

Let's all take a chill pill

by Michael Cook | September 03, 2018

It has been an extraordinary week in the Catholic Church. The Vatican's former ambassador to the United States has called for the Pope's resignation. Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò alleges that Pope Francis covered up for ex-Cardinal McCarrick, who had used his position to seduce seminarians and priests over many years. Catholic media is split down the middle: conservatives support Viganò and attack the Pope; progressives attack Viganò and support the Pope. Some American bishops have defended Viganò as a man of integrity whose allegations ought to be taken seriously; others have dismissed his claims as self-interested grandstanding.

But the crisis has gone beyond claim and counter-claim. Jaw jaw is morphing into war war. There is talk of a schism. Friend and foe are mooting the possibility of major changes in Church governance. Archbishop Charles Chaput, of Philadelphia, has written to the Pope asking him to cancel next month's synod on youth vocations and focus on the life of bishops.

However, outside the Church, believe it or not, media interest in the controversy is waning. Surge again it will, but the lull is an opportune moment to review some of the issues which have emerged.

Remember the riots in the Muslim world in 2005 sparked by the publication of Danish cartoons satirizing the Prophet Mohammed? Churches were burned around the world and dozens of people died in a classic case of social panic. Now Catholics are – figuratively speaking – burning their own churches. It's time to chill.

Here are a few points to bear in mind.

Risking trust. Catholics, or rather, some Catholics, or rather some Catholics in the English-speaking world, have worked themselves into a frenzy over Viganò's allegations. The fundamental issue -- how to deal with historic and current sexual abuse by the clergy -- is immensely important. Despite the fact that the vast majority of priests are

honourable men, disgust at the crimes of a few and cover-ups by bishops is undermining the credibility of the Church's message. Bitterness and conflict dismay Catholics and repel outsiders. Ensuring the safety of children is being out-shouted by a media mob with pitchforks calling for the heads of the Pope and his advisors. But beheading Louis XVI in 1793 didn't make France any more prosperous or peaceful, and it won't help the Catholic Church in 2018.

This is not a moment to make rash changes. The suppurating boil of sex abuse burst in the US in 2002. The incidence of this crime appears to have fallen dramatically, but after 16 years the problem is still in the news. Catholics feel shame and rage that their bishops have not been open and have failed to make the problem vanish. But making decisions when you see red is not a good idea.

The media cycle. The Catholic sex abuse issue has been sucked into a 24/7 media cycle which demands immediate responses and instant action. The torrent of information gushing through the internet is making the problem even worse. Catholics are not giving themselves time for reflection and dispassionate analysis.

The impeachment template. The day-in, day-out woes of President Trump -- secrets, scandals, corruption, calls for impeachment -- have created a template for journalists reporting on the Viganò allegations. The feverish atmosphere of American politics in the summer of 2018 is the new normal for journalism -- even in Church politics.

Stonewalling? "I will not say a single word about this," the Pope said in his in-flight press conference when queried about the Viganò document. This has been interpreted as stonewalling and lack of transparency. But what else could he say? He had been ambushed: the document was released during his exhausting trip to Ireland. Viganò makes not one, but dozens of allegations: how could Francis be expected to respond to them all without checking records? Silence was the best response at the time. We need the truth, but we can wait a few days or weeks.

Defining what's wrong. It's not clear what The Problem is. Is it a cover-up by the Pope and his lieutenants? Is it the cover-up by the American bishops? Is it the existence of a "lavender mafia" within the Catholic Church? Is it the shame of American Catholics? Is it the cumulative damage of historic sex abuse? Is it the prevalence of sex abuse today? Is it lack of lay input into Church decision-making? Is it the Church's attitude towards homosexuality? Is it – we're in danger of forgetting – the pain of the victims? In this moment of shame and rage, we want Something To Be Done. But unless we define the problem clearly, The Something We Did will almost certainly be a mistake.

The down side of the guillotine. Has anyone considered how much damage the resignation of Pope Francis would do to the Catholic Church? Resignation is an option which no Pope until Benedict XVI had taken advantage of for hundreds of years. Now it is being bandied about as if he were a Governor of Illinois. There are very good reasons why Popes never resigned. Resignation under pressure would wind back the clock to the very Bad Old Days when soldiers or mobs surrounded conclaves and threatened to kill the cardinals if their candidate were not elected. A 21st Century Pope would become a hostage to Twitter lynch mobs. It could take generations to restore his authority.

A parable for the times. Even though he spoke about it at length in the in-flight press conference, journalists ignored an incident which goes a long way towards explaining the Pope's apparent intransigence. "No one is evil until it is proven," he said. And he illustrated it with a heart-wrenching example. In 2014 a man known as "Daniel" wrote a five-page letter to the Pope complaining that he had been abused as a child by several priests in the Spanish city of Granada. Almost immediately upon reading it, the Pope rang him. "I have read your letter several times," he told Daniel. "I could not help feeling terribly pained in reading your story. I want to apologize to you on behalf of the entire Church of Christ. Forgive this grave sin and the very serious crime that you have suffered. Forgive, my son, all that pain that you suffered". Later on Francis even invited Daniel to join the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. (Apparently he did not accept.)

The Vatican also rang the Archbishop of Granada to ensure that he cooperated fully with the police. Three priests and a layman were arrested, and ten other priests and two laymen were implicated. For three years the media was full of revolting details: orgies, rape, pornography, and so on. One priest took the brunt of the publicity, a 60-year-old named Fr Ramon Martinez. He faced nine years in jail and a fine of 50,000 Euros.

In April last year, the case was thrown out of court. The judge found that Daniel had built a castle of lies and ordered him to pay costs. In July Pope Francis met Father Martinez in Rome and begged his pardon.

There are three morals to this particular story. First, no matter how horrifying the accusations, people are innocent until proven guilty. Second, the Pope has seen both sides of the abuse crisis: the damaged souls of children and the damaged lives of innocent priests. Third, anyone who says that the Pope is reluctant to end child abuse is ignorant or malicious.

Finally, there can only be one permanent solution to the child abuse crisis. It is the one which Pope Francis has hammered from the day of his election: [personal holiness](#). There will never be a perfect Church. At its very beginning, one of the Twelve Apostles betrayed Christ. Changes in structures, white papers, commissions, committees, and new filing cabinets may be necessary, but they are a small part of cleansing the Augean Stables. It was the piety, courage and joy of the other Eleven Apostles which made the early Church flourish. As Francis keeps saying, nothing has changed since the Beatitudes 2000 years ago.

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