



By JASON KEITH FERNANDES

Between Scylla and Charybdis: Catholics and their Dilemmas

In recent times the Catholic Church across the world has hauled up not merely for the sexual abuse committed by priests against minors, but also the inept, and unjust manner in which the complaints about this abuse was received by diocesan authorities. All too often, rather than take strict action against such priests, the response of the diocese was to transfer these offenders who merely continue their abuse. In doing so, these dioceses violated not only the integrity and dignity of these individuals, but also compromised the ministry of the Church. Priests are looked up to; they operate as figures of trust. When such figures violate this trust, and their superiors look the other way, it impacts not merely the persons involved, but the Church itself.

Not too long ago, this controversy was expertly opened up to the world through *Spotlight*, the Oscar winning film directed by Tom McCarthy. The film takes its name from the Boston-based newspaper, *The Boston Globe's* Spotlight team that investigated the misguided handling of complaints of sexual abuse committed by priests in the diocese of Boston, USA. What is great about the film is the muted manner in which it has focused on the investigative process of the Spotlight team allowing us to absorb the horror that such violations involve, rather than opt for easy sensationalism.

The sexual abuse of minors is not, however, the only crime that plagues the contemporary church. One need only look at the real-estate scandals currently rocking the Archdiocese of Goa and Daman for one example from a list of other moral and legal violations that are too long and upsetting to list here. All manner of unpleasant questions are being raised with regard to the manner in which properties belonging to, or under the care of, the Archdiocese have been sold off to property developers, at the cost of the residents and tenants of these properties. There are some who claim that the Archdiocese has a valid explanation for every case. And yet, the scandal continues, and grows even, to the extent that some are now asking for the resignation of the Archbishop, largely because of the inept and fumbling manner in which the Archdiocese has mounted, or not, its response to these allegations.

Two sentences from Michael Kirwan SJ's review of *Spotlight* in the blog of the British Jesuits | 1

help understand the crisis that impacts the Catholic Church today. The first sentence reads "The city of Boston's strongly-knit but introverted and defensive Catholic culture thus stands indicted." The second sentence, later in the text read, "Too often the Church's default position towards secular media, towards secular feminism, has been defensive and oppositional."

These two sentences captured two radically different positions that may be present within the same institutional framework. The first sentence speaks to how the failure of the Curial hierarchy can be the result of a defensive Church, a defensiveness brought about when the Catholic community in the area is a marginalized one. The second sentence suggests that the problem lies with the culture of the Curia being oppressively patriarchal.

What is often unknown, and not adequately highlighted in *Spotlight*, is that until recently Catholics, and the Catholic Church, in the United States lived under severe restrictions and social hostility. This kind of hostility is not dissimilar to that faced by non-Hindu groups in India. Universally too, at least from the time of the French Revolution, the Catholic Church has been pushed to the wall and represented as an evil institution. It is this culture of hostility that creates a culture where internal differences are quashed, often with the grudging consent of the victims, so as protect the larger group. In other words, external hostility works to feed authoritarian leadership and suppress democratic dissent within marginalized groups. If, therefore, justice issues within the Catholic Church are not discussed, one has to also lay the blame for it at the feet of the dominant culture.

But this is not to suggest that there is a patriarchal traditional within the Curia that is not *sui generis*. Any institution that provides leadership invariably succumbs to the assumption that it knows best, and its ways are the best. Patriarchy, in this sense, is not merely about misogyny, but about the way in which power is wielded, excluding the voices, and indeed the concerns, especially of marginalized persons within the group. The tragedy is that when the Curia behaves in this patriarchal manner it betrays the understanding that the Church is not merely a physical institution, but also, more importantly, a mystical one. In failing to appreciate this distinction so much is lost. Indeed, as Kirwan points out the voice of God can also come from outside the church, and the Church needs to listen to it. There is also the loss in terms of those who find this a reason to move away from the Catholic Church into the embrace of agnosticism or other churches.



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Resolving the crisis the Church faces lies in finding a path between the two problems Kirwan identifies. And yet, this is an awkward position. How do we go forward? Carrying the question before statal authorities, especially when the state is hostile, or seeking to assert its own power, poses a great risk. One way in which this tension can be resolved was demonstrated by some of the protestors in Goa who have presented their claims to the Apostolic Nuncio. In doing so they have shown great nuance. Taking the issue, not before the state, that could possibly prove hostile, but a superior authority within the Church structure, they have opened up a space for the conflict to be resolved internally. One prays that the authorities within the Archdiocese of Goa will recognize this opportunity and respond appropriately, and create systemic change rather than leaving room for a conflict that we can ill afford.



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