

FALLEN PRIESTS ABANDONED BY CHURCH HIERARCHY

By Charlene C. Duline

The members of the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church have washed their hands of those they led. The sexual abuse of a child is an appalling crime, worse when it is committed by those we trust. The priests and religious convicted of such crimes, the guilty along with the innocent, are now in prison. And there they languish. The church hierarchy does not deign to respond to their letters – unless it is to advise them of laicization proceedings. Neither do they respond to the priests’ requests for forgiveness, prayers, religious materials, or simply a word of compassion. Visiting incarcerated priests is apparently something bishops do not do, and do not allow other priests to do, despite the Lord’s statement that by visiting those in prison, one has visited Him.

Last July I wrote an article reflecting upon the treatment of priests in prison for sexual abuse, (“Throwaway Priests,” July 20, 2007 National Catholic Reporter), their treatment by other inmates, and the lack of forgiveness by our church. I was overwhelmed by the letters, telephone calls and e-mails from active priests, priests who have left the church, priests in prison, and lay people. My article was passed around in prisons by incarcerated priests because they said I was the only person who had ever publicly asked for forgiveness for them. Where are their parishioners, their bishops, and their fellow priests? Shame has already been visited upon these men of God. Who are we to continue to condemn and deny them love and forgiveness? Everyone cannot visit a priest in prison, but we can send cheerful notes or at least cards on holidays to let them know that they are in our prayers.

Yes, I deplore the sexual abuse committed by some of these men, but I know they need compassion. I pray for them and for their accusers. I speak as a survivor of sexual abuse. I know the pain of remembering, the lack of trust, the fear, the shame, and the agony of keeping it all inside one’s heart. Yet, I have been blessed with the gift of grace, and I have nothing but love and compassion in my heart for my fallen angels, as I think of them. They are grateful that someone has the courage to ask for compassion for them because they have been treated as lepers. I am also treated as a leper by some in my

parish for speaking out and shaming them for their lack of compassion. We have all been too quiet for too long. The voices of the hateful are loud and clear, where are the voices of the children of God?

It is imperative that church leaders acquaint themselves with the treatment of some of the elderly priests in prison. One elderly priest recently greeted a visitor in a wheelchair and shackles. He ordinarily needs a cane to walk, but because he has been in solitary confinement and has had to sleep on a cold floor for the past two months, his condition has worsened. He is now in a wheelchair. Another elderly priest needs a knee replacement, but the surgeon refuses to operate because he said, “The prison is too dirty. If I operate, and you go back there, the knee will get infected.” Another old priest was taken by prison guards to a neurologist for treatment of his legs. The priest had severe bruising on his lower ankles due to being manacled in a metal cage enroute to the doctor. The doctor was unable to do the scheduled tests because of damage to blood vessels in his legs. The doctor has filed a complaint with the prison board charging Elder Abuse. A copy of the doctor’s letter was sent to the bishop of this priest. I doubt that he cares.

Since the scandal broke we have heard much from the Catholic Church hierarchy regarding the need for healing and reconciliation for the accusers. Never has there been a word of forgiveness or prayers requested for incarcerated priests or for their families. The princes of the church have rid themselves of these troublesome priests. They have enriched greedy lawyers. They have pacified victim advocate groups. The church hierarchy sighs in the mistaken belief that their trials and tribulations are over. And God is in His heaven shaking His head. Shepherds of the Church, what a golden opportunity you have been accorded to demonstrate what our faith is about, why our Lord died for us, why we say in our Creed that we believe in “the forgiveness of sin.”

One priest wrote:

“They (the bishops) are afraid to express even enough concern for us as might be reflected in a promise to pray for us. The bishops ... appear to have discerned that they cannot minister to both victims and (the) accused; that they cannot be church to both; that they cannot be Christ to both. I suggest that in this way, they fail their own vocations and betray their witness to the Gospel. It’s a scandal within the scandal, a crisis within the crisis, and points to a profound deficit of faith and courage.”

Several priests told me of the axiom bandied about among priests: God always forgives; man sometimes forgives; the Church never forgives. Does that make us proud?

Massachusetts Cardinal Sean O'Malley has twice visited the prison where several priests are held. In 2006 he spoke to inmates through the steel doors to their cells, and ignored requests from several priests to meet with them. In 2007 he visited again, but did "not have the time" to visit the unit that houses incarcerated priests, although one priest noted that the Cardinal walked past their unit to reach another unit "for which he apparently did have time." I submit that is not the action of a caring shepherd, one who is under orders from God to guide, to love and to forgive. Our church hierarchy has abandoned those it perceives as being the least loved of God's children. We pray, "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." Let us never forget that God will judge; not us. Our bishops must take the lead in healing.

May the Lord touch each of our hearts with hope and compassion. May He bestow His blessings and love upon us, and may we extend the same to all incarcerated priests and religious. Let us keep them, their families, and their accusers in our prayers.

*"Christ is present in this world.
He is mysteriously present in those
for whom there seems to be nothing
but the world at its worst."*

- Thomas Merton