

Sunday March 24, 2013

Unfair portrayal of Catholic Church

By Jim Taylor

Someone needs to say a good word for the Roman Catholic Church. Ever since Pope Benedict XVI announced his retirement, media reports seem obligated to refer to the “scandal-ridden” church. The surprise election of Pope Francis on Thursday March 14 offered a new scandal to monger – allegations that as Archbishop of Buenos Aires he had collaborated with the military dictatorship that terrorized Argentina between 1976 and 1983.

That’s not fair.

I’m hardly an apologist for the Roman Catholic Church. I don’t like its hierarchical structure; I consider its attitudes to women, birth control, and papal infallibility misguided and damaging.

Although I’m not convinced that papal infallibility is any more dangerous than the biblical infallibility proclaimed by some Protestant factions.

But the Roman Catholic Church is no more scandal-ridden than any other large organization. With about 400,000 priests worldwide, it would be amazing NOT to find a certain percentage of pornographers, perverts, and pedophiles among them.

What the evidence says

Philip Jenkins of Baylor University is considered the authority on investigating abuse charges. He writes, “My research of cases over the past 20 years indicates no evidence whatever that Catholic clergy are any more likely to be involved in misconduct or abuse than clergy of any other denomination -- or indeed, than non-clergy...”

Thomas Plante of Stanford University supports Jenkins’ figures. He calls the rate of clergy abuse “significantly lower than the general adult male population, which may double these numbers.”

Both agree that no more than four per cent of Catholic clergy have had questionable relationships with members of their parishes.

By contrast, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) estimated that 10 to 20 per cent of its clergy had sexual involvement with parishioners. And sexual and physical abuse by America’s public-school teachers, according to Charol Shakeshaft of Virginia Commonwealth University, “far exceeds the rate of documented abuse by Catholic clergy.”

Andrew Brown, of Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper, cites estimates that over 20 per cent of American females and 12 per cent of American males may have experienced sexual abuse – clearly, not just at the hands of Catholic priests. But, Brown continues, while “victims in the general population are overwhelmingly female, the pattern among American Catholic priests was quite different. Four out of five of their victims were male. Most were adolescents...”

Covering its backside

“Why the concentration on Catholic priests and brothers?” Brown asks. “Perhaps I am unduly cynical, but I believe that all institutions attempt to cover up institutional wrongdoing.”

He adds, “The Roman Catholic church has had a higher opinion of itself than most, and thus a greater tendency to lie about these things....”

The real sin of the Roman Catholic Church was not that some priests betrayed the trust placed in them – bad as that is -- but that the institution considered its own reputation more important than the people it served.

By protecting its backside, the Catholic Church did the same as scouting, hockey leagues, and public schools. Or, for that matter, as professional associations of doctors, lawyers, and engineers -- who quietly discipline errant members while avoiding publicity.

Hypocrisy rampant

But back to the media -- when not implying corruption throughout the Catholic Church, the media focused on possible flaws in the Pope's past, during the Argentinian purges.

And that's not fair either.

Some 30,000 people disappeared. It was, I understand, the most ruthless repression anywhere in Latin America, surpassing even Pinochet's regime in neighbouring Chile.

So where were those media at the time? If they believe Pope Francis didn't protest enough against injustice, aren't the media equally guilty?

How many stories about systematic torture, incarceration, and murder in Argentina do you remember on CNN? Or anywhere else?

Oscar Romero spoke out -- stridently -- against military oppressors in El Salvador. And look what it got him. Murdered. While celebrating Mass.

Los Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the "mothers of the disappeared," earned the right to challenge Pope Francis. They risked their lives daily by protesting in Buenos Aires' main square. American media faced no such risk. Yet they said next to nothing against military terrorism in Argentina.

Afraid of the military?

Besides, why pick on the church because it failed to protest crimes? Why not pick on the organization that committed those crimes?

As I said, the Pope heads about 400,000 priests. The world's military leaders command almost 70 million obedient bodies. If any organization has consistently violated human rights -- through torture, rape, killing, and property destruction -- it has been the military.

I'm not attempting to excuse those members of the priesthood who did wrong. They violated their vows. They harmed those placed in their care -- sometimes irreparably.

But they are a tiny minority in a vast multitude of dedicated and faithful representatives of the church's ideals.

Exactly the same criticism could be leveled at any collection of people. Including journalists. A small minority can bring disrepute to the entire organization.

It happens. But when it does, it's not fair to tar everyone with the same brush.

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YOUR TURN

Lots of letters about last week's column, in which I argued for permitting assisted suicide, when people become so disabled that they are no longer capable of ending their own lives.

An Australian reader, who preferred to remain anonymous, wrote, "When my 13 year old nephew was toward the end of his nearly 7 year battle with cancer, he wanted his suffering to end. This incredible fighter who beat the odds again and again had reached the end of his tether. He was on morphine for pain management, his body was breaking down rapidly, and he welcomed an end to his suffering. He pleaded for his parents to shoot him. They refused.

"It was against the law, but of course they would not shoot him, even if it had not been against the law. But they certainly did not want him to suffer, nor did they want him to die. It is hard to let go of the people we love, even when we know deep down that what they are living with is not living at all. Yes, we are kinder to our animals, but you can get another dog, but not another human to replace the one who died."

My childhood friend Janie Downs Wallbrown had her own story too: "After Daddy retired, he worked for 8 years at a hospital in Kentucky. He declared that in many different ways physicians helped along the process. No one said anything. However, slowly but surely it became more and more difficult to do so. It was the advent of computers keeping track of everything. Families became increasingly reluctant, for whatever reason, to let folks die.

"Daddy, age 103, told me one Saturday that his body was falling apart. He thought he likely had 2 more days. The next morning he didn't get out of bed. It was the first time Frederick and I had seen Daddy in bed during the day time. It took him 4 days to die in my brother's home where he had been living for 5 years.

"From that morning he never spoke lucidly. We had been given morphine by Daddy's doctor. I was to administer it as I saw fit when Daddy's final days came. Was I ever cautious about that morphine! I only inserted drops under Daddy's tongue when he was visibly agitated. Growing up with Daddy, we all were thoroughly indoctrinated against taking medicine unless it was absolutely necessary. So....cautious I was. Horrors if he should become addicted to morphine!

"Afterwards, I made my own son swear that when my time to die was there, give me huge doses of morphine!"

Bev Ireland didn't support my views: "To refuse treatment is everyone's right. That means, stopping chemo when it is no longer helping, removing breathing machines when that is the only means by which a person is kept alive, stopping IV therapy when it is only used for sustenance or in the case of our dear Ruth who asked that her oxygen mask be removed after a five year struggle with ALS. None of these measures promoted or hastened death; they merely allowed the disease process to run its course.

"Palliative Care continues to be vastly misunderstood and greatly undervalued in this country. A well staffed and well funded program does far more than make the 'final days and months more tolerable.' The programs run with an understanding that their role is neither to hasten nor delay death. A well-coordinated program provides both physical comfort and mental and spiritual support to the patient and family, whether at home or hospital. I feel saddened that people still report terrible pain and suffering of their loved ones, such as your friends did with their son.

"There are many and effective ways of dealing with pain with modern medicine. Why I ask are we not doing more to support such individuals and families? Why are we not rioting over the fact our government spent millions on new prison cells at a time when the crime rate was decreasing. Why are we not ensuring we have as many competent doctors as we have veterinarians?"

After offering condolences to my daughter, Bev added, "One last word about suicides. How many strong, contributing folk would not be here if we had not intervened at an impulsive time in their youth? I have cared for many people, to be rewarded with their thanks for stopping their actions at a time which to them seemed hopeless."

David Shearman was another not in agreement: "As a pastor for many decades, I have seen death in all its peaceful and horrible forms. I cannot agree with your "we give our dogs better" arguments. What we lack is adequate medical training in relief of pain and understanding of death. I am burying a congregation member this week who died of brain cancer and whose pain was almost allowed to get ahead of her. Fortunately, a very experienced palliative care physician was involved and ordered medication which gave a dignity and peace to death which would have otherwise been absent. That is what is required, not an opportunity to kill oneself.

Larry Joose is one of those veterinarians people talk about so glibly. He wrote, "As a veterinarian I have performed numerous euthanasias. At the start of my career, owners would drop off pets for this procedure and rarely stay with their pet. Now most family members stay and are present to comfort their companion and have some time to mourn the loss of a friend. We have a separate room in our clinic where clients can stay with their pet and when they are ready they can leave via a separate exit away from the waiting room. Often the options or resources for palliative care are not available or practical and we have the privilege of ending needless suffering.

“There are things worse than death. Some countries like the Netherlands have dealt with this issue in humans. My wife's late uncle was a M.D. and he told me that he would order more morphine in terminal cases, yet he himself suffered terribly at the last stages of melanoma. I believe in a saviour who came to end suffering. My hope is that our society can come to realize that we can give people the option that our pets have. It is not easy to say goodbye but it is worse to see needless suffering.”

Ted Wilson had similar thoughts: “Dad was a professional livestock handler. He told me once that animals have it better than people -- we can put them down when it's their time. I saw him do that many times growing up.

“In the half-century since, medical science has given veterinarians more and better ways to end an animal's life when it is the right and kind thing to do. It has also given doctors who practice on humans more and better ways to prolong our lives, whether it is the right and kind thing to do or not. They are compelled by law to do so.... The 1972 revisions to the Criminal Code were a step in the right direction but they are insignificant compared to the advances in medical science.

“I believe future generations will judge us to be the most cruel and barbaric people in history. In the past, prolonged and horrible deaths were reserved for those considered unworthy. For example, in Christ's time Roman citizens could not be crucified. They reserved crucifixion for lesser peoples. We, on the other hand, reserve it for those we hold dearest. If we were a truly compassionate people we would be focusing only on improving the quality of life, not trying to prolong it to the ultimate.”

Bob Stoddard noted an anomaly: “One ironic situation – [some] states that still execute prisoners use efforts (such as forced feeding, etc.) to prevent a convicted person from committing suicide so the state can end his/her life at a later time.”

Val Lockstead described the measures some desperate people take: “Recently there was a report of a missing senior in Penticton. She was 81 years old and had health issues that made her life intolerable and untreatable. She was forced to end her own life by drowning. I cannot imagine the agony she went through to make the decision and how horrendous for her to have to take herself into the lake.”

John Shaffer wrote, “When my mother was in the dying process, she had to starve to death. That made me very angry ... My two brothers were present; they were also upset and have always been in favor of assisted suicide as a direct result. Having my mother linger for three days when she had given up eating was not an act of kindness. Fortunately she was not in serious pain, as far as we know, but I have worked for assisted suicide ever since and we finally have a reasonable start on this in the states of Washington and Oregon).”

John had a closing thought: “When you compare animals and people, check out the amount of money spent on animals in our society. And then think what that amount of money would do to help those who lack the basic clean water and adequate food that most of us in North America take for granted.”

Charles Hill wrote, “I'll be personal on this topic. Two years ago I was diagnosed with a terminal cancer and given about two years to live, with debilitating medication. First I sought spiritual counsel. My next step was to begin a plan for suicide when my life was in extreme pain and I could not be social nor functional. My greatest problem was how to do it without my wife, an RN, being accused of aiding me by supplying drugs.

“Fortunately, a second opinion found the cancer diagnosis to be wrong. [However] the experience did leave me with a strong agreement that we should be permitted to be in control of our own destiny. I don't see any prohibition against suicide in the Bible.”

David Gilchrist: “This is a tough subject to be objective about. Both my wife and I have lived through the terrible decision.

“My late wife had colon cancer, with a tumor around the sciatic nerve, and pain that even morphine could not entirely eliminate. One day, a visitor said: ‘If you let your horse suffer like that, you would be charged with animal cruelty’. I too, could not bring myself to heed her request to help her end it.

“My wife's husband had Pseudo Bulbar Palsy (like ALS, except that it starts with speech and works down to the feet). He also pleaded to have the feeding tube left out -- a request that was denied for a long time, till a new doctor came and let him slip peacefully away.

“The ‘sanctity of life’ argument doesn't hold water when it really means the prolongation of suffering. The heart may still be ticking, and the lungs drawing air; but that is not LIFE!”

After David and his wife were interviewed on CBC about their experiences, "We were shocked at the ignorant and belligerent kind of threats we heard. Some people seemed to feel that it was wrong to let someone die who wanted to go; but perfectly okay to execute those who thought differently from themselves..."

"And as far as the military is concerned, it seems fine to send our young and healthy to die; but we must prevent death for those whose lives are essentially ended, until they have endured whatever pain and suffering some presumed 'god' (small 'g') has allotted them."

There were another half-dozen or so letters that I have not quoted. But I thank you for them, anyway.

TECHNICAL STUFF

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrapp@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
