

CHURCH CHAT #82
BY
TOM SMITH
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IF I ONLY KNEW THEN...

If I only knew then what I know now, I would have____(fill in the blank). We say it often enough and it often enough is an accurate assessment. After more experience, we have a different perspective than we had originally. We would act differently, wiser, handle the situation better. It implies that we are not responsible for what we didn't know then, even if we admit we were naïve. It's just the way life is. Experience teaches, and we hope we learn.

I hear the phrase, and use it myself, as a grandparent reflecting on the experience of parenting. Another quick example: after years of experience on a job, we may hear it when the conversation turns to what it was like when we started the job.

Common enough observation. And universally accepted as true.

Most of the time.

Sometimes, this commonly accepted axiom is used as an excuse, a cover-up for what should have been known in the first place but ignored. A case in point is the recent coverage of Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahoney's scandalous and criminal handling of child sex-abuse cases. Between the lines of the reporting is the premise that "If I only knew then what I know now about child sex abuse, I would have acted differently."

Resorting to this revered truism in this case is not only misleading, it is a calculated lie. To Cardinal Mahoney and all others like him, I say: "You knew then that the sexual abuse of children is a heinous, criminal, damaging act. You chose to minimize it because of your sinfully distorted view of the Church, and your role in it."

There are some things that are so clearly wrong that years of experience are not needed to see that they are wrong. Child sex abuse is one of them.

But there are other examples as well. Mandatory celibacy for priests is another one. We have known for centuries that requiring celibacy for priesthood is ridiculous and damaging. Lay people may have known it as a fact long before some priests and bishops knew it, but for at least the last century, priests knew it too. Many brain-

washed seminarians even knew it but didn't say anything because if they did, well, they wouldn't be seminarians any more.

Ordination of women to the priesthood is another case in point. We have known for at least 50 years that the arguments against women's ordination are unfounded. When we get through all the theological jargon, misquoting of Scripture, appeals to an unenlightened tradition, misguided acceptance of the cultural imposition of second-class status on women, all that is left is anatomy. And it is self-evidently preposterous to think that God, and therefore Jesus, limits priestly service because of anatomy.

We have known for a long time, but it gets increasingly clearer, that the hierarchical structure of our current Church is not only dysfunctional and destructive, it is flat out wrong. It looks Orwellian to me, with a heavy emphasis on thought control. It certainly isn't collegial as Vatican II envisioned. Is it a monarchy, a dictatorship, an oligarchy, a gang, a Mob? It is not a democracy or a republic. Whatever it is in practice, we have known it for a long time. And we know its destructive power. It looks like a structure mired in the Middle Ages, fundamentally incapable of communicating effectively with the 21st century no matter how many Tweets the Pope supposedly generates, and an organizational museum piece hanging in the backroom of history. We know it and we know it is wrong.

Is there hope? Of course, there is. God is bigger than our structures and policies. And certainly much more loving, accepting, and forgiving, if forgiveness is really needed. Can we find God in the midst of the currently constituted Catholic Church? Of course, we can. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit knows how to breathe underwater. The Spirit will find us, even when we are not looking. We don't have to leave the Church to find the Spirit. Just poke around in different parts of the Church and the Spirit will find you.

Why even chat about the bad stuff? Because some of us have to, just to point out alternatives and not let the bad guys (and they are mostly guys!) claim they speak and act for all of us.

So, don't let the axiom of "If I only knew then what I know now" fool you. They knew. They knew.