

Spotlight and a changing Catholic landscape

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February 16, 2016

Nearly 15 years ago, the *Boston Globe* broke the story of the priest-pedophilia and bishop-cover-up crimes. The film *Spotlight*, which chronicles the investigative reporting behind the newspaper's Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage, is now up for a Best Picture Academy Award. While this new film shines a light on what happened then, watching it now reveals how the Catholic landscape has changed (and not changed) since the story broke in 2002.

While the reporters depicted in *Spotlight* initially pursue the stories of particular priest-pedophiles, the editors see the bigger picture: the bureaucratic system, the hierarchy, and the mindset that allowed these priests to be moved from parish to parish without legal intervention. Who thought it was acceptable that these criminals weren't arrested and prosecuted? Many in the pews said then and say now: "Who the hell do these people think they are?"

The movie correctly portrays how clericalism, hypocrisy, and arrogance enabled these criminals. For centuries good Catholics were told to say, "Yes, Father." Abuse survivors in the film and in many other accounts relate that having a parish priest in your house for dinner or going with him on a trip felt like God was paying attention directly to you. Often, those who did stand up to these predators and their protectors were attacked, told to sit down and shut up, or even threatened: "How dare you attack this man? What could he do wrong? After all, he's a priest."

In the years since the events recounted in *Spotlight* there have been some steps forward, but not enough. Dioceses around the world have put into place greater oversight, reporting, and zero-tolerance measures. But survivor networks and watchdog groups remind us that compliance is not guaranteed. The United States witnessed the forced and overdue resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law in Boston in late 2002. And last year bishops in Minnesota and Missouri stepped down, again long after calls for them to do so. But open inquiries persist, including troubling cases in Chile and Germany. Measures are still not firmly in place to bring to legal account those bishops who were complicit in pedophilia by failing to call the police.

More than a decade after these scandals broke into the open, a new pope is now attacking the very system of clericalism that facilitated the crimes and cover-ups. Again and again—in formal talks, in homilies, in conversation—Pope Francis goes after the sense of entitlement that some priests, bishops, and cardinals derive from their ordination or title. His reform program is less about administrative matters like rearranging the financial reporting structure of the Vatican Bank. The target is wider: Pope Francis is trying to create a church-wide attitude adjustment that knocks down the clerical ladder and flattens the hierarchy of vocations.

Pope Francis seeks better priests, not just more priests. He calls for only the best candidates for ordained ministry, not second-rate men. Like the rest of us, he has seen just what damage can be done by priests and bishops who were so imbued with a sense of clericalism that they thought their first job was to protect the church—although for them “the church” meant not the people of God but the institutional system that ensured their status. As many have noted, clericalism is not a gospel value. It is not the same thing as authority or authenticity. In fact, the crimes and cover-ups undermined the credibility of church hierarchy. They’ve created a crisis of authority and trust that is still present in the Catholic Church.

Although *Spotlight* revisits horrid crimes that some would rather forget, the sex abuse scandal depicted in the film is an important chapter in the history of Catholicism. It was the moment when the Catholic laity told their bishops that they were tired of being treated like children. The trust was gone and would not automatically be restored because someone wearing a Roman collar said everything would be taken care of. A future historian might even say that 2002 was the year many Catholics started saying, “No, Father.”

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