Let’s Transform Our Present Church Crisis into an Opportunity

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In June of this year a daring rescue took place in Chang Rai Province, Thailand. Twelve boys and their soccer coach had set out to explore a cave; unfortunately, while they did so monsoon rains came, flooding the tunnels and blocking their exit.

The team members and their coach would not emerge for two more weeks. Marooned in darkness on a small rocky shelf, they lost all sense of time, and were filled with fear and a growing sense of hopelessness. These young people and the man who led them knew that they were facing a crisis of survival.

Here in the US, Catholics have been facing a crisis of a very different sort for the last month or so. A steady stream of news reports about sexual misdeeds on the part of a cardinal as well as a number of bishops and priests, along with tales of coverups and more recently accusations and counter accusations reaching right up to the Vatican have left many feeling disgusted and angry, and demanding that significant changes be instituted to clean up the mess and ensure that it does not happen again.

Without a doubt, the Catholic Church in the US, as well as the church universal, is facing a serious crisis. Some compare it to the situation in which the church found itself during the years immediately following the Reformation. At that time, however, those in leadership managed to turn their crisis into an opportunity: addressing the challenges facing them within a much larger context, they introduced significant and long overdue structural changes. Do we have the courage to do the same today?

The situation confronting us is complex and there are no easy solutions to the problem at hand. If we are serious about lasting change, however, we cannot avoid examining what appears to be a major cause of our present dilemma: clericalism. The term describes a culture that consolidates authority
in a religious hierarchy, refuses to entertain constructive criticism and fosters misplaced loyalty. It is also generally resistant to including non-clerical voices when searching for a solution to any problem.

For a long time now, clericalism has shaped our understanding of the church’s structure of authority and models of governance as well as the nature of its priesthood and formation for ordained ministry. If we want to turn the crisis facing today’s church into an opportunity, we can start by being courageous in examining these areas and making necessary changes.

That will mean adopting models of governance consistent with the spirit of Vatican II and practices of the early church, reforming our programs for priestly formation, examining the case for ordaining others, in addition to celibate men, to the priesthood, and giving greater life to the office of the diaconate, including accelerating a decision on the ordination of women to this ministry.

**Authority and Governance**

Vatican II’s universal call to holiness was one of the council’s most revolutionary teachings: an unequivocal declaration that by the gift of baptism we all share in the one mission of the church. The council sought to restore the laity to its rightful place within the ecclesial community.

How, though, is authority exercised in the church today? Several years ago, Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco suggested that to combat what then-theologian Joseph Ratzinger identified as “extreme centralization,” we would need to develop better models of shared responsibility between local churches and the Church of Rome, without diminishing the role of the pope.

This idea was discussed at Vatican II and during subsequent years but with little tangible results. Setting up the Synod of Bishops was an attempt to address the issue; unfortunately, that structure has no governance role. The time has come to revisit and revise it so that greater shared responsibility is the result.
Quinn also insisted on the need for greater local involvement in the selection of bishops. During the years following the council, lay consultation was often part of the process of choosing bishops here in the US; over time this practice has been reduced. Can we develop a procedure for this important task, one that avoids politicizing the local church but also does not cede the job entirely to those in Rome without sufficient involvement and trust on the part of the local church?

Fresh models of shared responsibility on the local level are also needed. Of course, we have parish and presbyterial councils in many places. However, these structures, as they exist today, appear inadequate for the challenges that we are facing as a church. Why are examples of genuine lay leadership so hard to find? How is it that a parish’s spirit and practice can change overnight because a new pastor arrives on the scene? Why are the gifts of so many laywomen and men often ignored simply because they are laywomen and men?

If we are convinced that the Spirit of God is present in every believer, then surely genuine wisdom will be found more readily in the community as a whole, and not solely in one segment of that community. Hasn’t the time come to imagine new structures of authority and responsibility on the local and diocesan levels as well as in the wider church? Greater lay involvement in decision making on the part of our faith community would be a welcome first step. And that involvement needs to include both women and men and to be more than window dressing.

In but one example, for fifteen years here in the US, the Leadership Roundtable—an organization of laity, religious and clergy—has worked to promote best practices and accountability in management, finances, communications and human resources in the church. They have also fostered the incorporation of lay expertise. These measures have been adopted by numerous parishes and dioceses. By instituting the Roundtable’s measures more widely, trust can begin to be restored.
Ordained Ministry

Next, we need to rethink our understanding about ordained ministry and priestly formation. Over the last five hundred years, the curriculum of Catholic seminary formation has changed but a few times. To a large extent, the Council of Trent designed the model that we follow to prepare young men for priesthood today. It assumes that candidates come from areas with a Catholic culture that will provide their primary formation.

Maintaining institutions that are monastic in form and removed from the church’s everyday world, and treating candidates as if they were adolescents has ceased to be useful in our post-modern world. Are we willing to reinvent seminary formation, creating programs that will prepare young people well for the challenges that they will actually face? Numerous religious orders, for example, maintain houses of formation for candidates that are located in urban areas, near universities, working in collaboration with men and women candidates from other faith traditions.

Let’s also ask: what necessary and bold steps can we take to ensure that the sacramental life of the church remains vibrant? Why do we delay in rethinking our understanding about priesthood? Let’s move away from our present model and toward one that might better meet the needs of a church that is growing worldwide and in desperate need of a vibrant sacramental life? Why put off taking a hard look at ordaining others, in additional to celibate men, to celebrate the sacraments?

Finally, deacons. Can we at last fully implement their role? In some dioceses they are little more than glorified altar servers. Why not reinvent this important office in the Church and give deacons additional responsibility for areas of substance? Also, don’t delay in moving ahead on women deacons; this is no time for endless discussion, we need some action in this area if faith is to be renewed. Finally, can we ensure that deacon formation is consistent across the country?
Yes, the church is in crisis and, yes, we do need clear policies and practices, in addition to those already in place, to ensure that children and young people are safe in our church. Developing those policies and practices will be so much easier if we have a church that is a genuine communion of the faithful. The safeguards that we put into place to protect children and young people will do little long-term good if we fail to also redirect our energies toward creating a church that will truly reflect the dream of those who gathered at Vatican II. We have a chance to transform today’s crisis into an opportunity. Let’s join together to create a church where young people will be safe and where all believers can find a home and a source of new life.

With innovative thinking and a great deal of daring, those twelve boys and their coach were rescued from the mountain cave that had come to imprison them. Let’s think outside of the box for a change as we work to make today’s crisis in our church not only an opportunity to better protect children and young people but also for renewal and a new beginning.

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