

When theology and sex collide

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Not even a tightly controlled diocesan press has prevented U.S. Catholics from learning about the terrible problem of sexual abuse in the priesthood. We are bombarded almost daily with new revelations on the evening news and in the morning papers.

In his recently published book, *Lead Us Not Into Temptation* (Doubleday), Jason Berry estimates that between 1982 and 1992 approximately 400 priests were reported to church and civil authorities for molesting youths. The vast majority of these men, he notes, had multiple victims.

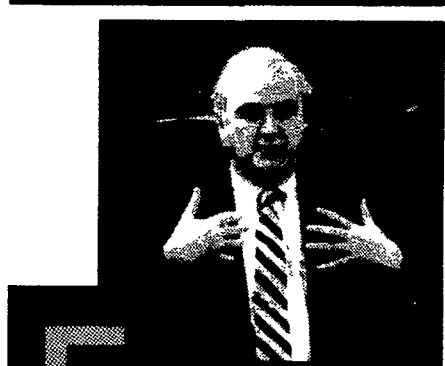
By 1992 the church's financial losses from victims' settlements, legal expenses, and medical treatment of clergy has probably reached \$400 million. That figure is sure to increase in the years ahead.

Father Thomas Doyle, a canon lawyer who served for five years at the Vatican Embassy in Washington, has called the pedophilia scandals "the most serious problem that we in the church have faced in centuries."

In his foreword to Berry's book, Father Andrew Greeley agrees. It may be, he writes, "the most serious crisis Catholicism has faced since the Reformation."

Many Catholics react defensively to such observations. They are quick to point out that the percentage of priests involved in these tragic cases is tiny, and that the overwhelming majority continues to serve God's people with complete moral integrity. But that's not the point.

"The crisis in the Catholic Church,"



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Berry writes, "lies not with the fraction of priests who molest youngsters but in an ecclesiastical power structure that harbors pedophiles, conceals other sexual behavior patterns among its clerics, and uses strategies of duplicity and counterattack against the victims."

Father Greeley is equally blunt: "Bishops have with what seems like programmed consistency tried to hide, cover up, bribe, stonewall; often they have sent back into parishes men whom they knew to be a danger to the faithful."

"Catholicism will survive," he predicts, "but that will be despite the present leadership and not because of them."

When criticized for failing to produce a comprehensive and effective national policy to deal with the crisis, the bishops and their official spokes-

men appeal to theology to explain and justify their posture.

Father Thomas Bevan, executive director of the Secretariat for Priestly Life and Ministry for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, states the matter well in a recent interview with *The Boston Globe*.

"Rome, he says, 'feels very strongly that each bishop operates in relation to the Vatican and that the conference is simply a means of coordinating their activities. The conference cannot stand as a step in between the individual bishops and Rome.'"

So it's not that the bishops are indifferent to sexual abuse in the priesthood. On the contrary, most of them are scared to death of it by now. The scandal and its financial costs have been at once shattering and staggering.

The stumbling-block is theology. A seemingly abstract argument over the authority of national episcopal conferences is what's preventing the bishops from dealing effectively with the sexual abuse crisis.

How did this come about? Several years ago a small group of conservative Catholics, partisan advocates of the policies and politics of the Reagan administration, began to complain that their bishops — under the mesmerizing influence of liberal staff members — were steering the U.S. church on a disastrously leftward course.

The bishops' 1983 pastoral letter on peace had already challenged the administration's military policies, and now their projected pastoral letter on the economy (which eventually appeared in 1987) was about to chal-

lenge its economic policies as well.

They brought their complaints directly to Milwaukee's Archbishop Rembert Weakland, who was chairing the committee responsible for drafting the pastoral letter, but they also made their displeasure known to the Vatican.

Some high-ranking curial officials were sympathetic, but on ecclesiological rather than political grounds.

Bishop's conferences, they pointed out, do not have a mandate to teach (*mandatum docendi*.) There are only two centers of teaching authority in the church: the pope (with the Roman Curia), and each bishop in his own diocese.

According to this particular theology, a diocesan bishop is subject to no one except the pope and the Curia. No body of bishops can tell a bishop what he can or cannot do in his own diocese.

Although more interested in politics than in theology, the Reagan conservatives were happy with this response because it gave them a basis on which to criticize and downplay the pastoral letter on the economy.

But the price of their victory has been high. That same bad theology that challenged the bishops' right to teach authoritatively on matters of peace and social justice is also preventing the formulation of an effective national policy on sexual abuse in the priesthood.

Leaving the matter up to each individual bishop will only ensure that the crisis will not be contained or dispelled.

An unholy marriage of theological and political interests has seen to that.

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