

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH NEEDS AN EPIPHANY

by Rev. Patrick W. Collins, Ph.D.<sup>1/</sup>

The biblical story of the Wise Visitors from the East to the Christ Child ends with those people returning to their own country "by a different route." They did not "return to Herod." Looking into the manger in the light of a star from above, they saw themselves differently and changed their course. They refused to return to the deceptive Herod who only wanted to protect his power base from the threat of "the newborn King of the Jews" - not even knowing who that King would be or in what ways that threat might function. Herod functioned out of fear whereas the Wise Guys were energized by a New Hope.

Would that the bishops in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops would see their reality from a Higher Light and do the same. They need to come back to their own country by another path than the one they have been following for far too long. They could learn a good deal by meditating on The Return Journey of the Magi to discover a new path for themselves - letting go of their Herod-like fear of losing control and opening an energy of courage through listening and engaging in liberating ecclesial collaboration with the rest of the People of God – in spite of their fears .

As 2007 begins it would seem that the United States Catholic bishops are like emperors without clothes - with a few happy individual exceptions. As a body they have lost the "clothes" of credibility with a majority of the priests, the women religious and the laity. How did this sad state of public nakedness come about?

First, our bishops have been long complicit in the crime and depravity of clergy sexual abuse as recent studies have made that painfully clear. They have engaged in systemic practices which have been designed to secretly protect their priests and their institution through cover-ups, subterfuges and lies. For the most part - prior to 2002 -many have systematically ignored the cries of clerical victims and have often punished the courageous witnessing by whistle-blowers who have tried to bring the light of a star to shine on priestly crimes against the Child.

In the late 1980's, for example, I twice brought to the attention of two bishops the sexual improprieties of a specific priest. Not only was nothing done about those allegations, but that priest was quickly promoted to a high position of leadership in the diocese. I concluded that either I was not believed or the hierarchs did not care. In either case I resolved to leave service in that diocese.

Second, in their attempts to respond to the clerical sexual abuse crisis which broke into full public view in early 2002, the U.S. bishops' conference created in June of that year the Dallas Charter in which even a single credible allegation of sexual abuse, no matter how far in the past, would cause that priest to be removed from active ministry. That policy has seemed sometimes to include almost any sexual impropriety regardless of the age of the victim. Instead of treating each case separately, all were treated the same. This is hardly the approach of Jesus in the Gospels. And, of course, the two-thirds of the bishops who have been proved to have been complicit in this problem have not been removed or resigned. Where is the justice, where the fairness? Far more bishops were proportionally complicit than priests who abused children. On the morning that 2002 meeting opened, a Dallas newspaper reported that of the 189 bishops they had investigated, 111 had at least one case of cover-up on his record.

Many of us priests felt that we had been pushed out on the edge of a limb which the bishops then sawed off. Any disgruntled person could come forward with an accusation against a priest and it would be taken seriously enough to be reviewed by a diocesan board. In the meantime the priest is placed on administrative leave, often his name appears in the media, and the rest of his life is tainted - whether innocent or guilty.

I remain puzzled about just how such review boards function. How do they determine that an accusation is credible - especially one which the priest denies? And especially if the alleged incidents took place a long time ago? Is the assumption of credibility now with the alleged victim rather than the former practice of assuming the innocence of the perpetrator?

Prior to the Dallas Charter, when allegations were made against priests, bishops favored the innocence of

the priest. They kept the matter "in house" and sought psychological help for the man. He was then transferred to another venue to minister. Little concern was shown for the victim who came forward. Now the opposite would seem to be the case. The charged priest is assumed to be guilty and the claim of the victim is taken seriously and, in the case of diocesan priests, the man is "out on the street."

This is precisely one of the principal reasons why the emperors have no "clothes." Before Dallas the hierarchy cared primarily about the priests and the reputation of their institution. After Dallas their concern was primarily for the victims and the priests were treated miserably. In this the bishops have been perfectly and tragically consistent. Their concern has been institutional, not personal - neither about the persons of the priests or the persons of the victims. Protecting patriarchy and patrimony trumps everything for many bishops in this egregious matter. Everyone has come or is coming to see in the light of a Higher Star that our leadership is in a state of embarrassing undress.

Third, our bishops as a group seem to resemble the American presence in the Green Zone in Baghdad, Iraq - circling the wagons from the realities outside of their protected space in which they seem to listen only to their own fears and ignore the voices telling them of their nakedness. In their platitudes about praying for more vocations to the priesthood and religious life, they just don't seem to see the real world outside of their circle. In the issues that they choose to address such as in their meeting in November, 2006, they seem to prove that they can only deal with matters of little import if not irrelevance.

One U.S. cardinal has said privately that the Dallas Charter must be revised but he lacks the courage to address the matter in public or within the Conference out of fear that "the time is not ripe." Several other bishops I know feel the same but feel their voices would not be heard if they spoke up.

What can be done to bring the Light of the Epiphany Star to shine in the consciousness and the behaviors of our Roman Catholic bishops? What can priests do? Most priests that I know of my generation at least are frustrated and demoralized. Many can hardly wait to retire. They feel abandoned by their bishops, far too many of whom seem intellectually bankrupt (afraid of new questions), morally compromised (unwilling to face the implications of their own complicity) and managerially and financially inept (the money scandals have only just begun to surface). An aging and numerically depleted presbyterate feels stressed and overworked and seldom feels support from those within its own ranks. They find many of the recently ordained to be of such a traditionalist stripe that they do not want to work with them. The "new breed" of today often say that they have been called to straighten out the mess made by those of us in the post-Vatican II generation. Plus, like serfs in a medieval system of governance, priests tend to lack the courage to stand up to their bishops to tell them the truth of his situation and theirs. Their status and well-being depend upon being good little boys in the eyes of Big Daddy so he will, as the saying often goes, "be good to me." Priests seem powerless to do much that will return us to "home" by a different route. I suppose such is the case in many situations where workers are disappointed and frustrated with their bosses.

What can the laity do? Many of the laity either have experienced such disappointment, disillusionment or disgust with their bishops that they have marginalized themselves from the fray or they have departed the ecclesial scene in disinterest. While some few have chosen to withhold funds from the church or taken prophetic stances by participating in lay reform groups, too many simply don't care and so lack power to call for a new route towards "home."

What could the bishops do? Even in their weakness and humiliation, they are the ones who can still lead us into our own country. But how? First off, they must take the angelic message of Christmas seriously:

Fear Not! An incident makes my point. A priest friend was saddled with a recently ordained priest from Africa as his associate. The priest's English language skills were weak and his work ethic was even weaker. My friend ended up doing the work of two and was becoming physically ill and psychologically depressed. Since his bishop is an long time friend of mine, I called that bishop to tell him of the stressful situation that my friend was experiencing. The bishop told me that he was afraid that might happen but added: "But what can I do? I only have two associate priests in my whole diocese." Then I began to feel sorry for my bishop friend - until I hung up the phone. "What can you do?" I thought. You could summon some episcopal courage and speak up.

Tell the truth in the conference of bishops. Gather others who would support you. Speak truth to power in the Vatican. Too many in the current crop of hierarchs were appointed by John Paul II precisely because they would not speak up to power and would simply mouth the party line of Rome. Loyalty was their pass into leadership. Bishops have to gain the interior freedom to not care about being lockstep puppets for Vatican policies. They have to stop caring about advancing their careers in the episcopacy by being silent partners in the demise of the priesthood and the diminishment of vital church life as so many see happening today. They must be true bishops of their own local church and, as a group, prophetically speak up for an American way of being Church while still in union with the Bishop of Rome. Unity does not require uniformity.

In the Broadway musical "1776" G. Washington writes from fighting in the field of battle to the Philadelphia ensconced Continental Congress struggling with the wording of the Declaration of Independence. "Is anybody there? Does anybody care? Does anybody see what I see?" This same message from reality needs to be spoken with compassionate and courageous truth by those "in the field" to those struggling with issues of governance, our bishops.

How could our bishops come to such creative courage - to see as the People of God see? How might they be shown new ways to imagine their role of leadership? How might they be enabled to go "home" by a fresh route?

It is the time for all in the Church to exercise what I call Compassionate Prophecy in the gentle spirit of Isaiah: "Not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. ... I have called you for the victory of justice... To open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeons, those who live in darkness." Isaiah 42 And one might add: "and to cloth the naked!"

This would not be an in-your-face hate tactic toward the bishops as has too often been the tone of reform-minded groups and individual reformers. Public "whipping" of those who have failed us in leadership is not the answer. We must help to cover their nakedness with honesty and loving concern. They too suffer and struggle. Bishops must be confronted first of all by the laity - and then by priests and religious -with compassionate yet firm voices. Since from their circled wagons they don't seem to see what most outside that circle are aware of, they must be told the truth of the deteriorating situation outside their Green Zone. "Do you see what we see, Bishop?"

Concretely this could mean having open forums or small meetings in which bishops - one by one - are invited to participate first of all as listeners to the concerns of those who still care about the situation of governance and ministry in our Church. And those in the Church who speak up must also trust the Christmas tidings of "Be Not Afraid." Then all could collaborate more effectively in following the Star toward our true home where justice reigns and there are sufficient ordained ministers to celebrate Eucharist. Bishops who see and are not afraid to speak what all see could assemble a coalition of willing bishops to join them in speaking up particularly about the problems of an aging, numerically diminished and growing traditionalist priesthood.

Reform of the ways of governing must flow from deepening spiritual renewal by all concerned. Reform is not possible without spiritual renewal flowing from serious, disciplined spiritual practice by every believer. Only by shining the Star of Reality in the midst of the bishops' fearful circle can the whole Church begin to go home by a different route. Then the bishops could stop acting like Herod and instead join the path of The Wise Seekers. And thus the prophecy of Isaiah would be realized as the unfolding truth:

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those dwelling in the land of shadows, upon them a light has dawned. You have made their joy abound and given them great rejoicing. You have broken the yoke of their burden, the rod of their oppressor." Isaiah 9

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