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Interview with Father Tom Doyle

66



“They ought to sell the Vatican to the Mormons or to Disney or something and go out and start all over again.”

Father Tom Doyle, Catholic priest & Canon Law expert

ABOUT WATCH TRANSCRIPT COMMENTS (66)

Right now it's the international news story that's impossible to either avoid or ignore. Early on, it was being reported as an American scandal, then an Irish one, and most recently it's been rocking Europe. Over the years, it's reared its ugly head with almost monotonous regularity in this country. Dateline is talking, of course, about rampant, worldwide sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests. For the Church - its priests, bishops, the Vatican and right up to Pope Benedict himself - it's turning into the most damaging crisis not in years, but centuries. Father Thomas Doyle describes himself as "the most reviled priest in the US". The outspoken Dominican has literally devoted his life to the plight of victims of clergy abuse. When I spoke to the outspoken Father Doyle from Washington DC, he insisted I "drop the 'Father' bit - 'Tom' will do!"

REPORTER: George Negus

GEORGE NEGUS: Tom Doyle, thanks for talking to us. It could be said, seeing that we're talking at Easter weekend, that this is not going to be a joyful, if you like, happy Easter for most Catholics throughout the world. This holy mess - or unholy mess - that the Church is in at the moment doesn't look like it's going to go away very quickly.

FATHER TOM DOYLE, DOMINICAN PRIEST: It's certainly not going to go away. It's not going to go away, and I think it's the beginning - or it's along the way - of a serious change for the institutional Church, especially for the ruling elite in the Vatican. It's definitely a moment of truth, and among other things it's a sign that the world, the society, is no longer going to show the deference to the Vatican, to the Pope, that they always expected. This is a time for accountability.

GEORGE NEGUS: How do you think that others in the Church - priests, bishops and practising Catholics themselves - react to hearing something like that from yourself? It sounds like you're

by George Negus

Veteran journalist and interviewer George Negus presented Dateline from 2005 until 2010.



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- taly (4)
- catholic (5)
- sexual abuse (3)
- Ireland (3)

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- The Vatican

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saying the Catholic Church has been an accident waiting to happen on this whole issue for a while.

FATHER TOM DOYLE: I certainly agree that it's been an accident waiting to happen. How do people react? I think a significant number of Catholics react with denial and anger because what this does is it seriously rocks the source of their spiritual security. They don't like to hear it, but it's true. I mean, the Catholic Church, the men in the Catholic Church, are human beings - they're not supermen and they're not junior gods, they're people. And there's a lot of serious, serious corruption that needs to be taken care of so the Church can really be what it's supposed to be.

GEORGE NEGUS: You include the pontiff himself in that? Because his infallibility is now being questioned. In fact, you're suggesting the foundations of- if you like- the whole Catholic belief system - including the existence of a pope at all - is up for scrutiny.

FATHER TOM DOYLE: Well, what I think is up for scrutiny is the image and the way the papacy has been formed or shaped over the past few centuries. The Church is really supposed to be about Jesus Christ, not about the Pope. And the fact is that, whatever his intentions were, the Pope and the Vatican have been knowledgeable of this incredibly serious, horrendous plague that's been inflicted on the people of the Catholic Church for a long time, and they've done exactly the wrong things - they've tried to cover it up and lie about it to save their own skin, to save their own reputation and image, forgetting what is most important. And what is most important is that these children, the victims - many whom are now adults - they are the ones who need to be taken care of. They're the ones who are important.

GEORGE NEGUS: A lot of people listening to you say those sorts of things - whether they're in the Church hierarchy or the laity - would regard what you're saying as heresy. Are you a lonely voice in the wilderness on this horrible issue, or what?

FATHER TOM DOYLE: No, I'm not a lonely voice in the wilderness. There are at least from my observation in the United States, Canada, Ireland, the places I've been involved in, and certainly in Australia

GEORGE NEGUS: Right.

FATHER TOM DOYLE: There's nothing heretical about seeing corruption and calling it to be what it is and demanding that something be done to change it. And if you look at this issue, you're talking about hundreds of thousands of human beings that have been raped and pillaged and devastated by clergy, and to make it worse it's been covered up. That's not heresy, that's truth.

GEORGE NEGUS: You've actually said that the Church itself cannot and will not fix itself. I mean, if the Church can't do it, who's got the job of fixing up this dysfunctional Church, as you've described it?

FATHER TOM DOYLE: Well, I want to just make a distinction. There's the institutional Church, which is the governing structure - the bishops, the priests and so on - that's not the whole Church by a long shot. The Church is the people. Whether they're in there on Sunday or not, they're the people, and that's what will fix it - it will be the people themselves and it will happen because of pressure from outside, from the courts, the media. Generally, societal outrage will force some change. The system can't fix itself. If it could have done that, it would have done it, but it can't, because it's a monarchy and the whole concept of a monarchy in the 21st century is completely anachronistic. And so that will start, I think, the change - it will have to - because the system is changing, the Church itself is changing drastically, and many of the people at the top are afraid to admit that because that means their power structure is going to change.

GEORGE NEGUS: Are you talking about actually some sort of movement to eliminate not the Pope personally, but the whole idea of a pope and the Vatican and infallibility and these sorts of things?



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FATHER TOM DOYLE: We need infallibility about as much as a duck hunter needs an accordion. But I would say that what's necessary is not so much the Pope or the Vatican itself, it's how they do business - it's how they see themselves. They see themselves as some sort of an elite that's better than everyone, above everyone, and they're engulfed in secrecy and mystery and everything else. And the Church is a community of people

GEORGE NEGUS: Yep.

FATHER TOM DOYLE: and there should be complete openness in the concept that they're serving, not running.

GEORGE NEGUS: The Pope has made an apology of sorts in the Irish situation. There are cases in the courts as we speak, people talking about inquiries internally, etc. But could you react to this statement for me, Tom? This is from the Vatican Secretary of State in Rome. "The Church still enjoys great confidence on the part of the faithful, it's just that someone is trying to undermine that, but the Church has special help from above." Now, isn't that a suggestion that God actually approves of what's been going on, including the child sex abuse?

FATHER TOM DOYLE: That's a nonsensical statement. First off, to presume that they have all this support and backing, who are they talking to - each other? These men are completely out of touch with reality and they've been out of touch - they only talk to one another. Secondly, to claim that God approves this, that's heresy. The statement itself is very offensive.

GEORGE NEGUS: But that's the Vatican! That's a statement from the Vatican. If I could interrupt you there, Tom - that's actually an official Vatican spokesman saying that the Church gets special help from above. Big call!

FATHER TOM DOYLE: I know - I realise who said it - and I think that's very presumptuous because the Church is the people, it's not just them. Maybe 'above' is helping the victims and their supporters to bring accountability - maybe that's where the help is coming from. So, it's a turkey shoot - you know, you throw it up and "Whose side is God on?" I don't think that's the point at all. The point is - what is right and what is wrong? Hiding the abuse of children is wrong, period.

GEORGE NEGUS: Can we raise the thorny subject of celibacy and how much that is an issue in this whole situation, because to non-Catholics it certainly is an issue that maybe celibacy is at the bottom of all of this, that it's the sort of behaviour that, if you like, leads to paedophilia and child sex abuse, etc.

FATHER TOM DOYLE: There's a lot of misunderstanding about celibacy and I have to say that being a celibate priest, being celibate, does not turn you into a sexually dysfunctional man - it doesn't make you a paedophile or a pervert or something of that nature. But the relationship of mandatory celibacy to this issue is much more complex and it's this, I believe, or part of it - that celibacy, the preparation for celibacy, the training and to convince a man that celibacy is acceptable, means you have to convince him that there's something secondary in importance about relationships, about marriage, about women and about family. Celibacy also has depended in the past on a very distorted notion of human sexuality - that it's something you can take and put it outside of yourself, turn it on and turn it off. And so what you had was men growing up with this incredible fear - any sexual thought, anything, was a mortal sin and you'd go to Hell - which is fairly unrealistic and it's certainly not very reflective of what a human being is.

GEORGE NEGUS: It sounds like you're saying if the Church has a close look at itself in the way you're suggesting it has to almost pull the whole institution apart and start all over again.

FATHER TOM DOYLE: Well, I think there are a lot of things that they should take a close look at - celibacy being one of them. They're deathly afraid to look at the women priests issue because they claim that Jesus Christ only ordained men. Well, that's a long short there - to presume that Christ had an ordination ceremony

at the Last Supper, you know, that's a bit of a stretch.

GEORGE NEGUS: It's a new version of history, that's for sure.

FATHER TOM DOYLE: Well, definitely a new version of history.

GEORGE NEGUS: People are asking questions like, "Will we see priests and bishops end up in jail as a result of this?" "Will we see the Pope having to consider resignation?" But you've actually said, "Punishing the perpetrators is completely missing the forest standing behind the trees. The clerical culture entwined with the institution needs to be fearlessly examined and dismantled as we know it." Isn't that more-or-less what I was saying before - knocking the whole edifice down and rebuilding? You're questioning almost the very basis of Catholicism.

FATHER TOM DOYLE: It's unfortunate that it takes this type of destruction to move it towards change, but that's what has to happen, I believe. I'm not one anymore to mince words and be diplomatic and fart around with this. I mean, this is it. I've spent 25 years talking to people who've been ruined because of this stuff, and you know, the whole damn thing, they ought to sell the Vatican to the Mormons or to Disney or something and go out and start all over again.

GEORGE NEGUS: Tom Doyle, it's great to talk to you - fascinating, actually - and we'll stay in touch. Thanks again.

FATHER TOM DOYLE: Great. Thank you.

GEORGE NEGUS: Other than that, the mild-mannered Father Tom Doyle has nothing to say on an issue that's clearly not about to suddenly disappear off the Catholic Church's agenda.

Interview Producer/Researcher

JANE WORTHINGTON

Editor

ROWAN TUCKER-EVANS

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EDOARDO FALCIONE



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