

Church can learn from BCCI scandal

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The Catholic Church may have something to learn from the way the BCCI scandal has been unfolding.

BCCI stands for Bank of Credit and Commerce International. The scandal has to do with the laundering of drug money, the illegal sale of arms on the international market, the selling of nuclear secrets, and the worst instance of bank fraud in history. The Sept. 2 issue of *Time* magazine has called it "the world's first truly global financial scandal."

The BCCI story is one of unheeded warnings and of deliberate efforts to conceal the facts and to discredit the whistleblowers.

As early as 1984 federal agencies were warned of the problem, but no investigation was launched.

In 1986 the Central Intelligence Agency informed the Treasury Department that BCCI had gained control of First American Bankshares, Inc., headed by Clark Clifford and Robert Altman, two very prominent and politically well-connected figures in the nation's capital.

Neither agency passed the information along to the Federal Reserve Board, even though the board had in 1981 expressly prohibited such control.

In late 1988 federal investigators in Florida discovered at least one witness to

the link with First American, but two years passed before the Federal Reserve Board verified it.

As a result, innocent investors have been defrauded of billions of dollars, countless lives have been ruined by the BCCI-financed drug trade, and the world has become an even more unstable place because of illegal arms sales to Iran, Iraq, India and Pakistan.

The age-old lesson of human experience has once again been verified: problems do not go away simply by denying them. They remain, they fester, and eventually they resurface in more virulent and destructive forms.

For some years now Catholic officials have been reluctant to acknowledge problems of a different sort in the church: (1) the precipitous decline in vocations to the priesthood and the increase of candidates unsuited for ministry; (2) the demoralization of middle-aged priests who feel themselves "caught in the middle" between current church policies and the attitudes of their post-conciliar congregations; (3) the growing alienation of women; and (4) the waning influence of the hierarchy in matters of private and public morality.

In each one of these sensitive areas, the tendency has been to ignore or deny evidence of the problem, to suppress or control criticism, and to discredit or censor critics.

Regarding the decline in vocations to

the priesthood: We have constantly been assured that the problem is only temporary, and that the Holy Spirit will see to it that the church has a sufficient supply of priests in the future.

The solution, we are told, is spiritual, not institutional. The remedy is prayer and sacrifice, not a change in the rules pertaining to celibacy or the ordination of women.

Some even take comfort in what dismays many parish priests and seminary staff members; namely, the influx of rigid, authoritarian and sexually immature candidates who manage to persuade their sponsors that they are "men of prayer." Their future bishops may discover, much to their consternation, how much psychological baggage comes with the prayer.

Regarding the demoralization of middle-aged priests: When the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry released its report, "Reflections on the Morale of Priests" (*Origins*, 1/12/89), a number of bishops refused to circulate it among their own priests while others — in a classic instance of blaming the messenger for the message — criticized the bishop who chaired the subcommittee that prepared the report.

Regarding the growing alienation of women: The bishops' committee that has been struggling for the past several years to produce a document on the role of women in the church has met with nothing

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

but frustration.

It has been advised that its statement may not differ in any way from current Vatican policies and that the revealing testimony of women summarized in the first draft had to be dropped. Because of such pressures, at least one woman resigned as a consultant to the committee.

Finally, regarding the waning influence of the hierarchy, a phenomenon that Eugene Kennedy has called "The Problem with No Name" (*America*, 4/23/88): Whether it concerns condoms in New York City schools or abortion legislation in Massachusetts, the church's leadership finds itself on a different wave-length even from its own members.

And that story is repeated in such staunchly Catholic countries such as Poland.

But anyone who calls attention to the problem and urges a less authoritarian mode of teaching is met with glares of disapproval, or worse.

Denial or benign neglect won't dispel these problems, however, and if unaddressed, they'll only get worse.

The BCCI scandal teaches us that much.

Blindness can keep followers from Jesus

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 10:46-52; (R1) Jeremiah 31:7-9; (R2) Hebrews 5:1-6.

We read about Bartimaeus, a blind man, in Sunday's Gospel. He goes to Jesus because he is blind. Jesus heals him.

A deep need drove Bartimaeus to Jesus. Often we do not go to Jesus because we do not know our needs or our blindnesses.

A person can have three kinds of blindnesses. First, there is physical blindness. Helen Keller, who was born blind, wrote a powerful essay, entitled "Three Days to See." In the essay, she asked, "Suppose you who are reading this have only three days to see! What would you do? How would you plan to use to the full your precious eyesight for those three days?"

"Most of us," she wrote, "walk through life blind to its beauty and deaf to its sounds."

How grateful we should be to God just for our eyesight. Yet are we blind? Blind to the beauty of the world around us? Do trees have tongues for us, do stones speak to us, are brooks books to us? Do the heavens and the firmament declare to us the glory of God? Do we look for beauty in people, for goodness? Or do we look only at and for the salacious in books, on television or at the movies?

Secondly, a person can experience intellectual blindness. There are none so blind as those who will not see.

A man went to a psychiatrist one day and said, "I'm dead."

The psychiatrist answered, "You're not dead, and I'll prove it. Go home and — each day for 30 days — stand in front of a mirror and say, 'Dead men don't bleed.'"

The man went home and did as he was told. After 30 days, he returned to his psy-

chiatrist. "Did you do as I said?" the psychiatrist asked. When the man answered "yes," the psychiatrist said, "Now I'll prove you're not dead."

He grasped the man's hand and pricked his finger with a pin. The psychiatrist showed the blood to the man and said to him, "Now what does that prove?"

The man replied, "Gosh, doctor, it proves that I was wrong all along. Dead men do bleed."

Some people are so blind they can't see the obvious. They can see the speck in their neighbor's eye, but not the beam in their own. They can see how much they have to put up with people, but can't see how much people have to put up with them.

The third kind of blindness is spiritual blindness, in which people don't realize that they cannot make heaven on their own; that daily prayer is a necessity for salvation; that devotion to Mary and her rosary should be an integral part of their



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

spiritual lives; that frequent confession and frequent Mass are as necessary for salvation as eyes are for seeing.

One thing about Bartimaeus was that he knew he was blind and he knew what he wanted: "I want to see."

Every time I genuflect upon entering the church, I say, "Domine, ut videam! Lord, may I see! Lord, I want to see why I am here; where I am going; and how am I to get there."

When Jesus said to Bartimaeus, "Be on your way," he followed Jesus. He saw at last that here is the Way — Jesus! May we, too, see that Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. Without Him there is no going, no knowing, no living.

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