

# *A Scandalous Education*



*by Hilary Walker*

BEING A CATHOLIC was no fun. My country's national religion was Church of England—I was in a minority, even though the word catholic means universal. Mass was in Latin, hardly a universal language. Unlike my Protestant counterparts, I had to go every Sunday and behave myself during the week. Yuck! At age nineteen, I missed Sunday Mass and waited for God's thunder bolts to get me.

No lightning struck and I stopped practising my faith. In later years I couldn't have children and wasn't surprised at God's punishment. But when he took away my father, I was seriously annoyed - nay, bitter. That was going too far. If God thought I would turn to him in my misery, he had another think coming.

The night Father died, a strange inner voice said, "You're going to have a son." It was rubbish: I forgot it.

I remembered it six months later when I became pregnant. Somehow God was telling me my child was his gift for taking my father: a life for a life. Though still sore, I stopped ranting at him for snatching my parent, and looked forward to motherhood. I knew I was carrying a son.

Well, that changed everything, didn't it? Gratitude for my miracle brought me back to church. Mass was now in English, I could wear jeans, no hat and bare shoulders. "Sweet!" as my ten-year-old would say. Our family trio moved to the States and I happened to join a church where they don't even kneel. The monotonously predictable celebration, which I'd found so stifling when younger, was now enjoyable. My American Catholic family was larger than England's minority group.

But huge scandal was bubbling beneath the surface of the Church, a disgrace that was to prove catholic in its extent. Little did I realise how swiftly my re-found faith was to be tested.

News of sexual misconduct by priests broke spectacularly in the Archdiocese of Boston and elsewhere. Paedophiles and homosexuals had been shuffled from one parish to another to hush up the whole nasty business. The image of the Catholic Church was tarnished.

Our priest, whom I don't wish to identify, was immensely popular. His cha-

risma and sheer hard work built the parish over ten years from a handful to five thousand faithful, for whom a huge church was being built. I thanked God that our spiritual leader was above reproach. I viewed the growing shame of other parishes from a safe distance, mourning the misfortunes of other Catholics and smug in the knowledge that my new community was a haven immune to corruption. It saved my having to examine the issues too closely.

Stupidly I ignored the media van outside as I attended Mass one Sunday in June. Sure enough, the pastor read aloud a letter outlining accusations by a former seminarian of sexual misconduct some thirty years ago. (Thankfully it was not abuse of a minor.) He was placed on administrative leave by our bishop while the allegation was investigated. He protested his innocence and anticipated exoneration. Many of us were in tears as we left the church convinced Our Man was Not Guilty.

Still unwilling to face facts, I decided the charge came from another priest who had been at the seminary with our pastor and was jealous of his popularity. This monster had jumped on the band wagon of religious scandal and seen his chance to do harm.

Although reveling in the revelations, the media was fair enough to point out that our bishop was an example of straight dealing in the matter by immediately setting up a panel to investigate the allegations. Unlike Cardinal Law, who failed to tackle the problem correctly.

I joined other parishioners in wearing the “Support Your Parish Priest” badge, and tying a plastic yellow ribbon round my car aerial. (This, to us Brits, is a very strange custom, but when in America...)

Attendance at Mass the following Sunday was massive. Was this in support of our pastor, even though he wouldn't be there, or were we curious about his locum?

The young substitute employed humour and sensitivity in a homily which earned him a standing ovation.

Turnout of the ‘faithful’ dropped considerably after that, leading to the conclusion that previous vast numbers were indeed due to nosiness, but I continued to attend Mass at my presumed safe refuge, doggedly hoping the whole mess would go away. I'd come back to the Church to find answers, not questions.

Six weeks later we rejoiced when the bishop reinstated our priest and church attendance soared again.

Then the real uproar began. Not one but five students had reported “sexual abuse or misconduct” in the 1960's and 1970's and the investigative team of ten had found the allegations credible. A criminal investigation was even underway. Our bishop was accused of ignoring the panel's findings and making his own decision. So much for straight dealings. So much for our priest's innocence. Was

our bishop no better than Boston's Cardinal Law? His motives in reinstating a possibly guilty man tasted like avarice and cowardice in our mouths.

What were we to think of our spiritual leader now? One allegation could be construed as falsehood. But five?

I was forced to examine my own position. Was I going to leave the Church again, in revulsion that the humans running it turned out to be exactly that - human?

For over thirty years our pastor had built and served our parish. Were those decades wiped out because of previous misdemeanours, and were his inspiring homilies now rendered worthless?

Surely not. And what of Christ's maxim "Let he who is without sin throw the first stone"? Who among us had not misbehaved?

Yet example is the greatest form of leadership. Representing God, the Greatest Good, how can a priest be excused of immorality?

Before the fiasco erupted, our pastor dared make a very unpopular point in a homily: For other religions being good earns rewards on earth; for Catholics, we look for heavenly compensation, and in our mortal state we find God in our suffering. After his reinstatement he behaved like a leader, despite continuing investigation by the police. He told a small group of us that he could not break down after having enjoined us to find God in our suffering. During his agony he sought strength in God. He lived by his own words when it was the hardest thing to do.

A fanfare of trumpet music heralded the opening of our magnificent new church in October. It was packed at each of the four Masses. But were we just curious to see the building?

No: after three months the church is full every Sunday. Our Catholic priest is still under investigation, yet his ordeal has taught us a universal, catholic, truth. We should not expect our leaders to strive alone for perfection and thereby absolve us from the struggle. With God's help, we should seek our inner hero and demand no more from our neighbour than from ourselves, be he priest or president.

**THE END**