

The Outsider

A Jesuit talks about the ways the Catholic Church is like Xerox and why women now are more important than priests

Not many people can say they've been fired by the pope. But that's what many claim happened to Father Tom Reese, now a senior fellow at Georgetown University's Woodstock Theological Center.

Reese had been editor of *America*, a magazine published by the Jesuits, since 1998. A Jesuit priest with a PhD in political science, he transformed the magazine into a forum for discussion of issues facing the Catholic Church. *America* published essays on such topics as gay priests and condom use. Shortly after Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected pope in 2005, Reese resigned. He won't speak publicly about why, but Jesuit officials acknowledge that pressure for his ouster had been coming from the Vatican for years.

Reese describes himself as an incrementalist who wants to hear both sides of a debate: "I think the problems come when church and society don't constantly change. I'm in favor of trying to make small changes. I'm in favor of open discussion. But I'm not in favor of ad hominem attacks on bishops or the pope."

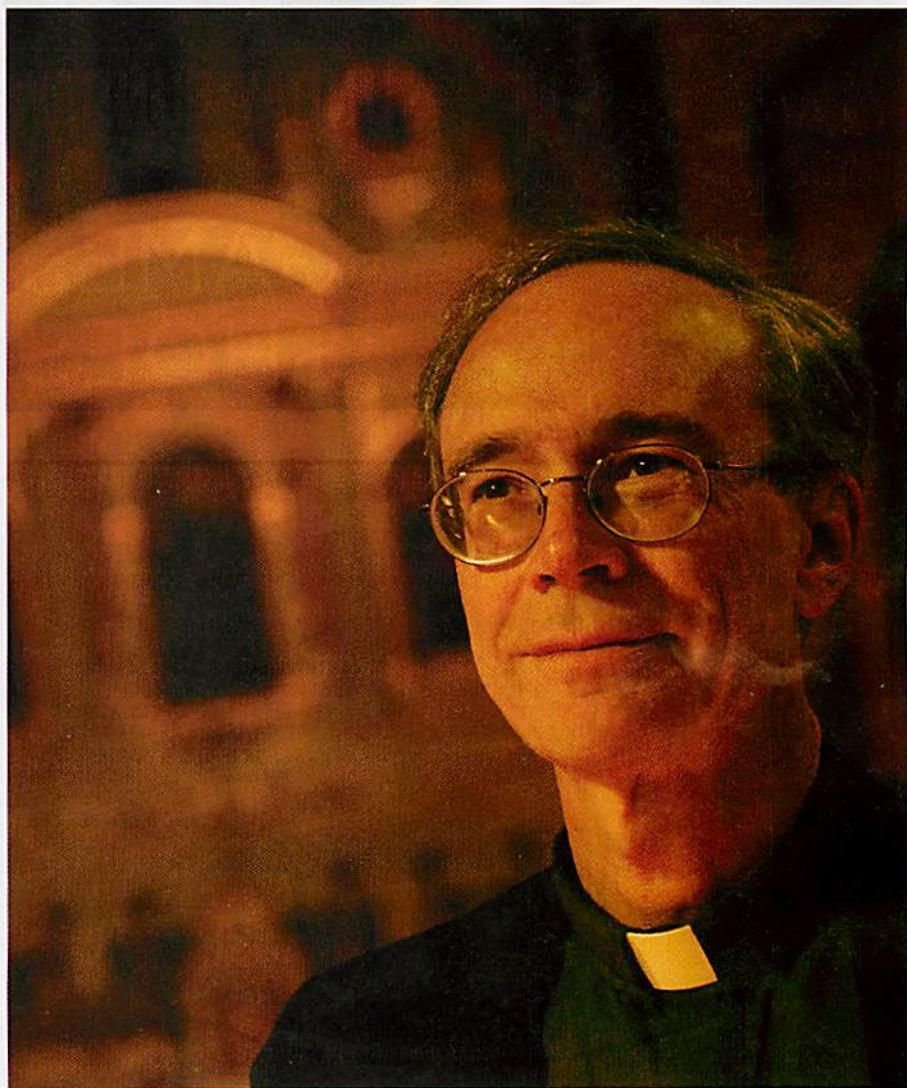
When Reese decided to become a Jesuit priest in 1962, Catholic Masses in the United States were still said in Latin. Over the last 48 years, he's watched the Church try to adapt to and survive in modern America.

A contributor to the *Washington Post's* On Faith blog and the author of three books about church hierarchy and politics, Reese writes *often* about the social issues that American Catholics discuss around their dinner tables.

In his office at Georgetown, he talked about the future of Catholicism and the role of religion in people's lives.

Let's talk about the sexual-abuse scandals that have plagued the Catholic Church.

Nobody in the Church understood this problem before 1985, when the first major court case occurred in Lafayette, Louisiana. So the first reaction of the Church was denial.



The second reaction was "We've got to take care of our brother priest." And since the bishops were trained as priests, they dealt with it like a priest would: "Are you sorry for what you've done? And you'll never do it again? Okay, good—and God bless you." Then they gave them another chance.

They treated the priest like a brother and forgot that the children were their brothers

"The Catholic Church has to learn how to tell stories again," Father Tom Reese says. "Jesus spoke in parables; we do doctrine."

and sisters and daughters and sons. It was the classic mistake of dealing with the person in front of you and forgetting everybody else.

The biggest mistake the bishops made was not meeting with the victims. All you have to do is listen to the stories of the people who

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have been abused. I've done it, and it tears your guts apart. You say to yourself, "We've got to make sure this never happens again."

Some of the most devastating stories involved bishops who moved these abusive priests to different churches.

Some bishops learned faster than others. Cardinal James Hickey got it quickly, so you hear about very few cases in Washington.

"Women pass on the faith to the next generation. They teach their kids their prayers. Priests get five minutes on Sunday."

A layman hired by Hickey to deal with social justice told me this story: His first week on the job, he attended a meeting discussing an abusive priest. A committee examined the case and said, "You can't return this guy to ministry." At the meeting, every priest around the table said, "But he's such a nice guy. We've got to give him another chance." As he was listening to this, the layman said to himself, "This is my first and last week on the job." At the end of the meeting, Hickey smiled and said, "It's a good thing the Church isn't a democracy—we're not returning this guy to ministry."

A lot of people were angry with the Vatican's response to the abuse scandals in Europe.

Pope Benedict simply doesn't comprehend the media. He is much more interested in what's in a scholarly journal than what's on the evening news. There's one press person for the entire Vatican; he's not in there talking to the pope about what we ought to do and how we should respond to this in the media. So structurally it's not organized to deal with it.

The Vatican didn't learn from the mistakes the bishops made in America. Don't blame the media. And calling it petty gossip or comparing it to antisemitism—give me a break. The people in the Vatican think they are defending the pope; they are pouring gasoline on him.

It's been several years since the scandals first broke in America. How have priests been affected?

Every priest's worst nightmare is a false accusation. How do you prove yourself innocent? After Mass, I used to hug kids. No way I'm going to hug a kid now. I mean, if there's a tornado and I see a couple kids on the sidewalk as I'm driving by, too bad! Lightning, rain? Sorry, find your own way home. This is the world we live in.

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But it's not just priests. I know of husbands who will not drive the babysitter home. And considering the epidemic of abuse we've had, it's a good thing.

What are the other biggest challenges facing the Catholic Church?

We're losing people like crazy. One-third of Catholics born and baptized in the United States have left the Church. This is a disaster, but you wonder if the bishops have noticed. They haven't, because the people leaving have been replaced by Hispanics, so our numbers are still pretty good. We're still the biggest church, but we would be so much bigger if we kept all those people.

Why are so many Americans leaving?

We use 13th-century language to talk to people in the 21st century. It worked when we were isolated in ghettos and weren't influenced by everything happening in the world, but not anymore. The trouble is many people in church leadership see certain issues as not debatable. But people are going to discuss them no matter what.

What issues are off limits?

A lot of them are in areas that affect women—birth control, abortion, women priests, married priests. The more educated a woman becomes, the more alienated she

becomes from the Church. That's a recipe for disaster. The Church can be run without men; it cannot be run without women.

Women pass on the faith to the next generation. They teach their kids their prayers, they talk to them about God. They are interacting with kids all the time. Priests get five minutes on Sunday.

Will women ever become priests?

We have a leadership that is saying no to these things, and this is a self-perpetuating leadership. They're not elected. And what does a self-perpetuating leadership do? It selects people who are very much like themselves to replace them.

As a social scientist I have very little hope. But as a Christian I have to have hope.

Should priests be able to get married?

For 1,000 years the Church had a married clergy. Peter, the first pope, was married. All the apostles except John were married. Jesus chose married men.

The issue we're starting to see now is that we don't have enough priests to serve the community. If we don't have priests, we don't have the Eucharist. We become a Bible church, and we've always been something more than that.

What do you think of how the Arch-

diocese of Washington handled the legalization of gay marriage?

The position of the Church is not quite as bad as many portray it. The Church says we should love gay people. They are children of God; they are our children. At the same time, the Church argues that gay sex is against God's law. And so is sex outside of marriage between heterosexuals. We're equal-opportunity condemners.

I personally think the Church's battle against the legalization of gay marriage is misplaced. This idea that gay marriage is somehow a threat to family life or to heterosexual marriage doesn't make sense.

I just don't see it as a battle worth fighting. We ought to be concerned about issues like immigration reform, feeding the hungry, climate change. This is a matter of personal morality between two consenting adults. It's like birth control and divorce: The Church is against birth control and divorce, but it's not going out there saying they should be illegal.

Why did the argument with the DC government escalate?

The city council, it seems to me, was looking for a fight, too. Traditionally in these areas, governments carve out an exception for religious organizations. We're in the deepest



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recession since the Great Depression. Is this the time when you want to kick out the best welfare provider of services? The Catholic Church does pretty well for people—uses the money efficiently, provides good services.

Could the Church have compromised too? Sure. So it was a mess all the way. I think Archbishop Wuerl would have been happier trying to work this out behind closed doors. The council wanted to do it in the newspaper.

Is Archbishop Wuerl more conservative than his predecessor, Cardinal McCarrick?

Catholic bishops don't fit the regular categories of liberal and conservative. We're with the right and the Republicans when it comes to gay marriage and abortion. But when it comes to refugees, immigrants, economic justice, labor unions, we're to the left of Obama.

Is the Church's fight to outlaw abortion working?

We've got to argue it as a human-rights issue. It can't be presented as a matter of faith or doctrine. It's got to be presented as the right to life of the unborn child if the Church is going to convince the whole country.

But then, given the real world in which we live, how do you deal with it? Do we make

abortion illegal and put people in jail? Or can we work to reduce the number of abortions by helping women to choose to have their children? We know from surveys that most women have abortions for financial reasons. Universal health care will help women choose not to have abortions.

Europe has more-liberal abortion laws than we do, and still they have fewer abortions because they have national health care. They have a good safety net. That was the argument of the pro-life people who supported Obama and the Democrats.

Have the US bishops acknowledged that argument?

Some would privately, but as a whole, no. In a sense, the bishops want both universal health care and the outlawing of abortions. The problem is we don't have a party that wants both. So then you've got to make a prudential judgment about which one you vote for.

The Republicans have been promising to do something and have done nothing. Even their Supreme Court appointments have not been able to do anything. They're not reversing *Roe v. Wade*, and they're not going to. So do you keep betting on that horse that keeps losing, or do you start thinking about betting on another horse that can actually

reduce the number of abortions?

What is the Church going to look like 100 years from now?

It's going to be very different. In the United States it's going to be much more Hispanic. I think we're going to get smaller.

Religion in the early 20th century and before was more like nationality. You were born into it. And you would never think of leaving, even if you disagreed with the Church's viewpoint. In the United States today, religion is more like a consumer product. It's a lifestyle choice. You move to a new neighborhood, you find out where your neighbors and your friends go, and you get a new church. Is the music good? Is the preaching good? Do they have a good program for my kids?

Why has that changed?

The Church is a lazy monopoly. The evangelical churches are entrepreneurial. They're the Silicon Valley start-ups. The Catholic Church expects people to come to us because we've got the sacraments, we have the truth. Well, they aren't coming anymore.

Pope Benedict is very focused on controlling the theologians and the thinkers in the Church to make sure they're in tune with Vatican policy. But that has suppressed creative thinking.



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The Church today is like Xerox. The whole icon system for computers was invented by Xerox. They had these creative people out in California playing with computers and coming up with ideas, but the management in New York had no interest in it. And Steve Jobs asked if he could go in and see this stuff. And the people in New York said, "Oh, sure, why not?" And the people in California said, "Are you out of your mind?" He saw this icon system, and he just absorbed it like a sponge and he went out and created Apple computers.

The Church is the same way. Would you invest in a company whose management and research-and-development divisions are not on speaking terms? You've got to let your theologians be creative.

The Vatican is still fighting the Reformation. It's afraid another Luther will arise from the theologians and divide the Church. The fight should be against boredom and clericalism. Why don't people come to Mass? Because it's boring or because they're mad at their priest for some small reason—he wouldn't let them have their wedding in their garden or preached against the Democratic candidate?

How can priests make church more interesting?

The Church has to learn how to tell stories again. Jesus spoke in parables; we do doctrine. We need to present heroes to people. We've got to use art, literature, images, the Internet to get this message out. We still are functioning on a classroom model—you round up the students and tell them the truth, and they're supposed to take notes and memorize it and follow it. It doesn't work.

Should the Church change its message on some of these social issues?

Sometimes we just need to rethink how the message is presented. It should not be a series of no's; it should be a series of yeses. We are saying yes to love, commitment, idealism, concern for the poor.

What have you learned from the scandals and debates?

The sad thing about what's happening is that the credibility of the bishops and the hierarchy is being compromised, both by the sex-abuse crisis and by some of the positions they've taken where the people say, "This doesn't make any sense to us." On the other hand, this is forcing people to realize that to be a Christian is to place your faith in Jesus, not in the pope, not in the bishops.

Structure and organization are important, but whether you like or don't like the pope is not central to your faith. You should respect him, you should listen to him, but ultimately our faith is in Jesus Christ. **WI**

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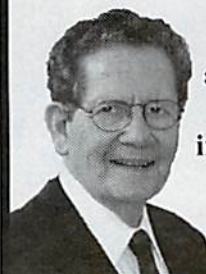
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