Opinion
Editorial

(OSV News/CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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Toward the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus uses unsparing language in his condemnation of certain religious leaders of his era. He concedes the leaders'

authority, telling the people gathered that they should listen to their leaders' instructions. "But" he adds, "do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice."

He continued: "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen. …They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.' "

That reading comes easily to mind with the recent news from the Diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana, where a permanent deacon who had left the Catholic Church in disgust after his son had been molested by a priest, was notified that he had been excommunicated.

Whatever Bishop Douglas Deshotel was attempting to accomplish — after the deacon had written the prelate about his intent to leave and his reasons for doing so — it was devoid of the humanity of Jesus, who certainly would have wept with the distraught father.

> 'Hypocrites' would be a mild scolding.
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This was a Jesus who went on a tear against religious leaders, calling them hypocrites, vipers and "whitewashed tombs," for their incessant posturing in religious garb, demanding too much of people when they themselves were self-serving and corrupt. Imagine what that Jesus might say to religious leaders of today, what he might say of the cult and culture that for decades hid the sexual abuse of the community's most vulnerable. What might he say of those who protected the perpetrators of crime — transferring them among our communities, knowing children would continue to be harmed — to protect the hierarchical culture. All the while posing as pro-life champions? "Hypocrites" would be a mild scolding.

Scott Peyton (OSV News/Courtesy of Scott Peyton)

In his letter to the bishop, Deacon Scott Peyton wrote, "The pain and suffering endured by the victims [of clergy sexual abuse], our family, and most importantly our son, coupled with what appears to be a systemic failure in addressing and preventing such heinous acts, have left me disillusioned and unable to reconcile my commitment to the Church with my conscience."

In return, Peyton received a notice from Deshotel on the bishop's letterhead and marked with the diocesan seal that acknowledged Petyon's email. It listed the canons (1044 and 1041) under which he had been removed from all ecclesial offices and further declared the former deacon — who had already announced he was leaving both ministry and church — "irregular for the exercise of the sacred order of the diaconate."

Bishop Douglas Deshotel of Lafayette, La. (CNS/Diocese of Dallas)

The bishop also said he would inform the Vatican's Dicastery for Clergy and "await further guidance."

One hopes that the guidance includes a note saying that all the fussing over canons and pronouncements of irregular status and the rest was nonsensical and absurdly unnecessary. It was, to use the words of Jesus, the meanderings of a "blind guide."

The sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church is old news in the sense that the endless tales, numbingly similar, have persisted for decades. While the numbers have diminished, thanks to safeguards forced on diocesan and parish entities as the result of publicity and legal proceedings, the effects of the deep betrayal continue to wear on the community.

Way back in the beginning, after the first national report appeared in National Catholic Reporter in the summer of 1984, one often heard the phrase "they don't get

it" as a way of explaining hierarchical behavior.

The tragic reality, as we've all come to learn, is that they do, indeed, "get it." They get it enough to protect themselves, enough to go to such absurd lengths as to issue declarations of excommunication upon someone who has made it perfectly clear that he's already left and wants nothing more to do with Roman Catholicism. It is a demonstration of how difficult it is to reclaim authority once it is so thoroughly shredded.

It should be noted that Deshotel sent a more personal email note, saying he was "sad" to get Peyton's notice and offering, "Please feel free to call if I can ever be of assistance."

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But the note apparently said little to nothing about Peyton's reasons for leaving. In his notification to the bishop, the deacon wrote, "This decision is not a rejection of my faith in God or my commitment to living a life guided by Christian principles. Instead, it reflects a conscientious objection to the way the Church has handled cases of sexual abuse, and a desire to distance myself from an institution that, currently, falls short of the values it professes."

Too bad the bishop didn't ditch the canonical gibberish and instead send an invitation to a meal so that he could hear more of what Peyton felt, how his son was doing, how his life had changed. An invitation to hear more of his thoughts on what the church and its leaders might do to address what Peyton sees as failures.

Too bad the religious leader didn't simply sit and pray with the deacon whose trust and that of his son had been so deeply betrayed, perhaps shed a tear of remorse and wish him well in his family's efforts to begin "our own healing spiritually."

In this holiest time of year for Catholic Christians, we might keep Deacon Peyton and his family, as well as all victims and perpetrators, in our prayers, as the lamentations of Jesus echo down the centuries.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 12-25, 2024** print issue under the headline: Excommunication in Louisiana lays bare church's hypocrisy.