

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 26

Article 15

10-1-2004

Forum: Crisis in the Church. Reform Structures, Focus on the Evidence

Thomas P. Rausch, S.J.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Rausch, S.J., Thomas P. (2004) "Forum: Crisis in the Church. Reform Structures, Focus on the Evidence," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 26, Article 15.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol26/iss1/15>

they nevertheless point to deep concern, anger and confusion that exists regarding this situation and other sexual matters. The most effective response is neither abrupt rejection nor evasion. As defenders of free speech have long advocated, the best response to speech you don't like is *more speech*...vigorous discourse that challenges logic, acknowledges error, accepts certain points while questioning others...discourse that provides context and, perhaps, leads all participants to deeper understanding.

What better site for such discourse than Catholic Jesuit colleges and universities? We have within our communities the intellectual resources to provide accurate information and mature context. Moreover, we have a ready audience in our students, our faculty, our staff and our surrounding neighborhoods. These are people who have heard the jokes and sound bites and read the headlines. These are people who are hungry to engage in thoughtful, honest discourse. Finally, we have a tradition of asking questions, examining multiple viewpoints, and confronting issues. The fact that we do so with an abiding appreciation of our faith tradition as well as intellectual rigor is a unique gift that we are obliged to give not only to our academic community, but also to the Roman Catholic Church and the wider society in which it exists.

Bren A. O. Murphy is associate professor in the department of communication at Loyola University Chicago.

REFORM STRUCTURES, FOCUS ON THE EVIDENCE

Thomas P. Rausch, S. J.

The scandal caused by the sexual abuse of young people by clergy has transfixed the Roman Catholic Church for the last two years (2002-04), and it has raised the issue of structural reform in the Church with a new urgency. While the vast majority of Catholics have remained loyal to their Church, many have a clear sense that something is seriously amiss.

The scandal has indicated dramatically how little input the laity actually has in the decision-making process in the Church, particularly at the local

Church level. And, more and more laymen and women are becoming aware that there are no institutional checks and balances that allow them some say about how authority is exercised in the Church, whether at the parish, the diocesan, or the universal level. They have no way to address the problem of an incompetent pastor or an authoritarian bishop, no say over their appointment, no way to bring their own concerns and experience to the decision-making process of the universal Church. There are no structures of accountability. And they are increasingly seeing the present crisis as calling them to adult status in the life of the Church. I would suggest at least two things that Jesuit colleges and universities might do in response.

First, the Church in the years ahead must progress from renewal to the reform of structures that will provide for greater accountability and a system of checks and balances, so that the Church can function, not as a top-down authority structure, but as an interdependent *communio* of pastors and faithful which it truly is. Jesuit institutions need to address concretely this issue, using their scholarship and research. Some have already done this. Boston College has established an on-going program, "The Church in the Twenty-First Century," which will focus on issues arising from the sexual abuse crisis, particularly the relationship between lay men and women and Church authorities through conferences, special lectures, media, and assemblies. Santa Clara University sponsored a conference in May, run by the Bannan Center for Jesuit Education.

Secondly, perhaps the greatest good that might come out of this crisis is a sustained focus on the evil that the sexual abuse of young people is, not just in the Church, but in society in general. For example, the Gallup Organization reported 1.3 million children were sexually assaulted in 1995. The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Systems found that for the year 2001, approximately 903,000 children were victims of child maltreatment, 10 percent of whom (or 90,000) were sexually abused. According to the U. S. Department of Justice, some 250,000 to 500,000 pedophiles reside in the United States. The Catholic League recently reported that "in New York City alone, at least one child is sexually abused by a school employee every day," and 60 percent of employees accused in the New York City schools were transferred to desk jobs at district offices located inside the schools. Of these, 40 percent are repeat offenders. If the Church has begun to deal with this problem, other institutions have not.

Most instances of abuse take place in families where it remains a hidden but very real problem.

According to Dr. Garth A. Rattray, (*The Gleamer* (May 14, 2002), "about 85 percent of the offenders [of child sexual abuse] are family members, babysitters, neighbors, family friends or relatives." This is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Thomas P. Rausch, S.J. is T. Marie Chilton professor of Catholic theology at Loyola Marymount University.

A DOUBLE CRISIS OF FAITH AND LEADERSHIP

Diana L. Hayes

The Catholic Church in the US and around the world is today struggling with a crisis that strikes to the very heart of what we, as the People of God think not only of our Church but also of our Christian faith itself. The crisis caused by the unfolding and deepening of the sexual abuse scandal among priests and religious has in part been made even more difficult because of the seeming inability of our leaders, bishops and others, to confront openly and honestly the impact that this scandal has had and continues to have on the Church and the faithful. We are thus confronted not only by a crisis of faith but also by a crisis of leadership.

Although the impact spreads throughout the Church, those especially affected are young Catholics, those found in our many Catholic colleges and universities, who are still struggling to shape and strengthen their faith in the face of countless shocks from the increasingly secular world. Having to deal with further shocks from within the Church itself leaves many of them teetering on the edge of an abyss. What can and should we who teach and serve in administrative roles at Jesuit colleges and universities do to help them bridge this abyss with a strong and unflinching faith that leads them over the abyss into the arms of Jesus rather than a shaky and unformed faith that allows them to fall?

In keeping with their mission as institutions of higher learning, Jesuit colleges and universities must ensure that their students are not only introduced to the rich tradition of social justice teachings that have historically placed the Roman Catholic Church in the forefront as a critical voice over against the growing secularization of society with its accompanying hedo-

nistic worship of self and mammon. A Jesuit institution should also provide opportunities outside of the classroom for students to discuss issues that challenge their faith in God and their Church and its leadership. It should also enable them to see this tradition in action lived in the world. This means participating in programs and projects that acknowledge the harm that has been done but also work to change the circumstances under which they occurred.

What should be done? Opportunities are needed and safe spaces provided for serious and critical dialogue between students, faculty and administrations. Painful they may be, but is this not part of the process by which we seek to develop our students as critical thinkers and contributors to both Church and world? It is of critical importance that we meet with these students, individually if necessary, but more importantly in larger forums that enable them not simply to hear the truth about what has happened and how it was allowed for too long to happen but are also able to ask questions and receive clear and honest answers from which they can draw courage and hope.

Martyred Jesuit scholar Ignacio Ellacuria affirmed that the task of a Catholic university is to engage with rather than withdraw or hide from the world. It has a responsibility to mold future leaders, both of Church and society, in an atmosphere of open yet critical enquiry. This is especially critical today as the People of God who are truly the Church seek to walk their journey with the Christ, not blind-folded and hand-cuffed by regulations and restrictions that leave them mute, blind and restrained but with the awareness that we are all responsible for ensuring the vitality of the Church and the faithful.

Diana L. Hayes is associate professor of theology at Georgetown University.

