TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE

Towards a humble Church

Last week we published the first part of a talk given by the former Master of the Dominicans to priests of the Diocese of Dublin, in which he highlighted the fear and anger caused by the revelations of child abuse. Here, he asks how the Church can rid itself of the clericalism besetting it

Friendship with Jesus – intimacy – means learning to be gentle and lowly of heart. Then we shall find rest for our souls. But if one thinks of the Catholic Church, the first word that springs to mind might not be "humble".

I have given retreats for dioceses in 15 countries since I finished my term as Master of the Dominican Order in 2001. The vast majority of priests and bishops whom I have met are simple and unpretentious people who just wish to serve the people of God. But this personal humility has to be sustained in the teeth of a clerical culture, common to all Christian denominations, which stresses rank and power.

This terrible crisis of sexual abuse is deeply linked to the way that power can corrupt human relationships, which is why it touches all the Churches, even if the Catholic Church happens to have been more in the spotlight recently. Celibacy is not, I believe, the source of the crisis, otherwise it would be the case that Catholic priests have a higher rate of offence, which, it seems, we do not.

We shall only really address this crisis if we learn from Jesus who is "gentle and lowly of heart", and find ways of embodying authority which honour the equal dignity of all the baptised, and cherish the weak and vulnerable. Careful vetting of candidates for the priesthood and child-safety procedures are necessary, but they will not get to the root of the problem.

Every institution always seeks to preserve and augment its power, but the philosopher Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, has traced the genesis of "a culture of control" from the seventeenth century onwards. Society is seen as a mechanism rather than an organism, which needs to be adjusted and manipulated.

Monarchs claimed absolute power even over the Church. Imperial powers took possession of the world; millions of people were enslaved and treated as commodities. Once society has ceased to believe in God's gentle providential government of the world, then the state must take his place and impose its will. This culture of power is perhaps one reason for the widespread abuse of children in our society. The Church, alas, has often been infected by this same culture of control. This happened partly because the Church has for centuries struggled to defend itself against the powers of this world who want to take it over. From the Roman Empire at the time of its birth until the Communist empires of the twentieth century, the Church has fought to keep hold of its own life, and often ended up by mirroring what it opposed.

> Painfully, the Lord is demolishing our clerical pretensions to grandeur so that the Church may be a place where we may encounter God more intimately

We will not have a Church which is safe for the young until we learn from Christ and become again a humble Church in which we are all equal children of the one Father and authority is never oppressive.

At the end of the Middle Ages, the priesthood was in crisis. It was unable to respond to the challenges of a new world of widespread literacy. The parish clergy were poorly educated, sometimes barely able to celebrate the Mass, often living with concubines. The response to this crisis led to an extraordinary renewal of the priesthood, with a new spirituality, new seminaries, a more profound theological formation, a new strict discipline. Without this, the Church would have found it hard to survive the rise of Protestantism.

But this Tridentine understanding of priesthood is in its turn showing signs of crisis, of which the sexual abuse scandal is just a symptom. Its stiff clericalism and authoritarianism, unsurprising perhaps in the context of our past battles, do not help the Church now to thrive and be a sign of God's friendship for humanity. And so we need a new culture of authority, from the Vatican to the parish council, which lifts people up into the mystery of loving equality, which is the life of the Trinity.

Crises are not to be feared. It is through repeated crises that God drew closer to his people. Israel's worst crisis was the destruction of the Temple and the monarchy, and exile to Babylon ... Israel lost everything that gave her identity: her worship, her nationhood. Then she discovered God closer to her than ever before. God was present in the law, in their mouths and hearts, wherever they were, however far from Jerusalem. They lost God only to receive him more closely than they could have imagined.

Then that difficult cross-grained man, Jesus, turned up, breaking the beloved law, eating on the Sabbath, touching the unclean, hanging out with prostitutes. He seemed to smash all that they loved, the very way that God was

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present in their lives. But that was only because God wished to be present even more intimately, as one of us, with a human face. And at every Eucharist, we remember how we had to lose him on the Cross, but again only to receive him more closely, not as a man among us but as our very life.

In the Office of Readings for the first week of Advent, we heard: "For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high; against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan; against all the high mountains, and against all the lofty hills, against every high tower, and against every fortified wall" (Isaiah 2:12-15).

But this was so that God could dwell again in the midst of his humbled people: "Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory there will be a canopy. It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain" (Isaiah 4:5-6).

Painfully, the Lord is demolishing our high towers and our clerical pretensions to glory and grandeur so that the Church may be a place in which we may encounter God and each other more intimately.

Jesus promises rest for our souls. Often we priests are consumed by a destructive activism in our service of the people. Indeed, this crisis of sexual abuse may aggravate the temptation to show that we at least are wonderful priests incessantly devoted to our work, always available on our mobile phones. That is salvation by works and not by grace.

Thomas Merton believed that this hyperactivism was a collusion with the violence of our society: "The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation in violence."

If we let this implicit violence infect our lives, then it will come out somehow. It may overflow into violent words. We may do violence to ourselves through drink. We may fall into sexual violence, and be caught in the horror of abuse of the vulnerable.

So if we face this terrible crisis of sexual abuse with courage and faith, then it may precipitate a profound renewal of the Church. We can discover Jesus' commandments not as a heavy burden which crushes people but as the invitation to his friendship. We can be liberated from harmful ways of using power in the Church, which are ultimately rooted in secularism, and become more like the Christ who was lowly and humble of heart, and we shall find rest for our souls.

■ Timothy Radcliffe is a Dominican of Blackfriars Hall, Oxford.

DAVID BLAIR

'Al-Qaeda is looking for new havens, and Yemen may be its favoured alternative to Pakistan'

The young Nigerian who came close to destroying an airliner on Christmas Day appears to have been remarkably cooperative with his American interrogators. Hardly had Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab been bundled off Flight 253, with nothing to show for his efforts but third-degree burns on his left leg, than vital details about his background emerged. He appears to have lived in Yemen after gaining a degree in mechanical engineering from University College London in 2008. The working hypothesis is that he was coached on how to make an explosive device capable of passing through airport security during this stay in one of the Arab world's poorest and most troubled countries.

His time in Yemen provides the hardest evidence to date of a crucial change in the modus operandi of terrorism inspired by al-Qaeda. Once, Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province was the epicentre of this threat, with seven lawless tribal areas serving as the unofficial headquarters for al-Qaeda's core leadership. In the last two years, however, increasingly effective counter-measures have been taken. Pakistan's army has mounted a series of offensives against al-Qaeda and their Taliban allies, while missile attacks launched from unmanned drones controlled by the CIA have devastated the network.

In the last year or so, these strikes from Predator drones have become almost daily occurrences. One of President Barack Obama's first decisions was to escalate the attacks and devote more effort to identifying targets. America has not disclosed its estimate of how many senior al-Qaeda figures have died as a result. But figures compiled by the Pakistani authorities suggest that 14 al-Qaeda leaders have been killed in 60 drone attacks carried out on Pakistan's territory between January 2006 and April 2009.

John Brennan, who serves as Mr Obama's senior counter-terrorism adviser, says that al-Qaeda's core leaders have been reduced to doing little but keeping their heads down and "staying out of harm's way". Abdulmutallab's attempt to bring down Flight 253, however, suggests another vital trend: al-Qaeda is looking for new havens, and Yemen may have become its favoured alternative to Pakistan.

All the conditions that al-Qaeda would look for are present in Yemen. The country's central government under President Ali Abdullah Saleh does not control all the national territory. Large areas, particularly along the rugged northern border with Saudi Arabia, are beyond the reach of the state. The Middle East's ossified leaders cannot claim many successes, but most of them are able to govern every inch of their countries. In fact, the usual problem is an over-centralised state, rather than the reverse. Yemen is the exception: it possesses an abundance of what diplomats call "ungoverned space".

The country also meets al-Qaeda's second condition: Yemen is wracked by unrest. For the last five years, the Houthis in the northern province of Sa'dah have been in rebellion against Mr Saleh's government. The causes of this insurgency, which has recently escalated and forced tens of thousands to flee their homes, lie in Yemen's thicket of clan and religious rivalries. Since winning power in 1978, Mr Saleh has concentrated power in his own hands and those of his clan. The Houthis deeply resent their exclusion. Moreover, they come from Zaydi sect of Shia Islam and allegedly benefit from weapons and cash supplied by Iran's Shia regime.

Al-Qaeda may now be exploiting this insurgency for its own purposes. Saudi Arabia's brutally effective campaign against terrorist cells inside its own borders has forced some senior al-Qaeda operatives to flee to Yemen. The kingdom has duly intervened in the fighting inside its neighbour, launching air strikes on Yemeni territory and sending its army to fight Houthi rebels along the border. Saudi Arabia clearly believes that a combination of al-Qaeda and the Houthi insurgency could lead to the birth of a dangerous mini-state, dominated by terrorists, on its southern frontier.

Yemen is doubly vulnerable because it is the Middle East's poorest country, with a population of about 30 million and scarcely any oil or natural gas. Al-Qaeda's leaders may have concluded that Yemen is a country ripe for subversion. The question is whether the West can respond without making the situation even worse. The precedents are not encouraging.

■ David Blair is Middle East and Africa news editor of the *Financial Times*.