

# ON CARRYING A SCANDAL BIBLICALLY

## INTRODUCTION ...

Our topic is that of carrying a scandal biblically. Perhaps it might more aptly be entitled: *"From being scandalized to helping to carry a scandal biblically."*

I begin with an apology: Clerical sexual abuse is a difficult subject for all of us. It's a topic that's full of pain and anger. Moreover, there isn't just one anger here. The anger is multiple: Victims are angry with perpetrators, priests are angry with their bishops, bishops are angry with the press, Catholics are angry at their church, and a large body of church-goers aren't sure who to be angry at ... and, I suspect, by the time I'm finished with this presentation many of you will be angry at me.

I want to do *three* things in this presentation: First, talk about this as a crisis for the church, particularly for the American church; then give some necessary clinical information on the disease of paedophilia; and finally, talk about what it means to carry something biblically.

## THE CRISIS ITSELF ...

For the church in the United States, and to a certain extent for the Canadian church, this is probably the biggest crisis of credibility we have ever faced. Analysts point out that it's not really a crisis of faith so much as a crisis of credibility, a massive crisis of credibility for young church.

The Catholic Church is 2,000 years old, but many of us grew up in a church that's less than 100 years old. The Catholic Church in North America is an immigrant church and it's still a very, very young church. By and large too, it's had a wonderful history, with the situation in Quebec being a little exceptional because the church there had some features an established religion; but the rest of North America Catholicism came in with the immigrants, and it came in from where Christianity is supposed to come in - the bottom. For the most part, until this crisis came along, Roman Catholicism in North America enjoyed a wonderful history of trust with its people.

And then this scandal comes along, creating the biggest crisis of soul and crisis of credibility that the North American church has faced in its young history. This is, in effect, a *"dark night of the soul"* for us and, like most dark nights of the soul, wounds expectedly and at a particularly vulnerable part of ourselves. When you read the literature on nights of the soul by the great mystics, you see that a dark night of the soul almost always hits you in the achilles heel, as a surprise, where you are most tender and unprotected. That's true too for this scandal. The whole issue of sexuality, and not just inside the church, is one of those vulnerable spots. Society likes to pretend sex is not an issue, but it's a massive issue within every culture and every psyche. Sex, anthropology assures us, is next to our instinct for breathing, the most powerful thing on the planet. It hasn't worked itself out really well anywhere. Although it hasn't done all that badly either, because it's produced all of us and through it God has kept the human race going, no

minor achievement. However, all of that notwithstanding, it is easy to be scandalized, especially religiously, when sexual issues are involved.

### **PAEDOPHILIA AS A DISEASE ...**

There's a lot of misunderstanding about the disease of paedophilia. We need to highlight its prevalence in our culture, the nature of it as a disease, the utter devastation it does to its victims, and the needs of genuine victims.

First, some stunning numbers about its prevalence: It's very important to name this so as to contextualize the crisis we are in. Though these numbers pertain to North America, I suspect it isn't very different in other parts of the world. This is painful to say but, in North America, one out of every four or five persons, girls and boys, comes to adulthood scarred, having been violated sexually, in either a major, traumatic way or in some minor way (though it's rare that the violation is minor because by its nature all sexual abuse is serious.) In terms of an image, this is what it means: In every fourth or fifth house [statistically] in the Western world, there is some kind of sexual abuse happening. It's important to keep that in mind because (and I'm not trying to excuse priests and the church officials) sexual abuse is a massive problem in the culture at large.

Because of the way the issue has constellated, it's too easy for us to identify the word paedophilia simplistically with priests and with the bishops' less-than-stellar history of handling its clergy who are accused of it. That's not to excuse priests, but contextualizing this in terms of its prevalence in the culture keeps us aware that priests are less than .01 per-cent of this massive problem. In fact, statistically, this disease is marginally lower among the clergy and vowed religious than it is among the population at large.

Moreover, paedophilia is not a celibate disease, not a gay disease, not a married disease, not a man's disease, nor a woman's disease. It's a disease, pure and simple, and, like alcoholism, it cuts across all boundaries, affecting alike clergy and lay, men and women, gay and straight, married and celibate. Like alcohol, it plays no favourites. It's a sickness and not a question of somebody who is celibate not having proper willpower or of somebody who doesn't have sex acting out because of that deprivation.

A comparison can be made to alcoholism: If we could roll the clock back 60 or 70 years, we would see that society then had no understanding of alcoholism as a disease. It naively thought that the problem was simply a failure of willpower: "Why don't they just stop drinking?" Now we recognize that it's a sickness and must be understood and treated as such.

This naive understanding of the nature of the disease is one of the reasons bishops made some mistakes early on. Unaware of the real and deep nature of this as an illness, they believed the perpetrator when he said, "I'll never do it again." The perpetrator was sincere in saying that and they were sincere in believing it, but, as we know now, that's not a responsible statement and there's a dangerous naivete in believing it because in most cases there's little chance that the paedophile is not going to do it again.

What causes paedophilia? While there is now division over a former axiom that held that "every abuser was first abused", everyone agrees that paedophilia is caused by some massive trauma in childhood. In many, perhaps most, cases the perpetrators were themselves sexually abused as children. Whatever the trauma he or she experienced, the consensus is that it was massively deep and this is part of the very nature of the disease. Paedophilia is an awful disease - but something awful has caused it. Every year we learn more about the devastating nature of sexual abuse. It's the worst kind of "soul-violence" on the planet. Nothing approximates it. And because devastating trauma, especially the trauma of being sexually abused, can be buried so deeply in one's memory, when perpetrators act out they often bury the memories of their actions equally as deeply, giving them incredible denial mechanisms. I've seen a paedophile pass two lie-detector tests in a row. This makes it hard, and in many cases impossible, to treat the disease.

The anatomy of the illness itself helps us to understand it: A paedophile is someone who is attracted to a child who has not yet reached puberty. A normal adult is not sexually attracted to a pre-pubescent child. So why is a paedophile attracted to a child? The literature within this area tells us that a reason for that attraction, perhaps the main reason, is not to do with sex itself but with the trauma the perpetrator experienced as a child, namely, his or her pathological attraction is to the child that was lost in the paedophile's own early childhood trauma. His or her own trauma killed the child in them. Simplistically put, the pathological sexual attraction to children exists in the paedophile because the paedophile has had his or her own childhood stolen from them.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, we need to be clear vis-a-vis the effect of sexual abuse on its victim:

We may never in any way understate the utter devastation of soul that is caused in the victim of paedophilia. There is no greater form of soul-violence on this planet. Nothing so scars, violates, and unravels the soul - literally pulls it apart - as does sexual abuse. I've heard two highly respected psychiatrists say that their hunch is that teenage suicide, which is so rampant in our culture (the second leading cause of death among young people in the Western world) is, 80% of the time, the result of sexual abuse. That's also true, I suspect, for a lot of adult suicides. Sexual abuse scars deeply and permanently. A victim I once worked with shared how she had a single incident when she was about eight years old, in a washroom. She was now in her 30s, married, with three children, and at least once a week when she goes into a bathroom she nauseates and throws up. It's thirty years later and she is still suffering extreme physical reactions. That's not untypical, but more the norm.

And what do victims want from us?

When victims are asked what we as a church, especially as the official church, can give them, they invariably name several things:

i) An honest acknowledgment that somebody else is sick (which is important for their own healing). Since generally the perpetrator is not going to do that, the bishop, the provincial, the pope, whoever, must do it. Someone who represents the church must say to the victim: "We

hurt you, we were wrong, and we are sorry!" There has to be an honest acknowledgment and apology which may not be a rationalization or half-apology.

Today this is made difficult because of legal ramifications. There's tremendous tension today in the church, in chancery offices and elsewhere, between compassion and the Bible, between what we're called to do by Jesus and what our lawyers tell us to do. Richard Rohr, in a recent article on this in **SOJOURNERS**, comments on how, given the state of things, we need too to play the legal game, but we must recognize as well that sometimes this is antithetical to what scripture calls us to do. The biblical and the legal often work in opposite ways: *Legally, you're innocent until proven guilty, then punishment is administered. Biblically, you admit guilt, are declared innocent, and there is no punishment.* Biblically there is forgiveness, but legally things take a very different course. So today it is often very, very difficult to do the biblical thing.

ii) Victims also ask another thing of us: "Don't be afraid of our anger!" On some previous occasions when I've addressed public groups on this topic, I first phoned a number of victims and asked them what they wanted me to say. Always one of their responses was: "Tell them not to be afraid of our anger!" By and large, I don't think we have heard that.

## **ON CARRYING A SCANDAL BIBLICALLY ...**

As Christians we're asked to carry this scandal biblically. What does that mean? Carrying something biblically means a number of interpenetrating things:

### *1) Name the moment:*

Not everything can be fixed or cured, but it needs to be named properly. Jesus called this "reading the signs of times". This scandal, this particular time in our history as a Catholic Church in America, is a moment of humiliation, a moment of humbling, a moment of pruning. We must begin the process of healing by clearly, and with courage, naming that - and then not, through an over-defensiveness or personal distancing, try to escape the humiliation and what that calls us to.

### *2) The call to compassion:*

Our faith is biblical. So the question is: What does our biblical tradition ask of us at this moment, in this painful situation?

First of all, to radiate the compassion of Christ. That sounds obvious, but, so many times, when we are in crisis the first thing that goes is the compassion and understanding of Christ. Simply put, we too often end up bracketing the fundamentals because we think that our cause is so great and our indignation so justified that we may disregard some of the essentials of compassion, namely, respect, tolerance, patience, graciousness, and understanding. To carry something biblically means, first of all, to reground ourselves in the non-negotiables of Christian

compassion - respect, tolerance, patience, and graciousness. Wild anger, disrespect, bitterness, personal distancing, and viciousness will not help carry this to any kind of meaningful closure.

And our compassion must, first of all, go out to the victim. The cross itself teaches us this. It highlights the excluded one, the one who has been hurt. Empathy must always move first towards the victim.

Usually, though, we are pretty good at this. Empathizing with a victim generally brings with it a good feeling. This crisis, however, asks us to take compassion to another level: We are asked too to have compassion for the perpetrator because this person was also a victim and he or she is ill ... and ill with the most unglamorous of all sicknesses. No sickness is glamorous but most sicknesses don't have horrific moral connotations to them. It's easy to be selective in our sympathy, offering our compassion at those places where we feel good and clean when we give it and withholding it from those people and places where we don't get a good, clean feeling when we offer it. Compassion for the paedophile is, I believe, a biblical test as to the real measure of our compassion: Can we love and offer empathy when our love doesn't feel (or look) clean?

### *3) Healing, not self-protection and security.*

To carry this scandal biblically means too that healing, not self-protection and security, must be our real preoccupation. Sometimes for bishops, provincials, religious superiors, and church officials there's a real (and understandable) danger of losing perspective in the face of accusations of sexual abuse. Many times, in fact, we have lost perspective.

In the vortex this crisis, what has to be our primary preoccupation? To protect the innocent and to bring about healing and reconciliation. Everything else (worries about security, lawsuits, and the like) must come afterwards.

Part of this too is how we must understand the role of the media and press in all of this. It's too easy and too simplistic to blame the media for this crisis. They are not the problem; in fact, they are rendering us, the world and the church, a great service, irrespective of how painful this is. The press are not the villain - Don't kill the weatherman for reporting bad weather! Granted that sometimes their coverage hasn't been fair, but that's ultimately not the issue. Beneath it all, the substance is true.

### *4) Carrying this crisis is now our primary ministry and not a distraction to our ministry.*

Henri Nouwen used to say, "For years I was upset by distractions in my work until I realized the distractions were my real work!" That is also true for this sexual abuse scandal. This is not a distraction to real ministry in North America, it is the real ministry for the church in North America.

Carrying this scandal properly is something that the church is invited to do right now for the sake of the culture. It is easy to lose sight of this. The church exists for the world (not vice versa). Jesus said, "*My flesh is food for the life of the world [not for the life of the church.]*" In

essence, Jesus came "to be eaten up by the world". That's why, symbolically, he is born in a trough and ends up on a table, an altar, to be eaten. The church exists for the sake of the world and we must keep that in mind as we are faced with this crisis. What does that mean?

Right now priests represent less than one per-cent of the overall problem of sexual abuse, but we're on the front pages of the newspapers and the issue is very much focused on us. Psychologically this is painful, but biblically this is not a bad thing: The fact that priests and the church have been scapegoated right now is not necessarily bad. If our being scapegoated helps society by bringing the issue of sexual abuse and its devastation of the human soul more into the open, than we are precisely offering ourselves as "food for the life of the world", and we, like Jesus in his crucifixion, are helping to "take away the sins of the world." And as stated before, this is not a distraction to the life of the church, it's perhaps the major thing that we need to do right now for the world and our culture. There are very few things that we are doing as Christian communities today that are more important than helping the world deal with this issue. If the price tag is that we are humiliated on the front pages of the newspapers and that the Anglican, United, and Roman Catholic Churches of Canada end up financially bankrupt, so be it. Crucifixions are never easy and they exact real blood! It might well be worth it in the long run if we can help our world come to grips with this.

*5) Painful humiliation as a grace-opportunity.*

Purification and pruning, humiliation leading to humility. This is a moment of purification for the church. Granted the rest of the culture is also guilty, but, for too long, we falsely enjoyed clerical privilege. The chickens have come home to roost. Now we're being pruned, humbled, and brought back to where we're supposed to be, with the poor, the outcasts. That's where we are meant to be. Jesus resisted all power other than moral power. Too often we bought into power. Today the Body of Christ is not just being humbled, it's being humiliated and we have the chance to come to humility through that. This is an important grace-opportunity for all of us inside the church. Biblically, it's our "Agony in the Garden".

What does this imply? Two things:

i) First of all it implies the acceptance of being scapegoated. In the Garden of Gethsemane, before Jesus has his life-and-death conversation with his Father, he invites his disciples to "Watch". He wants them to learn a lesson. He has just come out of the Last Supper room and he invites his disciples to go with him into the garden. "Watch and pray!" he tells them. But they sleep through it, overcome not by wine or the tiredness that comes at the end of a day, but, as Luke says, "they fell asleep with sorrow". They fell asleep out of disappointment, as we also often do. And they missed the lesson.

What is the lesson? Luke captures it in one phrase: "*Wasn't it necessary!*" There is a necessary connection between humiliation and redemption. We can only carry this scandal biblically (offering ourselves up on the altar of humility for the sake of the culture) if we recognize and accept this connection, redemption comes through this kind of pain. And we learn

that lesson through "watching" how Jesus did it: "*Stay awake, watch, pray!*" Unlike the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, we must not let ourselves fall asleep because of disappointment.

ii) Second, this scandal is putting us, the clergy and the church, where we belong, with the excluded ones. When Jesus died on the cross he was crucified between two thieves. There wasn't just one cross at Calvary, but three. The onlookers weren't looking at the scene and making distinctions, sizing Jesus up as innocent while judging the other two as guilty. Jesus was painted with the same brush as the others, seen as compromised and tainted.

Carrying this scandal biblically means precisely to accept that kind of judgement and humiliation without protest. Let me offer an example: A young priest that I know recently went into the pulpit and protested to his congregation: "This thing is very unfair to me! I'm not a paedophile and now people are watching me and sizing me up! I'm scared to wear my collar in an airport, knowing that people will stare at me and wonder: 'Is he one too?' I can't hug your kids any more and can't be spontaneous in relationships. This simply isn't fair!"

He's right, it's not fair, but, on the cross, Jesus is not protesting his innocence, saying: "This isn't fair to me! I'm not guilty like the other two! Don't get Me mixed up with them!" Jesus helps carry their sin, the sin of the world.

The incarnation still goes on: Christ is always hanging, crucified, between two thieves. That's true too for the young priest whose protest I just quoted and it's meant to be true for us. The invitation to us as adult Christians is to help carry this scandal - and not, first of all, to protest our own innocence and distance from it. Carrying it also means that we don't simplistically project it onto the hierarchy, shrugging and saying: "They have a real problem on their hands!" If we do that then we are doing exactly what that young priest did in his self-serving protest. But his was not really an adult response. What should be the response?

We are the church, all of us, and we need to carry this, all of us. We stand within a tradition that stretches back in time for nearly 4,000 years (of Judeo-Christian revelation and grace). We carry that tradition, but we need to carry all of it, not just the wonderful parts. Yes, we stand in the tradition of Jesus, Paul, the great martyrs, and all the grace that has entered history through the historical church. But, we also stand in a tradition that carries murder, slavery, the inquisition, popes who had mistresses, racism, sexism, infidelity of every sort, and paedophilia. We can't claim the grace and then distance ourselves from the sin - "This is unfair to me!" We need to carry it all, as Jesus carried everything, grace and sin, good and bad, without protesting his innocence, even though he was innocent.

*6) To carry this scandal biblically asks of us "a new song".*

Sing to the Lord a new song! We are invited to do that often in Scripture. Have you ever wondered what the old song is? If we are to sing a new song, what's the old one and how is the new one to be different than the former one?

Jesus specifies this quite clearly: He tells us that unless our virtue goes deeper than that of the scribes and pharisees (the "old song") we can't enter the kingdom of heaven. What was the virtue of the scribes and pharisees? Actually it was quite high. It was an ethic of justice and fairness: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, give back in kind to everyone. What's wrong with the simple virtue of justice? Jesus, in his most important homily, one which lays down the central criterion for orthodoxy within our faith, points out the defect within an ethic of justice alone.

What's wrong with the ethic of justice alone? It's too easy! Anyone, he submits, can live the virtue of strict justice at a certain level. A paraphrase of Jesus might read like this: "Anyone can be nice to those who are nice to them, anyone can forgive those who forgive them, and anyone can love those who love them. But can you go further? Can you love those who hate you? Can you forgive those who won't forgive you? Can you be gracious to those who curse you?" That's the real test of Christian orthodoxy. And it's what is being asked of us in this scandal: Can we love, forgive, reach out, and be empathic in a new way? Can we have compassion for both the victim and the perpetrator? Can we have compassion for some of our church leaders who made some blunders? Can we give of our money when it seems we are paying for someone else's sin? Can we help carry one of the darker sides of our history without protesting its unfairness and distancing ourselves from it? Can we carry a tension that's unfair to us for the sake of a greater good? Can we help carry something that doesn't make us feel good and clean?

*7) We need to "ponder" as Mary did.*

Inside of this, we must begin to "ponder" in the biblical sense. How do we do that?

To "ponder" in the biblical sense, as Mary did, does not mean what it means in the Greek sense (from which our common sense takes its notion), namely, that the unexamined life is not worth living and that we are, consequently, meant to be reflective and introspective. When scripture says, "Mary pondered these things in her heart," it doesn't mean that she thought all kinds of deep thoughts about them. What does it mean?

Let's begin with an image, Mary at the foot of the cross. What is Mary doing there? Overtly nothing. Notice that, at the foot of the cross, Mary doesn't seem to be doing anything. She isn't trying to stop the crucifixion, nor even protesting Jesus' innocence. She isn't saying anything and overtly doesn't seem to be doing anything. But scripture tells us that she "stood" there. For a Hebrew, that was a position of strength. Mary was strong under the cross. And what precisely was she doing? She was pondering in the biblical sense.

To ponder in the biblical sense means **to hold, carry, and transform tension so as not to give it back in kind.**

We can be helped in our understanding of that by looking at its opposite in scripture. In the gospels, the opposite of "pondering" is "amazement", to be amazed. We see a number of instances in the gospels where Jesus does or says something that catches the crowds by surprise and the gospel writers say, "and they were amazed." Invariably Jesus responds by saying: "Don't



be amazed!" To be amazed is to let energy, the energy of the crowd, simply flow through you, like an electrical wire conducting a current. An electrical wire simply lets energy flow through it and give it out exactly in kind - 220 volts for 220 volts.

Being amazed and giving back in kind is wonderful at events like rock concerts or sporting matches, but it is also the root of all racism, gang rapes, and most other social sicknesses. Nobody holds, carries, and transforms the energy and everyone simply gives back in kind. That's the flaw that Jesus points out in the virtue of the scribes and pharisees, they simply give back in kind, justice for justice, love for love, hate for hate.

In the gospels only two people aren't amazed - Jesus and Mary. Mary ponders and Jesus sweats blood. They take in the energy, good and bad, hold it, carry it, transform it, and give it back as something else.

Jesus models this for us. He took in hatred, held it, transformed it, and gave back love; he took in bitterness, held it, transformed it, and gave back graciousness; he took in curses, held them, transformed them, and gave back blessing; he took in betrayal, held it, transformed it, and gave back forgiveness. That's what it means to ponder and this is the opposite of amazement.

Two images can be useful in understanding this: To be amazed, biblically, is to be like an electrical wire, a simple conduit that conducts energy, taking in and giving back in kind. To ponder, biblically, is to be like a water purifier; it takes in all kinds of impurities with the water, but it holds the impurities inside of itself and gives back only the pure water.

That is what Mary did under the cross - she held, carried, and transformed the tension so as not to give it back in kind. And that is what we are called upon to do in helping to carry this scandal biblically, namely, to hold, carry, and transform this tension, so as not to give back in kind - hurt for hurt, bitterness for bitterness, accusation for accusation, anger for anger, blame for blame.

And this might mean that, like Mary under the cross, sometimes there is nothing to say, no protest to be made. Rather all we can do is "to stand", in strength, silent, holding and carrying the tension, waiting until we can transform it so that we can speak words of graciousness, forgiveness, and healing. That's not easy. Luke, in his gospel, tells us that the price tag for that is "to sweat blood". There are few phrases, I submit, more apt right now in terms of describing, biblically, what we are called to do in response to this scandal than that cryptic phrase from Luke's gospel: "to sweat blood." The author of Lamentations puts it this way: Sometimes all one can do is to put one's mouth to the dust and wait!

*8) We must re-affirm our faith in God as Lord.*

This too will pass. There will be resurrection, even from this. God is still God and firmly in charge of this universe.

Our prayer in times of crisis must be a prayer that precisely affirms that God is still Lord of this world. When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, at his most anguished moment, he

began his prayer with the words: "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you!" In essence he is telling God, "You are still firmly in control of this world - even though, tonight, it doesn't appear like that!"

We need, in the midst of this crisis, to affirm our faith in the lordship of God. God is still firmly in charge, the centre still holds - betrayal, some bad choices by bishops, inflated media reporting, and predictions of doom on all sides, notwithstanding. The church isn't dying. Crucifixions don't end life, they lead to new, enriched life.

*9) We must patiently stay with the pain.*

This is a dark night of the soul which is meant, like every dark night of the soul, to stretch the heart. To be stretched is always painful and our normal impulse is always to do something to end the pain, to make it go away. But the pain won't go away until we learn the lesson that it's meant to teach us. Pain of the heart never leaves us until "we get it", get what it is meant to teach us, and get stretched in the way it's meant to stretch us. This pain will stay with the church until we learn what we are meant to learn from it.

And what is it meant to teach us, beyond a new humility?

That there is a terrible pain within the culture right now, the soul-devastation caused by sexual abuse, and we, the church, are being asked to be like Christ, namely, to have our flesh be food for the life of the world so that this wound might be opened to healing.