

THE YEAR THAT CHANGED THE CHURCH

Well, maybe that's too strong a statement, but perhaps not by much. The leading stories of the past year were centered on further rents in the purple curtain that has long protected prelates from having to answer for their actions.

Early on, the John Jay Report gave some idea of just how prevalent sexual abuse had been, but it did not provide the information many victims wanted about how so many clerical predators had escaped the consequences of their actions. The study had to rely on data supplied voluntarily by each diocese and religious community, so there was not a way to determine how many individuals, following an accusation, had just moved on from one area to another—how often, in other words, a particular bishop or superior might have unloaded a problem priest on an unsuspecting colleague. As long as personnel records are regarded as privileged information—the stand still taken by Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles—we can only guess.

Nonetheless, the cost to the church just in terms of dollars and cents has been enormous. The more victims have been encouraged to come forward, the more devastating are the monetary claims for damaged lives. Last year three dioceses (Portland, Tucson, Spokane) filed for bankruptcy protection because of them. By the end of 2004 twenty dioceses had already ended litigation, and two made the headlines when they did so.

Boston paid out 85 million dollars, and then in early December the far smaller diocese of Orange in California agreed to a reported hundred million dollars. Some victims clearly came out better than others, with those in Tucson and Orange receiving settlements over a million dollars per person, but repeatedly victims stated that this was not just about the money. It was about having their stories heard and acted on.

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In addition, the church has been impacted financially as Catholics, angered by what they now have learned, either have deserted their parishes or drastically cut back on their contributions to them. This, together with a shortage of priests likely made worse as seminarians rethink their vocation because of the scandals, has forced a number of bishops to consolidate parishes. In Boston one out of five parishes has been ordered closed down, but in several due for closure angry parishioners have resorted to classic tactics of civil disobedience. For many, who have now learned to rely on their own rather than the hierarchy for worship services, it has been a time to rethink just what the church is all about. ARCC, which for a quarter of a century has been pushing for the rights of Catholics and a more democratic vision of church governance, has been offering its support by providing the information parishioners need to challenge actions that often seem arbitrary and occasionally punitive.

RED BISHOPS, BLUE BISHOPS

It made the news as the election drew closer. Several bishops thundered from the pulpit that politicians who supported legal actions conflicting with Catholic moral

teaching should not approach the communion rail. Not to be outdone, others, most notably a prelate from one of the so-called red states supporting the Republican

candidate came forward to suggest that even voting for such a politician was a mortal sin. Asked to comment, senior members of the hierarchy, whose sees are in the so-called blue states, demurred. With the election now over, the issue remains about how fervently these red bishops will push not just for their parishioners, including elected officials, to tow the line but how they will attempt to influence the rest of the country.

Some idea of what lies ahead can be seen from the report of the November general conference of the Catholic bishops, which elected Spokane's William Skylstad its new president just weeks before his diocese joined the elite group appealing for bankruptcy protection. Washington's Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, one of those who had refused to join the communion-denial chorus, presented the

report of the task force he headed on the issue of Catholic bishops and Catholic politicians. Two points from his report stand out. One involves "a commitment to maintain communication with public officials who make decisions every day that touch issues of human life and dignity" and the other is the affirmation "that the Catholic community and Catholic institutions should 'not honor' those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles."

If it were not for the fact that McCarrick himself denounced the media portrayal of division among the bishops ("I look around the room and see bishops who have been unfairly attacked as partisan, others who have been called cowards") we would be tempted to say that the blue bishops still command the field with a call for dialogue rather than a simplistic appeal to damnation. At least we hope it's so.

Read the full text of the report at <http://www.usccb.org/bishops/mccarrick1104.htm>

REACTIONS TO OUR NOVEMBER ISSUE

Editor's note: Despite my best efforts to stir things up, I do not get much mail. However, after the analysis of the election in the last issue I received this from George Hein, an ARCC member from New York:

"Because of CORPUS and BREAD RISING getting too much into politics I do not intend to renew membership/subscription, this after many years.

"As to ARCC I take offense with your 'NOW THAT IT'S OVER' mention that, in effect, under G.W. Bush it would be considered unpatriotic to criticize the government.

"ARCC is and should not be a political organization. Criticism of any politician for ethical views is appropriate, such as [views on] the killing of innocent humans some eight months after conception. Some items such as debating whether a war is just are not as obvious (although you may think otherwise). In any event, it is best that ARCC avoid both areas and STICK WITH ARCC MISSION!"

I do apologize to George and to other readers who may feel we "dissed" the President. My point was that voters could be seen as having endorsed a certain outlook on dissent that has a

parallel with what we have seen from Rome and our own hierarchy. That I still find disquieting.

I also invited response to the article from the ARCC Board. Len Swidler offered this commentary:

"My inclination always is to go for the positive! We will have gotten more than enough hand wringing on the part of the Democrats in the secular press.

"I also am very aware that the general cultural mood very much affects the Catholic Church. Yes, I do believe that there is an element of 'pay back' in this election on the part of some in this generation (namely, the very conservative white evangelical Protestants and more traditionalist Catholics, especially when egged on by reactionary bishops) to the excesses of the 60s.

"However, recall that it was only about five or six years ago that Henry Hyde and others were hell-bent on impeaching Clinton, and the more they pushed 'moral values,' the higher Clinton's ratings went. I do not think that we are seeing so much of a radical turn toward reactionary ethics and politics as a political victory of Roveism.

"Almost a hundred years ago Vilfredo Pareto

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predicted that those politicians who could discern the 'residues,'--the emotional neuralgic points of a people--and were able to play to them, would triumph. Rove knew the hot-button issue of conservative white evangelicals (and their Catholic counterparts)--that is, sex--and mounted a massive campaign to get them to come out of their political isolationism and vote, which they did just sufficiently in key states to squeak by with a victory.

"But my analysis is in any case all by the by. I think that we in ARCC need to concentrate on devising ways to work effectively on shifting Catholic consciousness to see that democratic governance structures (such as transparency, accountability, and representativeness) are not only appropriate in the Catholic Church, but are desperately needed! Why not stay on the theme of the ongoing episcopal scandal in the American

(and global) church: diocesan bankruptcy with more and more sex scandals coming to the fore (we keep in mind that Tom Doyle is deeply involved with grand juries in both Los Angeles and Philadelphia). If we want to focus on the negative, that, I would argue, is the negative we would do well to focus on, and then at the same time show that we have a remedy--the only remedy!--for it: democratic structures."

Board member and author Sidney Callahan appeared to share some of my pessimism:

"Our present divisions in the Church and the country seem to reflect some common themes. Fear and anxiety over our welfare, from terrorists or heresy and schism, will make people retreat into safe and defensive postures. Thinking which separates 'us' from 'them' will increase and a more positive inclusive stance will become less probable.

Relevant to the general question of accountability, Sidney Callahan also presents this review of an important discussion. The book is available through our archives website (<http://www.arcclight.com>)

Richard R. Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003)

Everyone in the Catholic reform movement should read Richard Gaillardetz's book on authority in the church. Here you can find the current consensus on theological thinking inspired by Vatican II clearly presented. At the end of succinct chapters on the authority of scripture and tradition, the authority of the church's teaching office, and the authority of the believing community, Gaillardetz provides a section on disputed questions. Therein ongoing differences between more liberal and conservative interpretations are fairly described

One excellent result of reading this book is to be reassured about how much room there is in the church for faithful dissent and disagreement. Few teachings are given an infallible status by theologians. Gaillardetz makes it possible to sort out the confusing distinctions between the "ordinary," "extraordinary," and "ordinary universal magisterium." In the same way definitions are provided for the differences between "dogma," "definitive doctrine," "authoritative doctrine," and "prudential admonitions and church discipline." The different degrees of assent required to be in communion with the Catholic Church are discussed. This section helps answer those anguished questions such as "What do I have to believe to stay in the church?" Many people have left the church because they disagreed with teachings that the church never held, or hasn't held for centuries.

In addition to excellent discussions of the inspired and yet human status of scripture, Gaillardetz gives an excellent explanation of what the sense of the faithful and the doctrine of reception are and how they operate. Dialogue and discernment are the only ways to understanding the Spirit of God at work in the church.

The recent unrest and anger at the American bishops is not addressed in this book, but the treatment on the role of bishops in the church is illuminating. A bishop must be seen as the vicar of Christ in the local church, which exists as a whole church and not as a branch office of Rome; the bishop is not an executive answering to the Pope as the head of the institution.

Bishops are responsible to Christ and to the gospel, and must safeguard the apostolic revelation handed down through tradition. They must gather up the sense of the faithful in their local church and creatively witness and teach in collegial communion with other bishops and the

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Pope. It is a large order to conserve the past, to represent their people's present faith, and to creatively teach and reach out to their fellow bishops and the future church. No wonder so many bishops fail miserably. It is easy to see why other denominations have tried to do without an authoritative college of bishops. The Roman Catholic communion has flourished when it has had able bishops who could be in dialogue with

the laity and with church theologians—and receive evangelical criticism with profit.

Yes, on the rocky road to reform and renewal Catholics need a firm grounding in what church authority is—and what it isn't. Read Gaillardetz and take heart.

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