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Altar boys are paying the price of Vatican II

By Stuart Reid

(Filed: 12/04/2002)

THE news from America is not good. In my day, there was none of that sort of malarky. At school (in England), the priests who taught me were good and holy men who did not, as a rule, indecently assault the boys.

The only incident I can recall that might now be classed as paedophilia involved a friend who was given one-on-one counselling about masturbation by his housemaster. My friend was told to take down his pyjama trousers. There was no "inappropriate touching", at least by hand, but there was a bit of close and apparently expert scrutiny and . . . But that's enough of that. We thought it was a bit of a lark.

What is happening now, in America, is not a lark. The sex scandal rocking and roiling the Roman Catholic Church there is serious. Even if, as I suspect, many of the weeping "victims" of pervert priests are on the make, there is still compelling evidence that very bad things indeed have been going on, and are still going on.

The scandal stretches back 30 years and more. It involves allegations against as many as 2,000 priests - among them the Cardinal Archbishop of Los Angeles - and has cost the Church about \$1 billion. On Thursday in Holy Week, the Pope felt compelled to denounce paedophilia in priests as the work of the Devil.

It's not just paedophilia, either. There is a flourishing gay culture among Catholic priests in the United States. There have always been homosexual priests, of course, many of them very good men. What is new



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Of course, many of them very good men. What is new is that such priests now claim the right to indulge their preferences. According to an estimate from within the Society of Jesus, roughly half the American Jesuits under 50 are homosexual, and most of these are sexually active.

In California, the Jesuits have an official website that defies parody. Until recently, it was displaying pictures of novices cuddling one another in Mardi Gras costumes. The pictures carried captions such as "Pretty Boy and Jabba the Slut" and "Lambada, anyone?". These images were not found in some spotty novice's desk drawer, note, but were intended to place the Jesuits in a good light before the 700 million people around the world with internet access. ✓

There is a very serious problem in the Catholic Church, but let's be clear what the problem is not. It is not, as so many believe, the rule of celibacy. ("I mean, if they was allowed to get married, they wouldn't be rogering them choirboys, would they?" The same sort of reasoning, in posher language, can be found in broadsheet newspapers.) If you want proof that celibacy is not the cause of child molestation or promiscuous homosexuality, look at the Church of England, or visit your nearest internet paedophile circle. The truth is that celibacy is the only hope that paedophiles - and their potential victims - have.

The real problem is the legacy of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). It is no coincidence, as the Marxists say, that the revolutionary "spirit" of Vatican II began to kick in at about the time much of the sexual abuse began. }

By opening itself up to the world - the aim of Vatican II - the Church hoped to foster a renewal of spiritual life. The renewal never materialised. On the contrary, pews emptied, seminaries and schools closed, annulments soared (in America, from 338 a year in 1968 to 52,000 in 1983), nuns started reading Germaine Greer and priests left to get married (giving greater scope to the non-marrying kind). }

What followed the Council was decline: moral, intellectual, cultural and spiritual. It spread far beyond the Church. By ditching its ancient Latin Mass - the Mass of Bach, Beethoven and Palestrina - in favour of a participatory vernacular service of praise and thanksgiving, Rome committed an act of vandalism just as surely as it would if it had ordered the destruction of all the great cathedrals of Europe. }

As it is, huge sums of money - though perhaps not as much as has been shelled out to the victims of paedophilia - have been spent on smashing altars, ripping out communion rails and generally trashing sanctuaries to make room for the new, man-centred liturgy. It is as though Rome had been seized by a

...ing, it is as though Rome had been seized by a frenzied hatred of beauty. No wonder the churches are empty; no wonder the culture of the bathhouse and the internet chat room has such a secure footing in the Catholic - and for that matter the secular - world.

The Pope has stamped out some of the worst abuses, and has even allowed the old Latin (or Tridentine) rite of Mass to be celebrated publicly, if in moderation; but it is hard to forget or forgive the fraud and experimentation that attended the introduction of the new liturgy in the 1970s. There were clown Masses and bunny rabbit Masses and dancing girl Masses and rock Masses. Christ, it was embarrassing. Celebrants began to get in touch with themselves, and, as we can now see, with others. Out went repression, in came expression. Altar boys paid the price. So did a new, inclusive presence: altar girls. ✓

A measure of the frivolity that infected the Church in the 1970s is to be found in the statement issued last month by the Bishop of Palm Beach, when he resigned after acknowledging impropriety with a 15-year-old boy in 1977. The poor fellow was reduced to trying to account for his behaviour by saying, inter alia, that he had fallen under the influence of the "sexologists" Masters and Johnson, but added that he had made "wonderful Jewish friends" and "wonderful friends in the Muslim community". He asked for prayers and "expressions of love". He suggested that those who were a bit miffed should "pray for their ability themselves to forgive".

It is no good just blaming the Yanks, however. The decline of the Church in America mirrors the decline of the Church elsewhere in the West, and indeed the decline of the West in general. The sex scandals will eventually disappear, but the rot is almost certain to continue, and perhaps grow worse when John Paul II dies. We'd better watch out.

Stuart Reid is deputy editor of The Spectator

Alice Thomson is away

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