charge of some structure, perhaps as head of a department or organization at work, or as a parent of a family with children, in which you must make decisions about daily functioning? And haven't there been some people calling on you to change things with ideas that you resist because they seem so disruptive to the operation or question basic assumptions?

How about inside your own heart? Do you ever find some part of yourself clinging to the status quo, the world as you know it and fight against change, even necessary change you know you must make and yet for some reason find yourself unable to summon up the will or determination?

Even worse, have any of us woken up at some point in our lives to discover that we have been fighting tenaciously for values and beliefs that were actually self-destructive? Do we ever discover, to our horror, that we have been campaigning against exactly what would have been, in the end, the very best for us? Who among us, if we are really truly honest with ourselves as we examine our lives deeply cannot see the purification process, perhaps even what some of us might call a crucifixion, that we are experiencing as a necessary process in our journey from what is to what will be?

And to push this challenge a bit more: Is it possible that those "old European men" in Rome might have a prophetic side that challenges some of our own priestly attachments? Is it possible we have blind spots ourselves precisely in some of the beliefs we hold so dear? Maybe we suffer from a kind of First-World-itis, an entitled sense of agency and individualism that is less healthy than we think?

This might sound ridiculous. Those who identify with the liberal American left, like myself, can be pretty certain we're right — so right that we might miss a note of triumphalism and condescension toward others. But it was exactly this tone in Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* that alienated some of the voters during the Bush-Kerry campaign and swung them toward Bush, in spite of the film's devastating indictment of his handling of the attacks.

I think we avoid this interior civil war between priest and prophet at our peril. If we let it, the faith-struggle will force us into a zone of ambiguity where we get stripped of the certainties that we have taken for granted. To me, in my Christian way of seeing things, I'm offered the bitter opportunity of taking up my cross of doubt and difficulty and allow my ego-attachments to undergo crucifixion. Yet I can do so only because, through faith in the example of Christ, I can trust that if I let myself fall into the abyss, I'll sprout wings. My ego-destruction is not self-destruction but self-emergence. And I will emerge wiser and more mature.

This reveals the problem with the slick, cultural meta-story based on the partial truth: it gives us an easy out. It offers a quick by-pass from spiritual struggle with a pat answer. We get to skate over the surface of reality, never facing the troublesome depths. We can stay within the safe confines of our own mind. We don't need to admit we're lost and confused and need God in a radical way. We don't have to grow.

Ultimately this is the crucial difference. The cultural meta-story allows me to stay stuck in life, just as the struggle for faith forces me to move ahead into a new reality. The ulterior motive of the meta-story is that it offers to lull me asleep; the faith-struggle wakes me up.

At this point, I took the paradox of these two events, the Church's treatment of Fr. Roy and of Stephen Kiesle, into meditation, and asked in empty, hopeful waiting:

Where is the truth? Where is God's presence in this situation? How am I being called to see this, and to respond?

I spent some time on this, and as I left my prayer mat, I became aware of my own ignorance about the layers upon layers of human history and thought that are coming into collision in this one moment. I also must confront a faith in the goodness of God yet a universe permeated by the incomprehensible mystery of evil, even in the Church.

Later on in the day, I was flooded with feelings I didn't know I had. I was overcome with pain and grief, compassion and love, for the victims of the abuse, for the women frustrated in acting on their interior call to serve as priests, for the Catholic bishops trying to balance the voices they hear throughout the world and within themselves, and yes, for the pope, a human like the rest of us, torn between his own priestly and prophetic selves.

St. Paul compared the struggle of humanity to a woman laboring to give birth. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:22-23)

Everyone is groaning in travail as we await redemption in our physical reality. We are in the birthing room – and who would leave and retreat to the safety of waiting room, listening to the process, making snap judgments, insulting the participants and wondering why some just don't walk out and leave others on the birthing table to die?

Perhaps this is the ultimate cost of the cultural meta-story and all the superficial judgments like it: they keep us from feeling the emotions of our labor. Perhaps the emotions themselves contain part of the answer I'm seeking.

Does this mean we should passively sit by with a box of tissues, and letting "events take their course?" Absolutely not! The process of this faith-challenge, this faith-confrontation leads us into a new understanding. We can act honestly and openly, with justice, not just vengeance. Whatever can be done, must be done so that victims find the peace of true healing and not just the continuation of the cycle of abuse targeted at someone else.

But action by itself will not circumvent the spiritual struggle. Something is purifying and transforming all reality, including the Church. Something is calling us Catholics to look more deeply into these visible layers of what we call the Catholic Church. We're all being forced to mature into a genuine faith and place our hope in something more invisible, more mysterious and better than just merely good.

As St. Paul said next: For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:24-25)

TEXT NOTE:

- 1) Quote from Hodding Carter III, a Southern journalist who joined the civil rights movement, worked for Lyndon Johnson and became an assistant secretary of state under President Jimmy Carter. He became the public voice of the Carter administration during the time he held the briefings during the Iran hostage crisis.