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Too true to school: Seminaries and sex abuse

In the spring of my first year of college, I wrote my bishop and told him I wanted to be a priest in our East Tennessee diocese. Four months later I was in the seminary—at a Benedictine monastery on the far side of Missouri, a good 13-hour drive from the Catholics among whom I had experienced a call to serve.

On the way, I stopped for the night at a small high school seminary just across the Mississippi River, where my bishop had been rector. There I met some nice priests and learned about one of the few remaining seminaries for high school students, once common stops on the way to ordination.

I didn't know it then, but the visit was my first contact with the clergy sex abuse crisis. Within 10 years I learned that two of the priests I had met were perpetrators; one was carrying on an abusive relationship with a student I would meet when I arrived at seminary. The third priest claimed on national television to have been abused by my bishop, who was one of the few in the United States to resign as a result of the scandal.

As the latest chapter of the sex abuse catastrophe is being written across Europe, I remain struck by how early in my clerical training I was "involved." My time in seminary left an indelible mark on me, much of it for good. Yet it occurs to me that it is the way we prepare priests—rather than celibacy, homosexuality, or any other of the "causes" ascribed to the crisis—that is a major part of the problem.

In effect, a Roman Catholic priest is made in a way similar to a U.S. Marine. Candidates are sent away to "basic training" for an extended time, share an intense experience in a strict hierarchical system, and are encouraged to form bonds of brotherhood in that system, in fact, to draw their identity from it. Precious few non-priests are involved in the day-to-day formation of seminarians, and personal contact with parishioners, especially women, is limited and infrequent.

One result of such formation is a certain loyalty to the priestly institution, such that priests identify first with their brothers rather than with those they are ordained to serve. (I still detect that tendency in myself though I was never ordained.) One product of such group loyalty has been a systemic failure among priests and bishops to report clerical child sexual abuse, some cases of which are so monstrous they should be labeled rape and torture.

To sex abuse one could add the less sensational problems of food and substance abuse and other sexual and financial misconduct among priests, which only ever seem to be detected when a particular case spirals completely out of control and ends up on the front page. It is rare indeed for a priest to report a brother who is faltering to higher authorities, often out of fear that

“scandal” will result. Those who do, I have been told, find their concerns are rarely acted upon.

If clerical culture itself is at least part of the problem lying beneath the sex abuse crisis, then an obvious remedy must begin where that culture is created. Priestly formation must of course foster a common identity among the ordained, but a pastor must also identify with the people he will serve.

Sending candidates hundreds of miles from their local churches for training does not foster that connection. Neither does it make sense to leave the formation of future pastors almost solely to other priests. Seminarians need the guidance and Christian witness of laypeople every bit as much as they need good ordained role models. Perhaps if families with children had been a daily part of seminary formation in the past, victims of sex abuse would have found a fairer and more generous hearing when they first spoke out.

Today's seminary system was created as a response to the Reformation and was meant to educate a clerical corps that could hold the line against Protestantism. Now that system is part of a problem so serious that it is undermining not only the moral authority of the Catholic hierarchy all the way to the pope but the Catholic proclamation of the gospel itself.

That proclamation is finally the only mission of the church; the priesthood, as well as the institutions that form its members, must empower that mission, not cripple it. The residential seminary system is hardly part of the deposit of faith, and there are other ways to prepare clergy. Priestly training should create pastors to shepherd God's people, not a clerical system that fails the weakest of those in its care.

I am grateful to Roger for his reflection and to Joe for passing it along. These thoughts are based on the readings for the Twelfth Sunday of the year (June 20, 2010).

When I talk or write about the presence of the risen Jesus among us, I have a problem with pronouns. There's no such problem when my topic is the historical Jesus. The late Raymond Brown constantly reminded his students and readers that Jesus was "a free, Palestinian Jewish man of the first third of the first century CE." He was that free, Jewish man between 6 BCE and 3:00 PM on Good Friday of the year 30 CE.

But, as Paul reminds his readers, after Jesus' resurrection, the Galilean carpenter became a "new creation." If any of us has doubts about the meaning of new creation, the Apostle provides us with a classic description in today's Galatians pericope. Referring to the uniqueness of baptized Christians, he writes, "... All who were baptized into Christ have clothed (themselves) in Christ." Then he quickly tells us what's at the heart of being another Christ. "There is neither Jew nor Greek (Gentile), there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The risen Jesus is just as much a Gentile as a Jew, as much a slave as a free person, as much a woman as a man!

A few years ago, spiritual author Michael Crosby remarked in a lecture, "It took the church about 50 or 60 years to totally accept Gentiles into the faith on an equal basis as Jesus; over 1,700 years before it realized and taught that no person, by nature, was to be regarded as a slave to others; and, at the present time, we're still working on making Paul's insight about men and women a reality."

Even beyond my problem with pronouns, it's difficult for us to appreciate the risen Jesus, and ourselves, as new creations.

Certainly we can identify with Zechariah's conviction that true followers of Yahweh will acquire a grace-filled spirit of dependence on God. Yet, no one can figure out what the prophet, or his redactor, meant by "mourning for the one they have thrust through." Modern commentators generally shy away from John the Evangelist's interpretation that it referred to the crucified and pierced Jesus.

On the other hand, when Luke's Jesus speaks about how his followers reach the state of becoming new creations, he's quite clear it has everything to do with losing one's life in order to save it. And he's very clear on how that loss is to take place. "Those who wish to be my followers must deny their very selves, take up their crosses each day and follow in my steps."

Scholars remind us that "taking up one's cross" would have meant almost nothing to the historical Jesus' followers until he actually died on a cross. They presume he originally encouraged them to take up their "tau." The tau, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, was employed in religious circles as a sign one was giving oneself totally over to Yahweh. Just as we'd say we did something "from A to Z," so they said they did it "from aleph to tau." Since tau is parallel to our T, the symbol of the cross, it's easy to see how the tau in this saying eventually was transformed into a cross.

Becoming a new creation doesn't automatically happen the instant we're baptized. It's an ongoing process, which takes lots of dying to ourselves to achieve. We know from carefully reading our Christian Scriptures that the Gentile/Jew question wasn't settled without a tremendous struggle. And our own American civil war is proof the slave/free issue didn't just walk gently off into the night. So it shouldn't surprise anyone when man/woman issues create bitter conflicts and divisions in some Christian communities. Though we escaped the pain our mothers experienced in giving birth to us, no one escapes the pain of being born again.

Thanks to Sal for passing along George's comments on excommunication.

Excommunication How Sad ! The RC institutional church is still discussing/ implementing excommunications, even automatically! No wonder millions of people, especially women, are leaving the church, going to other churches who live the Gospel of Christ. The institution still lives by the law and not the spirit. As Bernard Haring, A Great Theologian once wrote, "The Law Of Christ is love." After the Vatican Council II, it was an embarrassment to speak of excommunication to the People Of God. Excommunication was on the level of the crusades and the Inquisition.

Excommunication is a sin within itself. No one is excluded from the Grace of Christ. When will the institutional church stop punishing and doing harm to her people? When will the Gospel of Christ be proclaimed as the message of mercy and love?

The world is now looking at the public church as it becomes a further embarrassment to its people as the Image of Christ. When will the law of clerical control, canon law, be placed aside, and the loving, kindly mercy of Christ, The Peacemaker, be fully upheld? The institutional church continues to exclude millions of people of right conscience throughout the world. The church expresses no love, no mercy and no kindness. The sins of clerical and papal life do great harm to the People Of God. Now, humanity wants the church to seek public forgiveness and do penance. Please no more excommunications, Change your ways! No more sins of the father. Do no more harm!

A provocative joke, edited for the young.

A female CNN journalist heard about a very old Jewish man who had been going to the Western Wall to pray, twice a day, every day, for a long, long time.

So she went to check it out. She went to the Western Wall and there he was, walking slowly up to the holy site.

She watched him pray and after about 45 minutes, when he turned to leave, using a cane and moving very slowly, she approached him for an interview.

"Pardon me, sir, I'm Rebecca Smith from CNN. What's your name?"

"Morris Feinberg," he replied.

"Sir, how long have you been coming to the Western Wall and praying?"

"For about 60 years."

"60 years! That's amazing! What do you pray for?"

"I pray for peace between the Christians, Jews and the Muslims."

"I pray for all the wars and all the hatred to stop."

"I pray for all our children to grow up safely as responsible adults, and to love their fellow man."

"How do you feel after doing this for 60 years?"

"Like I'm talking to a ***** wall."

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