

Scandals in the Church

by Sebastian R. Fama

In January 2002, the Catholic Church was rocked by a horrific scandal. It would eventually be revealed that several Catholic priests were guilty of raping minors under their supervision. Understandably, the public was outraged. Lawsuits were filed, Church assets were sold off to settle claims, and some people left the Church. The actions of the guilty were unthinkable and indefensible. To be sure, anyone found guilty of such crimes should be locked up until God comes for them. These individuals have caused tremendous harm to their victims and to the cause of Christ. Their actions were outrageous, and no effort should be spared to prevent this sort of thing from ever happening again.

I was recently asked how I could be so committed to the Catholic faith in light of the scandals. I responded by saying that the scandals actually strengthened my faith. In fact, I think that this is a perfectly reasonable reaction. To begin with, my faith is in God and not men. Sometimes I think we forget that priests are human and thus sinners. At the end of the day, they are just as capable of offending God as the rest of us. Do not get me wrong, most of the priests I know are very dedicated to their work and are prayerful, holy men. But being a priest does not guarantee anything. And as we all learned from Judas, not even being hand-picked by Jesus guarantees anything.

So why would the sins of a small group of priests strengthen my faith? These individuals graduated from seminaries where they studied Scripture and theology. In other words, they knew more about God than most people. And yet they still committed some of the vilest acts imaginable. It is only by the grace of God that we become the people that God wants us to be. Obviously, these men had rejected God's grace. I came to the realization that if those who know the most about God cannot make it without His grace, no one can.

The requirements to become an astronaut are tough. And very few applicants are accepted. But even if the smartest astronaut attempts a spacewalk without being tethered to the spacecraft, he will be lost. And so are we without God's grace. And the best place to receive that grace, is in the Church He established.

The Bible tells us that God sent His only Son to die for our sins? Practically speaking, what does that mean? First, it means that we are all sinners. Second, it means that we all need to be saved from our sins. How is that done? Once again, by the grace Jesus offers us from the cross. The same grace that saves us from sins committed in the past can help us to avoid sins in the future. As the Scripture says "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. **Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need**" (Hebrews 4:15-16).

God respects everyone's free will. If you accept Him and allow Him to work in you, you will be who He wants you to be. If you reject Him, you are on your own. And that is not a good place to be. Lucifer was the most intelligent being that God ever created. And yet he fell from grace due to his pride. Solomon was given more wisdom than any other human being and yet he sinned grievously due to the influence of others. If the smartest and the wisest of God's creation cannot make it on their own, once again, no one can.

Some critics have said that the scandal is the result of clerical celibacy. But that argument does not make any sense. Let us assume for a moment that at least a part of their premise is correct. Suppose we have all these priests who want women but cannot have them. Wouldn't that make them long for women? How does not having a woman make a man want a boy? I thought being a homosexual would cause that? Besides, we are talking about rape here. Anyone who has a rape mentality has a problem that has nothing to do with being married or not being married. Rape is a crime of violence; it is not an act of love.

The presence of hypocrites in the Church is disturbing, but it should not totally shock us. Jesus Himself told us that they would be with us until the end:

Another parable he put before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among

the wheat, and went away. So, when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:24-30).

Now that does not mean we should not send abusers to jail once they are discovered. By all means, lock them up. We have an absolute duty to protect the innocent. The message here is that God is not going to hurl down a bolt of lightning every time someone betrays Him. But rest assured, God is very much aware of who the weeds are. And no matter what anyone thinks, justice will be served. He will see to that. In the meantime, we are still called to walk with Him in the manner that He prescribed.

No one is forced to be a priest. Furthermore, the issue of celibacy is discussed during the discernment process. Any man who feels he cannot live without a woman would be kept out of the seminary. I personally believe that the offending priests were not at all interested in women. I also do not believe they were good men gone bad. I believe they were men who had serious problems long before they were priests. I suspect they just used the Church as a place to hide and prey on those entrusted to their care.

While betrayal by church leaders is a great disappointment, it should never cause us to abandon Jesus or His Church. To do so would be like condemning hospitals because people get sick. The logical response to sickness should be to embrace the cure. Likewise, the logical response to sin should be to embrace the cure. And as we said before, the cure for sin is God's grace. And we receive grace through His Church. Denying ourselves God's gift of grace serves no good purpose. And it certainly does not hurt the abusers. In fact, it pleases the father of all abusers (Satan).

If men fall and our faith fails it is because our faith was in men and not in God. Benedict Arnold was a trusted American general during the Revolutionary War. He attempted to betray the United States and was caught. His treason was a discredit to himself and not the American cause. Likewise, those who are guilty of abusing their positions in the Church are a discredit to themselves and not to the cause of Christ. By choosing the path he did Benedict Arnold ceased being a servant of the United States and instead he became an agent of the enemy. Likewise, by choosing the path they did the abusing priests ceased being ambassadors for Christ and instead became agents of the enemy. For all intents and purposes, they were no longer Catholic. For they have become, by their own choice, sons of Judas.

Were these men hypocrites? Absolutely! Were these men criminals? Absolutely! But let us not fall into the demonic trap of judging the faith by the actions of those that do not practice it. Look instead at those who embrace the faith to see what authentic Catholicism really is. Father Maximilian Kolbe volunteered to take the place of another man who was condemned to death in Auschwitz. Fr. Damien of Molokai worked with lepers in Hawaii until he himself died from the disease. And then there are the countless other priests who tirelessly serve their parishes. Is their work to be discarded because of those who pretend to be shepherds, but in reality, are ravenous wolves?

Jesus said that we should judge a tree by its fruit. So, what is the fruit of Catholicism practiced? The hungry are fed; the poor are clothed and sheltered. We find the sick being comforted and cared for. And this does not just happen in our own neighborhoods. Some go off to the mission fields where they forgo family and the comforts of home for the sole purpose of helping those in need.

On the spiritual front there are many who have given their lives to preach the life-giving news of the Gospel. Those who truly embrace the faith find that the grace of God compels them to see others in the same loving way that that God sees them. When practiced, Catholicism produces some truly wonderful fruit. The vile acts of a few criminals can never be justified. But how much more tragic would their crimes become if we allowed them to rob us of our faith.