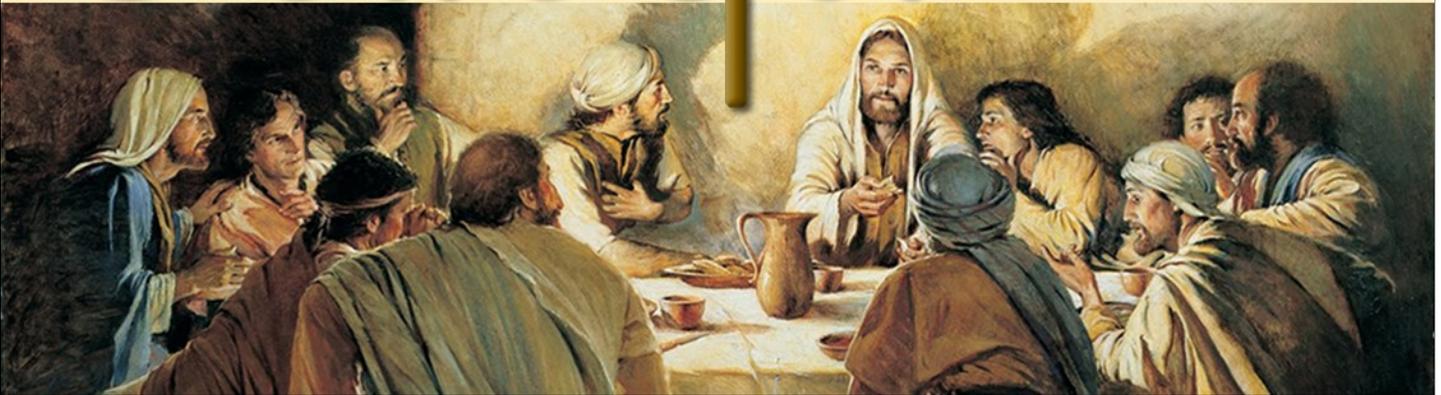


# Colloquī

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A journal for restless minds

## Incredible Credulity

*A foolish consistency*

Colloquī is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose: to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God.

Each week Colloquī will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more.

Be forewarned! Articles may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the express intent to seek the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

## Incredible Credulity

*A foolish consistency*

**A**ncient Greek mythology held that the gods were divine anthropomorphic (attributed with human characteristics and behaviors) creatures with specific and distinct attributes or characteristics; the nature of each god defined his or her divine powers. Dionysus was the god of fertility and wine, and patron of the arts. He also had a dual nature: he was capable of uninhibited joy and divine ecstasy yet equally capable of brutal and blinding rage.



*The Bacchae*, an Ancient Greek tragedy written by the Athenian playwright Euripides, focuses on opposite sides of human nature: the rational and civilized side represented by the character of Pentheus, the king of Thebes, and the instinctive side—sensual, emotional, feel-

ing without analysis—represented by Dionysus. *The Bacchae* conveys the message that it is perilous to deny or ignore the human desire for Dionysian experience; those who are open to the experience will find spiritual power while those who suppress or repress the desire in themselves or others will transform it into a destructive force. By the end of the play, the Maenads, devoted disciples of the sensual Dionysius, led by the king's mother, Agave, are driven mad and cruelly rip off Pentheus' limbs and his head

and tear his body to pieces. Agave believing it the head of a mountain lion, nails the head above her door for everyone in Thebes to admire; too late, the madness

wanes and Agave recognizes that she has destroyed her own son.

**W**ritten some twenty-five hundred years ago (405 BCE) few today, especially those opposed to dwelling,

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even superficially, in the dead and ancient past, see the obvious similitude between the salacious and lascivious behavior depicted in *The Braccae* with the current cultural faux-worship of sex, sentiment and feelings and the unbridled and constant rage propelled against those who hold man to a higher moral standard, based on natural law, rationality and reason: all human faculties and attributes endowed by our Creator God.

**W**hile many will argue to the contrary, the truth is Catholicism has always considered reason with the highest regard. Reason, within its fullest meaning, cannot be construed as a mere scientific tool to be used to discover nature's secrets; reason enables man to know what is right, what is moral, what is objective truth, what is logical (e.g. that 2 plus 2 must always and everywhere equal 4) and above all reason provides the rationality to understand and know of God and his ineffable being.

*The Bacchae* depicts the combat and conquest of reason by sentiment and feelings which the modern Western world now mirrors. Samuel Gregg calls this *Affectus per solam*.

"By Feelings Alone" captures much of the present atmosphere within the Church throughout the West. It impacts how some Catholics view not only the world but the faith itself. At the core of this widespread sentimentalism is an exaltation of the strongly-felt feelings, a deprecation of reason, and the subsequent infantilization of Christian faith.

So what are symptoms of *Affectus per solam*? One is the widespread

use of language in everyday preaching and teaching that's more characteristic of therapy than words used by Christ and his Apostles. Words like "sin" thus fade and are replaced by "pains," "regrets" or "sad mistakes."

Sentimentalism likewise rears its head whenever those who offer reasoned defenses of Catholic sexual or medical ethics are told that their positions are "hurtful" or "judgmental." Truth, it seems, shouldn't be articulated, even gently, if it might hurt someone's feelings. If that was true, Jesus should have refrained from telling the Samaritan woman the facts about her marital history.

*Affectus per solam* also blinds us to the truth that there is—as affirmed by Christ Himself—a place called Hell for those who die unrepentant. Sentimentalism simply avoids the subject. Hell isn't a topic to be taken lightly, but ask yourself this question: When was the last time you heard the possibility that any of us could end up eternally separated from God mentioned at Mass?

Above all, sentimentalism reveals itself in certain presentations of Jesus Christ. The Christ whose hard teachings shocked his own followers and who refused any concession to sin whenever he spoke of love somehow collapses into a pleasant liberal rabbi. This harmless Jesus never dares us to transform our lives by embracing the completeness of truth. Instead he recycles bromides like "everyone has their own truth," "do whatever feels best," "be true to yourself," "embrace your story," "who am I to judge," etc. And never fear: this Jesus guarantees heaven, or whatever, for everyone.<sup>1</sup>

**W**henever someone afflicted with *Affectus per solam* offer such sentimental therapeutic trope it inevitably brings

to mind the reaction of the Jews when Jesus told them they must eat his flesh.

"I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" (John 6:51-52, 60).

**A**nd thus many no longer followed Jesus because he demanded too much of them. Jesus refused to compromise on sin.

A Jesus who agrees with everything and everyone, a Jesus without his holy wrath, without the harshness of truth and true love is not the real Jesus as the Scripture shows but a miserable caricature. A conception of "gospel" in which the seriousness of God's wrath is absent has nothing to do with the biblical Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

The seriousness of God's wrath of which then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger writes is important.

The sentimentalism infecting much of the Church is all about diminishing the *gravity* and *clarity* of Christian faith. That's especially true regarding the salvation of souls. The God fully revealed in Christ is merciful but he's also just and clear in his expectations of us because he takes us seriously. Woe to us if we don't return the compliment.

So how did much of the Church end up sinking into a morass of sentimentalism? Here's three primary causes.

First, the Western world is drowning in sentimentalism. Like everyone else, Catholics are susceptible to the culture in which we live. If you want proof of Western *Affectus per solam*, just turn on your web-browser. You'll soon notice the sheer emotivism pervading popular culture, media, politics, and universities. In this world, morality is about your commitment to particular causes. What matters is how "passionate" (note the language) you are about your commitment, and the cause's degree of political correctness—not whether the cause itself is reasonable to support.

Second, let's consider how faith is understood by many Catholics today. For many, it appears to be a "feeling faith." By that, I mean that Christian faith's significance is judged primarily in terms of feeling what it does for *me*, *my* well-being, and *my* concerns. But guess what? Me, myself, and I aren't the focus of Catholic faith.

Catholicism is, after all, a historical faith. It involves us deciding that we trust those who witnessed to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who transmitted what they saw via written texts and unwritten traditions, and who, we've concluded, told the truth about what they saw. That includes the miracles and Resurrection attesting to Christ's Divinity. Catholicism doesn't view these as "stories." To be a Catholic is to affirm that they really happened and that Christ instituted a Church whose responsibility is to preach this to the ends of the earth.

Catholic faith can't therefore be about me and my feelings. It's about capital-T Truth. Human fulfillment and salvation consequently involves freely and constantly choosing to conform myself to that Truth. It's not about subordinating the Truth to my emotions. In fact, if Catholicism isn't about the Truth, what's the point?

Third, sentimentalism's pervasiveness in the Church owes something to efforts to downgrade and distort natural law since Vatican II. Natural law reflection was in mixed shape throughout the Catholic world in the decades leading up to the 1960s. But it suffered an eclipse in much of the Church afterwards. That's partly because natural law was integral to *Humanae Vitae's* teaching. Many theologians subsequently decided that anything underpinning *Humanae Vitae* had to be emptied of substantive content.

While natural law reasoning recovered in parts of the Church from the 1980s onwards, we're paid a price for natural law's marginalization. And the price is this: once you relegate reason to the periphery of religious faith, you start imagining that faith is somehow independent of reason; or that faith is somehow inherently hostile to reason; or that your religious convictions don't require explanation to others. The end-result is decreasing concern for the reasonableness of faith. That's a sure way to end up in the swamp of sentimentalism.

Other reasons for sentimentalism's traction in today's Church could be mentioned: the disappearance of logic from educational curricula, excessive deference to (bad) psychology and (bad) sociology by some clerics formed in the 1970s, inclinations to view the Holy Spirit's workings as something that could contradict Christ's teachings, syrupy self-referential Disney-like liturgies, etc. It's a long list.

The solution isn't to downgrade the importance of emotions like love and joy or anger and fear for people. We aren't robots. Feelings are central aspects of our nature. Instead, human emotions need to be integrated into a coherent account of Christian faith, human reason, human action, and human flourishing—something undertaken with great skill by past figures like Aquinas

and contemporary thinkers such as the late Servais Pinckaers. Then we need to live our lives accordingly.

Escaping *Affectus per solam* won't be easy. It's simply part of the air we breathe in the West. Moreover, some of those most responsible today for forming people in the Catholic faith seem highly susceptible to sentimentalist ways. But unless we name and contest the unbridled emotivism presently compromising the Church's witness to the Truth, we risk resigning ourselves to mere [irrelevance] for the near future.<sup>3</sup>

**M**ar Steyn, in his review of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* described the prevailing *liberal progressive* view of our Lord this way:

Some in this post-Christian culture don't believe anything, some are riddled with doubts, but even the ones with only a vague residual memory of the fluffier Sunday School stories are agreed that there's little harm in a Jesus figure who's a "gentle teacher". In this world, if Jesus came back today he'd most likely be a gay Anglican bishop in a committed relationship driving around in an environmentally-friendly car with an "Arms Are For Hugging" sticker on the way to an interfaith dialogue with a Wiccan and a couple of Wahhabi imams.

Though briefly mentioned, early faith education through graduate and post-graduate religious education, and most importantly, seminary formation, since the 1970s have largely incorporated *Affectus per solam* into virtually all parts of their respective curriculums. In most religious education courses, the emphasis has been almost

entirely on efforts to sacramentalize but not to evangelize.

During the years of peak sexual abuse, vast numbers of priests and religious abandoned their vocations. The number of laity dropped, and those who remained were sacramentalized but not evangelized. The much-touted New Evangelization is a fancy admission of failure. After all, what's new about the New Evangelization? Who it targets—the baptized—have certainly benefited from it, but who else?

The implicit point of this initiative is that somewhere, somehow Catholic evangelization of the world failed the first time, so we need a do-over. Call it the re-evangelization. But bishops couldn't even seem to get that right.

As the 20th century drew to a close, the state of catechesis in the Church showed us that teaching during this period was abysmal.

On behalf of the U.S. bishops at the time, the late Archbishop Daniel Buechlein of Indianapolis acknowledged that 80% of catechetical textbooks in the late '90s contained serious doctrinal deficiencies. Thankfully, the problem has been largely corrected. But who was held accountable for years of what can only be described as catechetical or pastoral malpractice? The brokenness of today's clergy is the harvest reaped from the Church's broken teaching apparatus of yesterday. Indeed, the sexual abuse crisis is a symptom of a much more serious ecclesial malaise.<sup>4</sup>

It is ironic and perhaps somewhat providential, that those who participated in the Vatican Clergy Abuse Summit gathered in the hall of Pope Paul VI, whose controversial encyclical *Humanae Vitae* reaffirmed the classical, unchangeable Church's doc-

trinal teaching on marriage, chastity and procreation. Since its publication in 1968, there can be no doubt that *Humanae Vitae* has been reviled and condemned almost universally by liberal Catholics and Clergy; it is perhaps the most frequently dismissed and disobeyed magisterial teaching in the history of the Church. The most often dismissed, criticized and ignored has been the prohibition against contraception which most priests and bishops in America have taught married couples that they should consult their own consciences to determine whether contraception is right for them.

Human sexuality, since the '60s so-called "sexual revolution," has been subjectivized; sexual morality reduced to what feels right, what produces the most pleasure.

Every 14-year-old boy quickly learns that subjectivizing sexual morality often leads to rationalizing one's sexual desires. The delightful rush of hormonal energy, youth have been taught, is "life affirming" and "liberating." The common mantra of the day remains "It can't be wrong if it feels so right." Yet, if this approach led to greater expressions of "freedom" from guilt for the faithful, human nature, being what it is, often has the last word, as unconfessed sins sear the conscience into a paralysis that rejects the graces available through sacramental forgiveness.

Likewise, many in the clergy also destroyed their ability to discern right from wrong—and thereby their opportunity to cooperate with God's will. Did not their rejection of Church teaching on marital chastity predispose them not only to tolerate but to perpetuate immorality among themselves?

Our tolerance of sin has diminished the effectiveness of the bishops' moral authority, shattered the integrity of the priesthood, corrupted the soul of the victims and damaged the plausibility of the Gospel.

If we are serious about restoration, we need the ecclesiastical equivalent of the Warren Commission—not four days in Rome fiddling with policies, mining pious platitudes or virtue—signaling with vehement affirmations of how badly we all feel. Moral authority is restored by embracing moral responsibility for one's sin.<sup>5</sup>

In his *Manifesto of Faith*,<sup>6</sup> Cardinal Gerhard Müller, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2012-2017, stated what should be obvious but seldom acknowledged:

Today, many Christians are no longer even aware of the basic teachings of the Faith, so there is a growing danger of missing the path to eternal life. However, it remains the very purpose of the Church to lead humanity to Jesus Christ, the light of the nations (see LG 1). In this situation, the question of orientation arises. According to John Paul II, the Catechism of the Catholic Church is a "safe standard for the doctrine of the faith" (*Fidei Depositum* IV). It was written with the aim of strengthening the Faith of the brothers and sisters whose belief has been massively questioned by the "dictatorship of relativism."

Cardinal Müller, relying extensively on the Catechism of the Catholic Church and Sacred Scripture, offers a clear summation of the interpretations of Tradition, communicated over the years and centuries by popes and theologians alike.

**A**s should be expected, critics, especially social media, but a significant number of Vatican commenters and reporters were quick to pounce, and as usual, being unable to directly refute the doctrine, they aimed their arrows at the messenger.

A Catholic blogger, Mark de Vries, from the Netherlands posted a well-written refutation of the critics which since I could not have said it better, I offer his commentary here in its entirety.

I really shouldn't be surprised anymore, but I was nonetheless yesterday.

On Friday, Cardinal Gerhard Müller, former prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and now a sort of free-roaming cardinal with no specific mission, issued a "Manifesto of Faith". As he explains in the opening paragraphs he did so on the request of various people, both clergy and laity, in order to provide some measure of clarity to the confusion that exists about Catholic doctrine. Without doubt, we must understand this to be based in the different interpretations of recent papal teachings regarding such varied topics like marriage, sexuality and ecumenism. The teachings themselves may not be confusing, but their communication and interpretation most definitely are. But Cardinal Müller's reasons go beyond this, and back over past decades and the formation, or lack thereof, of the faithful on matters of conscience, the nature of Christ, the Church, the sacraments, morality and eternal life.

The manifesto is in the first place a summary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, at least regarding

the topics discussed. It is stuffed with references to paragraphs from the document, which aims to summarise the faith, and as such can serve as a helpful reminder of what it is that we confess as Catholics and how that affects our spiritual and daily life. Cardinal Müller also offers a few interpretations and explanations, which are all the interpretations of Tradition, communicated over the years and centuries by popes and theologians alike. Until those interpretations, for example that divorced and civilly remarried faithful can not receive Communion, are changed, they stand. They are what we are beholden to as Catholics. And, despite footnotes and desires expressed in interviews, under Pope Francis no steps have yet been taken to change this.

On to my surprise.

The reception of Cardinal Müller's manifesto, especially in social media, has been as expected. Some quietly welcomed it, presenting it as a text worth reading, without, I must say, a lot of further comment. Others, however, including a significant number of Vatican commentators and reporters, have taken the text to frame the cardinal and his supporters:

Cardinal Müller, they say, is opposed to Pope Francis, and with this manifesto he presents an alternative Magisterium. Some have gone so far as calling him an anti-pope. How on earth, I wonder, can a text so rooted in the Catechism, in the faith that we all claim to confess as Catholics, be an alternative Magisterium? It is as if the critics claim that this is not the faith they confess, and, worse, not the faith that the pope confesses. If that were true, we would indeed have an anti-pope, but it would not be Cardinal Müller.

The criticism they level at Cardinal Müller is also marked not by theo-

logical refutations, but limit themselves to superficialities. The cardinal is angry at the pope for being dismissed as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, they say. We know this because of the way he signed his manifesto. He must be opposed to Pope Francis, because the Holy Father chooses not to discuss doctrine that much, instead focusing on social and charitable issues. Thus, they insist, the manifesto should not be taken seriously, even mocked (and not just the text, but in the first place its author).

Worst of all, those critics continue to insist that there is no confusion. There is therefore no other reason for Cardinal Müller to publish his manifesto than to position himself as an alternative authority to the pope. In reality, though, the different interpretations of various recent papal communications, and the spiritual and formative developments of the faithful over the past decades, are clear as day.

In the minds of Cardinal Müller's attackers, a cardinal's duty is to quietly fall in line with what the pope says and does. Their mission is not that of a shepherd, but of a sheep. Any hint at them overstepping that role is seen as an attack against them and what they consider the "fluffiest pope ever", to borrow a phrase. This is an unhealthy attitude that changes the nature of the Magisterium and the hierarchy of the Church into a dictatorship. Some say that's due to Pope Francis, but it's his supposed self-appointed supporters who do the most damage.

The manifesto is text worth reading. As I've said above, it offers a reminder of what our faith actually entails in various matters. It says little about practical applications, but theologically it is a reminder of the rich foundation and intricate beauty of our faith. The manifesto is

also a call to action, to rediscover that foundation and beauty, and grow beyond the earthly superficialities, which have their place and value, but which do not define our faith and unity with Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

**I**n his reflection for the Register Symposium (*see endnote 4*), Cardinal Müller amplifies the fact that only those who live according to the commandment of God can be good shepherds and models for their flocks.

The root cause of this evil is disregard for the Sixth Commandment. Without chastity, piety and strict discipline, priestly life cannot succeed. Only he who lives according to the commandments of God can be a good shepherd and a model for the flock. When it comes to a path toward healing with respect to episcopal accountability, some bishops and their propagandists, particularly in Germany and the United States, do not want to admit at any price that the sin of unchastity is the root of the problem. They don't want to know anything more about Christ who died because of our sins, only to arrive at the *zeitgeist*.

They feel as if they are the Church's new founders. The "old Church" came from a man 2,000 years ago, but the "new Church" comes from them, in their image and likeness. They defend the group that they call "homosexuals," and especially homosexual practice, because they believe it is legitimized through human relationships among these individuals. But their task should be to defend the many good priests, the sacramental priesthood and celibacy. They pretend that affections for a person of the same sex, and the opposite sex, include the right to sexual contact.

It has been said that if priests and bishops were allowed to practice homosexuality with persons over 18

years of age, boys and young men would be protected. Therefore, the prohibition, rooted in divine law, to keep practicing homosexual candidates away from the priesthood must be dropped. Those "enlightened" individuals place themselves above Revelation by wanting to free the word of God from prejudice against homosexual practice. They discriminate against those who are not homophile and mercilessly persecute them.

The facts and statistics are clear for all to see: 80% male victims, 20% female victims. No doubt there is forgiveness before God for criminals who repent of their sins. But these perpetrators must also take responsibility for their actions, apologize to the victims, repair the damage as far as possible and not apologize cheaply as victims of clericalism or Church structures. Those who use the vague term "clericalism" to absolve the perpetrators of personal guilt and give them the opportunity to pretend to be victims of the sacramental structure not only sin against the victims of these crimes, but make God the author of evil because God's Son has given spiritual authority to the apostles and their successors.

My expectations for the meeting are that, finally, the secularization of the Church's thinking and acting is recognized as the cause of the unprecedented decline of Christianity in the West.

Rather than adaptation to the mainstream of a world without God, the salvation of the world through the return to God in faith and obedience is the way to the New Evangelization and renewal of priests, and especially of bishops. It is not sophisticated managers who are needed, but shepherds who give their lives — and who also have theological formation and deep piety.

For those who may have accidentally on purpose forgotten the sixth com-

mandment: "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex 20:14; Deut 5:18).

**A**nd for those who tend to skip the details, to relativize uncomfortable facts and truths, by waffling on what is meant by 'adultery', Jesus has a few words for you.

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Mt 5:27-28).

It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Mt 5:31-32).

Father Roger Landry believes that in order to remedy the current sexual-abuse crisis, the Church must form priests to be spiritual fathers not just in name, but in truth. The crisis shares many contributing causes, each must be studied, addressed and eradicated. Among the contributing causes, Father Landry writes, "one of the most important is the lack of spiritual fatherhood shown in the crises' three main aspects: the sexual abuse itself, the failure to confront and eliminate it, and the scandal to lie about it and cover it up."

He begins by reflecting on what then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—the future Pope Benedict XVI—had said in a speech in Palermo, Sicily in March 2000.

“The crisis of fatherhood we are experiencing today is an element, perhaps the most important element, threatening man in his humanity.”

The crisis, he clarified, is a “dissolution of fatherhood,” flowing from reducing paternity to a biological phenomenon without its human and spiritual dimensions.

Fathers are treated as superfluous, seen in the explosion of what sociologists now term “sperm dads,” “absent dads,” “dead-beat dads,” “visiting dads,” “nice-guy dads” and various other descriptors for fathers who have no decisive role in protecting, providing for, rearing and mentoring the children they’ve begotten.

This crisis of fatherhood likewise extends to the clergy. Priests and bishops are called “fathers” for a reason. God uses them to give his children a deeper form of life through baptism and the other sacraments. Their fatherhood, however, cannot be reduced just to spiritually generative sacramental actions, but is meant to flow into fatherly identity and behavior, particular in the commitment they make spiritually to protect, provide for, rear and mentor, to teach, sanctify and shepherd — in short, to love with the love of God — the spiritual children entrusted to them.

The dissolution of spiritual fatherhood happens when these spiritual bonds break down, when priests are reduced to ecclesiastical functionaries who never form authentic fatherly bonds with the individuals and families whose baptisms, weddings and funerals they celebrate.

We see this breakdown of spiritual fatherhood in every form of clerical sexual abuse. When a priest looks at the world with the eyes of a spiritual dad, any sexual activity — with minors, those his own age, those

much older, with women or with men — is a form of spiritual incest. And incest, even the thought of it, sickens all but the most perverted.

In preaching retreats for seminarians and priests, I stress that if we maintain a healthy sense of spiritual paternity such that we view everyone we serve, of whatever age, as a spiritual son or daughter, then the temptation to regard others with lust, or engage in unchaste activity, or pretend that such spiritually incestuous behavior is “love,” basically disappears. Sexual infidelity in priests begins with this dissolution of spiritual fatherhood. This is one reason why, if we sincerely want to reform the Church, we can never limit the focus just to the eradication of the molestation of minors. Sexual sins against minors, who are unable to give true consent, are obviously the most execrable. But while spiritually incestuous relations with a 15-year-old are worse in degree than with an 18-, 30- or 90-year-old, we’re still dealing with priests sexually abusing their spiritual children.

Without addressing these gross violations of priestly paternity with older spiritual children, we will never really address the roots of the abuse of their younger children.

The second failure in spiritual fatherhood is with regard to protecting children from those who would use them for their gratification. This negligence is what most shocks parents: that proven abusers would continue to be placed in positions where they can exploit their collar to harm others.

Good fathers risk and give their lives to protect their children from harm. They would never risk inviting their brother whom they know is an abuser to sleep at their home where he might have access to their children. This basic fatherly solicitude, however, was absent among

various bishops and chancery officials, who behaved more like businessmen and lawyers than dads. Such clericalism is a blatant defect in loving spiritual paternity.

The third failure is in the notorious cover-ups and lying with regard to abuse in order to protect bishops’ personal reputations or the reputation and material goods of the Church. This basic failure to take responsibility is a spiritual immaturity reminiscent of teenage dads trying to evade their paternal duties.

It’s been said that the supreme test of any civilization is whether it can socialize men by teaching them to be fathers and truly take responsibility to defend, equip, raise and guide their children.

One of the supreme tests for the reform of the Church is to form priests to be spiritual fathers not just in name, but in truth (*see endnote 4*).

The current crisis, which arguably has been called the most serious crisis the Church has ever faced, is actually not, at least with regard to abusive clerical habits. That does not diminish the seriousness of the current crisis, but the past can help us understand how we might effect remedies for the present.

Much of St. Peter Damian’s reform struggle seems strikingly relevant to the modern situation of the Church, offering an incisive and useful critique of sexual immorality and laxism among the clergy.

When the eremitic monk and reformer Peter Damian cast his critical gaze upon the Catholic Church of the mid-eleventh century, he encountered a panorama of corruption that would have appeared

daunting even to the most hardened observer of the modern ecclesiastical scene. The “household of God” was in a catastrophic state of moral disorder, admitting of no easy remedy. The crisis of the period, and Damian’s heroic response, offers much of historical value to us as we confront our own explosion of clerical vice and doctrinal infidelity.

The Church of Damian’s time had been rocked by almost two centuries of political and social chaos, and the doctrinal ignorance, scandalous personal behavior, and petty venality of the clergy had reached intolerable levels. Bishops and priests were involved in every kind of immorality, publicly living with concubines or illicit wives, or furtively engaging in homosexual practices. Many had purchased their ordinations and the lucrative benefices that accompanied them, and spent their free time in scandalous secular amusements. An outraged laity was beginning to rise up against ecclesiastical authority, sometimes in riotous outbursts of violence that threatened the civil order.

The pinnacle of the crisis was reached in the year 1032 with the election of Pope Benedict IX, a raucous and libertine youth of no more than twenty-two years of age, and the latest and worst in a long succession of compromised popes who served wealthy and powerful secular patrons. Mercifully, few details of Benedict’s personal behavior have been preserved in historical accounts, but the pope’s “vile and contemptible life,” his “rapine, murders, and other nefarious deeds,” and his “depraved and perverse acts,” in the words of the future Pope Victor III, were widely known in his day.

However, by 1049 a new generation of reformers was on the rise, beginning with the pontificate of Pope St.

Leo IX, and running through the pontificate of Hildebrand (St. Gregory VII), in 1073. Peter Damian, who was famous for his life of austerity and penance, would act as the principal theorist of the counter-revolutionaries against the Church’s corrupt establishment. Damian provided the rhetorical firepower for their reform projects, publishing a constant stream of open letters that often took on the dimension of pamphlets or small books on every conceivable theological and disciplinary controversy. When it was necessary, he showed up in person to confront corrupt actors and to stand them down – including the Holy Roman Emperor himself.

In many ways the crisis of Damian’s day seems foreign to our own; thankfully, we seem not to be suffering from a plague of illicit clerical marriages, nor do we find ourselves in a crisis of nepotism and simony, even if such problems continue to exist in isolation. However, much of St. Peter Damian’s eleventh century reform struggle seems strikingly relevant to the modern situation of the Church, offering us an incisive and useful critique of sexual immorality and laxism among the clergy, as well as an inspiring example of a reformer of immense personal integrity, whose courage never seemed to waver, even in the darkest of moments.

Most relevant to our own age is Damian’s famous *Liber Gomorrhianus*, or “Book of Gomorrah,” a long letter in the form of a *libellus* addressed to Pope St. Leo IX sometime between 1049 and 1054. The book, which is written against an epidemic of sodomy “raging like a cruel beast within the sheepfold of Christ” has deep resonance with us today, and offers many insights into the contemporary crisis in the priesthood.

Damian’s opening words almost seem addressed to the contemporary Church, as he warns the pope that the “cancer of sodomitic impurity” is threatening the integrity of the clergy itself, and urges him to act with all speed, adding that “unless the force of the Apostolic See opposes it as quickly as possible, there is no doubt that when it finally wishes for the unbridled evil to be restrained, it may not be able to halt the fury of its advance.”

One of the most important elements offered to the modern reader by Damian’s work is his understanding of “sodomy” not merely as a sexual perversion involving two people of the same sex, but rather a continuum of sins that progressively depart from the nature of the sexual act. This continuum begins with acts such as contraception and self-abuse, which then ranges to various acts involving accomplices, each more unnatural and shameful than the other. It is significant to note that in Damian’s eyes, the majority of Catholics today are practicing a form of “sodomy,” one that may easily lead to worse perversions. This insight may offer a useful explanation for the pervasive indifference to homosexual behavior among modern Catholics – most of them are engaged in behavior that is fundamentally similar.

Damian is also concerned with a phenomenon that has become disturbingly familiar for us: the tendency of those involved in sexual perversion to seek promotion and advancement in the Church, and to recruit others into their lifestyle. “Why, I ask, O damnable sodomites, do you seek after the height of ecclesiastical dignity with such burning ambition?” writes Damian. “Why do you seek with such longing to snare the people of God in the web of your perdition? Does it not suffice for you that you cast your very selves off the high

precipice of villainy, unless you also involve others in the danger of your fall?"

Much of the saint's critique is focused on the existence of falsified penal canons in the penitential manuals of his day, which often allowed clerics guilty of sodomy to do brief and light penances for their offenses and to easily continue in their destructive vices. Damian urged the discarding of such canons, holding that the worst offenders should be removed permanently from the priesthood, and that all those guilty any grade of sodomy should be required to do the much longer and more difficult penances established by the episcopal synods of the first millennium. Such penances involved many years of gradual restoration to full communion with the Church.

The saint holds that such measures are necessary to impress upon the guilty the severity of their offense, arguing that as long as the "carnal man . . . does not fear losing his honorable state by his indiscreet discretion, he is also inclined to take up new vices and to remain longer in those he has taken up with impunity, so that, so to speak, as long as he is not struck where it hurts more severely, he lies serenely in that pigsty of filthy obscenity in which he first fell."

In a rebuke against the 11<sup>th</sup> century equivalent of covering up scandals of sexual misbehavior, Damian blames lax ecclesiastical superiors for their "silence" with regard to clerical sodomy, and regards them as sharing in the guilt of those under their authority. "Undoubtedly, those who turn a blind eye to the sins of their subjects that they are obligated to correct, also grant to their subjects a license to sin through their ill-considered silence," writes Damian, later adding that he would rather be persecuted than to fail to speak out: "Indeed, I

prefer to be thrown innocent into a well with Joseph, who accused his brothers of the worst of crimes to their father, than to be punished by the retribution of divine fury with [the high priest] Eli, who saw the evil of his children and was silent."

One penitential canon approvingly quoted by Damian directly addresses the case of a cleric guilty of child sex abuse, that is, he who "persecutes adolescents or children, or who is caught in a kiss or other occasion of indecency." Such a cleric was to be "publicly beaten and lose his tonsure, and having been disgracefully shaved, his face is to be smeared with spittle, and he is to be bound in iron chains, worn down with six months of imprisonment, and three days every week to fast on barley bread until sundown." Following this he was to be "separated in his room for another six months in the custody of a spiritual senior" and should "always walk under the guard of two spiritual brothers, never again soliciting sexual intercourse from youth by perverse speech or counsel."

Although Damian cited St. Basil as his source for this canon, his unreliable penitential manuals had deceived him. Its true author seems to have been St. Fructuosus of Braga, who had applied it to his monks in the seventh century. The canon had then passed into the penitential literature and later the attribution to Fructuosus had been dropped. Finally, in later manuals it began to be erroneously attributed to Basil. The penalty of confinement in a monastery for clerical offenders would later be extended by the Third Lateran Council to all clergy caught in acts of sodomy, a measure that now seems to have totally disappeared from the Church's practice.

The canonical penances of ancient councils are no longer in effect under current ecclesiastical law, but the problem of moral indifferentism

and disciplinary laxism has obvious relevance for our own context, in which homosexual tendencies in the clergy are often ignored or dismissed, and homosexual unions are increasingly treated as morally legitimate. How can it be doubted that the current sex abuse crisis would have been avoided if Church authorities had applied St. Fructuosus' canon, or something like it, to the guilty?

For Damian, the issue of homosexuality within the clergy is deeply related to the dignity of the priesthood, and in particular the sacrifice of the Mass, which he sees as defiled by the offending priest, who is "unworthy" of offering the sacrifice, asking if such a priest "is barely permitted to enter the church to pray with others, how is it that he can approach the altar of the Lord to intercede for others?" The incompatibility of such behavior with the dignity of the sacrifice of the Mass offers a useful explanation for the modern correlation between liturgical abuse and an effeminate clergy indifferent to the moral demands of the gospel.

The notion of "homosexuality" as a deep-rooted psychological tendency wouldn't come into existence for another seven centuries, but Damian's work offers a profound analysis both of the irrationality of same-sex attraction and the devastating psychological and spiritual effects of homosexual practice. The saint expresses a deep concern for the spiritual welfare of those involved in such behavior, and offers them encouragement in the struggle to extricate themselves from it.

For Damian, the practitioner of homosexual sodomy suffers from a fundamental disorientation regarding the natural complementarity of the sexes. "What do you seek in a man, that you are unable to find in yourself—what difference of sexes,

what diverse features of members, what softness, what tenderness of carnal allurements, what pleasantness of a smooth face?" he asks the homosexual, adding, "whatever you do not find in yourself, you seek in vain in another body."

Damian tells us that the practitioner of the vice is tormented spiritually and even physically. "His flesh burns with the fury of lust, his frigid mind trembles with the rancor of suspicion," he writes. "Chaos now rages hellishly in the heart of the unhappy man while he is vexed by as many worries as he is tortured, as it were, by the torments of punishment." However, far from dismissing or dehumanizing those who appease such urges, Damian insists that they are redeemable and implores them not to give up hope. He expresses grief over the "noble soul, made in the image and likeness of God and united with the most precious blood of Christ," and adds, "You who hear Christ the reviver, why do you despair of your own resuscitation? Hear it from his own mouth: 'He that believeth in me, although he be dead, shall live.'" He assures his reader that he may extricate himself from his captivity to sin through faith and penance, and rise to greater spiritual heights than ever before.

It is safe to say that, as wretched as the situation of the Church was in his own day, Damian could hardly have conceived of the possibility of a revisionist movement that would seek openly to vitiate the historic Christian doctrine on the immorality of sodomy, or to treat homosexual unions as "analogous" to marriage, as Cardinal Walter Kasper does in his most recent book, *The Message of Amoris Laetitia: A Fraternal Discussion*. Damian's work is therefore devoid of any explicit response to the tenets of modern LGBT ideology and to the clerics who defend it. However, the saint's

critique of sodomy in the Book of Gomorrah has been perceived as such a threat to the revisionist project that scholars seeking to legitimize homosexual behavior in a Christian context have argued against its credibility for decades, most notably the historian John Boswell.

Such scholars have latched on to an erroneous narrative that originated in the early twentieth century, which claimed that Pope St. Leo IX in some way rejected Damian's recommendations, either by reducing Damian's suggested penalties for sodomy or even by repudiating the Book of Gomorrah altogether and distancing himself from Damian personally. As I show in my preface to my translation of the Book of Gomorrah, this "rejection thesis" is not only baseless, but contradicts the clear text of Leo's own letter to Damian, as well as the pontiff's official acts in response to Damian's book.

Leo praised the Book of Gomorrah and Peter Damian personally in soaring terms, expressing his desire that it be "known with certitude by all that everything that this little book contains has been pleasing to our judgment, being as opposed to diabolical fire as is water," and predicting Damian's future reward in heaven. The pope then decreed a more rigorous scheme of penalties for those guilty of sodomy than Damian had asked for. He also approved a canon decreeing excommunication for those guilty of sodomy at a synod at Rheims, during one of his reform tours in Europe. Revisionists have sought to counter these facts by claiming a different letter by Damian to Leo mentioning tension between them is really about the Book of Gomorrah, although the letter makes no reference to the book.

In short, Leo's unreserved and enthusiastic endorsement of the Book of Gomorrah cannot be reasonably

questioned, a fact conceded in the recent scholarship of William McCready, professor emeritus of history at Queen's University and author of *Odiosa sanctitas: St. Peter Damian, Simony, and Reform* (2011). In Europe, scholars seem generally to be unaware of this Anglophone controversy, and have found little reason to question Leo's support for Damian's cause.

However, St. Peter Damian's brilliant analysis of the crisis of his day and his recommendations for firm discipline in the face of the moral corruption of the clergy appear to have succumbed to the more devastating effects of oblivion and disuse, as casualties of the historical amnesia of our age. A remedy, perhaps, may be found in Damian's closing prayer, addressed to Pope Leo:

May almighty God grant, O most reverend father, that in the time of your apostolate the monster of this vice may utterly perish, and the condition of the prostrate Church might everywhere be restored in accordance with the laws of its youth.<sup>8</sup>

Many writers have noted that the Church is deeply wounded by the current crisis, a Church in desperate need of healing; this is no more so than with the laity, who are confused, angry, and losing faith in those who have been ordained to pastor and guide the faithful in their journey toward salvation and eternal life with God.

Catholics are leaving the Church; those who stay are withholding donations; parents who have long hoped for a son to become a priest are dissuading their sons from going into seminary.

The Catholic laity are in shock in respect to the extent of the depravity we are discovering in the clergy,

Low and high. Our default position is now one of a lack of trust.

The Pope, his advisers and many bishops seem to think that the crisis has been provoked by unresolved issues from the first crisis of 2002 that involved priests who abused minors and the widespread practice of cover-up of these crimes by the episcopacy.

Some Church-watchers are warning that if the February meeting limits its focus and range to only the problem of minors and associated cover-ups, the wounds will get worse and the credibility crisis will take stronger hold.

That is true, but it is not just a question of focus that is problematic; the problem is that those in charge are very much a part of the problem.

*The Boston Globe* reports that 130 living bishops have been accused of covering up priestly sexual abuse of minors. No steps have been taken to discipline them. So far, all we have seen our episcopal leaders do is take measures to ensure that priest abusers who are not part of the episcopacy are reported to civil authorities, although *The Boston Globe* states that 50 living bishops have been accused of cover-up since the Dallas Charter of 2002. The hierarchy has done nothing to ensure that bishops accused of such are reported.

Laity are appalled that some cardinals and bishops tolerate priests who openly live a double life and who advance "LGBT" causes; indeed, some even promoted such priests to significant positions, Archbishop Theodore McCarrick himself being a prime example. Laity are outraged that Jesuit Father James Martin is permitted to visit diocese after diocese, misleading people about the Church's teaching on sexuality.

Can we reasonably expect anything to happen at the February meeting in Rome that would be a step forward in dealing with the crisis? Sadly, the most likely outcome is that it will confirm what we already know: The hierarchy of the Church in its present configuration will resist solutions rather than seek them. Or perhaps worse? Could it be that some are trying to use the crisis to advance such causes as dropping the requirement for priestly celibacy?

Pope Francis has stated that priests who are living double lives should leave the priesthood, but there has been no episcopal corporate response to that declaration. Reportedly, a few bishops have made quiet attempts to remove priests living double lives from their own dioceses.

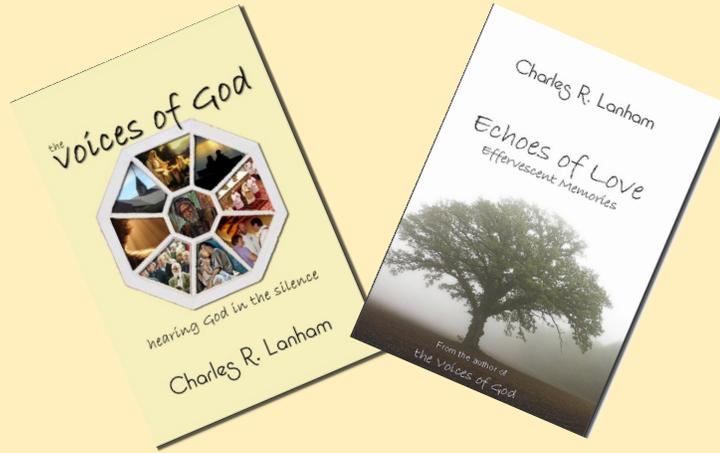
Thank God for them! May their tribe increase! While what they are doing is laudable, they need to come forward, band together and call upon their brother bishops to do the same. Yet it is doubtful that their efforts will do much in the short run to purge the larger Church of the filth; it is too pervasive and protected by the powerful. Still, even a small corporate effort may perform the invaluable service of establishing new diocesan cultures — to be a model for others — where priestly fidelity is fostered and expected.

Nonetheless, we doubt that there is much that mere mortals can do to clean up the filth.

Thankfully our God is omnipotent and can do the impossible. We need to pray and pray and pray to ensure that what we do is guided by the Holy Spirit. We need to stand faithfully at the foot of the cross and believe that when all seems darkest, the dawn is on the horizon. (see *endnote 4, Janet Smith*).

Let us pray, let us pray. Amen.

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