

3 Concrete Steps That Could've Circumvented Catholicism's Child Abuse Crisis

AUTHOR'S ADDENDUM: The day this commentary was submitted for publication, the pope released a global statement aligning with this third point.

The Catholic Church in America is on the ropes. It breaks my heart because I'm grateful for a heritage where my parents, who couldn't afford a car, scrimped and saved for me to be blessed with 12 years of excellent parochial education. I thank God to this day for the numbers of dedicated priests, brothers and nuns who shaped my moral and spiritual life.

Years ago, I was privileged to write my autobiography, *Clap Your Hands! A Young Catholic Encounters Christ*, which reached over a quarter million people worldwide. I wrote the book to highlight one of the three points I make in this commentary which I believe could have helped prevent the shocking revelations regarding the current sex scandal among Catholic priests.

Hours ago, I tried to counsel a grieving Catholic man who told me he was at a loss responding to justifiably angry people writing off Christianity and Catholicism because of what's come to the surface. I believe this man and his wife are representative of scores of sincere Catholics who are deeply troubled and struggling with what to do and say.

I told John not to be defensive but listen attentively, agree with their legitimate disgust and, if the opportunity presents itself, offer humbly that Jesus shares righteous anger over this long-standing concealment and perverted abuse of

children.

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea” (Mark 9:42).

What Happened?

A recent horrific Pennsylvania grand jury report revealed that in this one state alone, more than 300 predator priests sexually abused over 1000 children in a decades-old Catholic Church cover-up. The information was disgusting, inexcusable and leaves the reputation of the Roman Catholic church besmirched in a way that many believe will be irretrievable for generations. Jaw-dropping information that ordained ministers of God even used church property to produce child pornography is unconscionable, reprehensible and left millions of Americans aghast.

The perpetrators were shielded and simply shuffled about through therapy sessions then placed in other parishes to continue their aberrant behavior. According to the grand jury's 1,356-page document, official diocese records showed church leaders even negotiated with state officials to conceal the crimes to avoid prosecution.

Dodging the Bullet?

When I was first approached to write my story in *Clap Your Hands!* to especially help Catholics understand from Scripture a genuine, “born-again” conversion experience, I got off on the wrong track because I wrote in a way that was lacking humility and sounded somewhat arrogant. I wanted to set the Catholic Church straight amidst our increasingly post-Christian culture, seeing serious trouble down the road if we didn't return to basic biblical Christianity. A wise editor wisely counseled me to tear up my initial manuscript and share with humility and empathy, which I endeavored to do. I pray I do likewise at this extremely critical, emotional and

sensitive time.

Are there any specific steps that leaders in the Catholic Church could have implemented to have prevented the current tragedy? Going forward, should they carefully and prayerfully consider what the Bible teaches versus venerated church tradition and change? Would instituting some long-overdue reforms curb the hemorrhaging as well as help regain trust and respect before a skeptical, watching world?

3 Respectfully Submitted Solutions

1. Allow Priests the Option to Marry

Over the past 25 years, our culture has become hyper-sexualized, and temptations have intensified a hundredfold. If a man does not have the God-given “gift of singleness” (celibacy), he is being set up for almost inevitable disaster. And because moral failures affect multitudes of people, especially if someone is in church leadership, isn’t it time to return to the biblical position amidst brutal realities of our day?

The church was over a thousand years old when it issued a decree on celibacy. The directive was brought forth in 1139 and in 1563 the Council of Trent definitively affirmed the order of mandatory singleness.

It is true that Jesus never married, but he taught (b) that the gift of singleness was not for everyone: “He who is able to receive this, let him receive it.”

The apostle Paul gave divinely inspired guidance in this area. “I say to the unmarried and widows that it is good for them if they live even as I am. But if they cannot restrain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Cor.7:8-9).

The early church celebrated leaders marrying (as long as they

were Christians) and raising families. Peter, whom the Roman Catholic Church considers the first pope, was married (Matt.8:14-15). Historically, some popes were the children of other popes!

Celibacy is a beautiful gift from God if someone is called to it. If they are not, men can be vulnerable to all kinds of sexual temptation with women and, heaven forbid, with others who may be easily enticed. Is it really in line with grace and Scripture to continue requiring Christian leaders to remain celibate when God said how dangerous it is to “forbid people to marry”(1 Tim.4:3, NIV)?

2. Once Again Teach People and Priests, “You Must be Born Again”

A religious leader of the Jews asked Jesus the basic, God-ordained requirement for being properly related to God. Jesus did not say to be baptized, confirmed, attend church services, pray, give alms, engage in good works or serve the poor (as noble and beneficial as these may be). He clearly, emphatically and directly told this “priest” among the people, “You *must* [emphasis mine] be born again”(John 3:7, MEV).

For the first 20 years of my life, I, like millions of Catholics in America (including clergy) did everything a faithful Catholic should do. Yet I never understood the biblical command to humble myself and repent; admit there is absolutely nothing I could do to save myself (if I could, why His sacrificial, substitutionary death?); respond to God’s initiative and make a personal decision to put my total trust in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ alone to save and forgive me.

Whether you are a pope, a Mother Theresa wannabe, a Catholic priest or nun, a college student, a senator or president, the CEO of a corporation or a humble maid at the Comfort Inn, every single person must come to grips with whether or not he

or she will make the quality decision to transfer their trust in themselves to the one who was punished in our place on the cross so we might be pardoned and begin a new life as a genuinely converted disciple of Jesus Christ.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. For it is the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16a). The crushing reality is that many (possibly all) of these pedophile priests never truly repented and most likely were never supernaturally born again.

3. Pope Francis Publicly Repent on Behalf of Those Whose Hidden Sins Have Devastated Multitudes

Scripture tells us that “Godly sorrow produces repentance that leads to salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10a). The only one who can help bring healing and hopefully touch hearts of understandably skeptical and cynical people is the Shepherd of the Catholic flock. Senior leaders who knew what was happening in decades past should have come forward but there is now no excuse. Sins must be addressed biblically, quickly and forthrightly.

Years ago, when I took a course on Catholicism at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., the instructor confided in us “tongue-in-cheek” that “The Catholic Church never really admits it is wrong but simply publishes new decrees to go forward!”

No. No. No!

Here’s the deal: Before more damage is done and our adversary has further opportunity to destroy the reputation of Catholic Christianity in America, now is the time for Pope Francis to walk in the humility of Jesus and the beloved St. Francis he emulates by speaking an act of contrition to the watching world that is waiting. No more cover-ups.

“He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy” (Prov. 28:13).