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Commentary: Church Should 'Abandon Shame,' Embrace Accountability

02:06

April 26, 2010 By WBUR Newsroom

This article is more than 15 years old.

This commentary was written by Peter Pollard, a clergy abuse survivor from Hatfield.

With the resignations of Irish bishops in the ongoing Catholic Church clergy abuse scandal, it appears the Vatican may be finally moving beyond a strategy of dealing with the crisis solely through declarations of shame, sadness and vague promises of woefully overdue reforms. Ironically, the things I learned recovering from sexual abuse by a priest, and later, working with sex offenders, may hold some lessons for the Church.

Here's the deal: whether it's deserved or misplaced, shame is always a dead-end street. Real healing only comes when guilt and responsibility for harmful actions is properly laid. That is what has been lacking in the Church's response until now.

Peter Pollard (Courtesy)

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Shame is static. It says, "I'm bad. I'm really sorry. It won't happen again." Being ashamed focuses on failed moral character, rather than responsibility, so shame's only relief is forgiveness. In Catholicism, one usually turns to a merciful God for forgiveness. Angry Catholics who feel betrayed need something more.

At least from 1987 — when I first reported my abuse to former Boston Archbishop Cardinal Bernard Law — I and thousands like me have urged Church leaders to find the courage to adopt the very prescription for themselves that Pope Benedict XVI offered last month to Irish clerics who abused children: "Openly acknowledge your guilt, submit yourselves to the demands of justice," he said.

Pope Benedict and other Church officials would do well to take this advice, abandon shame and swallow the bitter pill of accountability. Declare a mea culpa. All bishops and clergy who betrayed those who expected to be protected should surrender their positions of authority. That includes the pope, if it's shown he mishandled abuse cases. Internal records should be turned over to civil authorities.

By admitting bad actions, guilt embraces accountability. And, at its heart, the crisis in the Catholic Church has always been more of a crisis of accountability than one about sex.

There's one last thing. To really work, firm accountability for the harm done must always include an opportunity for redemption. Even those admitting to serious wrongs — yes, even abusive clergy — must have some chance to re-establish a sense of pride in their humanity. With the possibility of restoring self-worth, they're freed to acknowledge wrongdoing, make reparations and begin nurturing the better aspects of their beings. That process heals me as well as them, and makes them less dangerous. It's the opposite of shame.

Only full accountability by the Church will begin the healing and reconciliation process that all of us involved deserve — including those guilty of wrongdoing. With full accountability, the Church may reclaim some of the moral high ground the scandal has eroded.

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But without full accountability, the pope and the Church will remain stuck with shame.

Opposing Commentary: Church Allegations Unjust, 'Sensationalized'

This program aired on April 26, 2010.

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