

Should I stay or should I go?

Clerical-abuse scandal

Timothy Radcliffe

As the scandal of child sexual abuse and its cover-up swirls around the Church, some Catholics are considering their options as regards their very membership of the institution. Here a former Master of the Dominicans explains why the Church is stuck with him, whatever happens

Fresh revelations of sexual abuse by priests in Germany and Italy have provoked a tide of anger and disgust. I have received emails from people all around Europe asking how can they possibly remain in the Church? I was even sent a form with which to renounce my membership of the Church. Why stay?

First of all, why go? Some people feel that they can no longer remain associated with an institution that is so corrupt and dangerous for children. The suffering of so many children is indeed horrific. They must be our first concern. Nothing that I will write is intended in any way to lessen our horror at the evil of sexual abuse. But the statistics for the US, from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in 2004, suggest that Catholic clergy do not offend more than the married clergy of other Churches.

Some surveys even give a lower level of offence for Catholic priests. They are less likely to offend than lay school teachers, and perhaps half as likely as the general population. Celibacy does not push people to abuse children. It is simply untrue to imagine that leaving the Church for another denomination would make one's children safer. We must face the terrible fact that the abuse of children is widespread in every part of society. To make the Church the scapegoat would be a cover-up.

But what about the cover-up within the Church? Have not our bishops been shockingly irresponsible in moving offenders around, not reporting them to the police and so perpetuating the abuse? Yes, sometimes. But the great majority of these cases go back to the 1960s and 1970s, when bishops often regarded sexual abuse as a sin rather than also a pathological condition, and when lawyers and psychologists often reassured them that it was safe to reassign priests after treatment. It is unjust to project backwards an awareness of the nature and seriousness of sexual abuse which simply did not exist then. It was only the rise of feminism in the late 1970s which, by shedding light on the violence of some men against women, alerted us to the terrible damage done to vulnerable children.

But what about the Vatican? Pope Benedict has taken a strong line in tackling this issue as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and since becoming Pope. Now the finger is pointed at him. It appears that some cases reported to the CDF under his watch were not dealt with. Isn't the Pope's credibility undermined? There are demonstrators in front of St Peter's calling for his resignation. I am morally certain that he bears no blame here.

It is generally imagined that the Vatican is a vast and efficient organisation. In fact it is tiny. The CDF only employs 45 people, dealing with doctrinal and disciplinary issues for a Church which has 1.3 billion members, 17 per cent of the world's population, and some 400,000 priests. When I dealt with the CDF as Master of the Dominican Order, it was obvious that they were struggling to cope. Documents slipped through the cracks. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger lamented to me that the staff was simply too small for the job.

People are furious with the Vatican's failure to open up its files and offer a clear explanation of what happened. Why is it so secretive? Angry and hurt Catholics feel a right to transparent government. I agree. But we must, in justice, understand why the Vatican is so self-protective. There were more martyrs in the twentieth century than in all the previous centuries combined. Bishops and priests, Religious and laity were assassinated in Western Europe, in Soviet countries, in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

Many Catholics still suffer imprisonment and death for their faith. Of course, the Vatican tends to stress confidentiality; this has been necessary to protect the Church from people who wish to destroy her. So it is understandable that the Vatican reacts aggressively to demands for transparency and will read legitimate requests for openness as a form of persecution. And some people in the media do, without any doubt, wish to damage the credibility of the Church.

But we owe a debt of gratitude to the press for its insistence that the Church face its failures. If it had not been for the media, then this shameful abuse might have remained unaddressed.

Confidentiality is also a consequence of the Church's insistence on the right of everyone accused to keep their good name until they are proved to be guilty. This is very hard for our society to understand, whose media destroy people's reputations without a thought.

Why go? If it is to find a safer haven, a less corrupt Church, then I think that you will be disappointed. I too long for more transparent government, more open debate, but the Church's secrecy is understandable, and sometimes necessary. To understand is not always to condone, but necessary if we are to act justly.

Why stay? I must lay my cards on the table; even if the Church were obviously worse than other Churches, I still would not go. I am not a Catholic because our Church is the best, or even because I like Catholicism. I do love much about my Church but there are aspects of it which I dislike. I am not a Catholic because of a consumer option for an ecclesiastical Waitrose rather than Tesco, but because I believe that it embodies something which is essential to the Christian witness to the Resurrection, visible unity.

When Jesus died, his community fell apart. He had been betrayed, denied, and most of his disciples fled. It was chiefly the women who accompanied him to the end. On Easter Day, he appeared to the disciples. This was more than the physical resuscitation of a dead corpse.

In him God triumphed over all that destroys community: sin, cowardice, lies, misunderstanding, suffering and death. The Resurrection was made visible to the world in the astonishing sight of a community reborn. These cowards and deniers were gathered together again. They were not a reputable bunch, and shamefaced at what they had done, but once again they were one. The unity of the Church is a sign that all the forces that fragment and scatter are defeated in Christ.

All Christians are one in the Body of Christ. I have deepest respect and affection for Christians from other Churches who nurture and inspire me. But this unity in Christ needs some visible embodiment. Christianity is not a vague spirituality but a religion of incarnation, in which the deepest truths take the physical and sometimes institutional form. Historically this unity has found its focus in Peter, the Rock in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and the shepherd of the flock in John's gospel.

From the beginning and throughout history, Peter has often been a wobbly rock, a source of scandal, corrupt, and yet this is the one – and his successors – whose task is to hold us together so that we may witness to Christ's defeat on Easter Day of sin's power to divide. And so the Church is stuck with me whatever happens. We may be embarrassed to admit that we are Catholics, but Jesus kept shameful company from the beginning.