

The Problem of Church Scandals

"If in 1,800 years we clergy have failed to destroy the Church, do you really think that you'll be able to do it?"

--Cardinal Ercole Consalvi to Napoleon Bonaparte, after the general had threatened to crush the Catholic Church

Even as I write this, a brand new wave of scandals in the Catholic Church is making headline news, with something happening in several countries all at once. Sadly, this is nothing new. Sex scandals go all the way back to the book of Genesis, starting with Ham having relations with his mother while his father, Noah, was asleep drunk (see Leviticus 18:7, some Bibles use the literal translation "to uncover nakedness," while other translations use the intent of this text: "to have sexual intercourse with."). Ham attempted to steal the birthright of his older brother Shem. To claim a man's wife was grounds to claim the man's inheritance. We have other Biblical examples of this political move: Reuben sleeping with Bilhah (Genesis 35:22), Ishbaal accusing Abner of doing so with Rizpah (2 Samuel 3:7), Absalom attempting to secure his inheritance by systematically sleeping with David's whole harem publicly (2 Samuel 16:21-22) and Solomon's half brother Adonijah seeking to start a coup by marrying Abishag (1 Kings 2:21-24). And these are only the scandals with political motivation, many other sex scandals are recorded as well. The damage such scandals have done and continue to do is clear and well documented, for both biblical and contemporary times. But again, I do not believe this discredits Christianity in general, nor the Catholic Church in particular. The Church is not a retail business and its congregation are not customers. I cannot emphasize this enough: the Church is the sum of *all* Christians, and *all* Christians are equal before God's judgment.

The role of the clergy is ultimately to teach and guide other Christians, but this title alone does not make them any more important to the Church than a newborn baby being baptized, nor does it offer proof against sin. One has a reasonable expectation that, as a professional teacher and as a leader, the clergy would lead by example. The overwhelming majority do just that and with great success. But a majority, even an overwhelming majority, is still not *all*. From this premise, I will address how the clerical hierarchy as a whole is still justified despite the acts of a few apostates (even the high ranking ones) and how the Church is likewise justified.

A) The Justification of the Clerical Hierarchy:

When he broke open the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the witness they bore to the word of God. They cried out in a loud voice, "How long will it be, holy and true master, before you sit in judgment and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" Each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to be patient a little while longer until the number was filled of their fellow servants and brothers who were going to be killed as they had been.

--Revelation 6:9-11

It is the job of a king to create laws for his people. When a subject breaks one or more of these laws, this does not discredit the king or his laws: it is a discredit to the lawbreaker. It is the job of the sheriff to apprehend and bring to trial those who break the law. If a sheriff chooses not to arrest the lawbreakers, then he will *embarrass* the king and his laws, but this still does not *discredit* the king or

the laws. A wise king will eventually discover his unfaithful servant and punish him severely for the embarrassment. It is only if the king does not take reasonable action to look for corruption, or if he ignores the corruption once found, that the king will be discredited.

The same applies to Christianity. Contrary to what some say about Catholicism, the Pope is neither the "king" nor the "head" of the Church. Jesus is. The Pope is a steward appointed by Jesus Himself (Matthew 16:19): "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Jesus is a wise king, and will remove any and all unfaithful servants. We actually have a biblical example of this in Isaiah 22:15-25, where God vows to strike down Shebna (steward of King David's house) and replace him with Eliakin, son of Hikliah. Eliakin is warned that the fate of Shebna will be his fate if he is not faithful. Note verse 22: "I will place the key of the House of David on his shoulder; when he opens, no one shall shut, when he shuts, no one shall open," and compare it to the words of Jesus to Peter just quoted. Jesus came to fulfill the prophets, not abolish them (Matthew 5:17). What applied to Shebna, Eliakin and other stewards of David will apply to Peter and his successors. Those who abuse their power will be held accountable. If it seems to take a very long time to bring them to justice, it is only to justify the punishment they will receive. Take heart in 1 Corinthians 2:11-13, "For no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there, namely, Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire (itself) will test the quality of each one's work." For leaders, this reckoning will not simply be for dereliction of duty, but also for the crimes of those who acted on the unlawful indulgence. I would also refer interested readers to the Book of Hosea, chapters 4 and 5, and even to the non-canonical Book of Enoch for more on why God may allow the wicked to continue for a time. But when the time does come for their removal, they will be condemned by those they wronged: Then I heard the altar cry out, "Yes, Lord God almighty, your judgments are true and just." (Revelation 16:7)

We see many examples of God bringing those who abuse their authority to ruin in the Bible. Rather than receive Shem's birthright, Ham's son of incest (Canaan) and all of his descendants were given over as slaves instead. Solomon's glory, which took a lifetime to make, disappeared like smoke shortly after his death, and set the stage for constant strife and the ultimate exile of the Israelis. By no means, however, is the reckoning limited to sacred scriptures.

King Henry VIII failed to get what he hoped to by leaving the Church: a lasting dynasty (the Tudors only reigned for 11 disastrous years after Henry VIII's death). Nor is this limited to the past: we only need to watch a little TV to see this is still going on today. Celebrities, politicians and other public figures are seen every night as they admit to not having a purpose to their life, check into various rehab locations, serve prison time, become exiled from family and home, contract deadly diseases, suffer mental problems and/or even die due to their lifestyles. When the shock from one celebrity's train wreck wears off, another former hero is paraded before us to be held up as a public spectacle. Inside or outside the Church, Jesus, the wise king, will hold accountable those who abuse their power:

The word of the LORD came to me: Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to them: To the shepherds, thus says the Lord GOD: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been pasturing themselves! Should not shepherds pasture the flock? You consumed milk, wore wool, and slaughtered fatlings, but the flock you did not pasture. You did not strengthen the weak nor heal the sick nor bind up the injured. You did not bring back the stray or seek the lost but ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and

became food for all the wild beasts. They were scattered and wandered over all the mountains and high hills; over the entire surface of the earth my sheep were scattered. No one looked after them or searched for them.

Therefore, shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live—oracle of the Lord GOD—because my sheep became plunder, because my sheep became food for wild beasts, for lack of a shepherd, because my shepherds did not look after my sheep, but pastured themselves and did not pasture my sheep, therefore, shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD: Look! I am coming against these shepherds. I will take my sheep out of their hand and put a stop to their shepherding my flock, so that these shepherds will no longer pasture them. I will deliver my flock from their mouths so it will not become their food. For thus says the Lord GOD: Look! I myself will search for my sheep and examine them. As a shepherd examines his flock while he himself is among his scattered sheep, so will I examine my sheep. I will deliver them from every place where they were scattered on the day of dark clouds. I will lead them out from among the peoples and gather them from the lands; I will bring them back to their own country and pasture them upon the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and every inhabited place in the land. In good pastures I will pasture them; on the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down on good grazing ground; in rich pastures they will be pastured on the mountains of Israel. I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest—oracle of the Lord GOD. The lost I will search out, the strays I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal; but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd them in judgment.

--Ezekiel 34: 1-16

B) The Justification of the Church:

On her pilgrimage, the Church has also experienced the "discrepancy existing between the message she proclaims and the human weakness of those to whom the Gospel has been entrusted." Only by taking the "way of penance and renewal," the "narrow way of the cross," can the People of God extend Christ's reign. For "just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and oppression, so the Church is called to follow the same path if she is to communicate the fruits of salvation to men."

--Catechism of the Catholic Church #853

There is no reason why any Catholic who can read would be unable to know for himself what corruption in the Church would look like. Catholics have a collection of teachings called the Catechism (some other Christian churches have their own catechisms as well). In 2,000 years, there has not been a single corruption the Catholic Church has been scandalized over where the guilty parties were acting in accordance with the Catechism. Every scandal was performed by someone who was professionally obligated to know and understand the Catechism, yet made a willful choice to go against it. These scandals were not simply small infractions of obscure parts of the Catechism, either. They have all been "mortal sins," which means they are especially heinous in their nature (the "deadly sin" in 1 John 5:16-17). Furthermore, they will be held even more accountable due to the positions of earthly

power they enjoyed when they committed them (again, Hosea 4 and 5). Sadly, their separation of faith is rarely followed by a separation of office. Such is the reality of this life, but this life will one day be no more.

But the history of the Church is not just a story of corruption. In 2,000 years of scandals of one sort or another, there have always been those who stood up to the corruption. Not with handcuffs and guns, but with the spoken Truth and a life that mimicked the Truth. With their efforts, positive changes have always followed. From the days when Saints Peter, James, John and Paul were warning the fledgling Church against early heretics, to the removal of corrupted clergy (including some Popes) during the tempestuous times that inspired the Protestant Reformation, to the ongoing efforts to remove the pedophiles today (which, while incomplete, have been more successful than the media would let the public think). There always were and still are those who stand up and say, "This is against our faith."

Because the Church not only comprises the clergy, but *all* Christians, *anyone* can help stop the corruption of the Church. *All* Christians have an obligation to stop the corruption: "Brothers, even if a person is caught in some transgression, you who are spiritual should correct that one in a gentle spirit, looking to yourself, so that you also may not be tempted." (Galatians 6:1). The Catechism of the Catholic Church specifically states that the laity have the right and sometimes even the duty to express opinions to the clergy concerning the good of the Church (paragraph #907). This is not limited to headline events: apostasy and heresy take many forms. Dissension and gossip are daily events in our lives that undermine the faith. As an alternative, the teachings of the faith can occur during any activity or conversation. No matter what scandals the future brings, a positive change will take place as long as one person in the world still believes in what Christianity is really about and has the courage to act on it. This self-correcting ability of the Church, which can be performed by its lowliest (but devout) member, is essential to the credibility of the faith.

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Original Publication Date: 10 December 2020