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### Forum: Crisis in the Church. Do the Bishops Really Know Natural Law?

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## DO THE BISHOPS REALLY KNOW NATURAL LAW?

Eileen P. Flynn

There are several crises in the Catholic Church. The most obvious is the fact that Catholic people are reeling at the extent of sexual molestation of children at the hands of priests and the complicity of bishops who covered up criminal conduct to carry on business as usual. Universities have been described from time to time as “the church thinking,” and I, as a faculty member who accepts the role of thinker, understand that professors should play a part in getting us out of the mess we are in. One contribution I already make in my classroom is to inform students of what transpired and explore with them how this could have happened. The conspiracy of silence is over for them and for me. When they have children of their own they will certainly be more wary than I was as I raised mine. And they will not be naïve, believing that people in authority, like bishops, are automatically entitled to trust based on the office they hold.

While telling the story of the evil that transpired is important, I know that Catholic professors need to go beyond who, what, where and when to break open the why. This is what I would be part of if I were given the opportunity to engage in rigorous examination of the causes of the crisis. I should mention, however, that in recent months at my school, Saint Peter's College, the administration rejected my request for a reduction in my teaching load so that I could write a follow up to my book, *Catholics at a Crossroads: Cover-up, Crisis, and Cure*, which examined the scandal through December 31, 2002. Additionally, the College has not recognized any of the eight op-eds I had published in newspapers in New York, New Jersey, Florida and Illinois from June 2002 through February 2004. This non-recognition consisted in not posting any of my articles on the College website; op-eds of other professors are routinely placed thereon. Consequently, in addressing how I would be part of examining the causes of the crisis, it must be understood that what I write is totally hypothetical as I do not expect support or encouragement for a role I might play in such a project.

In my opinion, a major issue to be addressed is the theoretical substructure of Catholic morality as it exists in natural law philosophy. Catholic authorities

have long taught that sexual morality is a matter of following clear rules derived from natural law. Bishops have maintained that many sexual actions are forbidden by natural law. Lay Catholics have tried to open this area to discussion, asking for dialogue about subjects like artificial contraception and stable, committed gay partnerships. Bishops have countered that there is nothing to talk about, that sexual morality is not open to revision. Unambiguous and uncompromising, bishops can be counted on to staunchly defend the “Catholic” way of deciding what sexual actions are morally right or wrong.

The startling facts that bishops, informed by natural law, clearly did not know how to respond to sexual molestation of children by priests or that it was urgent that they take decisive action cannot be ignored. One could say that the crisis facing the Church today revolves around the fact that bishops did not oppose criminal abuse of minors and did not even reveal the fact that it was happening. How could these leaders, who claim that their way of norming sexual morality is unquestionably correct, have missed the mark so consistently and predictably? Is the problem with the system of natural law or with its spokespersons?

This question cuts to the heart of what needs to be examined and it is a question that should be addressed in the university setting. A conference organized to probe this matter would be a meaningful response to the crisis as it exists at present. The National Review Board did not consider this subject in their report, and the bishops are not likely to bring it up at any of their meetings. Conservative Catholic television takes the adequacy of natural law as a given. Only in an atmosphere governed by academic freedom and open to unencumbered dialogue can progress be made in comprehending what may be lacking in the natural law underpinnings of Catholic sexual morality.

*Eileen Flynn is a theology professor at Saint Peter's College and author of Catholics at a Crossroads: Cover-up, Crisis, and Cure (Paraview Press, 2003).*