

Report on the Findings from OMC Sex Abuse Focus Group #1

Moderated and Reported by John Tarquinio

The focus group was conducted on Tuesday evening, December 11, in the OMC Parish Hall. The fourteen participants represented a broad cross section of active OMC parishioners, with nine women and five men ranging in age from mid-twenties to 75+. All of the participants had at least some Catholic school education and most of them had or were currently sending their children to Catholic schools. Within the group, several were members of various OMC-related admin and oversight committees, such as the Parish Council and the Finance Committee. In early '19, we plan to do a focus group with inactive OMC parishioners who still identify as Catholic and a third one with people who have left the Catholic Church and no longer consider themselves Catholic.

The purpose of the focus group was to discover the participants' perceptions and emotions regarding the current Church crisis triggered by the sex abuse scandal. The focus group lasted about two hours, running over the original 90-minute schedule because of the keen interest of the participants in continuing the discussion. The discussion was divided into three general subjects:

- 1.) The causes and symptoms of the current Church crisis.
- 2.) Assessment of Church leadership
- 3.) Action steps that could be taken at OMC in response to the crisis.

I should note that the participants' stinging criticisms of the Church hierarchy and clergy do not include parish governance and parish life at OMC. Everyone has the highest regard for Father Bob, Sister Christine and the Church staff. In many respects, people feel that OMC is a special protected place that manages to authentically serve the needs of the parishioners. Most of the participants agreed that because it is an order parish, it can maintain a certain distance from the problems of Archdiocesan parishes.

Causes and Symptoms

Participants were asked to rank how extreme the Church crisis is on a scale of 0-10, with 10 representing extreme crisis comparable to or worse than the Reformation. They unanimously ranked it as a 10, with a few saying it was even beyond a 10. They were asked to list and discuss the causes and the symptoms of the crisis. Here is a sampling of verbatim comments during this part of the discussion:

- “I see qualities of mind-numbing arrogance in the hierarchy and the priests and the complicity of the laity who have been willing to accept this for a very long time.”
- “I don’t know if you can point a finger at any one person. This (the sex abuse scandal) comes from years of malpractice and it’s not just the hierarchy. It’s bigger than that.”
- “In my entire Catholic adult life, you were supposed to accept the way things are, not to think or question.”
- “We were raised to respect the priests and never tell them what we don’t like or ask what is really going on.”
- “We believed that because they had given up marriage, children and wealth that they had a special virtue. But it means that they live in an unreal world.”
- “Their arrogance more than celibacy is the real problem. It’s actually harder to be married. Celibacy allows you to order your own life according to your own wishes. I didn’t recognize the reality of this until I had babies.”
- “You can’t zero in on celibacy. The arrogance and the clericalism have never been resolved and people are tired of it. I notice attendance at OMC started to thin this past summer because some people think nothing is ever going to change.”
- The fundamental problem is the homogeneity of the hierarchy. There are too many alike people – they are all old white men. Like any organization, it has become a good old boy network. This breeds problems.”
- “There is a lack of transparency and because of that, I’m not giving money to the Church because I don’t know where it goes.”
- “People began drifting away from the Church around the time of Vatican II. The laity was given the opportunity to think for

- themselves and not continue to go to church out of fear. The hierarchy was not able to deal with people thinking for themselves and lay people were disappointed by how the hierarchy responded to Vatican II.”
- “What turned me off the Church in my 20’s was its dictatorial approach to everything. I stayed away until my mid-30’s, when I got married.”
 - “The problem is that the hierarchy of the Church for almost 2000 years has never thought about its own structure, which is monarchical.”
 - “There has been a conservative pushback to Vatican II. We need to push for meaningful, real participation of the laity. This will be very hard to do and will take generations. We are angry because of the extent of the damage to the Church and its reputation.”
 - “Sex abuse is a result of a twisted sense of power over an innocent. I struggle about leaving the Church.”
 - “The archdiocese is so hypocritical in the way it treats homosexuality. It’s ridiculous to say there are no homosexuals in the clergy...or to say you can’t be a Catholic and also be a homosexual in a relationship with someone.”
 - “I stay because I believe it is a gift given to me. But my children are different.”
 - “My husband refuses to go to mass anymore. I am so furious, I don’t know if I can keep going and I don’t know if I can keep giving. My children ask me questions about what’s happening in the Church and when I try to answer, they think I’m crazy to still be Catholic. None of my friends who were raised Catholic are practicing Catholics. I feel like I’m slogging alone.”
 - “None of my friends or their children are practicing anymore. I’m not here to pray to Chaput or the hierarchy. I’m here to worship God. Now parents have to explain to their children the talk of sex abuse that they hear in church.”
 - “I went to a therapist because I was having so much trouble still believing because of the sex abuse.”
 - “I differentiate between my faith and my Church. I don’t want my money to go to any bishop. I make out every check to the block collection.”
 - “We don’t know where the dollars go. To the defense fund? I don’t want it to go there.”

- “The Church has all these membership rules, like about divorce and remarriage. There are too many rules about what makes a good Catholic. The hierarchy makes up these rules, like marrying a non-Catholic. That’s okay, but marrying a non-practicing Catholic is not.”

When asked to make a list of the symptoms of crisis as distinct from the causes, the group compiled and agreed with the following list of attributes of each:

Symptoms:

- Sex abuse
- The cover-up
- Lack of transparency
- Monarchical and hierarchical structure
- More than a millennium of the same or similar structure
- Teachings about clerical authority
- Clericalism
- Money

Causes:

- Power relationship of clergy to laity
- Power relationship of hierarchy to laity
- Bishops afraid of the Curia
- Vow of diocesan priests’ loyalty to their bishop
- Money

Views on Church Leadership

It was clear in the prior discussion that the group unanimously perceives the American bishops, as a collective body, to be incompetent and often corrupt. So, to start the next section, I mentioned that the Pope has referred to the role of the Church as a field hospital for a broken, suffering world. I asked if the participants understood what that meant. I also asked if they thought Pope Francis was an effective leader.

- “If you’re wounded, the Roman Catholic Church is not a place people would turn to now.”

- “The image of a ‘field hospital’ is a troubling, enigmatic phrase. A field hospital is just a temporary refuge, then you move on. But to where?”
- “If people are hurt by the Church, are they going to the Church to be healed?”
- “I liked it. It meant you didn’t have to be or do anything special to be helped. You were wounded and that was enough. I think Francis was on a roll until this past summer.”
- “I am thrilled with the bishops Francis has appointed. He is inspirational but he is incomplete as a leader.”
- “He inherited a mess.”
- “I’m impressed with his simple lifestyle. A lot of things he does set a positive example. His actions and words tell me he is a really good man.”
- “We don’t know yet if he will turn out to be a good leader.”

OMC Action Steps

In the listing of Symptoms and Causes, the focus group clearly determined that the fundamental cause of the current Church crisis is the power relationship of the clergy and bishops toward the laity. Most of the focus participants agreed that the OMC Sex Abuse Committee should have a much broader scope than sex abuse and that it would be appropriate to give it a more suitable name. They also want the Committee to stay focused on programs and initiatives within the OMC parish rather than linking itself to other reformist organizations. When asked to identify specific action steps they want the Committee to undertake, these were some of the comments:

- “I think we need the committee to keep our parish from bleeding people, to help our parishioners keep their faith and improve attendance. That would be a great goal.”
- “We need to help families address faith issues. To let them know why we still care about the Church. Maybe to provide psychological counseling using the social worker who conducted the parish open forum earlier in the year. She said she would be available to help. “
- “We need to show people that we want to know what they think and experience.”

- “This is a terrific parish because Bob Bazzoli is open to new ideas and initiatives. We have to change our mentality and say, ‘This is MY church,’ and he will give the power to try new things.”
- “We should investigate how to set up a channel for parishioners to make donations directly to the parish without any of it going to the archdiocese.”
- “If we can prove that we are a parish trying to do something about the Church in crisis, word travels fast. We could bring new parishioners into OMC if we had that reputation.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

The focus group participants generally came to consensus on every subject under discussion. They are bewildered, sad, angry, defiant but loyal to the OMC parish and fired up to see changes made. All of them believe they represent the majority of the parish and say that many other people would join an OMC Church renewal effort. They view the parish as an excellent place to experiment with different ways to achieve very parish-centric goals. The most important of these are:

- To create a forum in which parishioners can share their outrage and their hurt and travel together to personal and Church renewal. Everyone agreed that they often or most times feel like they are going through this crisis alone and they have no one to talk with about it. They need to be with other like-minded people to express their feelings and also their ideas for change.
- To help parishioners from falling away from the Church. The focus group participants are very concerned about declining attendance and contributions at OMC. If that trend continues, they fear it will become a self-reinforcing downward spiral that will make remaining parishioners even more discouraged. They want to see the committee develop ways to deal with this exodus, such as parishioner-to-parishioner counseling or maybe testimonials of people who have remained in the Church instead of dropping out and/or returned to the Church after dropping out.
- To identify ways to keep more of parishioner contributions in the parish and less (or none) going to the archdiocese. The focus group attendees obviously hold the archdiocese in very low

regard and believe the only way to make the Archbishop pay attention to the wants and needs of the laity is to cause a significant drop in revenue. Because the Archbishop is of retirement age this coming summer, they do have hope that Pope Francis will appoint a more pastoral and lay-friendly successor.

- To create a strategy for communicating the wants and needs of the laity to those who will influence the choice of successor archbishop. This will require research and a sophisticated outreach to those influencers. But if Philadelphia does not get an archbishop who is aligned with Pope Francis in style and substance, there could be dire consequences for the OMC parish and for the whole Catholic community of Philadelphia. On the other hand, the right archbishop could be an inflection point where the Philadelphia Church stops its decline and begins its renewal.
- To educate the parish on what it means for each parishioner to be a renewal change agent. Most of the focus group participants were inspired by the expanded role of the laity envisioned by Vatican II. They feel that this role never developed because of implicit opposition from the bishops and their refusal to change any aspect of Church governance or lack of transparency. Almost everyone sees the current crisis as the wake-up moment for the laity in which the laity saves the Church through individual and group actions for change and renewal. There is a broad understanding that the bishops have severely damaged the Church in many ways and now is the moment for the laity to chart a path to renewal.

**The underlined items reflect the broad areas for action favored by the focus group; the text without underlines reflects my contextual conclusions or observations.*