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Cleansing and re-inventing the Catholic Church: Let the sisters lead

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Bishop Ronald Gainer, of the Harrisburg Diocese, arrives to celebrate mass at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Harrisburg, Pa., on Aug. 25. Gainer, who's named in a grand jury report on rampant sexual abuse by Roman Catholic priests in the diocese, says the Vatican expresses "shame and sorrow" over the burgeoning scandal.

My Franciscan schooling in Malaysia is one of the building blocks of my Catholic faith that I most cherish, next to everything I learned from my mother's example. Both the Franciscan nuns, and my mother, had little time for blind adherence to rules, not because they were disrespectful of

church authority, but because they were drawn to the higher authority of the Gospel as it spoke to their heads and their hearts. We need that fidelity to a higher authority in these times of anguish as we read — again — what bishops and cardinals did for decades, to protect the assets and image of the church.

Once again we learn that bishops concealed and enabled predatory priests, and used church monies to silence victims instead of reporting criminals to civil authorities. Once again, we are confronted with the evidence that protecting the institution from “scandal” was more important than protecting thousands of innocents preyed upon by repeat offenders.

How can people still in the pews endure this replay? What can we hope for? What should the church do?

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, representing 80 percent of nearly 50,000 women religious in the nation, has called on church leaders to “implement plans immediately to support more fully the healing of all victims of clergy abuse, hold abusers accountable, and work to uncover and address the root causes of the sexual abuse crisis.” But will they?

Franciscan ecumenical teacher, Father Richard Rohr tells us that “Francis of Assisi was a master of making room for the new and letting go of that which was tired or empty.” There is plenty that is tired and empty in the Catholic Church. It needs to recognize women as equals, stop treating LGBTQ Catholics as second-class Catholics and end the discriminatory treatment of LGBTQ employees. And let’s be done with mandatory celibacy. What purpose does this medieval invention serve, other than to attract sexually immature men, vulnerable to being abused, and to becoming abusers themselves?

But first: the church needs to repent. The theologian Marcus Borg writes that “To repent is to embark on a journey of return to God — a journey that is also with God.” Not a journey with lawyers who can hide assets and public relations practitioners who can gloss the despicable.

We are heartsick. We do not want to validate the inexcusable by returning to the pews only to be met by a deafening silence from the pulpit. This parade, yet again, of the sins of too many clerics who were able to prey on children, protected by their collar, and when needed, by their Chancery, leaves us poorer in every way.

The forced disclosures of the failures of church leaders raise

serious questions about how the Catholic church's good works of education, healing, and service to the marginalized continue. And they cast a terrible pall over faithful priests.

The Pennsylvania report raises the obvious question: What don't we yet know about Asia and Africa and South America where the church holds great sway — where poverty makes the laity even more vulnerable?

It is time for the Vatican to turn to the women religious to save the church. The late Father Tissa Balasuriya of Sri Lanka, once excommunicated for his teachings, including calling out the church's role in colonialism, would support such an idea. He advocated for full recognition of women in the church, and described Mary as "the first priest of the New Testament."

American women religious have shown both strength and grace in weathering an unwarranted Vatican investigation that dragged on for seven years. Who better to lead the cleansing and reinvention of a church that seems to have lost its way?

Dawn Webster is a communications consultant and issues advocate in Honolulu.

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