

THE CHURCH, SIN, AND RECONCILIATION - PART II

Leonard Bernstein's 100th birthday was celebrated last Saturday on WFMT. As I listened to various recordings of his music that morning, I recalled one of his most powerful – and controversial – compositions: *Mass - A Theater Piece for Singers, Players and Dancers*. I vividly recall waiting for and watching the TV premier conducted by the composer in 1971. Some considered it sacrilegious, others brilliant, still others were simply intrigued by the idea of a Jewish composer appropriating a Catholic rite in a composition that ranged from shocking to profound. But one of the parts I remembered best and recalled in the midst of the past weeks' revelations from Pennsylvania was a part near the end of the piece, when the "celebrant" throws the "sacramental" vessels to the floor and sings "how easily things get broken." In hindsight, it seems almost prophetic.

So much has been "broken" over God-only-knows how many decades – centuries, really – by human beings in the Church, usually and sadly by the clergy, from the parade of "bad" popes to the Inquisition, from the physical and emotional abuse of children in Irish orphanages to the sexual abuse of children, teenagers and even adults in parishes around the world. None of it should have ever happened; none of it should have been tolerated, much less covered up. But all those things did happen, were tolerated and, too often, swept under the rug. Pope Francis, to his credit, has expressed his profound sorrow, called for repentance, and pledged to do all he can to ensure that the clerical culture which to a huge extent permitted these abuses will be reined in. He's admitted his failure to respond decisively to the crisis in Chile and, I suspect, he's still finding it challenging to navigate the elaborate bureaucracy of the Vatican with its entrenched culture of secrecy and the "good old boy" mentality that was part of my own seminary experience at Mundelein.

But I've been amazed at the number of Catholics I've talked to who are unaware that it was Pope Francis who removed the infamous Cardinal Law from his Vatican job and consigned him to live out the rest of his life in prayer and penance; hopefully he managed to do that before he died. It was Pope John Paul II who helped Cardinal Law escape justice for his criminal cover-ups in Boston by giving him his cushy Vatican job, complete with luxury accommodations. Most people know – I hope – that Pope Francis immediately removed Cardinal McCarrick from his post when his cover-ups were brought to light and, as with Cardinal Law, consigned him to a life of prayer and penance. However, once again, it was Pope John Paul II who had elevated Archbishop McCarrick to Cardinal even **after** multiple sexual misconduct cases against him had been lodged and settled in dioceses and parishes where he had served as both priest and bishop. The cover-up of misconduct is tragic and criminal. But it is truly tragic that such misconduct at the highest levels in the Church should be rewarded rather than punished. Why should any priest or bishop worry about their conduct – or misconduct – if all that awaits them is a Vatican job or the "red hat" of a cardinal?

I concluded last week's piece with a reflection on the need for reconciliation and hope even in the midst of the worst crimes or tragedies. When Jesus challenges his disciples to forgive "seventy times seven times" he doesn't say they have to forget, nor does he rule out divine justice for unrepentant sinners; but he also offers the promise of mercy for those who truly seek forgiveness. As we wade through whatever further revelations might be uncovered, we need to maintain that Gospel balance. No one who has suffered abuse at the hands of a priest or bishop should be expected to forget; but forgiveness is another matter, and a terribly challenging one for those who have suffered so much. No priest whose abusive behavior has been proven, no bishop who has covered up misconduct, should be able to get away with those crimes, and certainly, no one should be rewarded; justice must be served, both in this world and the next.

"How easily things get broken." How hard they can be to heal. The Church needs to work for justice, transparency and accountability. We all need to pray for healing and hope.

Fr. Bob