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Father Michael Crosby 'Takes Five'

Celibacy used as means of control, priest says
From the Journal Sentinel

Father Michael Crosby, a Capuchin Franciscan living at Milwaukee's St. Benedict the Moor Church, has authored a new book, "Rethinking Celibacy, Reclaiming the Church." He writes, "The current crisis around celibacy has made me conclude that this is the moment of grace given us by the Spirit to reclaim the Catholic Church for Jesus Christ and his gospel of liberation from all sinful forms of control. The time is at hand. The reign of God is near. Those who have promoted celibacy as a means of control and exclusivity rather than a mandate of the heart dedicated to wholehearted service must repent." Crosby, 63, has written more than a dozen books. He leads workshops and retreats worldwide on topics from biblical spirituality to socially responsible investing. A leader of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, he has a master's degree in economics and a doctorate and licentiate in theology. Journal Sentinel Reporter Tom Heinen interviewed him.

Q. You discuss celibacy in the context of the priest shortage and sexual abuse. Is your deeper contention that it's become a way that excludes laity and concentrates power in a male hierarchy?

A. Yes. And this is against Matthew's Gospel, often called "The Gospel of the Church." The only New Testament quotation that many Catholics have been taught to memorize is Matthew 16, about Jesus giving the keys of "church" to Peter, along with the power to bind and loose. However, in Matthew 18, that power is also given to the community - two or three gathered in the name of Jesus. When you just use one passage, and don't consider its context and other passages to balance it, you abuse the scriptures.

Q. What is different about this book in relationship to two of your previous books: "The Dysfunctional Church: Addiction and Codependency in the Family of Catholicism" (1991) and "Celibacy: Means of Control or Mandate of the Heart?" (1996)?

A. "Dysfunctional Church" sold very well and helped people put words on some of their frustration regarding institutional Roman Catholicism. "Celibacy" received first place in its class by the Catholic Press Association of Canada and the United States. When the second wave of (sexual abuse) scandals came last year, I was asked to update them. I have moved from notions of control to "abuse" as the lens through which I interpret mandated celibacy for diocesan priests as well as the climate of fear that keeps the church from changing institutionally.

Q. What do you mean when you say "abuse" sustains mandated celibacy and the organizational church?

A. The U.S. Catholic bishops have issued statements on domestic violence that define "abuse" and "violence" as any way one uses "to control another through fear and intimidation." From the bishops' own words, I consider the present forms of mandated celibacy and clerical/episcopal/curial/papal control in the church to be operating in a closed climate that too often is not only unhealthy and dysfunctional but abusive and violent.

Q. Cite one solution.

A. I think the way we Franciscans use power and governance in our way of interpreting the Gospel can be a model for the Roman church itself, which has approved our way of life. We elect our leaders. Everyone has a say in who our authorities are going to be. I don't see why we can't find ways of having everybody be involved in the selection of their leaders as it was done in the early church for the first 250 years.

Q. Do you have hope for the Roman Catholic Church?

A. Of course. The Roman Catholic Church, in its best expression, represents the fullness of what I believe the Church of Jesus Christ must be. But it is not without "spot or wrinkle." I believe in the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's abiding presence in our midst, even when we don't always let the Spirit break down all the divisions among us that are based on power and sex distinctions that have now been canonized in our laws. One day this Spirit will prevail.