

John Menadue – Pearls and Irritations



MASSIMO FAGGIOLI. Reform or Dismantle? Why We Need to Keep the Institutions that Keep Us.

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One of the effects of the sex-abuse crisis is the current moment of institutional iconoclasm—the temptation to get rid of the institutional element of the Catholic Church. The failures of the church’s institutions are now on full display, even more so than after the revelations of the Spotlight investigation. It is hypocritical, however, to interpret the abuse crisis as a clerical abuse crisis rather than a Catholic abuse crisis. Obviously, the clergy had a unique role in the crisis, but the moral and legal responsibilities do not belong exclusively to those wearing a Roman collar. We are still reluctant to acknowledge the systemic nature of this crisis as something that affected the entire Catholic world and not just its ordained ministers. We would like to contain it neatly within the hierarchy so as to exempt ourselves from the burden of critical self-reflection.

American Catholicism has not yet found its way out of the blame game for the abuse crisis. One sees this on both sides of the ideological spectrum. [Recent attempts to use the crisis as a pretext for abolishing the priesthood](#) are just a liberal version of conservative attempts to blame sexual abuse on gays or the sixties. All such strategies spare lay Catholics the bother of having to ask “What did *I* do wrong?” The abuse itself damaged the lives of the victims and their families, friends, and communities. Now, the shortcomings of our response to the abuse crisis—our failure to deal with its root causes—is causing another kind of damage. When prominent scholars of Catholicism publicly display [their “disgust” for Catholicism](#), it is clear that the abuse crisis has blurred the line between an ecclesially engaged Catholic *theology* and the more dispassionate, agnostic *religious studies* of Catholicism. The abuse crisis has produced two kinds of counter-evangelization: first, the counter-evangelization of the hierarchical church, whose example scandalizes the faithful and repels outsiders; second, the counter-evangelization of those who have used this crisis to self-righteously declare their liberation from what they describe as a morally corrupt institution. There is a prefabricated quality to at least some of these declarations. They seem less like honest reckonings with new information than shrewdly timed expressions of old resentments. There will always be an appreciative audience for “Why I Left” pieces.

The narrative on the abuse crisis that tends toward dualism—a good laity abused or duped by bad clergy—challenges key elements of Catholicism, and not only the ordained priesthood, though that is its most visible target. Recent developments at two Catholic high schools in Indianapolis have led some Catholics to ask whether it is time to silence the teaching ministry of the bishops. And one could add more targets of this wave of institutional iconoclasm: the Vatican, the bishops’ conference, religious orders, academic theology. Some seem to think the only way to save the Catholic faith is to tear down all the institutions of the Catholic Church and start from scratch.

Many seem to be forgetting the old principle *abusus non tollit usum*—the misuse of something is no argument against its proper use. They are forgetting this not only with respect to the institutional church but also with respect to other institutions—the judiciary, regulatory

agencies, international organizations. If only spotless institutions deserve our support, then we will soon end up not supporting any institutions, secular or religious.

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This is not just about celibacy or the priesthood, which do not necessarily go together, as the example of the Eastern Catholic Churches reminds us. And the question is not whether we want or need to change *structures*: these have changed in the past and may need to change again—for some of them, change is long overdue. The papal office, for example, is one of the ministries that has proven most mutable and adaptive to historical circumstances. It does not look the same in every age.

No, the real question is whether we still believe that the church needs *institutions*. Because there is a difference between structures and institutions. Structures are juridically regulated; the rules governing their existence, maintenance, reform, or destruction are different from the rules for institutions. The papacy relies on structures to act, but the papacy itself is an institution. So are the priesthood, family, marriage, schools. All these institutions undergo continual transformations to meet new needs. They are resilient to the degree they are adaptive.

Institutions permeate all dimensions of social life, and they are the context that makes most of our norms intelligible. Some of them involve juridical structures with formal, legal power. But others don't. Some institutions are just daily patterns of behavior and action, cooperation and communication; we are hardly aware of them most of the time. They structure our experience in ways we often take for granted. Indeed, we often become aware of the institutions we depend on only when they suddenly seem at odds with our society's cult of individualism. Institutions can survive with their character intact even when some of their members do not follow the common pattern. They can tolerate exceptions to their own rules—they are the stronger for being flexible, not rigid—but they cannot function without rules of some kind, official or unofficial.

We keep institutions because institutions keep us. On the other hand, institutions need change. Sometimes they are outdated and the lack of maintenance can create—indeed has created in the past—human suffering. And yes, some institutions, such as slavery, do need to be abolished. It is worth noting, though, that even abolished institutions often persist or return in some other form. Chattel slavery, for example, is a thing of the past in the developed world, but human trafficking is not.

The attacks against some institutions signal a moral and cultural emergency. The anti-vax movement signals a crisis for medicine and science more generally. The military, meanwhile, remains an institution above scrutiny for most of America's political elites. (The quickest way to get yourself written off as a crank in Washington is to recommend that we spend *less* money on national defense.) The relations between the government and the economy are influenced by institutions (lobbies, think tanks, multinational corporations) that are largely unaccountable to the public. Something similar is happening in the Catholic Church, where old institutions, such as seminaries, are losing legitimacy, while newer institutions, [such as EWTN](#), are on the rise.

The fact is that every community has institutions, more or less supported by juridical structures. And every community needs authorities that can regulate its institutions. Pope Francis is sometimes portrayed as an anti-institutionalist, but while some of the changes he has proposed challenge the rigid legalism of the Catholic right, he is not interested in dismantling the church's institutions. He wants to make them serve their purposes better, not get rid of them. His is not the anti-institutional Catholicism that appeared in Europe and America in the late-1960s and 1970s. Francis is less interested in the conflict between the institutional church and individual freedom than in the conflict between the rich church and the church of the poor and marginalized. He understands that one cannot simultaneously ask for the church to stand up for the rights of the poor and immigrants, and also embrace the

rage that would demolish all the church's institutions. Catholicism, after all, is not just a set of doctrines, texts, and intellectual traditions. It has survived by establishing institutions that could survive the vicissitudes of history, allowing it to contend with empires, nations, and hostile ideologies equipped with their own institutions. It is naïve, at best, to imagine that Catholicism as a system of belief could thrive without healthy Catholic institutions.

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Two signs of a growing institutional illiteracy in the church are the inability of some Catholics to deal with the distinction between the pope and the “pope emeritus” and the divisions around liturgical reform. These examples both demonstrate that institutional illiteracy is not without consequences on the real life of the ecclesial community. The price of hastily dismantling institutions or breezily dismissing them is an acceleration toward what Anthony Godzieba has called “[brand Catholicism](#),” which causes significant damage both to the Catholic individual and to the community. Brands have short lives and tend to respond more easily to the logic of the market than to the church's internal logic. The division of Catholicism into various brands—liberal, progressive, conservative, traditionalist—fosters a spirit of zero-sum competition rather than communion.

In *True and False Reform in the Church*, Yves Congar wrote very beautifully of a holiness and truth that are institutional in the sense that they precede and form the personal life of the Church's individual members. (It is somewhat ironic that, not long after writing this book, he was targeted by the Holy Office.) Two decades later, after Vatican II, Avery Dulles wrote critically of Catholic institutionalism in *Models of the Church*, but he also defended the necessity of institutions. Since then, there has been a tremendous loss of confidence in the institutions of the church, largely—but not only—because of the sex-abuse scandal. No one can seriously doubt that the church's institutions are in need of structural reform, but some have grown impatient with reform; what they want is to scrap the institutions altogether. If that were to happen, then the nature of Catholicism would change. The collapse of the authority of the Catholic episcopate is evident. But could the Catholic Church survive without bishops? The “ministry of oversight” (*episkopé*) is, despite its obvious failures and need of structural changes, common to various Christian communities and it plays an important part in ecumenical dialogue.

Getting rid of the episcopate will not solve the problem of an ecclesial community in need of *episkopé*. Nor will abolishing the priesthood eliminate our need for the sacraments. Closing down the Vatican will not help the church speak with Petrine authority on the most pressing issues for the church and the world in our times.

When Jesus called his disciples, he started a process of institution building. At Vatican II and in the post-Vatican II period, the rediscovery of the church *as a community* meant that its institutions had to be reconceived and reformed, so that the tail did not wag the dog. Conciliar theology was well aware of the dangers posed by institutions that outlive their original purpose. But today there is a danger that an indiscriminate skepticism toward institutions has blinded us to their necessity, and left them to be appropriated by people with no scruples about abusing institutional power to get their way. If Vatican II Catholics, disgusted and embarrassed by the failures of the hierarchy, abandon or neglect the institutions of the church, then those who remain bitterly opposed to Vatican II and eager to undo its work will be all too happy to take those institutions over.

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