Who Are The True Agents of Apostasy? (The Catholic Right, Twenty-first in a Series)

By Frank Cocozzelli

The PBS Frontline documentary, Hand of God., is the story of pedophilia victim Paul Cultrera. It is a disturbing illustration of the lack of explanation, the arrogance, the second-class treatment Italian-American Catholics are often subjected to; as well as the detached coldness of some of my church’s leadership. But there was one experience Paul had that I could not relate to: being molested by a priest.

The ordeal of the victims has only been exasperated by pastors, bishops and cardinals who still shirk responsibility often while trying to shift the blame to a secular society for what they often incorrectly misinterpret as hyper-individualism. The obvious question is raised: by evading full accountability, isn’t it now certain clergy, the not so large that is pursuing a reckless a course of self-interested behavior?

It is impossible to miss the film’s justified anger and bitterness. This is not the story of an individual who just walked away from his religion out of convenience -- but of a once-faithful man who in 1964 was abused by priest whose behavior was known to the local hierarchy and was not stopped and properly disciplined. Shockingly, Paul’s abuser, priest Joseph Birmingham who was first alleged to be a child abuser in the early 1960s, was instead assigned to duties that put him within greater access to potential victims, eventually rising to the level of pastor. Instead of punishing the abuser, certain clergy of the hierarchy chose to ignore the victim, and reward the predator with greater opportunities to further his serial crimes.

And the Catholic Right uses this scandal by attempting to use it to further an ultra-conservative agenda as well as making homosexuals in general the scapegoats. In Rove-like fashion they are trying to turn a disastrous week point into a strength. Many of the hard right leaders are of the idea that only power will come to the perverts and their enablers held accountable as “a culture of consent,” as if their primary goal was the Vatican’s demise. We hear of bishops and cardinals who falsely describe this shameful outcome of living in societies built upon American liberal democracy.

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Church. Someday, good people such as they will better be able to contribute to the direction of that great institution. But this will only come about when individual Catholics realize that without dissent, accountability is an impossibility—even at the risk of excommunication.

In Part Five of this series we examined how the issue of clergy pedophilism is a Philipian illustration of how theocracy can easily translate into physical and psychological danger to our most vulnerable loved ones. And in Part Twenty we examined the Aristotelian belief in inequality that still permeates the traditional Catholic mindset, paternalistic in its belief that only holy philosopher-kings, not the common men truly understand what constitutes the common good. The logical implication of a theocratic society built upon this autocratic thought would be an increase in such immoral behavior simply because there would be no secular society to ensure accountability.

IRD stalwarts of the Catholic Right, such as Robert H. Bork, rail against Liberalism’s faith in equality. Yet it is this very adherence to equality that prevents self-exemption from the law by those evoking the unenlightened grounds of heredity or non-meritoriously arrived at privilege. It almost seems bizarre that those whose actions are the most repugnant and close-minded have the audacity to attack loyal, reasoned dissent as attacks upon the Catholic Church. It is astounding that they would attack those who—as Christianity’s Founder questioned His religious hierarchy’s powers—that be did—call for internal accountability. Why is it that they are so threatened by a secular society that merely requires equal justice under the law? If threats of eternal damnation and excommunication could be used to avoid justice when sectarian beliefs are not confessed to or copied secular laws, what greater evils could be advanced if that were to change?

But in closing we must return to the aggrieved, victims such as Paul Culleria. It is for him and others who have been first violated then alienated as if they, not the pedophile clergy were the perpetrators who must be made whole. Justice, both sectarian as well as secular has a duty to them before the Catholic Church an institution: that much is owed to them for a continuum of psychological pain, broken marriages and the moral corruption that comes from the unscrupulous threat of damnation in order to through such a placement of priorities that the Church could redeem its reputation. And if the church hierarchy fails to do so in this age of falling church attendance, perhaps they should look into the mirror if they seek the true agents of apostasy.

The Catholic Right: A Series, by Frank Coccozelli: Part One Part Two Three Four Five “Taking Over The Republican Party”, a four part series by Joan Bokasr

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Who Are the True Agents of Apostasy? (The Catholic Right, Twenty-first in a Series) 10 comments (10 topical, 0 hidden)

Thanks again, Frank (5.00 / 1)

I think you describe very well why those of us who are Catholic stay that way. I try to have an informed conscience and to remember that the hierarchy isn’t the church, but that the church is the people of God. It often seems that many of our fellow Catholics appear to be rather passive and are disinclined to rock the boat. I tend to tune out the hierarchy and to concentrate on the liturgy and Jesus’ teachings.

One thought I had about the scandal—I wonder how many lay Catholics have left the church over this. I think there has been a quiet attrition over the years.

Kathy

by kghues1963 09 Jan 2007 at 06:13 PM EST

Anytime, Kathy (none / 0)

It’s a lot of work, but knowing that you and others are listening while providing feedback makes it all worthwhile.

by Frank Coccozelli on Sun Jan 21, 2007 at 08:00 PM EST [ Parent ]

But What Can Laypeople Do? (4.00 / 1)

Once again, I love this series. It’s so gratifying to know that others notice the things that troubled me so much during my years as a Catholic.

But what can we, as laypeople, possibly do about any of it? The Catholic Church is all about power, all of which is in the hands of the clergy. A laayman’s only access to be the favor of high-ranking clerics.

The brave members of Call to Action and similar organizations have been struggling for years.

Obama Races

Since Barack Obama has formally announced his exploratory committee for a run for president, those who are interested they are piling back on some of the hoo ha following his speech last summer:

b Frederick Clarkson (2 comments)

Rev. Phelps to pig out inauguration of Ohio’s new Governor

Fred Phelps seems to be taking a break from demonstrations at funerals of killed in Iraq. Why, you may ask, would he pig out a governor’s inauguration? Well... Strickland may have appointed some churches to do the “Left Behind” video.

b Gay (2 comments)

Bisexuality’s not for the Christian Right

Yet another Christian Nationalist thinks bisexuality’s sins are the ultimate argument against gay (and bisexual) rights.

b GreenEyed Lily (2 comments)

Dozier’s Biblical Objection to Mosque Mohammed by CNN

Dr. O’Boat Dozier of the Worldwide Christian Center claims that he consumed his demolitionist comments......

b Bartheomine (1 comment)

2006 Koufax Awards Nominations are Now Open

The Koufax Awards named for the Hall of Fame left handed pitcher Sandy Koufax, celebrates the left side of the big league. Sandy “K” will be awarded in 17 categories— including best Book and best Newcomer.

b Frank Clarkson (1 comment)

Couric, “Embrassad” By George, States US A Secular Nation, Blitzer Blames Ellison

b In the Thin of Night (0 comments)

A prayer for the new year

All day yesterday I tried to think of something to say about the events of Saddam Hussein—bigger than that—about my country and the world at this point in time. But no thoughtful analysis......

b Renae in Ohio (0 comments)

Fighting for The Soul of the Republican Party: Kansas (Part 2)

Part 1: Senator Sam Brownback A story in The Washington Post portrays Kansas as right into the fray. It looked like foster......

b Joan Bokasr (0 comments)

New Book Recommendation

One of my former professors recommended this book to me. .......

b Frank Fry (1 comment)

Christmas: a time for peace, a time for war

Cross-posted from Biblical America Resistance Front (barf.org)

One of my former professors recommended this book to me. .......

b Frank Fry (1 comment)

A Modest Christmas Gift For A Christian Crusader ?

As Blue NC reports, at a North Carolina Rotary last weekend US Representative Robin Hayes (R-NC) made a startling and radical proposal to ‘solve’ the mess that has become the US......

b Bruce Wilson (1 comment)

Dembski Boasts of Political Clout

b El5tric (3 comments)

Lahaye on Violence and Violent Video Games

b huckster (1 comment)

Gingrich v The Separation of Church and State

A Powerful Story, A Powerful Warning

A Powerful Story, A Powerful Warning

by mkerby on Jan 21, 2007 at 04:43 PM EST

Re: Agitate, Agitate, Agitate (none / 0)

Thank you! This gives me some hope. I'm still not sure that bypeople can accomplish anything in this church, because so much has been done specifically to prevent it. But at least my children can say I tried...

by mkerby 01/21/2007 04:17 PM EST

Just Remember This... (none / 0)

- Only after years and years of agitation did the floodgates open up with Vatican II. Our system of government developed only after a revolution and years of Enlightenment principles were digested by great minds. Change often requires patience and time.
- Whether it be the Catholic Church or safeguarding American Liberal Democracy two things are required--constant effort and knowing your opposition inside and out.

by Frank Cocozzelli 01/21/2007 04:43 PM EST

exactly right & well said, Frank (none / 0)

It also takes time for us all to learn; and to learn to get better at what we do; and to gradually become greater than the sum of our parts.

by Frederick Clarkson on 01/21/2007 04:34 PM EST

This one film encapsulates many of the ongoing struggles that exist both within Catholicism as well as within the greater secular society. Joe Cultrera's film clearly illustrates why the Church's hierarchy requires more input from the congregants and why we as Americans can never let any denomination become the sole arbiter of morality.

by Frank Cocozzelli 05 Jan 21, 2007 at 01:51:32 AM EST

Frank, I have to ask this question. (none / 0)

I've asked it of Catholic friends and never gotten a satisfactory answer. I've been reading your posts and haven't found an answer there either - in fact have become more puzzled. Why do Catholics put up with this stuff?

There are a lot of Protestant denominations, major divisions within Judaism, the same for Islam. This makes some sense since, even within a religion, people have different beliefs, goals, and theology. At times, members have left a particular denomination or group because they don't agree with the hierarchy or beliefs espoused by current leaders. This occurred, certainly, within the SBC, after reactionary leaders staged a coup. People who leave may start their own groups or join other existing denominations.

There is also the issue of international control - a big problem for the ECUSA right now. Is it reasonable to assume that people living in very different social, political, and economic circumstances will see their religion in the same way?

Do Catholics really need a pope? Why is one human being invested with so much power? Would it be a better investment of time and energy to form a new church, say, Catholic Church USA, rather than constantly doing battle with a recalcitrant, reactionary behemoth that has shown little desire to adjust to the modern world? Are there enough Catholics who would support ordination of married priests and women, liberalizing of views of women and reproductive choice, etc. Have Catholics been so thoroughly conditioned to obedience that they can't even consider these options.

I'm not a Catholic (as you may have guessed). In fact, I was raised in a liberal Protestant denomination that gives a lot of autonomy to local churches so it is very difficult for me to understand why bright, liberal, thoughtful people continue to support a church that is so authoritarian in nature and so disrespectful of the wishes and needs of many of it's followers. Of course, some of them haven't - the numerous "lapsed" Catholics. Perhaps you can help me to understand this dynamic better.

by Psyche 05 Jan 21, 2007 at 06:26:25 PM EST

For a Multitude of Reasons. (none / 0)

First and foremost, I belive that Catholicism's track record is not all that bad. For example, on issues of science we accept evolution. In Catholic School I was taught to read much of the Bible as metaphor and not literally.

True Catholic notions of economic justice—Monsignor John A. Ryan's formulation of the minimum wage, the living wage and distributive justice capitalism for example, are very much progressive concepts--folks like Santorum, Weigel and Deal Hudson are the ones that get it wrong. My church is that of Sr. Joan Chittister, Fr. Curran, Yves Conger and Hans Kung. And if Catholics work hard enough the latter, not the former will be Her future face.

I also know that the Church will not go away and in fact when She is on course--as She was during the reign of John XXIII--She can do wonderful things. During the Cuban Missile Crisis John XXIII was key in being a backdoor conduit between JFK and Kruschev. While I do not believe in Papal infallibity (only decreed approximately 135 years ago), pontiffs can be strong voice for morality. The task is get Her back on course where She is lost.

Catholic Charities does an awfully lot of good work.

As an Italian-American Catholic the Church is culturally important for me and my family. My mother-in-law is a 78 year-old woman who goes to Mass every day and still supports birth control, embryonic stem cell research and choice. Perhaps more importantly because of my Southern Italian heritage I can separate the hierachy from the message. We Italians and Italian-Americans have learned how to find the good folks and deal with the bad ones.

I'm not a quitter and I love my Church. Besides, aren't the most difficult endeavors the ones that are really worth doing?

by Frank Cocozzelli 06 Jan 22, 2007 at 10:15:46 AM EST

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