

# **Sinasac: I'm angry. I'm sickened. But we need to help Church confront its demons**

I am one of those angry and sickened Catholic laity. The torrent of news about the latest revelations of clerical sexual abuse in the United States and elsewhere has left me drowning in frustration and grief.

The Church that I love is hardly recognizable, with so many priests, bishops, even cardinals exposed as sexual predators or their enablers, with so many lay Catholics ashamed even to admit their faith, with so many men and women psychologically, spiritually and emotionally damaged for a lifetime.

What is a layperson to do?



**Joseph Sinasac**

We could walk away. Many have already. We could switch to other denominations for spiritual sustenance – Anglicans, Lutherans or (in Canada) the United Church would welcome us with open arms.

We could retreat into a spiritual quietism, focusing on personal prayer, meditation and Scripture, quiet acts of kindness. I have to admit that last option is most tempting to me.

But being Roman Catholic is not like belonging to a service club such as the Shriners, Moose Lodge or even the Knights of Columbus. Those of us raised

Catholic find there is something in our DNA we cannot dislodge.

Whenever I have prayed in other churches, at weddings, funerals or other special occasions, I have always felt like a guest. It's nice there, but it is not my home.

For better or worse, I remain a Catholic. I cannot walk away. I have stayed within the fold through more than three decades of working as a journalist, often covering the sex abuse crisis as it erupted through the 80s, 90s and the early 2000s.

Even though I recognize there has been some progress, it never gets easier to accept.

The other morning, I went into St. Michael's Cathedral in Toronto to pray. It was empty and quiet, filled with a beautiful serenity – as so many Catholic churches are.

Our religious architecture continues to remind me that we are best when we gather together to express our common need for the God who loves us. I remain convinced that God is listening there. It may not be the only place where we can find God, but it is the one I know best.

Still, this is not a rationale for meekly allowing our clergy to solve this mess on their own. It is not a rationale for “leaving them to clean up their own mess.” So what is a layperson who remains committed and in love with the church to do?

Pope Francis tells us to participate in a “penitential exercise of prayer and fasting.” and to be in solidarity with those many, many victims of abuse around the world.”

In his Aug. 20 letter to all of us, he wrote:

“Today we are challenged as the People of God to take on the pain of our brothers and sisters wounded in their flesh and in their spirit.”

This is all good. But the entire People of God cannot be held accountable for the sins of the few. And someone has to be held accountable. We can also be angry and make that anger heard.

Other voices have focused on the clericalism identified by the pope as a toxic corruption that fosters a climate of entitlement, superiority and exclusiveness. It is one of the single-most powerful factors perpetuating the evils of sexual abuse, not to mention pride, power-grubbing and suspicion of the laity.

Yet can we expect the clerical caste to reform itself? At no time in history has there been significant reform within the Church without the powerful

influence of outsiders.

The biographies of so many saints tell us otherwise. Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Benedict of Nursia and Catherine of Siena are examples of how the Spirit works through many personalities to guide the Church in uncertain times.

But for the laity to be effective agents of change, it is not enough to shout in righteous anger. There has to be recognition by the Church leaders themselves that they cannot do this on their own.

They need to go beyond the halting steps attempted so far to create meaningful collaboration with laity on confronting those demons that continue to plague us.

In the last few weeks, numerous bishops have expressed their dismay, concern, compassion and even horror at the situation. They rightly point out there has been much progress in the last 40 years.

In Canada, national guidelines to protect minors have been in place since 1992 and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has promised that updated guidelines will be issued this fall.

Cardinal Thomas Collins of Toronto points out that it “conduct(s) criminal background checks as well as extensive screening and testing for all candidates to the priesthood.”

In the United States, similar actions have been taken on a national level. The challenge is often that individual dioceses do not feel constrained to adopt national requirements. Implementation, monitoring and enforcement are spotty. The U.S. Church still awaits a response from the bishops worthy of the current scandal.

The most interesting response has come from bishops in the United Kingdom, who have proposed both a synod on the clergy and a preceding congress that would have broader participation, including from the laity. This is a start.

The success or failure of any such venture hinges on real collaboration with, even leadership from the laity. As Cardinal John Henry Newman famously said in the 19th century when asked who the laity were: “The Church would look foolish without them.”

*Joseph Sinasac is publishing director of Novalis, Canada's largest bilingual publisher. It is known for its missalette Living with Christ. This article was originally published by La Croix International.*