

Can the pope restore the purity of Catholicism?

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The scandal facing Catholics today looks a lot like the Watergate scandal that engulfed the United States in the early 1970s. Then, what started as a crime committed by a few burglars slowly escalated to reveal corruption at the highest levels of authority. The White House counsel, senior advisers and others were punished for their roles. In the end, the president of the United States was implicated and forced to resign.

Is the Catholic Church on a similar pathway to the resignation of a pope?

On the surface, there are many similarities. A few years ago, the church was embarrassed by revelations that some priests were involved in the abuse of minors -- unlike the Watergate break-in, a major crime. Those priests were largely in Boston, but other abusers were exposed around the country. Reforms followed, and the scandal seemed to pass.

More recently, the equivalent of the Watergate tapes have blown open the church's calm. The Cardinal Archbishop of Ireland was involved in not only a failure to act but appears to have been an active agent of cover-up. And the trail seems to be leading even higher: the pope himself, while an archbishop in Munich, may have played a role in failing to respond to abuse.

Must he resign?

That's where the parallels break down. Watergate was not only a scandal; it was a threat to the republic itself. The head had to be removed for the country to survive.

The church is not a democracy. Bishops (and popes) are not answerable to polls; they're supposed to be dismissive of popular trends in search of a higher truth.

But the church's indifference to public opinion is not designed to protect those who condone blatant violations of gospel principles. Yet that is exactly what has arisen in our time. An episcopal culture that placed defense of the structure over the defense of children is broken, pure and simple. The pope may not be guilty of any wrongdoing, but the culture is.

So if the pope isn't going to resign, can the hierarchy survive?

The first part of the answer will depend on justice: Catholics and non-Catholics alike must hear a full confession -- evidence of contrition so pure that it cannot be mistaken. We must see bishops leave their teaching positions because their moral authority is lost. We must believe that civil justice will be served when crimes are committed.

But that isn't enough.

And it's not enough to say that 95 percent of priests and nuns are heroic and dedicated servants of the faith, baptizing our children, caring for the sick and the poor, ministering to our families and burying our dead. They are of course all of that.

It's not enough to say that the church has created an enormous diversity of religious practice and expression, giving birth to contemplative, monastic, scholarly and popular forms of faith that have brought the gospel to life for billions -- even though it has.

It's not even enough to argue that the church traces its roots to Jesus himself -- that it is His church. It does indeed trace its roots to gospel times. But not even that is enough to justify confidence in the bishops.

The capital of trust between the people of the church and their leaders is dangerously close to empty. The bishops cannot take the people for granted any longer. We were raised to love the gospel, to seek the truth, to serve justice, to grow in the bosom of the sacraments. But we will not do it under their leadership unless they change.

What's needed is a conversion of the bishops and the pope himself. That's right: It's time for the pope and the bishops to convert their culture to one that is centered on loving God from the depths of their souls and to leading a church that is as much mother as father, as much pastoral as theological, as much spiritual as doctrinal. It is time for them to listen to the deep and authentic witness of the people of faith, to trust the spirit that blows where it will, to abandon their defensiveness of their positions and trust only the gospel, and not their edifice of control. Conversion is a total experience -- letting go of the old and putting on the new.

The conversion we seek for them is the same conversion they invite for us: Put on a contrite heart and fall in love with God, recklessly, totally and passionately. Let the love of God be the only measure of their actions.

We live in a spiritual age, and until the bishops and the pope learn to lead a people hungry for authenticity, trust and spiritual nourishment, we will look elsewhere. There are millions of Catholics with deep spiritual wisdom -- millions of faith-filled people who love God in transformative ways. We will trust their faith and witness if the bishops fail us.

My faith is not shaken by these scandals. My hunger for my own conversion to a more loving, more just and more peaceful way of living is undiminished. On Easter, my family and I celebrated the hope beyond all hopes and did so with the Eucharist.

***But this is Altargate.* [Emphasis added] The hierarchy, not the faith, is in jeopardy. The pope need not resign. He must do something far more difficult: convert.**

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