

Honesty can give church a better year

Many Catholics have been asking whether 2003 will be a better year for the Roman Catholic Church than 2002 had been. The only honest answer is, "Who knows?"

What is clear is that Cardinal Law's resignation last month as archbishop of Boston has not brought an end to the crisis, nor is it the beginning of the end. The problem of sexual abuse within the priesthood has never been confined to Boston, nor was Cardinal Law the only bishop who mishandled it.

Several months ago, *The Dallas Morning News* reported that there were as many as 211 bishops who had reassigned at least one abusive priest, thereby placing even more children and young people in harm's way. While not all of these cases were of equal seriousness or culpability, the total number was disturbingly high, indicating that the problem is far more extensive than at first realized and acknowledged.

Some like to blame everything on the media. Until recently, however, the media had actually steered clear of stories that were potentially embarrassing to the church. It had offered the same protection to major political institutions and figures as well. Until Watergate.

Watergate brought about a sea-change. Journalists came to see how much harm is done to society when evidence of serious wrongdoing is deliberately overlooked.

The situation is far differ-



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

ent today. Newspapers and their reporters win Pulitzers for exposing corruption in high places. *The Boston Globe* will surely receive one for cracking open the sexual-abuse scandal last January.

It is clear now that every individual, no matter how exalted, and every institution, no matter how powerful, is subject to exposure and a daily skewering in the media if there is evidence of serious misconduct and of a subsequent cover-up.

When an unpleasant story is dealt with openly and honestly, however, chances are good that it will hold the media's attention for only a few days at most. On the other hand, when the story has to be dragged out bit by bit, with a seasoning of lies and half-truths, it gets "legs."

The current sexual-abuse story has lasted for a full twelve months and shows no signs of subsiding. It is a story that got its "legs" because of the behavior of bishops and their lawyers who thought that they could somehow "manage" it and, in the process, protect the church from scandal. Those "legs" have proved to be as strong and as durable as a marathoner's.

Nevertheless, the year 2003 can be a better year for the Catholic Church if those who speak and act officially on the church's behalf were to do so in an open, honest and forthright manner. For starters, bishops should listen more carefully and more respectfully to their priests and lay people and resist their own theologically skewed instinct to suppress whatever they perceive as "dissent" and to punish the alleged "dissenters."

As the events of 2002 have demonstrated with painful clarity, however, it has been the bishops, not the theologians and other critics, who have, by their gross mismanagement of this crisis, brought about the most acute and damaging scandal in the history of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States.

To be sure, they did not themselves engage in sexual abuse of the young (although a few bishops, in fact, were guilty of such by their own admission), but they covered up hundreds of such cases, reassigned known predatory priests, stonewalled the victims and their families, and then, when all else failed, authorized millions of dollars in secret settlements in order to safeguard the reputation of the institutional church and its priesthood.

One hopes and prays that we can do much better than that in 2003.

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

'Roe' betrays the innocents

To the editor:

On the Christian calendar soon after we celebrate the birth of Christ, Christmas, we have the feast of the Holy Innocents (Dec. 28). This date commemorates when the male infants of Bethlehem were slaughtered by the soldiers of a jealously crazed Herod who killed them in his effort to kill the Christ child. Today there are many Herods, and they too continue to slay the innocents in our local abortuaries. Innocence betrayed!

At the end of Christ's life, we find another type of betrayal. Pilate, the procurator who officiated at Christ's trial, knew Christ to be innocent of the crimes brought against Him, yet he washed his hands of any responsibility for Christ's death. Popular public opinion became his operative instead of following Truth. We are perhaps more like Pilate than Herod. We turn our gaze away from the abortuaries in our midst and say that we wouldn't have chosen to kill our child, but after all, it is lawful in our country to do so. Hands washed, truth put aside, and again we've betrayed Christ.

Thirty years have passed since the infamous decision of *Roe vs. Wade* made abortions legal in our "one nation under God!" Isn't it time to stop the betrayal of innocence and of God?

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Foreign aid doesn't work

To the editor:

Thanks for shedding more light on the AIDS crisis in Africa and pointing a finger at predatory sexual behavior.

When government is derelict in their duty to protect their people, especially women and children, predators will prevail, as they do even in our great country.

I met my friend, Ralph Boryszewski, (retired Rochester cop) in 1999 because he wrote a letter to the *Democrat & Chronicle* explaining government is our biggest enemy. His book, *The Constitution That Never Was*, proves the point. I well remember a Catholic bishop from Africa speaking in our church a couple of years ago about the despair in Africa. After the service he talked with departing worshippers at the door, and I asked him what happened to the billions of dollars in foreign aid America had sent Africa over the years. His reply was that the money goes to the governments. "Governments give to governments. They have all the land and goods, and governments give them more." I suspected as much.

Of course, foreign aid is unconstitutional, as I told our now retired (thank God) congressman, John J. LaFalce, at one of his friendly town meetings. His reply was "the Supreme Court ruled foreign aid constitutional." LaFalce is a lawyer; he should have known the Supreme Court cannot legislate.

As long as African governments treat their women and kids like dogs, we'd rather give our money directly to the dedicated relief workers.

Maybe our new representative, Tom Reynolds, will be more reasonable and obey our Constitution, and work to stop our money being poured down the rat hole of foreign aid. Maybe he'll have a friendly town meeting, and we can talk face to face.

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