

COLUMNISTS

Scandal will result in laity assuming rightful role

Many of my friends are more optimistic than I am. They often try to assure me that everything will be fine "in the end." Lately I've been trying to heed their counsel and look for something positive that may come from the current round of scandals in the church. While most of what I've been experiencing might be classified most exactly as a kind of profound disappointment — applied to every aspect of the situation, I'm afraid — I keep looking for ways to detect some encouragement in the whole thing.

Lately I have begun to think in those terms. In fact, I think there is room for an emerging confidence as we look to the future. In particular, I think there is stirring even now a new kind of freedom and responsibility in the church that will overtake our future. My impression is that this new-found freedom is affecting particularly the laity, and that it is a movement that is long overdue. The fact that it is dawning in the midst of great pain and that most of us would have wished it to be otherwise does not diminish its strength or potential. I think we are at a crucial juncture leading to church reform, and that it's a reform of all of us together, not just one segment of the church.

In times past, church reform has often been associated with particular exemplary individuals, like Francis of Assisi or Catherine of Siena, or individual popes and abbots. But today the reform is taking place through all of us, and particularly at the "grass-roots" level of church



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

membership. I think it has to do in particular with the exercise of authority, which has for far too long taken place according to an authoritarian mode where knowledge, information and decisions are simply presented to the faithful.

Baptized Catholics, though adult and full members of the church, have been treated as if they were adolescents — not quite capable of understanding their faith, of making decisions about faith and church life, somehow not ready to be part of the governing structure of the church they love and support. While the Second Vatican Council called for reform of this "second-class citizenship" of the laity, the changes prescribed in the Council in this regard have remained largely "on paper." The moment is at hand, I think, for church authority and the power of decision making to move beyond its current state of centralization in the hands of very few. There needs to be a reform that will bring all the baptized into the full exercise of faith, which includes critical

freedom and informed decision-making about all matters of church life.

Lay Catholics have to assume their rightful role now as full, adult members of the church, ready and willing to assume their rightful place in its governance and decision-making. For too long, we have endured an atmosphere of fear in which, among other things, theologians have been accused of upsetting or "confusing the faithful" by asking critical questions or proposing new ways of interpreting tradition. This sort of paternalism underestimates faith itself, the power and meaning of baptism, and the people themselves.

I can offer an example of this kind of thinking. A few years ago I heard a lecture by a prominent churchman who used an image from a carving on a medieval bishop's staff to make his point. He described the carving as depicting three animals: a sheep, a dog and a wolf. In his terms, the wolf was primed to harm the sheep, except that the dog stood between them to protect the sheep.

The speaker's interpretation was that the wolf represented theologians in the post-Vatican II church whose "new ideas" threatened the innocent, vulnerable faithful (the sheep). The dog depicted the curia and other church governance departments who had assumed the role of protecting the faithful from harmful new ideas which would "confuse" the membership.

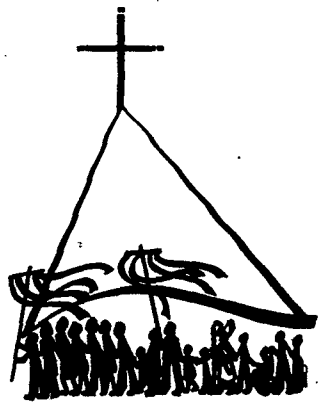
From where I stand today, the time has

come for this kind of paternalism to end. The American church is filled with life and vigor. Its members are faithful, educated, smart about matters of all sorts and are ready both to hear and consider new theological ideas and to assume their rightful role in governing the church.

Concentration of power and authority in the hands of a few has been proven time and again to lead to destruction. This has been shown in both secular and religious settings time and time again. The Second Vatican Council called for an end to this sort of governance, but we have all tolerated an atmosphere of fear and even greater centralization of power in the intervening years. Sadly, the current scandals will, I think, do more to bring about the needed changes than even an ecumenical council could.

Asking critical theological questions or posing new theological interpretations will not bring down the church. Refusing to extend rightful authority and decision-making power to all baptized members of the church, however, has been shown to be short-sighted and harmful. The time has come for all of us to insist that the structures of the church be reformed in ways that will allow true critical freedom to be exercised by all the laity and by all church members in appropriate ways.

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