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The theology of reparation:

How ordinary Catholics are restoring the Church to holiness

Dear Father Kerper: In recent months, I have read about bishops calling on lay Catholics to do penance in reparation for the sins of bishops and priests. Shouldn't the men in holy orders who committed crimes, covered them up and tolerated grave sins do their own penance? Why pass on punishment to people who had nothing to do with the sins of the hierarchy? This really irks me. I don't understand how any bishop would ask lay people to pay the price for scandals they caused.

Your comments and questions bluntly express the sincere sentiments of many Catholics who justifiably feel alienated from their bishops and priests. The call for reparation is indeed understandably irritating and puzzling. As it often happens, we toss out words without proper explanation, thereby causing confusion and anger. So let's walk through the notion of reparation.

On the surface, reparation obviously has something to do with repairing broken objects. In the case of the scandals, many people — not things — have been smashed to pieces, including innocent children, teenagers and family members. Moreover, the faith of many Catholics has suffered severe damage as have the good reputations of all bishops and priests.

Reparation also pertains to punishment. When someone does an evil deed, such as harming a child, concealing the deed and

even protecting the perpetrator, justice requires that a penalty be imposed.

In terms of our scandals, reparation is not primarily about punishment. Rather, it has to do with *satisfaction* for sin. Here we need to delve into the Church's vast theological wisdom and retrieve some useful insights.

St. Thomas Aquinas, as always, comes to the rescue. In his *Summa Theologica*, he discusses two aspects of punishment: first, the "penal" element, which belongs directly to the perpetrator; and the "satisfactory" element, which can pass on to another person who has nothing whatsoever to do with the evil deed.

How does this work?

Permit an analogy. Imagine that your 12-year-old son deliberately smashed your neighbor's windshield in a vengeful rage against your neighbor's 10-year old daughter. Perhaps you would impose

a severe punishment, say, grounding him for three months and depriving him of internet access. While he endures his punishment, you decide, as a matter of justice, to repair the broken windshield. You have then "made satisfaction" for your son's vandalism. You, an innocent person, have voluntarily borne the punishment for someone else, your son.

Now, let's think about Church scandals. They have created vast "spiritual gaps" within the Body of Christ — the destruction of young people's faith, the desecration of holy orders and the lessening of the Church's credibility as an agent of Christ.

Much of this happened precisely because "spiritual gaps" opened up within the Church almost without notice. As we now know, holiness and justice had apparently evaporated in key sectors of the Church, notably within the upper ranks empowered to govern wisely and justly. "Satisfaction," then requires "filling in the gaps" with renewed holiness.

Now, some of your comments understandably reflect the idea that reparation is an unfair burden imposed on lay people. Believe me, I get it. However, let me suggest that reparation, properly understood, is *not* a painful burden. Indeed, from the Catholic perspective, reparation is actually a *privilege*. How so?

First, those who practice reparation actually *reproduce in themselves Christ's great-*

Strengthening Catholic health care in NH

For 30 years I have had the honor to practice medicine at Catholic Medical Center. As a practicing Catholic, I take pride in working for a Catholic hospital! From the moment I arrived, I recognized that CMC was different from any other hospital I had ever been involved with. It was, and continues to be, a welcoming place where our Catholic identity is practiced each and every day.

It's still striking to me how many of my primary care patients told me they chose CMC because of its Catholic identity. Many of them lived closer to other hospitals, but they made the conscious effort to receive their care here. They told me stories of how they and their children were born at either Notre Dame Hospital or Sacred Heart Hospital, and how their grandchildren were born at CMC. In my seven years as CEO, I have never forgotten those patients' stories.

As CEO of Catholic Medical Center, my primary focus is to steward and sustain Catholic health care so it can grow and to ensure that CMC remains Catholic for decades to come. Since I took this office in 2012, we have reinforced our Catholicity in many ways and we've spread the message that Catholic health care is great health care. In spite of the many challenges that face health care organizations today, we at CMC continue to live out our Catholic identity and follow the *Ethical Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* (ERDs).

In order to preserve and strengthen Catholic health care, we must ensure its viability amid ever-evolving challenges. Throughout the United States, Catholic hospitals are partnering with non-Catholic hospitals to ensure long term viability. CMC is currently a member of the secular GraniteOne Health system, along with Huggins Hospital and Monadnock Community Hospital. In fact, most hospitals in New Hampshire are now part of a system, where 10 years ago most were independent. Several belong to an organization that is managed out of state.

In 2014, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith acknowledged the need for Catholic/non-Catholic collaborations when it published *Some Principles for Collaboration with Non-Catholic Entities in the Provision of Healthcare Services*. More recently, the sixth edition of the ERDs provided additional guidelines for these collaborations. Together, these publications recognize that collaborating with non-Catholic organizations is a reality for many Catholic hospitals and can actually be an opportunity to further their mission.

As we negotiate the terms of the proposed GraniteOne Health-Dartmouth-Hitchcock Health combination, we are following these guidelines and are including Bishop Peter Libasci in our discussions. In addition to state and federal approval, the bishop must make a declaration of *nihil obstat* – or no objection – in order for us to move forward. We are also working extensively with the National Catholic Bioethics Center in order to ensure that the Bishop of Manchester would maintain reserved powers over CMC under the proposed system.

I am careful and thoughtful in choosing a partner that will honor and respect CMC's Catholic identity. Dartmouth-Hitchcock Health brings clinical excellence and a commitment to community. They have also been strong partners for the last 15 years at The Mom's Place and Special Care Nursery, at the Norris Cotton Cancer Center, in our intensive care unit and other areas. The Dartmouth-Hitchcock providers at CMC work alongside us, respecting the ERDs as we give our patients the Catholic health care they seek.

I wholeheartedly believe that this combination is a great thing for the patients of New Hampshire. CMC is, at its core, a Catholic hospital and I am excited to preserve that identity and culture for the next generation. ■

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est act: his self-offering for the sake of sinful humanity. As such reparation enriches us spiritually by enabling us to grow into the image of Christ.

Second, the classic deeds of reparation — prayer, fasting and almsgiving — inevitably bring us into the presence of God. But this contact with God is its own reward. It benefits us much more than those for whom we pray. Why flee from it?

Something else needs attention: the call to lay people to engage in reparation for the sins of the clergy actually represents a *quiet role reversal* within the Church. Until recent times, most Catholics regarded bishops, priests and consecrated religious as the vast reservoirs of holiness and righteousness. The Church scandals have demolished that idea forever.

We now see the reverse. How astonishing to hear bishops humbly plead for the prayers of the baptized faithful!

Whether intentionally or not, the bishops now acknowledge that great holiness and enormous faith flow more abundantly through the hidden subterranean regions of the Church than through the top. Knowing this, we must hope that the quiet deeds of reparation by thousands of ordinary Catholics will mysteriously readjust the spiritual imbalances within the Church, thereby restoring her health and tranquility.

Amid the wreckage of our scandals, one great pillar continues to stand sturdy: the resilient faith of so many ordinary Catholics who continue to show up. The mere act of publicly attending Mass contributes much toward “making satisfaction” for the sins of others.

Reparation has begun. And we pray it will continue. ■



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