

Scandals signal need for institutional change

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

It seems self-evident that the reform of any institution (economic, academic, political, social and religious) should be implemented before the reform becomes absolutely necessary — or worse, before it's too late to save a desperate situation.

For the most part, however, institutions have always had an innate resistance to reform. They rationalize their failure to act by denying that the problem is as great as their critics say it is, or even by denying that the problem exists at all.

The Catholic Church is not exempt from this institutional syndrome, and nowhere is it more in evidence than in its non-response

to the growing chorus of concern and complaint about its clergy.

We are in a crisis situation, but those in pastoral leadership still refuse to act. Despite increasing evidence that the present system for the recruitment, formation and selection of priests is in need of a major overhaul, pastoral leaders still have not heeded calls for an immediate, no-holds-barred, let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may study of the problem.

Many Catholics are asking how many scandals will have to erupt before the leadership will finally admit that a very critical problem exists and that it will not go away by denying it, or by prayer and fasting alone.

The much-publicized pedophilia cases, with their multi-million dollar lawsuits against the church, are only the tip of the iceberg.

At this writing, the Covenant House scandal — sad and tragic though it is already — has been relatively well contained. But usually reliable sources indicate that the scandal is much more serious and much more far-reaching than the public now imagines.

The Newfoundland situation has already come to light, and the Archbishop of Halifax had to resign because of it.

There, as in so many other instances around the United States, the hierarchy engaged in denial and cover-up. It was

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always easier to disbelieve the charges against the clergy and religious and simply move the individual or individuals to another assignment, where the behavior would resume in a different environment.

There is no need to review the distressing story of sexual abuse at the Mount Carmel boys' orphanage in St. John's, Newfoundland. Suffice it to say, the archbishop refused to do anything about it, even though he was warned again and again with supporting evidence.

The commission found that the archbishop had lied when he said he had heard no allegations of sexual abuse until 1987. They cited three cases in which instances were said to have been brought to his attention in 1979, 1984, and 1986.

The commission's report urged the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to "fully, directly, honestly, and without reservation" examine the problems created by the requirement of obligatory celibacy.

What is theologically and pastorally significant about the Newfoundland case is the measure of lay involvement in its resolution.

Because they have no vested institutional interest in celibacy as the hierarchy seems to have, these laity draw their own conclusions based not on abstract appeals but on their experience as married people and as ordinary, active parishioners.

References to celibacy as a "precious jewel" (or some such metaphor) are not only meaningless to them, but frightening, because that kind of rhetoric is laden with denials and signals a refusal to explore whether a problem exists and to what extent it exists.

The people have a right to good pastors. The more they realize that the pipeline of good priests is drying up, the more they will demand change.

And the more these scandals keep bubbling to the surface of public attention, the more they will demand a change in the law of obligatory celibacy, just as the lay commission in Newfoundland has done.

Queen Esther prepares plan to rescue her people

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"Where is my uncle Mordecai?" Queen Esther asked her maid. "I haven't seen him for days. Send Hathach down to the palace gate to see what has become of him."

A short time later, Hathach returned and told the queen: "Mordecai seems to be in great distress over something. He is dressed in sackcloth and ashes and refused to speak to me."

"Bring him fresh garments to put on. He will not be allowed to enter the palace in mourning clothes. I must speak to him," she said, careful not to reveal to the servant that Mordecai was her uncle.

Queen Esther was bewildered when Hathach came back still holding the clothes intended for her uncle. "What happened?" she asked.

"Mordecai said to show you this edict," Hathach said, handing her the law written by the king's chief minister. "If Haman has his way, soon every Jew living in the kingdom will be eliminated. This edict has already been issued in all of the provinces."

"Whatever can be done?" Queen Esther

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said. "I should have known that all of this power would go to Haman's head!"

Hathach waited until the queen fell silent. "There is something else I haven't told you. Mordecai said that if you were to go to the king and plead with him to show mercy, the Jews might be saved."

"Me, I have not seen King Xerxes for 30 days," Queen Esther said. "It is against the law for anyone, even his wife, to approach him without being summoned when he is in the inner palace court. Punishment for disobeying this law is death!"

As determined as Haman was in destroying the Jews, Mordecai was equally bent on saving them. Hathach reported the queen's response to Mordecai, who gave him another message for queen Esther.

"Esther, do not mistakenly think that because you are in the king's house you will be saved," he said. "If you choose to do nothing to help, our deliverance will

come from another place. However, God may well have placed you in the position of queen so that you could come to the aid of your people."

When Esther read this message from Mordecai, she settled on a course of action. "Tell Mordecai to gather with all of the other Jews in the city and fast for three days," she said. "I will do the same. Afterwards, even though it is against the law, I will go to see the king. If I perish for doing so, so be it."

Queen Esther stood in the hall just outside the king's inner court and waited. From her vantage point, she could see Xerxes sitting in his throne.

As soon as the king looked up and saw her, he smiled and held out his gold scepter, giving her permission to come in to the inner court.

"Why have you come here my queen?" King Xerxes asked. "Whatever it is, even half of my kingdom, I will grant it."

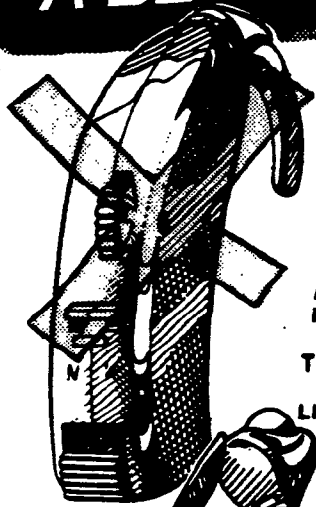
Queen Esther had already thought of a plan to save her people. "It is nothing quite so elaborate as that," she said. "I have prepared a banquet for you. Let the king come today with his chief minister, Haman. Then I will make my request known."

(To be continued next week).

Scripture reference: Book of Esther, Chapter 4:5-8.

Meditation: There are no coincidences with God's will.

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