

Watching the Demise of a Great Institution

BY BISHOP JOHN SPONG

We are watching today the tragedy of the demise of the Roman Catholic Church. It is a sad spectacle, but hopefully not one that cannot be reversed. It is not of recent origin. There was a high-water mark for this church in the middle of the 20th century under the leadership of the great Pope John XXIII. His attempt to call this church out of its medieval cobwebs and into dialogue with the thought forms of the modern world was both moving and impressive. He inspired a generation of young Catholic theologians like Hans Kung to come out of obscurity in order to give academic guidance to the Second Vatican Council that Pope John XXIII convened. It was as if a breath of fresh air had finally begun to blow, and renewed hope was born throughout the Christian world. With these initiatives, however, John XXIII also threatened some entrenched pockets of power in the Catholic hierarchy, and with his premature death they moved to batten down the hatches of reform and to reimpose the weight of authority on the Catholic faithful before they could taste the meaning of religious freedom.

No one can look at the progression of popes from John XXIII to Benedict XVI and not become aware that this is a church walking steadfastly into yesterday. Paul VI, John XXIII's immediate successor, overruled the recommendation of his own theologians to make opposition to birth control one of the identifying hallmarks of modern Catholicism. John Paul I did not live long enough to have much impact, but his successor, John Paul II, began the war on intellectual inquiry and Catholic scholarship in the Roman tradition with his inquisitor, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, silencing, harassing or removing from their positions the most creative Catholic theologians of their century, among them Hans Kung, Edward Schillebeeckx, Charles Curran, Matthew Fox and Leonardo Boff. Contemporary female lay theologians like Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, Rosemary Ruether and Uta Ranke-Heinemann were ostracized. Roman Catholic scholarship almost disappeared under this onslaught, leaving the church with only Catholic propagandists who did not educate but contented themselves simply to

defend what they assumed were unchanging divine revelations.

When Cardinal Ratzinger succeeded John Paul II to become Benedict XVI, the takeover by the right wing of this church was all but complete. Pope Benedict XVI, however, has had a very rocky pontificate. On the night before the conclave that elected him was officially convened, he addressed his fellow cardinals on the necessity of denying relativity in truth. Presumably he believed that truth had been captured for all time in the propositions of his Catholic faith. Early in his pontificate he repeated the long-held Catholic view that there was only one true religion, Christianity, and only one true expression of Christianity, namely the Roman Catholic Church. He even cautioned against referring to other Christian bodies as "sister churches," for that implied some tacit recognition of their legitimacy. Later he published a book on Jesus that was so out of touch with current New Testament scholarship as to be embarrassing.

Then, in quick succession, he moved to suggest that the child abuse scandal that had rocked the Catholic churches of the world, but had all but been ignored by the Vatican, was now in the past — a settled issue, when in fact it was little more than a covered-over cesspool. Next he insulted the Muslim world by quoting a very dated Catholic scholar who referred to Muslims as evil. He later apologized. Then, in the name of "unity," he reinstated an ultra-conservative bishop who denied the reality of the Holocaust. Again, he responded to massive criticism with a semi-apology, suggesting that he had not been thorough enough in his examination of the facts, and proceeded to cauterize the offense by forcing the aforementioned bishop to recant publicly.

When he launched a papal visit to turbulent Africa, he seemed totally out of touch. On this continent, where poverty is real; disease is rampant; genocide is common; political corruption reigns in such nations as Kenya, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and the Sudan; and where South Africa is reeling both economically and politically, the opportunities for leadership were obvious. Yet none of these issues formed the essence of his message. No, his primary concern was that people were using condoms instead of abstinence

to protect themselves from AIDS. It was hardly an inspiring message. He had ignored the essential and elevated the trivial, to which little attention was destined to be given.

Against this background, the New York Times ran a front page story on March 12, 2009, revealing that neither the priestly abuse scandal nor the Roman Catholic Church's constant attempt to cover up this scandal was over. A newly elected Democratic majority in the New York legislature re-introduced a statute that had been defeated on several previous occasions when Republicans held the majority. This proposed law would allow victims of child abuse to bring their charges to the public despite the fact that the statute of limitations had expired. The former statute had allowed victims only five years after their 18th birthdays to bring their cases to court. The reason for the proposed change was the realization that the trauma of this betrayal is so deep, and the sense of shame so overwhelming, that many victims are not willing or able to discuss their violation until a later time in their lives, when it is too late to have their grievances redressed. A number of other states have previously altered their legal procedures to allow such cases to come forward. The result has been a large number of additional lawsuits and convictions of abusive priests, which the Catholic Church has been forced to settle at a cost of between eight hundred million and a billion dollars. The official response of New York's Catholic leadership to this new threat was revealing. Their concern was not about whether justice prevailed but about the effect this law would have on the church. They attacked this proposal as an anti-Catholic attempt "to bankrupt their church." They did not seem to be aware that the real problem was the illegal behavior of their clergy and the massive attempt at cover-up by the hierarchy. The article went on to announce that the Catholic legal team had been joined in opposing this proposed change in the statute by the Hassidic and Sephardic Jewish institutions in Brooklyn, which are also facing equally costly abuse claims. That was treated in this article as good news, since it seemed to make their protest an interfaith one. Yet this new partnership was just one more manifestation of the religious sickness of our age. One can hardly be pleased at the image of any religious community trying to use legal means to keep more lawsuits from

rising even when obvious crimes have been committed by representatives of that community. Catholic spokespersons even declared that this bill was discriminatory to the Catholic Church. They went on to argue, as if this fact were relevant, that this proposed bill was highly inconvenient, coming up as it does at the time of transition in leadership of the Archdiocese of New York. The Vatican recently announced that Cardinal Edward Egan, the present Catholic leader of New York and one highly compromised on the sexual abuse issues, would be replaced by Archbishop Timothy Dolan of Milwaukee, whose jurisdiction has just been forced to sell its diocesan offices to raise funds to pay off court-ordered abuse settlements. Nothing could reveal more poignantly how systemic the abuse problem is or how desperately the hierarchy has tried to cover it up.

There is a mentality in this religious institution that seems to say that any criticism of the church reflects not truth or reality but only the anti-Catholic bias of the critic. This ploy is constantly used when one does not want to face an embarrassing issue. When I was the Episcopal Bishop of Newark, the Roman Catholic Church's archbishop of Newark was Theodore McCarrick, later the Cardinal Archbishop of Washington. Whenever we would have discussions about any criticism of his church's attitude toward women, including its unwillingness to consider women fit for ordination, its attitude on family planning or that church's outdated and distorted definition of homosexuals as inherently deviant, his response was always to counter that the critics were "anti-Catholic." It was little more than a frustrating dodge. There are many great things about the Roman Catholic Church that I have always appreciated, but I do think that they are wrong on the requirement of celibacy for ordination, wrong on abortion, wrong on their treatment of women, wrong on not allowing options at the end of life, wrong on the way they define and treat gay people and wrong on many of the great theological issues of the day. An unwillingness to discuss these differences means that this institution has identified its point of view with ultimate truth so that any disagreement is interpreted to be an attack on truth itself.

Does anyone doubt the reality of the massive, systemic guilt that the

priestly abuse revealed? Does anyone really believe that this church was open to investigating those crimes fully? Does anyone doubt that a massive cover-up was carried out? Cardinal Bernard Law, the architect of the cover-up in Boston, went to an elite position in the Vatican when he should have gone to jail. By being in Rome he was spared from having to testify under oath. When Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, a highly respected Catholic Bishop in Sydney, Australia, was assigned the task of investigating clergy abuse in Australia, he wrote that he got no cooperation from the Vatican and when his report revealed how widespread both abuse and cover-up were in that country, he was quickly ostracized. No moral leadership will ever come from an institution unwilling to be honest about its own public behavior, an institution that thinks that the effort to clean up this criminal behavior is nothing but an attempt to hurt the church.

This church's behavior is neither admirable nor trustworthy. Its reputation for honesty is in tatters. Perhaps Benedict XVI will be the last gasp of this sorry chapter in church history. If not, perhaps we are watching the demise of this once great church. Time will tell. Based on current data, I would not bet on a positive result.

- John Shelby Spong