

"Penn State and the Catholic Church"
Week of December 5, 2011
ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

The sexual-abuse scandal at Penn State that toppled the President of the University and the iconic football coach, Joe Paterno, has stimulated many references in the media to a similar problem in the Catholic Church.

Although the Church's crisis is more widespread and goes back more years than we can count, it is drawn from the same sources: human perversity and its principal enabler, human weakness.

There have been many attempts to link the two scandals, but Penn State's seems to have had more "help" from the civil authorities than did the Catholic Church. For example, the judge that reduced the alleged perpetrator's bail served as a volunteer on his foundation that also alerted him to various likely "prospects."

On the other hand, in some respects Penn State took more decisive action than the Catholic Church has taken. Only one bishop, Cardinal Bernard Law, has been forced to resign because of his inept handling of the scandal, while the President of Penn State University has been sacked immediately.

Even more dramatically, the long-time football coach, who expressed his intention to retire at the end of the current season, was also immediately fired for not doing enough when he was first informed of a serious problem in 2002, which is ironically the same year that the scandal in the Catholic Church broke because of an investigative series of articles in *The Boston Globe*.

One would have thought that Joe Paterno would have learned something from the fallout to the Church's scandal.

In any case, the Church, like Penn State, had as its reflex position to protect the institution and its priesthood (at Penn State it was the University and the football program).

In some respects, Penn State has taken more decisive action than the Catholic Church has taken. It fired the President, who is comparable to a bishop, and fired the football coach, who would be comparable to priests who looked the other way.

Penn State also fired the Athletic Director and a Vice President. Both face perjury charges from the civil authorities.

There were rumors that the graduate assistant and former quarterback of the football team, who reported an incident to Joe Paterno in 2002, would be on the field as an assistant coach and then that he would be up in the stands because of threats on his life.

These rumors were proved wrong. Penn State put the assistant coach on leave. Some say that they would have fired him, too, except that he is being held as a witness in the forthcoming judicial proceedings.

When the Penn State scandal unfolds more completely, the mishandling by the civil authorities will become clearer. It may even outweigh the firing of the President of the University and possibly even the firing of Joe Paterno.

Some television pundits have called for more severe action by Penn State, including the termination of what remains of the current football season and all of next year's. Since money is the most important commodity in college football, that would send an unmistakable message to the rest of the country.

We know now that Penn State did not suspend its current season, losing to Nebraska on Senior Day in spite of the unfortunate show of support for Joe Paterno by some of the students.

But obviously Penn State learned something from the Catholic Church's grave mishandling of its own scandal that erupted with full force in January 2002. Penn State immediately fired key

personnel, from top down. The Church, on the other hand, dithered and put the squeeze only on its priests, leaving the bishops off Scot-free.

Cardinal Law, archbishop of Boston, lost his job only after a group of priests issued a public statement asserting that the cardinal had lost his credibility. Of course, the ongoing discoveries by the civil authorities didn't hurt.

But even at that, the Church gave Cardinal Law a Roman position, cardinal-priest of St. Mary Major, one of the four major basilicas in Rome (alongside St. Peter's, the Lateran, and St. Paul's Outside the Walls).

Many interpreted that, wrongly, as a promotion of sorts. It was, and is, not. Cardinal-priest of St. Mary Major doesn't compare in prestige and importance with cardinal-archbishop of Boston.

On the other hand, Cardinal Law did retain his various curial posts, including the Congregation for Bishops. He remains influential, even at age 80, in the appointment and promotion of bishops in the United States.

This is where the critics should have aimed their fire rather than at the St. Mary Major post. These curial positions, especially the Congregation for Bishops, is where his real power lies.

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"The NCR Survey of U.S. Catholics – I"
 Week of December 12, 2011
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 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

The research team, commissioned by *The National Catholic Reporter* (NCR), which included William D’Antonio of The Catholic University of America (CUA), Mary Gautier of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University, and Michele Dillon of the University of New Hampshire, has just completed the fifth survey of U.S. Catholics.

The insert, containing the principal findings of the survey, is published in the NCR’s October 28-November 10 edition under the title, “Persistence and Change.” The summary essay is written by Prof. D’Antonio.

The survey purports to provide “a portrait showing both persistence and change in the beliefs, practices and attitudes of Catholics as they head into the second decade of the 21st century.”

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life issued its extraordinary report in 2009 that one in ten Americans are former Catholics (indeed, if they constituted a separate denomination, it would be the second largest in the United States, after the Catholic Church itself).

“As is true across all denominations,” Prof. D’Antonio writes, “the departures appear to be especially heavy among the younger generations.” So much for the widespread, but mistaken, belief that the younger generations are generally conservative.

However, Catholics’ share of the U.S. population has remained stable at 24%, largely as a result of Hispanic immigration. “In the midst of this fluidity,” Prof. D’Antonio continues, “no one knows the impact that the growing number of Hispanic Catholics will have on present trends.”

When the first survey was conducted in 1987, Hispanics made up only 10% of the Catholic population in the United States. Today Hispanics constitute one-third of U.S. Catholics, “with their numbers and proportion expected to continue to grow into the foreseeable future.”

“Catholic identity,” Prof. D’Antonio insists, “no longer a matter of simply knowing the Baltimore Catechism and having particular ethnic ties, has become part of the national dialogue between those with a more conservative vision and those who define the church more in terms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and its documents.”

The sexual-abuse scandal in the priesthood had dramatically erupted in January 2002 because of a series of investigative articles in *The Boston Globe*. The previous survey in 2005 had to take this scandal into account.

But the findings showed that the scandal had “little measurable impact.” The situation changed after six years of new headlines, nationally in Philadelphia and internationally in Ireland, Germany, and Austria. The current survey does take these developments into account.

Of course, demographic trends have also affected parish life. The survey discusses the strengths and weaknesses in current parish structures and implications of changes in Catholic attitudes and behaviors related to parish life.

The survey also studies the impact of Catholic education on U.S. Catholics. The bishops of the United States formally established the Catholic school system in 1884, with the goal that there would be a school in every parish. The public school system was by this time overwhelmingly Protestant.

However, that goal was never met. In fact, less than half of parishes ever had a school. The school as the heart of parish life, Prof. D’Antonio points out, reached its heights in the 1950s and 1960s. Today, of course, costs are rising, teaching sisters have largely disappeared, and schools have been closed.

The survey refers to young adults as millennials, those who came of age in the new century. Special attention is given to areas of Catholic life in which Hispanic and non-Hispanic millennials hold

similar and dissimilar beliefs, practices, and attitudes about Catholic identity.

The survey also takes “a long look at the generations, how they have changed over time, and the implications as those [who] have been called the pre-Vatican II Catholics make their final appearance....”

Likewise, the survey examines the way political party identification among Catholics has changed over time. In a few words, Catholics have become more Republican and less Democratic as they moved up the economic ladder and as the Church became more focused on such issues as abortion at the expense of social justice.

One of the most important findings concerns Catholic beliefs and attitudes toward church authority. A majority of Catholics surveyed say that the locus of moral authority resides with individuals rather than the hierarchy.

Fewer than one in five Catholics now say that the pope and the other bishops are “the proper arbiters of right and wrong,” whereas between one-fifth and one-third say that moral authority is “best exercised by individuals and church leaders working together.”

I shall be highlighting some of the specific elements of this significant survey in the weeks ahead.

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