

Getting real about our challenges

Tracking the Catholic zeitgeist these days can be a dizzying experience. It helps to have a sense of history, and perhaps a sense of irony as well.

Once upon a time, it was liberal Catholics who were upset at the pope, who wanted more democracy in the church, who railed against the Curia and wanted a return to forgotten practices like the election of bishops by the priests and people of the diocese.

Today we have conservative Catholics upset at the pope, wanting more democracy in the church, railing against the Curia and wanting a return to forgotten practices like the election of bishops by the priests and people of the diocese.

A friend of mine has commented on the strange turn of events where liberal publications are now defenders of the papacy and conservative publications publish a steady drumbeat of criticism. A few decades ago, renegade bishops became heroes to some progressives. Now a renegade papal nuncio is a hero to some conservatives.

And all of this is occurring against a backdrop that unfortunately hasn't changed — news reports of sexual abuse, accusations that a pope is not taking it seriously, divisions among bishops and between bishops and Rome.

Maybe this is business as usual, but it is surely wearying.

We are facing serious problems, there is no doubt, but they aren't just the problems getting the headlines.

That some priests, most but not all of them from years ago, violated their vows and committed grievous sins against young people is undeniable. Equally undeniable is that the majority of priests have done no such thing and still deserve our respect.

That some bishops — through cowardice or bad advice from lay lawyers and lay counselors, or cruel insensitivity and personal corruption — moved abusers instead of removing them or tolerated sinfulness so as to avoid scandal, there is no doubt. That there were bishops who did the right thing, who called a sin a sin, who might

even have risked their episcopal careers to do so, there also is no doubt.

And while there are Catholics who are planning to boycott bishop appeals and parish collections as acts of protest, such gestures don't hurt the wicked.

They hurt Catholic schools and hospitals and aid organizations. They hurt the priests who show up at hospitals to comfort the dying, who say Mass and hear confessions and also raise money from stingy parishioners to run complex and expensive parish plants. They hurt bishops who are increasingly forced to be more CEOs than shepherds and who are being scrutinized and second-guessed every step of the way.

We do face great challenges, all of us.

The church is still in the midst of an epochal change it does not fully understand. Laymen and laywomen need to be more fully incorporated into the life of the church to do the work at hand, and there is much work to do.

We need to know how better to hand on the faith to the next generation. We need to know how best to encourage vocations that will stick. We need to know how to evangelize a hurting world that has lost its faith and lost its way.

We need a church that recovers what it means to be a family, a family that can disagree and argue passionately about things, but also that loves one another.

We need most of all to be missionary witnesses: showing the world that knowing and loving Jesus makes all the difference. And if that is not true for us now, then that is our biggest problem by far.

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