

November 19, 2003

Talking about celibacy

By Tom Fox, NCR publisher

National Catholic Reporter, Vol. 1, No. 153

Part Two of Two Parts

In yesterday's Today's Take (Nov. 18, Why bishops won't talk about celibacy), I wrote about Milwaukee Capuchin Franciscan Michael H. Crosby and his recently published book, *Rethinking Celibacy, Reclaiming the Church* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon).

Today we talk with the man himself.

NCR: How do the issues raised in your 1991 book *The Dysfunctional Church: Addiction and Codependency in the Family of Catholicism* get expanded in *Rethinking Celibacy*?

CROSBY: In *Dysfunctional Church*, I considered the institutional or organizational element of the Roman church from the perspective of a family that was suffering as a whole because of the addiction of its "identified patient" (the clerical group) to the preservation of the male, celibate, clerical model of the church. The proper functioning and health of the whole was undermined by this negative use of power that was increasingly, itself, getting out of control.

My understanding of the addictive nature of the institutional church has moved to a deeper analysis of the sickness that underlies the addiction itself; this is abuse. I came to this conclusion from the U.S. bishops' own definition of abuse as "any way one uses to control another through fear and intimidation." Right now the clerical group, from the parochial to the episcopal and from the curial to the papal levels of the institutional church, are able to maintain their unilateral control, not through the power of their theology, but the power of their control ensured through canon law.

What is the essential message the bishops are not "getting" that they need to hear to continue the discussion on celibacy and restoring credibility in the church?

In my chapter, "Beyond Abuse," I show that, in the culture Jesus addressed, he faced the interconnectedness of power, sexual functions and religion. I show how, in the institutional church, power and sexual roles are key to the present form of its organization. Both have been developed over the centuries to reinforce the political pattern of patriarchy. With clericalism this patriarchy becomes patriarchal clericalism. This has ensured ideologically the male celibate clerics as "God's will for the church." So power, sex and religion are enmeshed.

What are the most effective strategies that come to mind to get the bishops to change?

That's a very difficult question. If their hearts, collectively, are part of the system, they too live in fear and intimidation. Everyone is afraid of facing the truth and unmasking the lie that the God of the universe, in whom there can be no discrimination, actually wants or wills, much less graces, such a system. The bishops have said the abuse or violence I noted above is sinful. Somebody's got to practice the truth in love and tell the bishops and curia that the system they call "graced," or of God, is actually sinful in its institutional expression.

Since the heart, biblically, is the seat of our thinking, feeling and actions, I believe effective strategies must address our theology, the fear factor, and the present mode of acting that is constitutively unjust insofar as it now seems a human law (celibacy) is more important for the future of the church than a divine law (Eucharist). Therefore, theologically I am trying to change peoples' thinking about the theological warrants that have isolated what I call "the church of Matthew 16" from the "church of Matthew 18." Both have been given by Christ the power "to bind and loose." We must find, with 16's "keys" and 18's "abiding presence" a new way of governing.

What is the vision you have for the church?

I have become convinced that, as we live in our imperial political economy with its god of consumerism and patriotism, we find parallels in imperial Rome. And, as we live in institutional Catholicism with its tradition ensuring the entrenchment of the clerical caste to the virtual exclusion of the charismas of the other baptized, we face the very situation Jesus came to confront with his alternative gospel. I also believe that, for the sake of preserving this tradition, our leaders are willing to nullify the word of God. This is especially true around the two "regular" sacraments that the community needs: the Eucharist and reconciliation.

The bishops and curia insist that celibacy (a man-made rule) must be preserved even as more and more communities are unable to celebrate the Eucharist. I believe if we envision a church that is truly Trinitarian at all levels, including its organizational level, there can be no discrimination among persons, relationship must be equal and all must have full access to all the resources (i.e., sacraments) available.

You have not really given a vision for the future of the church. Could you try again to flesh one out?

I offer a seven-point way of "reclaiming the church for Jesus Christ" in the book. However, building on what I have said, I believe we must preach not only the "gospel" of the Trinitarian reign of God as the model of all our coming-together as "church." We must also proclaim the gospel of the early church, which was the primacy of Jesus Christ in whom all things in the universe must hold together. The more we know from the "new science" and quantum physics, the more we must offer thinking people a church worthy of the God and the Christ whom we say are those in whom we live and move and have our being.

Tom Fox is NCR publisher. He can be reached at tfox@natcath.org

In What Do We Believe: "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic' Church" Or One-half of Humanity, Roman, Curial and Apodictic' Group?