

Whole Church urgently needs radical reform

By Daniel O'Leary, parish priest in Kinsley, England. With permission of **The Tablet** 16 Jan 2010. <http://www.thetablet.co.uk>

Something awful is happening within our Catholic Church. The recent abuse reports in Ireland offers a stark warning to the wider Church. Bishops are denounced and forced to resign, archbishops stand accused, dioceses across the world file for bankruptcy, the Vatican itself is held to account. Calls for wide-ranging diocesan investigations in many countries grow stronger daily.

And yet, apart from those directly involved, there is a strange silence throughout the Church, there is a strange kind of detached numbness. Why is this? In an ecclesiastical system where radical critique is not welcome, it is often easier to say nothing, or to tell a few white lies, or not to bother at all. Whether lay people, priests or bishops, we do not want to be victims of official displeasure, to break ranks, to be labeled disloyal, awkward or alarmist.

A widespread and silent "tipping point" in people's faith and loyalty has been growing for a long time in numerous western dioceses. The causes of the current malaise are more complicated than we may wish to explore.

As we are seeing in Ireland, the surface can collapse with a sudden and shocking intensity and finality. Ireland's disgraceful story today may be told in other places tomorrow. Many church leaders in European countries have said as much. Meanwhile, the relentless revelations continue to erode the moral authority of the Church across the world.

But where and when, confused people are asking, will there be radical and humble self-examination of the organization, of its leadership and of its self-awareness as the sacrament of divine love? The fundamental issue is the structure, culture and flawed theology that leads up to it.

Parishioners ask how a bland "churchianity" has come to replace a once-vibrant Christianity. There are centuries of reasons. Many writers, particularly in countries hard hit by various scandals, take certain members of the hierarchy to task. They trace the desperate efforts of well-intentioned, paternalistic bishops to ensure damage control by imposed silence lest the "the sins of the sons" be revealed, and Rome be upset.

They wonder, too, about the reasons for the continuing silence of the priest and the silence of the laity, given their long-standing difficulties with many of the Vatican's directives and directions.

A transformation within the Church will not be facilitated by blame and bitterness, but by a realistic acceptance of the role we all play in its dying and its rising. The clerical model of church authority has drifted too far from the vision of the carpenter's son. Commentators refer to the idolatrous pull of power, privilege and possessions that subtly infect even the most religious organization when an isolating clericalism replaces a loving servanthood.

Strangely, maybe it is in Ireland, in the midst of its painful and devastating meltdown, and maybe indeed because of it, that elements of the truth may be emerging at last. Lay folk and clergy are beginning to speak out their truth in the public forum even if it brings conflict, shock and anguish within their own ranks and across the country.

Taboos are being broken in the heat of anger. A defensive scapegoating is being revealed. It is painful and hurtful on all sides, but also cleansing. It is socking and confusing, but healing too. But at least it is authentic and real, and reaching for transparency.

Thoughtful lay people are beginning to recognize the subtle sin of mistaking the symbols of religion for the substance of love, the rubric of true worship, external conformity for inner conversion.

Many leaders may be astonished at the clear majority-conviction of the faithful about issues such as the need to de-Romanize leadership, the need to relativise false absolutes, the need to recover the radical exclusivity of the Gospel.

John Paul II prayed for another "springtime" for the Church. So, too, do anxious people who quietly long for a leadership that will finally say sorry, and then start to learn again from the tender humanity of Jesus. The recovery will be a long season of further conflicts and embarrassing climb-downs.

Beyond the scandals, a radical reform of the whole Church--its essential purpose and vision--is urgently needed. And this reformed Church will have so much to say to the world. But first it must befriend it. The "secular" postmodern world is God's body too.

It will all be a vulnerable waiting, a hard lesson of soul-searching throughout 2010 and way beyond. Richard Rohr OFM and others are exploring the spreading phenomenon, of "the emerging Church". This is not a new organization for disaffected believers but an ecumenical consensus of those who have rediscovered the charisma of contemplation, who, in the spirit of Vatican II, try to distinguish the essentials from the incidentals in church practice and teaching (see www.cacradicalgrace.org).

An emerging Church will refuse to build barriers of fearful silence around itself, will distinguish between faith and certainty, and will believe in charisma, imagination and joy. People want to be nourished in their precious humanity. They want to be held and supported in the messiness and failures of their precarious lives.

They want to be reminded of their beauty, to tell their story, to prophesy with confidence, to have a vision of those bright horizons already traced on their hearts by God. Those who still believe are at the edge of the nest waiting to fly.

This green growing will happen only through long, open, difficult and courageous conversations. Maybe a Third Vatican Council is what the Holy Spirit is prompting us to consider. Agenda for it already abound.

But first the Church must listen so as to be evangelized herself. The voice of the faithful--the *sensus fidelium*--needs to find a forum for a structured response, to find negotiation strategies so as to "quarrel peacefully", as Cardinal Martini put it.

Like Jesus did, we must hold the tensions and doubts of the church community in our own wounded souls. But there will be no instant reconciliation, nor perfect closure.

In "Healing", D.H. Lawrence wrote:

...The wounds to the soul take a long, long time,
only time can help
and patience,

and a certain difficult repentance
long, difficult repentance,
realization of life's mistake,
and the freeing oneself
from the endless repetition
of the mistake
which mankind at large
has chosen to sanctify.