

The Church in the United States after the crisis

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I appreciate the optimism of the talk's title "after the crisis." But the first question that needs to be discussed is whether the situation of the Church in the United States can be described as being "after the crisis." The answer has to be always unsatisfactory, "Yes and No."

For those not as familiar with the crisis as others, in January 2002, Father John Geoghan of Boston was on trial for molesting a young boy -- one of many, many allegations against him. Along with the criminal case, much civil litigation was aimed at the Archdiocese on account of his misconduct. The Boston Globe took an active interest not only in the immediate case but in the whole history of the treatment of Geoghan, especially after Cardinal Law became archbishop in 1984. The Globe had sued to open the sealed court papers that related to the litigation against the Archdiocese, and the suit was successful.

Thus was revealed years of unsuccessful psychological treatment while Geoghan remained in parish ministry until he was removed first for service at the home for elderly priests and then to no service at all. In 1998, Cardinal Law sought and received from the Holy Father the unilateral dismissal of John Geoghan from the clerical state.

Despite these eventual preventive actions, the Globe concentrated on the previous decade when he had been allowed to serve and the impact of his misconduct on those who suffered it.

Soon other priests who had been accused of sexual abuse of minors were identified as serving in ministry in Boston and elsewhere as the story spread to media in other cities. Although the bishops had never said that all offending priests would be removed from ministry and although it was no secret that priest offenders were sent for therapy to treatment centers, some of which were quite well-known, an outcry developed in the media all over the country that former offenders were being assigned to parish work without informing the parishioners and that bishops were merely shuttling offending priests from parish to parish.

In other words, the matter became a national scandal almost on the scale of Watergate or the Clinton administration scandals with the daily, all-day coverage in newspapers and on cable news channels and the Internet and the attendant mockery by late-night TV comedians which characterize such major scandals. Neither military action against the Palestinians by the Israelis nor the potential for war against Iraq could keep it off the front pages.

Despite this massive coverage, no media that I know of took up in any serious and sustained way the issue of the effectiveness of treatment and whether any of the recently (i.e., after about 1992) reassigned priests had become repeat offenders. Bishops began to remove these priests from ministry.

In April, the Holy See somewhat suddenly called a meeting of the U.S. Cardinals and the heads of the relevant offices of the Holy See. The media created exaggerated expectations for the outcome of the meeting which only exacerbated the situation after it failed to meet these expectations.

In June, the bishops met for their annual spring meeting and adopted the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" and the "Essential Norms" for dealing with the cases of clergy accused of sexual abuse. As eventually worked out in dialogue with the Holy See and with the approval of the Congregation of Bishops, they provided for the permanent removal from ministry of any cleric with even a single accusation of sexual abuse of a minor which has been admitted or proven in accord with canonical procedures.

A study was also undertaken of the nature and the scope of the problem of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy from 1950 to 2002. It showed a steady rise in accusations of abuse through the 1970s and 1980s with a sharp decline in the 1990s. Cases currently being reported to dioceses, by a very large majority, go back before the 1990's so that what we are facing now, by and large, is not an issue of current abusers but of the impact of past abuse through costly litigation.

AFTER THE CRISIS? YES

In certain obvious ways, it is the period "after the crisis." This is certainly true from the most superficial point of view of dealing with media. The Catholic Church in the US is no longer in a hailstorm of negative publicity. A survey of 64 major media outlets reveal that at the height of the storm, in April 2002 – a month during which there were both several new revelations and the meeting of the US cardinals with heads of the offices of Holy See – these outlets ran an average of 138 stories a day about crisis.

In addition, cases reported by the media seem to have less resonance. By that I mean allegations of abuse by a priest which would have been carried not only locally but also would have attracted a good deal of national media attention in 2002 now generally remain only local stories.

More substantively, the satisfaction level with Catholic Church leadership which sank in 2002 has returned to pre-crisis levels. We know this because the USCCB Committee on Communications has had the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) conduct half a dozen polls of the US Catholic population on their attitudes toward the sexual abuse crisis since March of 2002. As of the last poll, over 70 percent of Catholics indicate that they are somewhat or very satisfied with the leadership of the bishops and over 80 percent indicate that they are somewhat or very satisfied with the leadership of their own bishop. Satisfaction with one's own pastor was over 90 percent in one of these polls and in a poll taken for another organization as well. Some of the alarmist commentaries about the reputation of the bishops and the Catholic priesthood in the US (spurred by alarmist media reports) are not supported by these polls nor, may I say, by my personal experience as a priest. The negative publicity of 2002 when the spotlight was on some heinous conduct by clergy has not succeeded in shredding the reputation of the priesthood, although without significant action taken at the time it may have come close to doing so.

Most important of all, analysis of the data gathered for the study of the nature and scope of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy in the US by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice has demonstrated that not only is reporting of sex abuse incidents down but the actual incidence of these acts is down. This is important because the crisis in 2002 was fueled by several thousand victims coming forward for the first time, most long after the abuse had taken place. The fact of so much delayed reporting created the supposition that a few years down the road there could be another avalanche of victims coming forward accompanied by another bout of negative publicity.

However the John Jay analysis shows that this misconduct peaked in the 1980s and declined sharply in the 1990s. A mathematical analysis shows that the peak has not moved forward as would be expected with on-going misconduct. In addition, the research group CARA has been employed by the USCCB to do an annual survey of new allegations and costs. That data shows the same stable shape as the original John Jay data.

Realism dictates the assumption that this misconduct cannot be eliminated entirely, but we are not looking at the kind of build up of unreported cases that was so devastating. In fact, it is only looking back from the perspective of the John Jay study that one can see why 2002 constituted such a time of crisis. Before 1990, dioceses had received less than a thousand allegations. By 1993, a third of the allegations made by the nearly 11,000 persons reported in the study had been made. From 1993 to 2002 another third were made, and then in 2002-2003, fully another third. No wonder that time was so overwhelming.

AFTER THE CRISIS? NO

Even if the current incidence of sex abuse of minors is down considerably, it would be foolish to think there will not be allegations of current misconduct as well as allegations that continue to emerge from the past. New cases which 20 years ago might have been looked on as the aberrant behavior of an individual priest are now examined by the media as evidence of whether bishops are or are not living up to the commitments they made to protect children and young people.

In addition, the polls that I referred to earlier, which show high levels of satisfaction with episcopal leadership in general also show that only a minority of Catholics rate the bishops' handling of accusations of sexual abuse by priests as either good or excellent. The data also show that there is also a noticeable relationship between feelings of satisfaction with the bishops' leadership and opinions about the handling of sex abuse accusations against priests, with the latter dragging the former down. Also 60 percent of those polled say that they have some or a great deal of confidence that the bishops are addressing the sexual abuse problem and nearly two-thirds say that they have confidence that their own bishop is. That needs strengthening.

Other effects of the crisis in the form of litigation and of government involvement are very much apparent. The CARA survey recorded that in 2005, settlements for sex abuse cases totaled \$400 million. Government involvement is most often taking the form of changing the statute of limitations laws, including the statute of limitations in civil cases to permit persons to sue who would not otherwise be able to do so because of the passage of time. These matters are dealt with by the individual states.

The crisis has also provided persons with their own agenda or who object to the bishops' moral, ethical, and social positions with a stick with which to beat the bishops and the Church. Nearly three-quarters of Catholics do think the crisis has hurt the credibility of the Church when speaking on issues in the public sector.

The crisis, then, is not just a passing happenstance. It is part of Catholic history in the US, and thus a reference point that will have to be taken into account for much else the Church does, even many things that do not seem directly connected to the crisis.

At the same time, I do not want to exaggerate this point. There was a moment in 2002 when it looked like the malfeasance of priests and the negligence of bishops were the only matters about which the media would ever again report concerning the Catholic Church in the US. But it was not long before the situation righted itself and became more balanced. The Church, as a repository of an ancient tradition of wisdom and moral insight, remains too potent an influence in society to be reduced to the parameters of this crisis. I remember a phone call from one reporter last year in which he asked me how badly damaged the bishops were in terms of their public voice due to the crisis. My reply was to ask him whether as a reporter he was still interested in what the bishops might say on war and peace, on the life issues, and on marriage and the family. He grasped the point immediately.

SEIZING PART OF THE STORY

A cliché that bears repeating is that information is the coin of the realm of communications. An Office of Communications exists to provide information not excuses why the information can't be provided. Of course, some things must be kept confidential, but there must be a reason for confidentiality.

As the crisis developed, the USCCB office for communications could describe in great detail what the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse had been doing to advise dioceses how to deal with this problem. But the office had a lack of information – really no hard data at all -- on what dioceses were actually doing. One of the first things we did was to send out on the diocesan communications directors' listserv a request for certain information such as the existence of diocesan review boards for sexual abuse cases. It could hardly be a scientific survey, and we did not have any right to require an answer.

Eventually media outlets like the New York Times, USA Today, and AP did surveys, coming up with data which it would have been in the USCCB's own best interest to have and to supply to the media.

Throughout the 1990s, even reporters who understood that information on individual cases existed only in dioceses and was not collected nationally were perplexed that bishops had not made an attempt to find out the extent of the problem. This lack of information left the field open to speculations, one of which claimed that there might be as many as 100,000 victims of sexual abuse by priests. The USCCB had no hard data with which to combat such guesstimates. This lack of an attempt to grasp the nationwide extent of the problem also led to a "credibility gap" opening up in the minds of the media about just how committed the bishops were to dealing with the problem.

Given the outcry that developed, it was well nigh impossible to try to hold up one's hand and say, "Let's stop and re-examine the past with greater objectivity." If the bishops were to overcome the negative publicity, it had to be by making news themselves -- they had to seize part of the story by taking action. They missed an opportunity to do so at their March 2002 meeting of the Administrative Committee which is made up of about 50 bishops. So the next opportunity for joint action was their June General Meeting in Dallas. The action they took then was in the form of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* and the *Essential Norms* for dealing with the sexual abuse problem.

It has often been remarked how swiftly the bishops seemed to act on this occasion. But, in fact, the development of the *Charter* and *Norms* grew out of the five principles for handling sexual abuse allegations which the bishops had established in 1992. At their foundation was also the knowledge-base created by the USCCB's Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse which was established in 1993 and what dioceses around the country had been doing for several years to deal with the problem of clerical sex abuse of minors. The attitudes of the Catholic people were revealed by the polls taken at the time so decisions about what needed to be done could rely on good information independent of possibly biased and anecdotal media reporting. The polls showed that Catholics were looking for effective action by the bishops to deal with this matter of the utmost concern to Catholic parents especially. And the bishops were asked to respond in regional meetings around the country prior to Dallas meeting to questions embodying the major aspects of the *Charter* and the *Norms* so that the input of a large majority of bishops were included in their development.

The extensive media coverage of the Dallas meeting has lent some credence to the claims that the bishops rushed to please the media on the part of those who do not like what they did there. This is hardly the case. Whatever the media contributed in terms of the atmospherics, the bishops

had worked for over a decade before Dallas on this problem, especially through their Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse.

An important aspect of the *Charter* is that it embodies the means for dealing with problem and also with the communications issues which had permitted the crisis to get out of hand. The *Charter* requires that the Office of Child and Youth Protection which it established make an annual report on the steps taken to implement and maintain the principles established in the *Charter*. So much for the “lack of information.” The *Charter* also called for the study of the nature and scope of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy, in part, to eliminate both the misinformation and “credibility gap” that not having this information permitted to flourish. Thus were laid to rest the more exaggerated speculations, such as the estimate of 100,000 victims. The on-going surveys by CARA guarantee that the startling statistics that appear in the John Jay study will not get build up again.

KEEP TELLING THE STORY

The sexual abuse crisis deals with matters that are difficult to face in any organization and none more so than a Church dedicated to the highest principles of sexual morality with a celibate clergy. However if we are truly to reach a period “after the crisis,” it is important that we not walk away from this story as the media cools to it but that the Church keep demonstrating that it is an organization committed to protecting children.

The ways to do so, as I have indicated, are in the *Charter*: I have mentioned how it seeks to remedy the “lack of information” which was so crucial in the development of the crisis. Other ways included in the *Charter* are:

1) A compassionate response to victims and their families

Enormous damage was done by the image of a Church that brings up the drawbridge and takes refuge behind behinds walls and a moat to avoid its own injured people. That image was the image that dominated in the media, and it is being shattered by the compassionate outreach that the Charter calls for.

2) Transparency in Providing Information

Damage was done by the image of a Church that would not share information, if not to protect malefactors, at least to protect its own reputation. That image was the image that dominated in the media, and it being replaced by an attitude which communicates a commitment to sharing information wherever there is no serious reason to keep it confidential. This is a principle of the *Charter*. One practical implementation of this openness are the annual reports of the Office of Child and Youth Protection, which I mentioned, intended to let the public know year by year that the Church in the US is abiding by its commitments.

3) Accountability

Damage was done by the image of a church leadership which felt it could make all decisions on its own without receiving advice and counsel even from persons whose lives might be directly affected by these decisions. That image was the image that dominated in the media, and it is being replaced by an attitude that understands that if people are expected to have confidence in their leaders, their leaders must take them into their confidence. The provision in the Charter for diocesan review boards and the annual report of the Office of Child and Youth Protection provide for this accountability.

Let me add that accountability is a tool of good governance not its rival. When President Reagan appointed the Tower Commission to look into the Iran-Contra scandal, that was not a surrender of authority but an assurance that he wished to govern responsibly. That attitude ultimately strengthened his authority in a difficult situation. It did not reduce it.

THE MIRROR OF THE CRISIS – ENGAGING THE MEDIA

A little black humor always helps, and back in 2002 I used to say that my goal of putting the Church on the front page of every newspaper in the country had certainly been achieved.

I also used to tell people that I had lost my faith – not in the Church but in the media.

The “flooding the zone” kind of coverage to which the Church was subject in 2002 is the US media at its worst. I had observed it in other crisis situations in the US, and now I was seeing it affect the Church.

“Flooding the zone” means that a media outlet throws everything it has at a particular story. Now there’s nothing inherently wrong with that. But it does mean that the outlet makes a tremendous investment in that story, and it better be worth it or made to be worth it. It also means that a lot of reporters are on a story for which they may have little background.

If other outlets pick up on it, you can quickly find yourself faced with a mass of journalistic inquiry which even logistically becomes difficult to keep up with.

But worst of all, what occurs is that all the media covering the story develop a “conventional wisdom” which is almost impossible to reverse. And if you attempt to refute it, you are usually dismissed out of hand as being defensive (what else does one do when under attack other than try to defend oneself?). The supposedly competitive media told a single story – one that put the bishops in the worst light -- as if it were the only story to tell. And they told a story of great complexity as if it were a simple melodrama of good guys and bad guys. It’s enough to make one wonder how risky it is to depend on them for our knowledge of the overwhelming majority of events in our world which we do not directly experience.

And yet I cannot think that the Church is without fault in this. Like King Lear and the poor, we “have “ta’en too little care of this” (Act III.iv.32-33). We have not engaged the media. We have not thought through how to deal with them. We have often preferred to go about our business in isolation from them. And when we decide we need them for our purposes, we expect them to be there. To be content to operate outside the glare of the media, to react to their approach as if they bear a poisoned chalice, and never to take into account the exigencies of their profession are hardly ways to cultivate a good relationship with the media.

In this time “after the crisis” we need to adopt as a general approach to media a couple of the attitudes I described above:

1) Transparency in Providing Information

The Church above all should have no fear of her actions being known to the public. Sometimes the possibility that the little ones will be scandalized is given as a reason for secrecy. In my culture, at least, “little ones” are more likely to be scandalized if they think their leaders are withholding information from them.

2) Accountability

Despite emotional “mea culpa’s” by some major media outlets in recent years, the media generally resist being judged by any one. And they do seem to think that theirs is a power from which no one is immune. As grating as these attitudes can be, there is a sense in which they do act as “tribunes of the people.” It does no good for the Church to act as if it alone is exempt from the making its case in the media. It is through them that even most Catholics get their news about the Church. And unless you are leading a cause, it’s not very useful to treat them as a monolithic empire of evil.

Our challenge is to do a little of our own “flooding of the zone.” Sometimes this happens by itself with the media’s full cooperation. In my years on this job, the late Pope John Paul II visited the US three times. Each time was a triumph, and the media wanted very much to be part of it. And of course the events of just over a year ago with death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Pope Benedict XVI saw an intervention of the media in the life of the Church which was not only appropriate but even, for the most part, reverent.

Instead of resting from the media for a blessed respite “after the crisis,” church communicators should see to it that every day every media outlet in their vicinity receives an e-mail alerting them to a story idea, offering a word of appreciation for good coverage, or containing a correction that needs to be made of an error about the Church published or aired.

Catholic dioceses should be ready with:

1. Timely responses, especially on potentially controversial matters: Obviously the more timely the response in a critical situation the better. Generally speaking dioceses — and the USCCB as well — are not structured to make these kinds of responses. As artificial as media deadlines may appear, it is usually essential to respond on the diocese’s behalf during the same news cycle, especially when there are voices ready to make a case against the Church.

2. Available information: To create this timely response, it is essential to have the necessary information available. The media gravitate toward those who have (or seem to have) information and who are willing to share it. It is important not to let a good opportunity pass by because the information is scattered. Sometimes this is unavoidable with news that reaches the diocese first through the news media, but all diocesan officials should be instructed that there is priority for getting information to diocesan communicators in an emergency.

3. Third party defenders: I said earlier that if people are expected to have confidence in their leaders, then these leaders must take them into their confidence. In every diocese there should be a corps of people identified by the leadership as having the kind of reputations and credibility that guarantee that their voices will be listened to when they speak. They should be brought into the diocese’s confidence on a regular basis and their assistance should be sought when there are matters that call into question the diocesan leadership’s credibility.

Renewed consideration also needs to be given to the awesome power that the bishops can exercise together as a national conference. This point goes well beyond communications issues to issues of ecclesiology. However, speaking from the point of view of what one might call “practical ecclesiology,” one thing the crisis demonstrated is the extent to which bishops are viewed both as heads of individual dioceses and also as a body operating together on the national level. In 2002, there was an intersection of a problem which occurred all over the country with enormous attention paid to it by the national media. This created a situation which required intervention and resolution at the national level. One of the most elementary steps one take in a critical situation is to develop a

clear message consistently used by all. Surely a national conference is in the best to position to do his.

A national bishops' conference can also be the lead agent in what I call an "ecumenical dialogue" with media. As president of the US Bishops' Conference, Cardinal William H. Keeler began to meet with the media owners and executive in both news and entertainment media in New York and Los Angeles. Archbishop Foley participated in several. Cardinal Keeler continued these visits for several years, and they provided the kind of high-level contacts which should exist between church and media leaders. The USCCB Committee on Communications also sponsored, in conjunction with the Aspen Institute's Communications and Society Program, two roundtables involving media and religious leaders. The first was inspired by Pope John Paul II's 2003 World Communications Day message, and its theme was on the impact of media on global peace and conflict. The second was on "Artistic Freedom and Social Responsibility." The media executives at the second one rated the experience very highly but they also made it clear this kind of discussion does not take place in boardrooms or executive suites. We can help to see that it does.

But the greatest challenge is: Can a national conference do in a positive way what the crisis did in a negative way --- identify the Church nationally with issues that are of concern all over the country and capture the media's imagination while doing so? The USCCB in fact did this in the 1980s with pastoral letters on "The Challenge of Peace" and "Economic Justice for All," and then drew back somewhat. But it has kept the pro-life cause alive and right now the bishops are considered one of the most influential voices in the immigration debate going on in the United States.

Unlike what many predicted and some undoubtedly hoped for, the time "after the crisis" can and should be one of a resurgent voice on the part of the US bishops and not a muffled one.

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