

THE CHURCH, SIN AND RECONCILIATION - PART III

A little over five years ago, I saw a play in London (one of five in three days!) called *Peter and Alice*. It was a new work by the screenplay writer for the movie *Skyfall* which was created with two great actors in mind—Dame Judi Dench (*M* in *Skyfall*) and Ben Whishaw (*Q*)—portraying the real people on whom *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland* were based. It was set in a London bookstore, the scene of a real meeting some years after WWI between Peter Llewelyn Davies, then in his thirties, and the 80 year-old Alice Liddell. The play moves back and forth between past and present, and reveals the apparent sexual abuse Peter and his younger brother suffered at the hands of J.M. Barrie (who adopted Peter and his four brothers when their parents died) and the abuse Alice endured from Lewis Carroll (real name, the Rev. Charles Dodgson), a close friend of her family.

Alice, now old, widowed and having lost three sons in the war, has found a way to leave the past behind. Peter however, much younger and having lost a brother in the same war and another by apparent suicide—the youngest, who was also abused by Barrie—can't let go of his bitterness. After ninety minutes without an intermission, the play ends with Alice walking through a door and briefly turning to the audience while the voice of her younger self tells us that she lived for another year and died peacefully at her beloved country home. Finally, Peter walks through the same door and turns to the audience as an offstage voice reveals that, a few months later, Peter threw himself in front of an underground train at the Marylebone station.

I hadn't intended to write a third article under the above title. But for some reason, I recalled this play in the midst of all that has been happening in the past month with regard to the unconscionable cover-ups of clergy sexual misconduct by bishops and even by two previous popes. There have been a number of TV interviews and news stories—some from Ireland during the visit of Pope Francis—where Catholics understandably expressed their anger and dismay at this scandal that never seems to end. Many of those Catholics also say that all this has destroyed their relationship with the Church and they want nothing more to do with it. So I asked myself: knowing that J.M. Barrie and Lewis Carroll were apparently pedophiles, would most people vow to never again read *Peter Pan* or *Alice in Wonderland* to their children or watch the famous and engaging animated movies of those stories? Would it serve any purpose? Would such a decision punish those authors, now long dead? Would there be any real value in banishing classic stories that provided such delight to me, probably to you, and to so many others for generations? And the characters of *Peter* and *Alice* have been woven into a number of TV and movie fantasies through the years; would the knowledge of their creators' apparent misconduct cause me to dismiss those as well? I know my answer; I'd invite you to consider yours.

Our Church has been, and always will be, peopled by and governed by human beings. Some will sin, betray their baptismal calling or abuse their power. Most will live holy lives, remain faithful disciples of Jesus, and govern the Church with compassion and integrity. One of my history professors in college was fond of the expression “throwing out the baby with the bathwater.” We students grew tired of hearing it, but the meaning is clear. Do we throw out what is genuinely good and precious along with the part that is soiled? Another expression popular with my family was “you’re cutting off your nose to spite your face.” Because of these terrible, newly revealed sins, do we sever the unique and life-giving relationship with Jesus that we find in the Eucharist which comes to us only through the sometimes-sinful Church that he founded? *Peter and Alice* and their story reminded me, in these days, of those questions that really need to be asked and answered by each of us.

Fr. Bob