

THE PONTIFICAL SECRET: CONFIDENTIALITY IN THE CHURCH

It ought to be no surprise that I favor transparency at this moment in the life of the Catholic Church. I do not relish feeling the way I do— nothing displeases me more than recalling the horrific scandals resulting from clerical sexual abuse and related handling of these issues. Nevertheless, **transparency** is a necessary pre-condition in order for the Christian faithful to regain a modicum of trust in the Church. I employ the term “pre-condition” quite deliberately, fearing that if such transparency is not forthcoming soon, more will simply discard the Church, seeing her as just another corrupted organization in a world filled with credibility problems. How sad! Despite her festering wounds, the Church is forever the Bride of Christ, a community of believers born of divine and not merely human origin.

One little discussed corollary to the current crisis is the unprecedented step taken by former Apostolic Nuncio to the U.S., Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano. He revealed matters that **clearly pertained** to the promise of **confidentiality** that he took upon entrance into the diplomatic corps of the Holy See. Much of what he revealed in his testimony more than a month ago was confidential material covered by what is called the **Pontifical Secret**. No, it does not refer to the pope whispering some juicy tidbit in someone’s ear, swearing them to secrecy! The term *secretum pontificium* refers to strict confidentiality in matters pertaining directly to the exercise of the pope’s mission. After all, the Roman Curia is solely at the service of the Pope, assisting him to share his vision and implement his directives. When **journalists demand** that Curial officials answer questions about the Archbishop McCarrick scandal, they should know that they are unable to comment, unless expressly released to do so.

Confidentiality is essential and a grave obligation. Imagine if Curial officials chatted freely with the Press or others— this would clearly undermine the integrity of those entrusted with implementing the vision of the Holy Father, who himself works in collaboration with the world’s bishops. But therein also **lies a problem**. This confidentiality is clearly defined in nearly all its aspects, and most agree this is a **good and necessary component** of service to the Holy See. In the ten classes of material covered, most are in no way surprising. For example, when the Nuncio distributes confidential inquiries about the suitability of a priest being considered for being named a bishop, that inquiry is under the pontifical secret. Or if a Cardinal knows in advance whom has been selected as the new Archbishop of Paris, it would be entirely inappropriate and scandalous to reveal that selection beforehand, based upon knowledge he gained from his work in the congregation tasked with recommending episcopal appointments to the Pope. A third example concerns the work of preparing papal documents, such as papal encyclicals. That work could potentially fall under the secret.

However, the final category includes **any matter** that the Pope, a Cardinal in charge of a department of the Roman Curia, or a papal legate considers to be of such importance that it requires the protection of papal secrecy. Here, it could be tricky, because it appears to an outsider like me as open-ended, broad and vague. Could the Pontifical Secret be **re-examined** with regard to its **precise scope**? While I am supportive of strict confidentiality in the Curia, if we have learned anything in the past decades, it is that confidential legal settlements in dioceses also gave rise to the possibility of using that confidentiality to keep hidden what truly needed to be brought to light. Such agreements foster mistrust of Church leaders and is one reason why in some jurisdictions, law enforcement has even gone to the extreme of raiding Church offices. This is an extraordinary step in Western nations that have precedents for respecting the internal workings of the Church. That respect has all but faded today, with multiple Grand Jury investigations being launched. I fear we have only seen the tip of the iceberg.

I have professed loyalty to every Pope since my ordination— I pray for Pope Francis’ health, well-being and for God’s abundant blessing upon his ministry. I desire for the Church to thrive and to be a vibrant presence in the world. But **if it appears** that the Church is **stonewalling** in its own internal investigations, the lay faithful’s trust in the Church will erode even further. This past Tuesday, the **Pew Research Center** released a poll in which by a **margin of 2 to 1**, U.S. Catholics give Pope Francis **negative marks** for his handling of the sexual abuse crisis. Those troubling numbers may well get worse before they get better. The calls for accountability from the laity are unprecedented. A further loss of confidence could have devastating effects upon this papacy.

Indeed, confidential files are confidential for good reasons. But when trust has eroded and the faithful stop lending any credence to internal investigations, they will continue to walk away. That breaks my heart and I do not think I am alone in feeling powerless to stop the bleeding. The **Bishops Synod on Youth and Young Adults** just opened this past Wednesday in Rome. Our young adults do not just want—they demand accountability, transparency and authenticity from the Church, and are not afraid to ask for it! I hope that the Synod broaches these topics as well in its deliberations. Jesus proclaimed that the truth will set us free. He never said the truth would be easy or painless.

- Speaking of young adults...a generous Cathedral young adult is helping us update our **Cathedral parish website**. While we are not quite ready to launch it, the suggestions are spot on, and its look will be greatly improved. It is worth the time to take a comprehensive look at our presence on social media, including the website.
- When **Joe Mauer's** donned the catcher's gear for one pitch at season's end, it surely had the feel of a farewell. If he retires as most suspect, his fifteen year career included 3 A.L. batting titles and 3 Gold Glove Awards and an impressive lifetime **.306 batting average**. His switch to 1st Base five years ago complicates possible inclusion into the Hall of Fame as a catcher, but his character as a human being is unquestioned. A product of Catholic schools, Joe was the face of this team for many years and will be greatly missed.
- Do you notice anything **new in the sanctuary**? If so, we can thank a generous donor to the **Cathedral Heritage Foundation**. My heart will no longer skip a beat when someone tries to manage the steps, either by the high pulpit or carrying a ciborium for the distribution of Holy Communion. These magnificent hand-crafted **brass railings** were desperately needed! The center railings are even removable in case of a scared concert and the need for choir risers, etc.
- Shortly before this column went to press, I learned that **Paul Molitor** will not return as the Twins manager next season. The 62-year-old Hall of Famer and St. Paul native managed the Twins for four years. He was "old school," not too keen on the fancy "sabermetrics" of statistical analysis. I have no inside scoop on his replacement, but I suspect the Twins 30-something year-old brain trust will hire as our new manager a spiffy new MacBook Pro with 21 GB of RAM.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,

Rector