

Gone astray: Clerical accountability

From the Editors in the [August 28, 2002](#) issue

When Pope John Paul II spoke at World Youth Day in Toronto a month ago, he touched on the current crisis in the Catholic Church, admonishing his young audience to not be “discouraged by the sins and failings of some.” Instead, “think of the vast majority of dedicated and generous priests and religious whose only wish is to serve and do good.” That most priests and religious are worthy servants of the church and models of Christ is a given, but by acknowledging that there are a few rotten apples in the barrel, the pope conveyed the seriousness of the current situation.

The Catholic crisis is no time for Protestants to engage in what the Germans call *Schadenfreude*, a smug delight in the misfortunes of others. Although we are structurally separate, Protestants are still part of one spiritual body that includes Catholics and the Orthodox. When one part of the body suffers, the apostle Paul said, all parts suffer. But we might do more than just feel their pain: it’s a good opportunity to reexamine our own attitudes toward leadership.

Episcopal priest Margaret Guenther says that “it is a great burden to live among others who think that you have arrived.” Indeed, this is one of the perils of religious leadership. Too often we expect perfection of our leaders, and they end up living two lives as a result—one to fit our public image of them, and a private one in which they can be themselves. Sometimes leaders are so elevated above the rest of us that they remain unaccountable and cut off from meaningful intimacy and community. Leaders can be lonely, driven persons. Is it any wonder that their besetting sins are so often abuse of power and sexual indiscretion? As Eugene Peterson says, pastors and other religious leaders are subject to the same temptations as the rest of us. One difference is that they know religious jargon so much better that they are tempted to use it to rationalize their behavior. And the brighter the mind, the more adept the person is at rationalization.

Christians may never decide whether or not professional clergy are expected to live by a higher moral and spiritual standard than the laity. But we should all agree that

clergy should be expected at least to live by the same standards as the rest of us. Molesting children is despicable no matter who does it. Above all, clergy must be held accountable—we must not engage in cover-ups, nor put offenders into a setting where the past can tragically repeat itself. Furthermore, accountability should be to the whole church, not just to one's peers. The ministry is not a self-regulating profession that sets its own standards for who gets in and how business is conducted. The ministry serves the whole church, and for that service it must be accountable to the whole church.

Church leaders might begin by putting up the sign one pastor has in his office: Remember two things: There is a God. You are not God.