How Self-Critical Should Catholics Be?

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I have been a professor at St. John's Seminary for 27 years and, in general, it has been a very rewarding time. Early in my life, I was influenced by Catholic priests and, although my own vocation was to marriage and family life, I have been happy as a teacher, administrator, and formator of seminarians. The image of priestly ministry was imprinted on me from the time that I was a boy, and I have striven to graduate from the seminary candidates in the mold of those priests who molded me.

In the past 15 years, however, the priest sexual abuse crisis has cast a shadow over my work. All of us Catholics were disheartened by the failures of our Church to combat this problem. In 2002, the coverage of abuse cases by the Boston Globe brought our failures to national prominence. Our concealment of these cases, our too-slow acknowledgement of them, and our eventual efforts to repair damages and protect against future occurrences, have been painful and embarrassing.

Last October, St. John's Seminary hosted a formation day for students and faculty on the topic. Seminarians spent the morning of the formation day watching the film "Spotlight." It dramatized the exposure by the Globe's "spotlight" research team of the cover-up of sexual abuse cases in the Archdiocese of Boston. After watching the film, seminarians discussed it. In the afternoon, three victims of priest sexual abuse, invited by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, shared their stories with seminarians.

It was a sobering day. Most seminarians expressed disappointment and anger over the behavior of Cardinal Bernard Law, who resigned in 2002 as Archbishop of Boston. Other bishops also have been guilty or liable for covering-up abuse. In 2007, our own Los Angeles Archdiocese agreed to pay $660 million to compensate 508 victims in cases going back to 1937. The perpetrators not only have made their victims suffer, but have harmed each one of us.

Tonight's Theme

I tell this story as an introduction to my theme and question, "How self-critical should Catholics be?" The theme challenges us. Everyone here has a deep revulsion toward those who victimize children. Those who shield abusers are scarcely better than the abusers themselves. Our consciences revolt at the thought that someone would harm the innocent under the guise of religion.

At the same time, however, all of us (I venture to say) cherish the value of loyalty. We have been taught since childhood to be loyal to our friends, our families, our employers, our political parties, our nation, and above all to our God and our Church. Loyalty is the glue of the social fabric. Without loyalty, society comes apart.

Tonight I will first sketch the tension between the demands of loyalty and justice. They belong together, but we know that they can pull us in different directions. After sketching the tension between the two, I will present some false solutions to it. One false solution to the tension between loyalty and justice, as we shall see, is skepticism. It is

tempting to regard the Church skeptically on the basis of doctrines with which we disagree. Finally, we shall look at the process by which we Catholics assimilate the teachings of the Church. This is inevitably slow and gradual. The Church proclaims a universal and public morality, and we members often fall short of it. But that should not prevent us from trying.

Let us begin by looking more closely at the film "Spotlight." In it, loyalty was put to the test and found wanting. Boston Archdiocesan officials were embarrassed by the crimes of priests. They secretly employed a variety of means to conceal crimes and to hush-up victims with monetary compensation. Many Catholics reasoned that priest sexual abuse was an aberration, and that straightforward means of discipline, such as reporting crimes to police and laicizing abusers, would do greater damage to the Church than the abusers themselves had done. It was only when the Spotlight team corroborated the estimates of researchers – namely, that 6% of clergy had sexually abused minors – that the full extent of the problem was recognized. Until that moment, most Church officials had closed ranks and concealed abuse, justifying their actions as an expression of prudence and of loyalty.

The film dramatized the tension between loyalty and the demands of justice. *In a moment I'm going to ask you to reflect on that tension, and on how we experience it.* But before we talk about the tension, let me say a word about how the "Spotlight" team of reporters dealt with the tension in the film. Each of the major reporters – Walter "Robby" Robinson (Michael Keaton), Michael Rezendes (Mark Ruffalo), and Sacha Pfeiffer (Rachel McAdams) – were baptized Catholics. They acknowledged that they were not church-goers, but had close emotional ties to the Church. What enabled such Catholics to put aside their loyalty and tell the truth?

A cynical person might say that the "Spotlight" team was motivated only by a desire for self-aggrandizement, a desire to publish lurid stories and to sell newspapers. They were not at all motivated by faith, the cynic would say, because each of the reporters was no a longer practicing Catholic, and had fallen away. They were disloyal to the Church.

But that is not the full story, at least not as the film tells it. In one of its most emotional moments, the film shows Michael Rezendes (played by Mark Ruffalo) making a confession to his fellow workers. He says that, prior to the revelations about sexual abuse, he was unhappy about his absence from the Church. He had always thought, he says, that one day he would return to Mass attendance. After discovering the cover-up, he angrily contributed to the articles that exposed it. Although he was alienated, he still considered himself a Catholic.

This brings me to the initial question that I would like to pose to you tonight. I have sketched the dramatic tension in "Spotlight" as a tension between loyalty (in this case, loyalty to the Church) and the demands of justice. My question is this: *Have you experienced tension the between loyalty and the demands of justice, and how did you resolve the tension?*

The Biblical and Philosophic Traditions.

The tension between loyalty and justice is an ancient one. The Bible treats the matter and extols both virtues. Psalm 101 says, "I sing of loyalty and of justice; to thee O LORD I will sing" (101:1). In this psalm the author does not find any contradiction between loyalty and justice. It is precisely out of loyalty to God that the author wants to be just. Believers are loyal because they honor God as the standard for distinguishing good from evil.

But the tension between loyalty and justice remains. We see it, for example, in the Book of Ecclesiasticus, also known as the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach. Jesus ben Sirach observed the tension between loyalty and justice in married life. In his discussion, he began on a positive note:

> Happy is the husband of a good wife;
> The number of his days will be doubled.
> A loyal wife rejoices her husband,
> And he will complete his years in peace (26:1-2).

A loyal wife brings joy to her husband. We can say the same for a loyal husband and his wife. Spousal loyalty, in the Book of Sirach, reflects the justice that rightly exists between husband and wife. God wants such justice and loyalty. But Sirach, after he praised the loyal wife, castigated the disloyal one:

> There is grief of heart and sorrow when a wife is envious of a rival,
> And a tongue-lashing makes it known to all.
> An evil wife is an ox yoke which chafes:
> Taking hold of her is like grasping a scorpion (26:6-7).

We wonder what the wife would say about her husband. Envy damages loyalty. It leads to injustice. We honor loyalty in a spouse because it corresponds to justice. We are loyal to our spouses because they are just. Sometimes we are loyal even when they are unjust because we put our faith in God. When there is discord between husband and wife, loyalty suffers.

Like the biblical tradition, the Greek philosophic tradition unites loyalty and justice. Plato, in his collection of dialogues known as *The Laws*, views loyalty in relation to every other virtue. "A man will never prove himself loyal and sound-hearted in times of faction," said Plato, "unless he has all virtue" (Laws I, 630c). "All virtue" includes the virtue of justice. Plato means that one cannot be genuinely loyal unless one is also just.

Aristotle reflects this same thinking in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. There he equates loyalty with moral strength. "The morally strong [individual] will be a person who does not change under the influence of emotion and appetite," said Aristotle, "but on occasion he will be persuaded" by reason (Nic. Eth. VII.9, 1151b). In short, the loyal person is steadfast but not stubborn. He or she listens to reason. Being loyal – in our case, loyal to the Church – does not, or should not, blind us to justice.

Scepticism toward the Church?

In the film "Spotlight," we saw that the revelation of child sexual abuse changed the understanding of justice among many Catholics. Loyalty once meant, "Preserve the good reputation of the Church at any cost." But in Boston that attitude became a pretext for sheltering predatory priests. As a result, Boston Catholics (and I daresay all of us)

now have a deeper understanding of loyalty. Loyalty now means that we preserve justice within the Church best by being watchful over children and by holding one another accountable. We still believe in loyalty. But we express it now in a healthier way.

In other words, the virtue remains, but the expression of it changes. We continue to show our loyalty, but we do so in different ways. Such an acknowledgement of changes in the expression of loyalty can itself lead to a problem. Once we concede that the expression of a virtue can change, we face a temptation, that of skepticism. If we Catholics change the way we express loyalty, then we may be tempted to say that loyalty itself is at fault. The correct response to wrongly-placed loyalty (skeptics might say) is the rejection of loyalty altogether. From this viewpoint, loyalty is merely partisanship. You are loyal to your group, your ideas, and your agenda. I am loyal to mine, and you and I no longer have any common ground.

This is an exaggerated response to dissonance in the Church, but it is a common. When there are fundamental ideas in the Church with which Catholics disagree, skeptics will argue that critique (rather than the affirmation of common values) should be an end in itself. Tonight our question is, "How self-critical should Catholics be?" From the skeptical point of view, the correct answer is that Catholics should be relentlessly self-critical. Critique, the cultivation of a critical attitude, is for the skeptic a duty in itself.

The Example of Catholic Sexual Teaching

The response to Catholic teaching about artificial birth control is a good example. The Church, in its official teaching, has never accepted the pill or other contraceptives. Its teaching has been widely dismissed, however, especially by Catholics in the Americas and Europe. Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical on birth control, *Humanae vitae*, laid out the argument for natural family planning – what the encyclical called the right of married couples to "take advantage of the infertile period" (no. 16) in a woman's reproductive cycle. Instead of controlling ovulation by drugs or by interrupting the process of conception, natural family planning relies on self-control and careful attention to natural cycles of fertility. This approach has been discounted in the popular mind, however, as onerous and unreliable.

In 1979, my wife and I – we had been married about one year – had an opportunity to study in Germany. We lived in a high-rise student dormitory in Tübingen, in the only married couples' room on our floor. Shortly after arriving in the town, we broke the basal-body thermometer we were using to track my wife's fertile period. I remember going to the Tübingen pharmacy to buy a new one. I cannot forget the look of incomprehension on the pharmacist's face as I tried, in my best German, to explain what a basal-body thermometer was. To make a long story short, our first son was born in Tübingen about nine months later.

The common critique of the Church's teaching against artificial birth control – its apparent onerousness and unreliability – tends to blind us to the genuine values expressed in *Humanae vitae*. These are values that all Catholics would affirm. Pope Paul VI expressed concern that separating the potential for procreation from sexual intercourse might lead to lower moral standards. He feared that "sex without consequences" might tempt spouses to marital infidelity. He worried that separating the unitive act from procreation might diminish respect for women. No matter how we feel about the use of

the pill, all of us share the pope's concern for societal morality, for marital fidelity, and for respect for women. Society's embrace of the pill, however, may discourage us from even reading *Humanae vitae* or recalling the values that it promotes.

Something similar can be said about the Church's teaching against abortion. For millennia human society has condemned abortion, insisting that children are a blessing, that the human being is created in God's image and likeness, and that we are precious to God even in our mothers' wombs. Today, however, more than a million abortions are performed annually in the USA. While this number has fallen from an even higher total in 2008, the number of abortions signifies a societal change in attitude. Many people, including many Catholics, assume that the legality of abortion is equivalent to the morality of abortion. The right to choose abortion, they say, is a matter of justice.

The Assimilation of Catholic Teaching

For us Catholics, loyalty and justice form a unity. Loyalty to the Church must be consonant with justice and fidelity to the conscience. The ready availability of the pill, as well as the high number of abortions, may suggest that the Church's teaching in the area of sexual ethics is old-fashioned and unjust. Some find a dissonance between the Church's teaching and justice. They may conclude that it is not possible to be loyal to a teaching with which they disagree.

We Catholics, however, are obligated to both loyalty and justice. *In a few minutes I am going to ask how you have managed this dual obligation*. All of us have tried to assimilate the Church's teaching because we see its value. Church teaching helps us followers of Christ to hold onto God's truth. But this is not an easy thing. Loyalty to the Church is a demanding commitment.

Certainly no Catholic would say that loyalty to the Church should muzzle criticism. We betray the Holy Spirit if we refuse to speak the truth out of a mistaken sense of loyalty. This is especially true in the political debate about abortion rights. Catholics have a duty to speak out, not only in defense of human life, but also as a contribution to the body politic. If the Supreme Court were to overturn Roe versus Wade, and if some states were to criminalize abortion, what sanctions might apply to the crime? If abortion were outlawed, what would be the remedy for it? Who would be punished for engaging in it? These difficult questions have hindered Republicans and Democrats from overturning Roe v. Wade. We need to ask about them and about the social safety net. Who would support the unwanted children of the mentally ill, the homeless, and those who conceive children but who reject the responsibilities of parenthood? These are questions of justice that should be asked especially by those of us who are loyal to the Church.

Let me sum up our progress so far. The reception of Catholic sexual teaching challenges us in regard to loyalty and justice. Society's general rejection of Catholic teaching about the pill may tempt us to be skeptical toward the Church. Many have concluded that, because they disagree with the teaching, the Church has lost its moral authority and does not deserve our loyalty. But I would say that all people of good will share the concerns expressed in *Humanae vitae*, concerns about societal morality, marital fidelity, and respect for women. They are central to our Catholic tradition. They have proven themselves as valid, and continue to prove themselves.

That does not mean that we should be blindly loyal. We know better than that. In freedom we have a duty as Catholics to offer our critical reflections, especially in the areas about which we are familiar and knowledgeable. Today we have a valuable contribution to make in the political arena, in which critical thought can easily degenerate into mere partisanship. Our duty is to elevate political discourse. By sharing our Catholic moral tradition, we can prompt elected officials to look at matters in a thorough and responsible way.

This brings me to the second question that I would like to pose to you this evening. Most of us have assimilated the Catholic moral tradition to the best of our ability. *How have we done so? And how have we shared that tradition with those who, like our children, are close to us?*

Challenge to Catholic Morality in Contemporary Culture

Often fellow Catholics say to me, "I'm personally against abortion" or "No one really wants abortion." I hear this frequently from mothers and fathers who have raised or are raising children, and are entirely committed to them. They know how difficult it is to bring up a child. They have a realistic and extensive understanding of responsible parenthood. So they often follow these statements of personal opposition to abortion by adding that theirs is a personal conviction. They are wholly committed to their moral choice to raise a child. But they are reluctant to prescribe behavior for others. They take the attitude that no one can make a decision for another person because it is a private judgment of conscience. We cannot decide for another because we do not know their situation. We have not walked a mile in their shoes.

The unspoken implication is that "No one really wants an abortion, but some feel that they must have one." By conceiving a child, they made an unfortunate choice. They may have even succumbed to pressure. Now, faced with the prospect of raising the child, they realize how unprepared they are. No one really wants an abortion, the implication is, but some have no other choice. We Catholics cannot judge them, the argument goes, because we are not in their position.

This bears on our topic tonight of "How self-critical should Catholics be?" If we cannot make a moral judgment because morality is a private matter, then the answer is that we Catholics should be extremely self-critical. We Catholics should criticize ourselves, because our Church mistakenly acknowledges moral absolutes, such as the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." If the individual conscience is sovereign, and such a conscience is willing to concede the necessity of abortion, then (by this reasoning) the teaching of the Church is unjust. Loyalty to the Church and its moral teaching must give way, according to this argument, submitting to the claims of justice as defined by the private conscience.

Many Catholics take such a position today. Often they reason with historical examples. The Church, they say, once taught that lending money at interest was an offense against justice. We Catholics once believed that the state has a right to punish heretics who oppose the Christian faith. Catholic Christians once accepted the death penalty as an ordinary institution of law. But the Church's teaching in each of these areas has evolved. Usury is no longer a sin and the Church even operates a bank. Vatican II proclaimed the rights of the conscience and religious liberty. The official Catechism

states that capital punishment should be used only when there is no other way to safeguard the populace. If Catholic teaching regarding loans, heretics, and capital punishment can change, then other teachings can change as well.

For us Catholics, this line of argument poses a serious challenge to loyalty and to justice. Honest self-criticism requires an answer to two questions. The *first* is the question of how we can be committed to a common, public morality, one that claims to speak for all human beings. And the *second* question is about how virtues, such as loyalty and justice, can remain constant, even when the way they express themselves changes. It is possible to rise to these challenges today. In the time that remains I will sketch a Catholic response. You can tell me whether you find it persuasive.

A Common and Public Morality

Let us begin with the concept of a common and public morality. The foundation for such a morality, as every Catholic knows, is the presence of God. God created us human beings, and placed in our hearts a conscience. The conscience is the basis for the natural law, that innate sense that does what is right and avoids what is wrong. God is present in these judgments of conscience, which must be applied by every individual.

God became present in a new and explicit way by making Israel a chosen people and giving it a law written in human language. And God's presence became tangible in Jesus Christ, whose disciples we are. The basis for Catholic moral teaching is the tradition founded in Israel and transmitted in the Gospel. This tradition has elaborated and refined our understanding of God's will. We adhere to a common and public morality because it expresses God's presence in our midst.

Needless to say, there are many contemporary objections to the concept of morality based in God's revelation. Utilitarian and pragmatic objections tend to prevail. Utilitarianism is the doctrine that no situation is perfect, and that every choice will have positive and negative consequences. Therefore it makes judgments based on the principle of utility, i.e., a calculus of benefits and deficits. The correct utilitarian judgment is the one with the greatest benefits and the fewest deficits.

Pragmatism is related to it. The pragmatist denies the existence of universal moral truths. Right and wrong do not lie in truths but rather in deeds. Instead of seeking moral absolutes, the pragmatist aims at what works, i.e., at the best choice in a limited situation. This is the practical approach of government. Since pragmatism rejects moral absolutes, one must choose what works best for the body politic. This helps explain the Supreme Court's decision to subordinate the question of abortion to privacy rights.

In our Catholic tradition, however, we listen to the revelation of God, who made us in the divine image and for whom human life is precious. If abortion offends the Catholic conscience, we have to explain why. And that requires the use of our critical faculties. As I said earlier, it is not enough to oppose abortion. If we oppose it, then we also must be concerned about how we do so. We must also care for the children of the mentally ill, the homeless, and those who cannot or refuse to take responsibility.

If the Church's commitment to a common and public morality seems extreme – that is, if the Church proclaims a morality that some cannot accept – we can take some comfort from the realism expressed in Pope Francis' encyclical on "The Joy of Love." In

chapter eight the pope alludes to the so-called "law of gradualness" (no. 295). The human being, he says, "knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by differing stages of growth." We human beings come to an understanding of God's will, but we do so gradually. Yes, Catholics teach moral absolutes. But we do not grasp or practice them immediately. It takes time to discern what God wants.

The Constancy of Virtue

Up to this point we have explained the Catholic rationale for a common and public morality in the doctrines of creation and in revelation. We were created by God with a conscience that has been informed by the gospel tradition. Now we have one more task: to explain how a virtue can remain constant while the expression of that virtue changes. This seems like a self-contradiction. How can the virtue remain what it is when the expression of it takes different forms?

We already sketched the answer to this question earlier when we looked at the film "Spotlight." At one time, the virtue of loyalty meant "preserve the reputation of the Church by concealing priest-abusers." But now we express the same virtue in a different way. We say that loyalty to the Church means being vigilant for the safety of the vulnerable and reporting suspicious activity. This is the best way to show loyalty and express a commitment to the justice that rightly belongs to Catholic and Christian faith.

The insight that a virtue remains constant, while the expression of it may change, is an ancient insight. It goes back to Plato, who first elaborated the teaching that beauty, truth, and goodness remain constant, but variously express themselves in beautiful things, true statements, and good actions. Plato's insight gives us the best way to explain development within the Church. We saw that the Church has developed its teachings about lending money at interest, about religious liberty, and about capital punishment. But these teachings express something constant, namely, God's justice. Our commitment to that justice remains true, but the way we express it develops. Our fundamental convictions reveal themselves in ways that are always changing. Our convictions develop because God's divine Word is unfolding in history. This is the wisdom of Pope Francis' comment that we accomplish the good "by differing stages of growth." By gradual means we grow in our fidelity to the teachings of the Church.

How self-critical should Catholics be? Self-criticism should not be confused with skepticism and systematic doubt. Even unpopular doctrines of the Church have important lessons, and we should learn from them. Public opinion polls do not always indicate what true and good. It is unhealthy to put every truth and every loyalty under suspicion as a matter of principle.

When suspicions arise, however, we do well to pay attention to them. We Catholics should be self-critical because we are the members of Christ's Body. The divine Word has been entrusted to us, and we cherish it in reverence and truth. God's Holy Spirit guides us. The Spirit cannot be reduced to a philosophic opinion or a technique of thought. Being self-critical means that we Catholics must acknowledge when we are wrong, as we were in concealing priest sexual abuse. Acknowledging this, however, does not mean that we cannot hold our heads up high. God has called us. We are God's own children, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. And God's Holy Spirit

animates us in our search for fidelity and truth. Loyalty to the Church demands our commitment to justice.