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## From Holy See to Pompano, Church Shrouded in Fog

By Michael Mayo  
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They put on an elaborate but empty show at the Vatican last week, the ossified pope and his American lieutenants more concerned with damage control than with the victims of predatory priests. Pope John Paul II expressed "solidarity and concern" with the sexually abused but never got around to saying the simple words, "We're sorry."

The cardinals batted around some proposals about dealing with the criminals in their midst, but didn't reach a consensus. Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, who should have resigned long ago for accountability and decency's sake, still has his archdiocese. And the issue of celibacy was tabled before the clerics met, as if it had nothing to do with the crisis the Catholic Church faces.

Now the leadership tries to split hairs about the demarcation line between "notorious" priests who are serial abusers and "non-notorious" priests. As if it matters how many kids you molest before you are defrocked and sent to jail. As if broken vows and shattered trust were meaningless.

Catholics should be debating everything now, from the way priests are asked to conduct their lives to why superiors too eagerly hid crimes and shuffled bad apples to unsuspecting parishes. But you wonder, after the headlines fade, how much will really change.

"I don't want to pass judgment on anybody," Eddie Cruz said last week, clutching a Bible outside San Isidro Catholic Church in Pompano Beach. "I've been praying hard."

If you want to see the church in its confused, battered, yet hopeful condition, all you have to do is visit San Isidro. It stands in towering white behind trimmed green hedges, its cylindrical glass steeple rising high above a pristine campus.

The other morning, a maintenance man swept a sidewalk. There is dirt here.

Some of it shows the church at its worst. Some of it shows the outside world behaving just as badly, the make-a-buck crowd apparently exploiting the current climate without regard to the reputations they besmirch.

For the past few years, the Rev. Salvatore Miraglia celebrated Sunday Mass at San Isidro. When he stopped showing up a few weeks ago, parishioners didn't get an explanation. They did when they picked up the paper last week.

According to Newsday, Miraglia left his Long Island parish in 1982 after a complaint alleging he asked teens to disrobe. Law enforcement officials are investigating.

"I'm sorry to see him go," said Cruz, 55, of Margate. "He did a lot of good. He was a spiritual man."

Then there's the case of the Rev. Ricardo Castellanos. Last week, a Coral Gables family filed a civil suit alleging he molested their son in the 1970s. The son died in 1993. The Archdiocese of Miami says it has a signed affidavit from him denying the claims.

A lawsuit based on hearsay that contradicts a dead man who swore he wasn't a victim? And no other

alleged victims emerging to join the suit? You just knew South Florida would emerge from the muck with a sleazy new angle.

"People know the church has money," said Bob Thornton, a winter resident of Lauderdale-by-the-Sea who has worshipped at San Isidro for eight years. "And now they're going to come after it. ... Father Ricardo is a wonderful priest. If there were more like him, the world would be a better place."

Thornton and his wife, Leurenda, have six children, 18 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. None ever had an unsavory experience. Despite the scandals, they trust their priests and still swear by the Catholic Church. They point out that the percentage of bad priests is minuscule, that sexual abuse happens in all walks of life.

"As far as I'm concerned, all the abusers should be put out," Thornton said.

"There should be no tolerance. But I also think things are being overblown. People have been trying to destroy the church for 2,000 years, and it's still here."

But this time the danger is within.

The way the pope hunched over last week, his body wracked by age and Parkinson's, he resembled a giant question mark. It's time the church comes up with better answers.

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