

Help, St. Anthony: Another shipwreck averted

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

As I write, it is morning on the feast of St. Anthony of Padua, the patron saint of poor people and shipwreck victims and the finder of lost objects. It is June, the month of the Sacred Heart. The Catholic bishops have just begun their annual meeting in Dallas, with the media's floodlights upon them as they set out to create a national policy for dealing with the scandal of sexual abuse by priests and cover-up by bishops. On behalf of his fellow bishops, Bishop Wilton Gregory has delivered a frank and passionate mea culpa and call to arms, affirming beyond any doubt the commitment to reform, accountability and "transparency." Acknowledging that the media performed a service by bringing the scandal to light, he has asked the media to earn the public's trust by refraining from "hysterical and distorted" coverage. R. Scott Appleby, director of the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at the University of Notre Dame, and Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, editor of *Commonweal*, have emphasized the need for greater lay involvement in the administration of the Catholic Church. As I write, the meetings continue with testimony from victim survivors of clergy sexual abuse, testimony that is almost too painful to hear.

It is a remarkable moment in the history of American Catholicism, a *kairos*. The Holy Spirit must be up to something, but it may take a decade or more to discern what that something is. Complete overhaul of the structures that tolerated clergy sexual abuse is a certainty; yet the wider effect of such an overhaul, and of the soul-searching it entails, is only beginning to come into view.

Part of that soul-searching is a quest for explanations. Some have observed that the scandal would never have happened if Catholic teachings had been followed, and of course this is true. But no single explanation does justice to the pervasive pathology of it all. It is more than the perennial problem of infidelity. There must have been a shared delusion, a miasma drifting down the corridors of the Catholic Church and settling in corners where complacency and secrecy allowed it to thrive.

What was the source of this miasma? It is hard to avoid the suspicion that it may have come from the culture itself, a culture that had cut itself loose from its ethical moorings. Those of us who came of age in the '60s and '70s know this miasma well, for it curled its smoky trail through the decades in which we grew up. We were idealistic and would do almost anything to avoid causing suffering, but we were certain of only one thing: that we had to make up our own standards as we went along. By a curious casuistry, we exempted from ethical scrutiny any conduct that had no obvious victim. Our way seemed more compassionate than the old puritanical rules, yet unwittingly it generated great harm—divorce, AIDS, abortion, a growth industry in child pornography, the creation of isolated subcultures that have distorted our common life, countless casualties from drugs, despair, loneliness and *anomie*. Here is where our much-vaunted freedom landed us. We were like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, “We piped and you did not dance” (Luke 7:32). We did not realize that it would be children who would suffer most from this childishness, for when a society’s innocence is willfully destroyed, the first victims are its innocent young.

It seems ironically fitting that the institution which has been criticized for its uncompromising sexual ethic should provide the arena in which the harm brought by violation of that ethic would be made transparently obvious. The church is an image of heaven, but it is also a microcosm of the world, and if we can see clearly what’s wrong with the church, it may help us to see dimly what’s wrong with the world.

In a parable that used to make the rounds of Christian retreat centers, a group of explorers gets hopelessly lost until one of them chances to find a map in his pocket. Following the map, they walk to safety, only to discover that they have been using the wrong map. The moral is that any map will do as long as one feels one is getting somewhere. But the story is off the mark; any map *won't* do, for different maps lead to different places. Our choices matter. The any-map-will-do paradigm is worn out, finished, and not a moment too soon.

The other paradigm that is finished is us-versus-them. The notion that the Catholic Church is run by an old-boys club which will do anything to keep laypeople from having a say has been put to rest, one hopes, by Dallas. The notion of the laity as alienated and powerless does not correspond to my own experience or that of any practicing Catholics of my acquaintance. Greater collaboration will be one of the fruits of this crisis, but there is little to relish in a model of lay activism that blurs the distinct ministries of laypeople and ordained clergy. Rather, it is in Vatican II’s vision

of a symphonic, hierarchically ordered Body of Christ that the hope for renewal lies.

For Catholics there are signs of hope everywhere today, in the young people carrying the World Youth Day cross from Italy to Ground Zero to Alaska to Canada, the labor of good priests, the guidance of good bishops, the flourishing of ordinary parish life, the church's manifold works of justice and mercy, and above all the eucharistic presence of Christ who has promised that the gates of hell shall not prevail. The work of the bishops has just begun, but so far it looks as though St. Anthony has averted another shipwreck.