

COLUMNISTS

Where should blame fall for abusive priests?

Anyone who cares deeply about the Catholic Church and its priesthood has been profoundly and painfully saddened by the tragic story that continues to be played out in the Boston press, on local television and radio stations, and in other media outlets beyond the city.

The media have an expression for a story that is likely to be around for weeks, even months. They say it has "legs." Unfortunately, the terrible story that continues to unfold in Boston not only has legs; they are the legs of a marathoner.

The defrocked priest at the center of the scandal in Boston happens to have been a seminary classmate of mine. Although one can completely sympathize with his many reported victims and their families, and can also readily identify with their pain of disillusionment and then anger in the face of the institutional church's indifference and even occasional hostility toward them, the accused himself, and many others like him throughout the church, is also a victim.

He is the victim of a system that has for too many years accepted unsuitable candidates for the priesthood, passed them along from year to year, and finally approved them for ordination — all the while ignoring clear danger signals and words of warning by faculty members.



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

One would need to have had experience on a seminary faculty, as I did, to appreciate the often subtle, but no less real, pressure from bishops and sometimes vocation directors upon rectors and faculty members to push dubious candidates through to ordination.

And those dubious candidates were never difficult to identify. They were the ones who, when their entire class was under review, would almost inevitably stop the forward progress of the evaluation, requiring lengthy discussion and provoking sometimes heated arguments.

In many seminaries, there were two competing philosophies at work. On the one side, there were those who felt, sincerely and in good conscience, that admission to the seminary was tantamount to tenure in a university faculty. A semi-

narian could only be dismissed if the faculty could establish an air-tight, quasi-legal case against him, with substantial empirical evidence to support their negative impressions and doubts.

The other side argued that admission to a seminary is nothing more than an opportunity for a candidate to prove that he is indeed suitable for a life of ministry in the priesthood. Whether in his first year or deacon year, no seminarian has tenure. Every seminarian, right up to the day before ordination, is on probationary status. The burden of proof for his suitability remains always on him, not on the seminary administration or faculty.

In justice to the seminarian, it was argued that negative impressions and perceptions should be dealt with as early as possible. No candidate, who failed to dispel doubts about his suitability after, say, two years should be allowed to continue.

According to public testimony reported in the Boston newspapers, the tragic individual at the center of the scandal there received unmistakably negative reviews even in the minor seminary, where the rector specifically warned the administration of the major seminary about serious problems of immaturity. To anyone with any experience at all of how seminaries worked in those days, the

fact that such a clear warning was ignored by the higher-ups in the system is hardly a cause for surprise.

The so-called "needs of the church" came first, and the church always needed priests. It was as simple as that. Moreover, who are we, mere mortals, to stand in the way of a God-given vocation? Just because a candidate happens to create a suspicion or a doubt in the mind of a few faculty members does not necessarily disqualify him from a chance to realize his "sacred" vocation to the priesthood. And so the system continued to grind out new priests — good and bad alike.

Those efforts notwithstanding, the system has now broken down. The numbers are no longer there. But that makes the situation even more dangerous, as the pressure to admit and ordain candidates — or to import them wholesale from other countries with far worse priest-to-people ratios — becomes even more intense.

Unfortunately, there have been generous ecclesiastical rewards for bishops who recruit and ordain by the numbers. Down the road, however, the Boston experience may await them.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Gospel story becomes basis of 'Amazing Grace'

4th Sunday of Lent (March 10): (R3) John 9:1-41; (R1) 1 Samuel 16:1, 6-7, 10-13; (R2) Ephesians 5:8-14.

Sunday's Gospel tells of a man born blind and healed by Jesus. The deep lesson here is about healing another kind of blindness: moral and spiritual blindness.

One of our most popular hymns is "Amazing Grace." It is a hymn written by a Briton, John Newton. In his early days Newton was a slave trader, selling and buying slaves. At first, he saw nothing wrong in this. Then one day Jesus came into his life, and Newton saw his own sinfulness and turned his life around. His life story is told in this beautiful hymn. He wrote: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was blind but now I see."

There are many ways we can be blind: physically, morally or spiritually.

The disciples of Jesus were blind in a way. They talked about the blind man as if he wasn't even there! Then they had the audacity to speculate on the causes of his blindness. They asked, "Is he blind because of something he did or because of something his parents did?" In biblical times, conventional wisdom held that if something were wrong with a person, it was the result of sin. The man blind from



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

birth presented a perplexing problem for the disciples. How could he have sinned before he was born?

Jesus refused to enter this debate, understanding the man's blindness to be an opportunity for healing and teaching. He introduces the theme of light coming into darkness. The man born blind has lived in total darkness. Jesus uses his coming to sight, to light, as a metaphor of what he, Christ, is doing in the world.

Jesus gave the man sight. The Pharisees attacked Jesus for working on the Sabbath by making mud! They questioned the blind man and his parents. His answer is the basis for the hymn "Amazing Grace," that once he was blind, but now he could see! That wasn't the answer the Pharisees wanted, so they

threw him out of the community.

Driven out of town for telling the truth about his cure, the blind man runs into Jesus, who asks him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The blind man asks, "Who is he, sir?" "The one speaking to you," answered Jesus. At these words the young man believed and knelt down and worshipped Jesus. The man now becomes whole: He is cured not only in body, but also in spirit.

For most of us, Jesus comes to cure us of moral and spiritual blindness. Can you not imagine the excitement of the blind man in receiving sight and then his great joy in finding him who is not only the light, but also the true life!

When William Montague Dyke was 10 years old, he was blinded in an accident. Despite his disability, he graduated from a university with high honors. He fell in love with a girl and became engaged.

Before the wedding, William had surgery, hoping his sight would be restored. At the wedding, the surgeon stood next to the groom. When the bride arrived at the altar, he cut the bandages from William's eyes. As William stood face-to-face with his bride-to-be, his words echoed through the church, "You are more beautiful than I ever imag-

ined."

We, too, can experience enthusiasm like that of the blind if we invite Christ into our lives to help us see the world through his eyes. Then we, too, can sing, "I once was blind, but now I see."

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, March 11

Isaiah 65:17-21; Psalms 30:2, 4-6, 11-12A, 13B; John 4:43-54

Tuesday, March 12

Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12; Psalms 46:2-3, 5-6, 8-9; John 5:1-16

Wednesday, March 13

Isaiah 49:8-15; Psalms 145:8-9, 13C-14, 17-18; John 5:17-30

Thursday, March 14

Exodus 32:7-14; Psalms 106:19-23; John 5:31-47

Friday, March 15

Wisdom 2:1A, 12-22; Psalms 34:17-21, 23; John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

Saturday, March 16

Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalms 7:2-3, 9B-12; John 7:40-53

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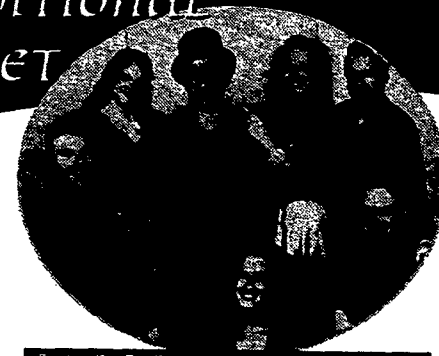
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