

May 31, 2022

Dear No-Longer-Fellow Priests,

This will likely be my farewell letter to most of you, which may be glad tidings to those of you who do not enjoy hearing from me.

Last week, I learned from David Staal, a canon lawyer for the Diocese of Oakland, that the Vatican had officially laicized me as of March 19th. The grounds for my ouster from the priesthood was my persistent refusal of an assignment in 2005 after I told Allen Vigneron, then Oakland's bishop, that I could not in good conscience accept another assignment until he was willing to open a public dialog throughout the diocese on three issues roiling the Church: the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and its cover-up by bishops and their cronies, the refusal of the Church to recognize the full equality of women and to admit them to ordained ministry, and the cruel treatment of sexual minorities based on an outdated theory of human sexuality. Vigneron refused such a dialog and I refused an assignment.

In the ensuing 17 years, I spent 11 years of Sundays, outside the Cathedral for two hours each week, to show solidarity with oppressed Catholics from the three groups named above: abuse survivors, women, and sexual minorities.

During those 11 years of Sundays, Bishop Barber never walked down to greet me or ask what I was about. Very likely he was embarrassed by my presence because I was calling on him to hold accountable the bishop of Oakland who ordained me in

1979, John Cummins. John is long since retired but his bad deeds live on in the daily suffering of the hundreds, possibly thousands of clergy abuse survivors whose abuse his decisions aided and abetted. I would like you to know at least a little about his egregious abuse of authority during his 26 years at the helm of our diocese. I have written to him more than once and asked him to publicly make amends for his choice to put the reputation of the church and protection of its assets ahead of the safety of children. He appears to be in blissful denial: “We made some mistakes.” Keep reading to learn the difference between a mistake and a crime.

When the time comes for John to pass from this world, he will likely be lauded as a good bishop who oversaw many worthwhile ministries and projects. Also likely will be a loud silence about his crimes. Every claim I make in the following description of Cummins’ misdeeds I can back up with good sourcing.

John Cummins was head of the diocese of Oakland from 1977 to 2003. He saw himself as a Vatican II-style bishop and in that vein, he promoted many worthwhile projects and initiatives. But his early and complete indoctrination and inculturation into the corrupt culture and power structure of all-male clericalism, which rules with absolute sovereignty over the Roman Catholic Church, conditioned his thinking and actions in perverse ways.

My first experience of his clerical shadow happened about a year after my ordination. He invited my three ordination mates and me to a meeting at his residence next door to St. Frances de Sales Cathedral in Oakland. He asked us how we were doing

after a year of parish work. Our conversation covered a lot of ground and he seemed sincerely concerned for our happiness and well-being. I reluctantly shared a concern with him about a notoriously eccentric and mean-spirited pastor of a parish near mine. John listened to the complaints I shared, ones I had heard from members of the priest's parish, which demonstrated beyond question the man's need to be in another profession. John responded by telling us that we priests needed "to take care of each other." Note his knee jerk habit of putting clergy ahead of abused lay people. His response was also an example of Cummins' propensity to use words to obfuscate but I didn't have the nerve to ask him what he meant. What his opaque words did not mean or include was an ounce of concern for the people in this angry priest's parish, some of whom were being driven away by Fr. X's erratic behavior. Never could I have imagined then that Cummins making excuses for troubled and authoritarian priests would have extended to priests who sexually abuse children and teens. In 1980, I had never heard of a priest abusing a minor with the exception of Steve Kiesle at Our Lady of the Rosary, Union City, but Cummins knew of many right here in our diocese.

I only knew about Kiesle because I succeeded him at OLR one year after he was arrested. As most of you know, abuse cases were kept as secret as possible until Boston was forced into transparency by journalists and the courts and my favorite lawyer, Mitchell Garabedian, prominently featured in my favorite movie, SPOTLIGHT.

My second significant experience of Cummins' clerical shadow occurred in the 1990's when I served on the Priest Personnel

Board of the diocese. This elected Board, comprised of about eight priests, met every two months to advise the bishop on priest assignments. Cummins usually accepted our recommendations. I found serving on the Board a maddening experience because we lacked enough priests (quantity) to fill vacancies in the diocese, but also enough competent priests (quality). Cummins would show up towards the end of each meeting when we would typically have lunch together and then offer the bishop our recommendations. At one meeting, I shared my deep frustration with Cummins and fellow Board members during an especially trying meeting. I said in effect: we lack priests in quantity and quality to serve the people of the parishes so why don't we discern together how we can expand the pool of available priests, e.g., married priests and women priests. Cummins gave me a death stare, as if to say, how dare you question Church tradition and doctrine openly! A fellow priest on the Board told me in no uncertain terms that it was only at the Vatican level that the pool of ordination candidates could be discussed. In other words, it was not my place to discern or even discuss who God might be calling to priesthood; that topic was way above our pay grade, case closed. This silencing flies in the face of the gift of the Holy Spirit given to all the baptized and confirmed members of the Body of Christ. Bishop Cummins kept on assigning some unqualified priests to the parishes of the diocese, and most Board members shrugged their shoulders and sighed, "What can we do?"

Little did I know, due to the secrecy surrounding these matters, that during Cummins' entire twenty-six years as bishop of the diocese of Oakland, he was aiding and abetting the sexual abuse of minors by leaving in place known-to-him sexual predators,

and transferring known-to-him sexual predators from one parish to another. Here follow a few examples, all now on the public record, thanks to the courage and perseverance of abuse survivors, journalists, and lawyers in the pursuit of justice and transparency:

1. Monsignor George Francis, pastor of St. Bede Parish, Hayward, from 1955 to 1986, abused little girls for over forty years. In the early 1980's, then Chancellor, Father George Crespin received a call from a neighbor of one of Francis' victims to say that Francis would regularly visit the victim's home while the little girl's parents were out. The neighbor lived across the street from the victim and noticed the priest's comings and goings, and grew suspicious enough to call Fr Crespin at the diocese headquarters. The victim, many years later, testified in a lawsuit settled by the Oakland diocese for three million dollars, that Francis was sexually abusing her on a regular basis from ages five to eight, from 1979 to 1982. Msgr. Francis was left in place as pastor until he suffered a stroke in 1986.
2. Monsignor Vincent Breen was pastor of Holy Spirit Parish, Fremont, from 1953 until 1982. Breen was reported to the diocese several times for sexually abusing girls from the parish school. Their suffering continues to this day: sleep problems, panic attacks, depression, substance abuse, and suicidality; and these are the fortunate ones who are still alive! Breen abused dozens of young girls with impunity for decades. Only his arrest by the Fremont police ended his reign of terror.

3. Fathers Don Broderson and Bob Poncirolli were moved from parish to parish repeatedly by the first bishop of Oakland, Floyd Begin, and his successor John Cummins with the assistance of Fathers Brian Joyce and George Crespin who served as chancellors. This criminal policy by Cummins and company provided these two dangerous priests new opportunities to abuse. Broderson was moved four times; Poncirolli was moved nine times. Broderson abused dozens of boys and two girls. Poncirolli sexually assaulted at least thirty boys.

This list of known examples of John Cummins putting the good of the Church's reputation ahead of the safety of children is far from exhaustive. He was equally protective of priest abusers like Gary Tollner, James Clark, and Stephen Kiesle, each of whom had several victims.

The current bishop of Oakland, Michael Barber, belatedly released the names of priest perpetrators in the Oakland diocese on August 16, 2018. His list was woefully incomplete but in his written statement he wrote the following: "The bishops who refused to stop this immoral and criminal behavior must also be held accountable." All well and good except that accountability for Begin and Cummins has yet to happen. In March, 2018, Barber authorized The Catholic Voice, the bimonthly newspaper, now magazine of the Oakland diocese, to devote an entire issue to honoring Bishop emeritus John Cummins on the occasion of his 90th birthday. Not one word in the Catholic Voice's tribute was allotted to Cummins' history of aiding and abetting sexual abuse of children under his care while scores of

individuals and groups from throughout the diocese and beyond sang his praises.

Why was Cummins celebrated in the Catholic Voice? Why is Cummins' name on a building at St. Mary's College in Moraga? Much of the information in this reckoning was publicly reported in an Oakland Tribune series in the spring of 2008.

Jesus' harshest criticism was directed at hypocritical religious leaders. How can we trust that children are safe in the Oakland diocese when John Cummins is treated with deference and unqualified and undeserved respect?

If you know and like John Cummins, or are feeling angry at me for this truth-telling, I ask you to imagine yourself as a ten year-old boy or girl from a Catholic family who suffers rape by a priest in your parish. The bishop and a few of his assistant priests learn of this horrific crime but instead of protecting you by calling the police, they conspire to keep the crime a secret by silencing your parents with a non-disclosure agreement and monetary payout, and then either leaving the priest in your parish or moving him to one at the other end of the diocese where he continues to sexually abuse more children. This scenario happened again and again and again under Cummins' leadership.

I hear from many clergy and lay people that things are better now: safer environments for children, "no more secrets", the Dallas Charter, pious apologies, and pledges of transparency and accountability from Cummins' successors, Vigneron, Cordileone, and Barber. I wish that things were better now but

they are not! In 2019 alone, two priests in the Oakland diocese were accused by minors of sexual abuse. Fr. David Vela sits in San Quentin Prison and Fr. Alex Castillo was removed from ministry only to flee the country while Bishop Barber and District Attorney Nancy O'Malley looked the other way.

Many people rationalize John Cummins' behavior in putting the reputation of the Church over the safety of children as the way that most bishops of his time behaved. That argument provides a chilling insight into the evil of clericalism as a culture and a system of power governing the Catholic Church. All the Church's preaching, teaching and laws about the primacy of Jesus as Lord and head of the Church is revealed to be empty rhetoric and glaring hypocrisy.

The victims of John Cummins' decades-long refusal to hold himself and the priests under his authority accountable were **CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS**. The ones still alive suffer devastating ongoing trauma. And all Cummins could say in a trial deposition was that "we made some mistakes". Tell that to the scores of victims whom Cummins left unprotected and vulnerable to the predations of Francis, Breen, Broderon, Poncirolli, Clark, and many more wolves in sheep's clothing.

The facts recounted here played a big role in my choice to refuse a parish assignment in 2005. Also, I could not go about business as usual after a long meeting I had that year with an abuse survivor of Fr. James Clark. Clark had previously served as pastor of Corpus Christi, Fremont from 1965 to 1985 where he abused at least five boys. The victim who shared his painful

story with me did so in the rectory which was my home from 1992 to 2004.

The next time you hear Michael Barber holding forth on the glories of the Latin Mass, or the importance of priests keeping celibacy, why not ask him why he has not held John Cummins accountable for aiding and abetting the sexual abuse of children and teens for 26 years? If he really wants to show that he is pro-life, not only pro-birth, why not ask him to stand up for the hundreds and hundreds of children whose lives as adults are a daily train wreck because he and every one of his predecessors lacked the courage and Spirit to say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH, and to put those words into action for justice.

As a lay person, I cannot preach or celebrate sacraments any longer, but I am available to share with your parish the dark history of our diocese. Of course Mike Barber may not approve because he thinks the catastrophe is all in the past. The victims of David Vela and Alex Castillo beg to differ, as well as the scores of victims who suffered abuse during the time of John Cummins.

In the Spirit,

Tim Stier
timstier1@icloud.com