

## **“I Am Very Sorry . . .”**

May 2010

“It was better for eight innocent men to suffer than for millions to lose their faith.” – Canon lawyer Martha Wegan in a telephone conversation with a clerical sex abuse victim, historian Jose Barba Martin. – New York Times/May 3, 2010.

“It was better for eight innocent men to suffer than for millions to lose their faith”.

On its face, this statement cannot be true. There is no relationship between the injustice of permitting suffering innocence and millions losing their faith. At best, Ms. Wegan’s comment is advice – a long-suffering appeal for sacrifice – one might give to a religious novice, or perhaps it is meant to sugar coat a bitter pill that must be swallowed by religious true believers in order to shield their religious superiors and/or the Church’s priestly caste from prosecution. At worst, it is a throwback to the thousand year-old canon law principle that clerical or church wrongdoing must remain forever secret, known only to church authorities, lest the faithful be scandalized and suffer the loss of their souls. What nonsense!

Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Ratzinger, is more truthful than Ms. Wegan, and pulled no punches, when he informed Bishop Talavera of Mexico that the Vatican would not file charges in this case: “I am very sorry, but it isn’t prudent”. It wasn’t “prudent” because the cleric who would have been charged with sexual abuse was “very beloved by the pope and had done a lot of good for the church.” None of this is about the loss of faith or scandalizing the faithful – not a bit! – it is about protecting the organizational church from accountability and about the Church’s

supremely human system of influence-politics – knowing the people in power and ingratiating oneself with them.

In this regard, the Catholic Church is no better or worse, than any multi-national business corporation or NGO, which seeks to avoid criticism or charges of wrong doing especially about sex abuse – cover up by intimidating the accuser and/or trashing their career, or if pinned to the wall, negotiate a no-fault monetary settlement on condition of secrecy.

Using this corporate business model to stifle allegations of wrong doing in the Catholic Church is morally unacceptable and certainly hypocritical because the Church holds itself up as a divinely inspired religious and spiritual institution concerned about the eternal salvation of its members. Catholics are taught, and expected to believe, that the Pope – sometimes officially referred to as the Sweet Christ on Earth or the Vicar of Christ – is a direct successor of the Apostles of Jesus, and when elected as the Supreme Pontiff, was entrusted with the Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. The Catholic Church defines itself as the Mystical Body of Christ.

These are all profoundly mysterious concepts with mindboggling implications that have been reinforced by two thousand years of institutional history and in the face of widespread international clerical sex abuse of children what kind of response should the Church be expected to make?

Thus far, the response has been pitiful – orchestrated cover up by church authorities, reassignment of the offending cleric to another parish, and when pushed to the wall,

purchasing secrecy through financial settlements. Oh yes, I have read about the new “zero tolerance” policy of the U.S. Catholic Bishops but I have yet to read that a single U.S. bishop has resigned because of his hands-on involvement in the cover up. Where is the admission of institutional wrong-doing? Where is the institutional accountability?

Dare I ask, “What would Jesus do?” Or has this question been forever forfeited to the Comedy Hour programs to be used as a laugh line? If the pope dares to accept the title of Sweet Christ On Earth, then why not model Jesus? Or is this pope the person to whom Jesus referred when he preached: “They (church authorities) love to sit at the head table at church dinners, basking in the most prominent positions, preening in the radiance of public flattery, receiving honorary degrees, and getting called ‘Doctor’ and ‘Reverend’ . . .” Assuming best case scenario – Pope Benedict XVI wishes to follow in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth – what WOULD Jesus do?

Of course, I don’t know what he would do but my wish list would include: **(1)** Discard the lavish trappings and accoutrements of noblemen and royalty inherited from the Holy Roman Empire. Put aside, the gold-threaded liturgical vestments, the bejeweled crosses, rings and chalices, the embroidered medieval headdress and gold crosiers, the ermine capes, silk cassocks and red silk slippers, and dare I add, the designer eyewear! What do any of these symbols of royalty and power and luxury have to do with the teaching of the Jesus of Nazareth? **(2)** Divest the Church of all ownership and any revenue relating to the Christian shrines of the Holy Land, including Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. For hundreds of years,

these shrines have been flash points of contention, even armed conflict, among Christian factions, between religious orders, Muslims and Jews – the issue is always the same: ownership, power and money. Pilgrimages and tourism aside, what religious purpose do these theme park edifices serve? How do these shrines promote the Gospel values of living a good life?

Jesus of Nazareth offered us a simple truth about life: all that was necessary, he said, was to love God and to love others, and then went on to show us how: I am the Road, the Truth and the Life. No one gets to the Father apart from me. Cathedrals, basilicas, churches, religious shrines, the Holy Land, are not Gospel values, nor do they promote the simple truth about life advocated by Jesus.