

The Church of the Sweet Christ on Earth

Jesus of Nazareth founded neither Christianity nor the Roman Catholic Church. At most, he sparked a religious cult of followers, which hundreds of years later, evolved into an Emperor-sanctioned religion.

It was this “church” to which the Apostles Creed prompted allegiance: “I believe in the one holy catholic church.” The cult of Jesus was a way of life: “sell what you have, give the money to the poor, come follow me,” while the apostolic church of the 4th century was a creed, a code of precepts, a set of traditions – all governed by a priestly caste.

None of this is remarkable, most religions evolved in a similar manner, but what sets the Roman Catholic Church apart is its insistence that it, above all others, is the one true church, not a defective one. The justification for this exclusive doctrine states the church was founded by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and through apostolic succession survives to this day, and because of this unbroken continuum, it provides the only sanctioned way to achieve eternal salvation. All other religions and belief systems, while perhaps well-meaning and/or uplifting, fall short because they will not lead to eternal happiness.

There is nothing new here; the church has asserted its primacy since the days of the Reformation, but for some reason - institutional insecurity? - the pope issued a new papal edict this past week, which restates and reaffirms the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church: “Pope Benedict XVI has reasserted the universal primacy of the

Roman Catholic Church . . . Orthodox churches were defective and that other Christian denominations were not true churches.”

Take that! my Protestant friends and colleagues! Greek Orthodox? Nice try, but off the mark! Muslims and Jews? Forget about it! Hindus and Buddhists? Not part of the European tradition, therefore irrelevant to the question of eternal salvation.

Barely a day later, this Vatican news story was buried alive by even a bigger church announcement. Two days before trial, Cardinal Roger Mahony agreed to settle 500 pending sexual abuse cases against the Los Angeles Archdiocese to the tune of \$660 million dollars. This was in addition to a previous \$114 million dollar diocesan settlement made earlier in the year. All totaled, the Roman Catholic Church in the United States will have paid out more than \$2 billion dollars for child sex abuse settlements dating back to the 1950's. This dollar amount will continue to grow until every U.S. Catholic diocese settles their outstanding legal claims. Child sex abuse costs from Catholic dioceses throughout Europe will certainly add many millions of dollars more to the final total.

What a sad, sad chapter in the seventeen-hundred-year history of the Roman Catholic Church, and it isn't finished yet!

The day following the Los Angeles settlement, the papacy issued a media release that was headlined on the Internet: “Sex Abuse Not Just Catholic Issue, Vatican Says.”

True, child sex abuse is everywhere present – even more than we dare admit – in every religion, culture and society, but what makes this abuse unique to the Roman

Catholic Church was the deliberate cover-up orchestrated by the U. S. bishops. Hush money in the form of insurance payouts and confidential legal agreements were used to buy silence from the victims and their parents. Only when the abuse became so pervasive and widespread that insurance companies, faced with an ever-growing number of aggressive lawsuits, were unwilling to take on more risk, did the issue make its way to the daily news of the public.

The rationale used by the U.S. Catholic bishops to justify its cover-up was reliance on a seven-hundred year-old theological moral concept: “lest the faithful be scandalized.” But of course, the real reason for the cover-up was the need to shield the bishops and the priestly caste of the church from the harsh judgment of the faithful. True, many of the abuser-priests were temporarily reassigned outside the diocese for extended periods of therapy, along with the assumption that at the end of the treatment period, they would be “cured.” Perhaps some were, but most were not, and besides, who really knew if therapy worked, and who could predict future sexual behavior?

Therapy or not, child sex abuse or not, the Roman Catholic Church holds that: “once a priest, always a priest.” – an indelible stamp that can never be erased. Defrocking a priest was never considered; the only pastoral option was religious confession and forgiveness. The institutional church code, along with the mindset of the bishops, dictated that these former, and now forgiven child abusers, must continue to be treated as priests; they had to be assigned to priestly duties, they were entitled to be supported financially throughout their lifetime, and they had to be afforded the respect due to them as chosen members of the priestly caste.

If there is even a thin thread of connection between the Jesus of Nazareth and the this pope who is enamored with his title “Sweet Christ on Earth” I fail to see it. Finery, privilege, wealth, self-promotion, a position of impunity, a sumptuous life-style and medieval headdress blur my vision. Perhaps – just perhaps – the prophetic witness of these sexually abused children from the Los Angeles Roman Catholic Archdiocese will force me to continue looking until I find the connection.