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***The New Power in the Catholic Church***

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The Catholic Church has for centuries been known for the power and authority of its central administration, its hierarchy. But the recent scandals of priestly sexual abuse of teenagers and the long-term cover-up of that abuse by bishops have severely weakened the Church's moral authority. More importantly, the scandals have removed the power of the Catholic Church's future from the hierarchy and handed it to the people in the pews, the laity.

What the millions of Catholic believers will do with that power is unpredictable, but I see three possibilities. The first two possibilities identify the opposite extremes. On the one hand, the laity could do nothing. They could ignore the scandal and essentially let business continue as usual. A few new committees will be formed, a few new regulations will be created, but nothing much will change. On the other hand, the laity could leave the Church. They could decide that the Church has failed them and simply abandon it, either moving to other denominations or giving up the Christian faith altogether.

I expect the future of Catholicism lies between these two extremes, but what will that middle way look like and how will it come about? The answer to both can be found by understanding the lay perspective on the problem. To put it simply, the lay view on the problem is not that there are predator priests out there, but that the hierarchy, in particular the bishops, have failed to protect the people from them. The bishops have disguised wolves as shepherds and then sent them out into their own flocks of sheep. When the wolves have behaved as wolves are wont to do, the bishops have scolded them and then sent them into another flock. Rather than protecting their flocks, the bishops have helped the wolves find new sheep to eat. So the sheep need to protect themselves.

Most adult members of the laity are parents, and whatever the strength or nature of their religious convictions, their primary concern is to protect their children. The record of the local bishops indicates they cannot be trusted. No one knows who is a pedophile. Case in point: the bishop who recently resigned from a Florida post was appointed to resolve sexual abuse problems, even though he himself was a pedophile.

Catholics can protect their children by taking control of their local parishes, and acquiring one simple power, the right to hire and fire the priest(s). Since the bishops can no longer be trusted to protect the children, the parents must do it themselves. This means that priests will have resumes, traceable histories of their employment. They will need letters of recommendation. They will have to apply for jobs. Their past, both professional and personal, will be open to inspection by the lay people. While this will remove a great deal of the priesthood's mystique, it will help ensure that priests who work in local parishes will not pose risks to parishioners.

It will also reduce the power of the parish priest. Rather than making decisions on his own, he will increasingly need to consult his parishioners. In disagreements with his congregation, he will not have the security of his position to use as a lever to accomplish his goals. His position, and that of the hierarchy of which he is the local representative, will thus become more democratic, more a matter of negotiation.

In the end, this small change, done locally to protect the children, would impact the Catholic Church as a whole. It would bring about a reform more widespread than that of Vatican II.