

## “CORRUPTIO OPTIMI PESSIMUM EST” EXCISING THE WOUNDS OF THE CHURCH

*Corruptio optimi pessimum est.* “The corruption of the best is the worst,” so reads the aphorism. The cover up is always worse than the deed. In ancient Rome, the *optimates* (literally meaning “the best men” in Latin) were those in Rome who wanted to conserve the power of the Senate, as against the *populares* (“ones of the people”) who favored increasing citizenship opportunities to those from the Provinces. The above cited adage indicates that the best and brightest, if corrupted, become by far the worst because their precipitous fall is so remarkable, and they wield such influence upon others. At times, the deed’s nature is so horrific that one begins to wonder how it is even possible for the cover up to be worse. Not since 1927, when **Louis Cardinal Billot** resigned from the College of Cardinals, has the Church witnessed what was offered last week by Theodore McCarrick. The French Jesuit Billot was a respected professor at the Gregorian University in Rome who became associated with the deeply conservative *Action Française* movement. Its adherents favored the restoration of a Catholic monarchy, with Catholicism as the state religion. That was a bridge too far for Pope Pius XI who feared that the movement was “using” Catholicism for its own political ends.

McCarrick’s resignation was of an entirely different sort, submitted for reasons of multiple abuse allegations, one of which (against a minor) has already been deemed to be “credible” by a Review Board. I’ll spare you the details, as they are readily available to anyone who googles his name. Ordained as auxiliary bishop in New York in 1977, he later became bishop of Metuchen and then Archbishop of Newark, both in New Jersey. He was installed as Archbishop of Washington in January 2001 and named a Cardinal just one month later. Suffice it to say, his steady rise through the Church’s hierarchy was as notable as it was notorious precisely because in this case **there were signs**— plenty of them—of troubling conduct towards those in subordinate positions, especially seminarians. Very few people who knew of his behaviors were “shocked” by these revelations.

We look to Church leaders for virtue—instead he exhibited pernicious vice. In place of prophetic witness there was nothing but deafening silence from those who knew or should have known that something was seriously wrong. Catholics expect that their leaders would “live in a **manner worthy of the call** you have received.” (cf. Ephesians 4:1). This bishop utterly betrayed the promises he made on the day of his ordination, sixty years ago this past May. However, the real corruption rests in the decisions (or non-decisions) of officials who had been warned of his troubling behavior with seminarians that was at best extremely imprudent, and as we learned, a gravely immoral abuse of power. We do not condemn people on innuendo, but the evidence appears to have been much more than clerical gossip. Buried towards the end of the press releases acknowledging “credible and substantiated” claims of the abuse of a minor were revelations that financial settlements had been reached in two N.J. dioceses involving misconduct with seminarians. The first settlement occurred when McCarrick was in Washington, but that Archdiocese was not informed about them.

A group of laity flew to Rome (on their own dime, I’ll add) to present troubling concerns to officials in the Roman Curia, as speculation was growing that Archbishop McCarrick might be named as the Archbishop of Washington D.C. Those and other warnings appear to have been deemed not credible or were ignored. I am keenly aware of my own weaknesses and have **never relished** using a poison pen to offer contemptuous words for the Catholic hierarchy. Quite the opposite in fact. Each of us is a humble sinner, but for the life of me I cannot imagine how someone, aware of such misdeeds, could even fathom receiving a red hat at a Consistory or speak about “zero tolerance” with a straight face. He did both. What would it take for someone to think to himself, “I can’t do this... I must decline” ?

Catholic laity and clergy alike have had it; if they are not outraged, it is either out of **sheer weariness**, or worse yet, because they have stopped paying attention to an institution whose leaders they have effectively written off. I am no longer surprised when I encounter people who so nonchalantly reveal that they no longer practice their Catholic faith, as happened at a recent reception. Twenty years ago, there was some diffidence in admitting that— not any more. The Church is utterly irrelevant to their lives. That saddens me greatly, yet I can no longer pretend that these are simply people who would rather sleep in on Sundays. Some are so utterly discouraged that they have stopped trying to make sense of the hypocrisy. They can no longer separate the individuals from

the institution.

What needs to happen in this moment is a full-scale **outside** audit, led solely by **Catholic laity** given full access to documents, headed by a person with serious *gravitas*. This group will be tasked with making recommendations that will be publicly shared. Dare I dream the impossible for just a moment? What if **U.S. Court of Appeals Judge**— and Catholic mother of seven— **Amy Coney Barrett** were to head a special task force and given **sufficient resources** and **authority**? Most people can clearly differentiate between the divine nature of the Church as the instrument of God’s grace, “the pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Tim. 3:15) and the all too fallible human beings who lead the Church and attend Mass in the pews. In this moment, much more than apologies and assurances, we need concrete actions— and we need them right now. Only then will confidence begin to be restored in our Church leaders.

- It was a privilege on July 25 to attend the 50th anniversary film on the sexual revolution, a spirited defense of *Humanae Vitae* and participate in a panel discussion following. The event was extremely well attended, and I left feeling affirmed as a priest and renewed in my desire to share this life-giving teaching more readily.
- Last week’s bulletin contained one prediction of mine that sadly came true. It was a full-scale fire sale for the Twins. They traded five regular players for a slew of minor league prospects that will take years to develop. I’ll especially miss **Brian Dozier**— a courteous, faith-filled Christian and Country Music lover who can field and hit with power for seven seasons with the Twins!
- I took my annual trip with a seminary classmate to visit churches in the Archdiocese. I drive, he pays for lunch! This year we visited some Minneapolis churches, and I am glad I have GPS in my car. Sorry, but I’m utterly lost in Minneapolis— he merely shook his head.
- As mandated by Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution, the first ever **U.S. Census** took place in **August of 1790**. Plans are well underway for 2020. We witness one birth every 8 seconds and one death every 12 seconds in this country. The new Census will be the first to utilize the internet and smart phones to collect data, perhaps cutting down on the nearly \$100 cost per U.S. household!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector