

## View

# Unhappy Fault

*Leon J. Podles on the Integration of Anger into the Virtuous Life*

Any institution tends to preserve itself by avoiding conflict, whether external or internal. In addition to this universal tendency, many Christians have a false understanding of the nature and role of anger. It is seen as something negative, something that a Christian should not feel.

In the sexual abuse cases in the Catholic Church, those who dealt with the bishops have consistently remarked that the bishops never expressed outrage or righteous anger, even at the most horrendous cases of abuse and sacrilege. Bishops seem to think that anger at sin is un-Christian. Gilbert Kilman, a child psychiatrist, commented, "What amazes me is the lack of outrage the church feels when its good work is being harmed. So, if there is anything the church needs to know, it needs to know how to be outraged."

Mark Serrano confronted Bishop Frank Rodimer, asking why he had let his priest-friend Peter Osinski sleep with boys at Rodimer's beach house while Rodimer was in the next bedroom: "Where is your moral indignation?"

Rodimer's answer was, "Then I don't get it. What do you want?" What Serrano wanted Rodimer to do was to behave like a man with a heart, a heart that is outraged by evil. But Rodimer couldn't; his inability to feel outrage was a quality that had helped make him a bishop. He would never get into fights, never rock the boat, never "divide" but only "unify." Rodimer could not understand why he should feel deep anger at evil, at the violation of the innocent, at the oppression of the weak.

### Emotional Deformation

The emotions that are now suppressed are hatred and anger. Christians think that they ought not to feel these emotions, that it is un-Christian to feel them. They secretly suspect that Jesus was being un-Christian in his attitude to the scribes and Pharisees when he was angry at them, that he was un-Christian when he drove the moneychangers out of the temple or declared that millstones (not vacations in treatment centers) were the way to treat child abusers.

Conrad Baars noticed this emotional deformation in the clergy in the mid-twentieth century. He recognized that there had been distortions in "traditional" Catholic spirituality. It had become too focused upon individual acts rather than on growth in virtue; it had emphasized sheer naked strength of will. In forgetting that growth in virtue was the goal of the Christian's moral life, it forgot that the emotions, all emotions, including anger and hate, are part of human nature and must be integrated into a virtuous life.

Baars had been imprisoned by the Nazis. He knew iniquity firsthand and that there was something wrong with those who did not hate it:

A little reflection will make it clear that there is a big difference between the person who knows solely that something is evil and ought to be opposed, and the one who in addition also feels hate for that evil, is angry that it is corrupting or harming his fellow-men, and feels aroused to combat it courageously and vigorously.

### Just Wrath

Wrath is a necessary and positive part of human nature: "Wrath is the strength to attack the repugnant; the power of anger is actually the power of resistance in the soul," wrote Josef Pieper. The lack of wrath against injustice, he continued, is a deficiency: "One who does good with passion is more praiseworthy than one who is 'not entirely' afire for the good, even to the forces of the sensual realm."

Aquinas, too, says that "lack of the passion of anger is also a vice" because a man who truly and forcefully rejects evil will be angry at it. The lack of anger makes the movement of the will against evil "lacking or weak." He quotes John Chrysostom: "He who is not angry, whereas he has cause to be, sins. For unreasonable patience is the hotbed of many vices, it fosters negligence, and incites not

only the wicked but the good to do wrong.”

Pieper observed the disappearance of the concept of just wrath in Catholic moral theology and spiritual life:

The fact, however, that Thomas assigns to [just] wrath a positive relation to the virtue of fortitude has become largely unintelligible and unacceptable to present-day Christianity and its non-Christian critics. This lack of comprehension may be explained partly by the exclusion, from Christian ethics, of the component of passion (with its inevitably physical aspect) as something alien and incongruous—an exclusion due to a kind of intellectual stoicism—and partly by the fact that the explosive activity which reveals itself in wrath is naturally repugnant to good behavior regulated by “bourgeois” standards.

Pieper’s quote from Aquinas’s commentary on John is relevant to both anger and forgiveness. Aquinas is commenting on the passage in which Jesus tells us to offer the other cheek:

Holy Scripture must be understood in the light of what Christ and the saints have actually practiced. Christ did not offer the other cheek, nor Paul either. Thus to interpret the injunction of the Sermon on the Mount literally is to misunderstand it. This injunction signifies rather the readiness of the soul to bear, *if it be necessary*, such things and worse, without bitterness against the attacker. This readiness our Lord showed, when He gave up His body to be crucified. That response of the Lord was useful, therefore, for our instruction.

The philosophical error that is at the root of this rejection of the passions is not stoicism so much as nominalism and a false concept of freedom which has become ingrained in Western Christianity.

### **Anger as Energy**

The Reverend Kevin Culligan, a priest in his sixties, was angry when he was a teenager, but says, “Since then I have been uncomfortable with anger.” He has been afraid of losing control of himself and doing something “I would later regret or have held against me.” He feared becoming “irrational.”

But then he saw a television program about a boy who had been abused by a priest when he was eight years old, and he saw the arrogance of the church officials who dismissed the boy’s cries for help. Culligan shouted at the TV set: “Those bastards! Look what they’ve done to the Church!” He felt the hot wrath of God in him against those who had made the Church a den of sexual predators.

Culligan reflected that “many current spiritualities regard strong emotion—fear, joy, anger, sadness, hope, pity—as ‘obstacles to spiritual growth.’” But Jesus felt the full range of human emotions, including anger, and Culligan decided that “our emotions too—our rage as well as our compassion—are sacred” because they give us the energy needed to rebuild the Church and do God’s work.

One Irish bishop said the calm way everyone approached sexual abuse helped mislead him about the seriousness of the matter:

“I think if it had come to me differently . . . if the parent had come roaring and shouting at me, it would have affected the response. It would have made me sit up more and be aware. The experience of having direct contact with a parent who was very angry and very upset would have alerted me more too. If someone had come thumping at the door outraged and making demands, which they are quite entitled to do, I would have learned a lot faster.”

As Gregory the Great said, “Reason opposes evil the more effectively when anger ministers at her side.”

### **Diplomatic Weakness**

This lack of aggressiveness among clerics has been noticed by psychologists. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops published a study that said, “Priests are often, by temperament and personality, anxious to establish harmony and to please. By theology and vocation they are concerned to be healers, reconcilers, and builders of the community.” Almost all psychological studies support this assessment: Priests and seminarians are “unassertive, dislike violence . . . and have a high need for abasement (i.e., want to give in and avoid conflict).” This dislike of conflict is present in other churches and their clergy as well.

Diplomats rule in the Vatican, and diplomats dislike confrontation, anger, and hatred, because such emotions make diplomacy difficult. The Vatican has appointed the bishops; the bishops have trained the clergy. Therefore, hatred of iniquity has been felt to be something that did not fit into the Christian life. The Catholic bishops had and have this lack of anger, and thereby betray a defect or weakness of the will in their rejection of child abuse.

To express sorrow but not anger at the mystery of evil that is child abuse demonstrates only part of the virtue of fortitude, as Thomas Aquinas explained:

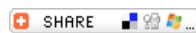
Whereas fortitude . . . has two parts, namely endurance and aggression, it employs anger, not in the act of endurance . . . but for the act of aggression. . . . Sorrow by its very nature gives way to the thing that hurts; though accidentally it helps in aggression . . . as being the cause of anger.

Sorrow at evil without anger at evil is a fault, a fault that the Catholic bishops have repeatedly fallen into in their handling of sexual abuse and that the late pope fell into when he tolerated the bishops' faults. Until just anger is directed at the bishops, until bishops (including the pope) feel just anger at their fellow bishops who have disgraced and failed their office, the state of sin in the Church continues.

### **Virtue Without a Name**

Meekness, which is the virtue that moderates anger, is misunderstood as passivity. Moses angrily confronting Pharaoh was the meekest of men, because he moderated the plagues to allow Pharaoh time to repent. Meekness moderates anger so that it is in accord with reason. Since most people suffer from an excess of anger, the virtue that *increases* anger in those who are *deficient* in it so that it is in accord with reason does not have a name, but it needs one.

*[Leon J. Podles](#) holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Virginia and has worked as a teacher and a federal investigator. He is the author of *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* and the forthcoming *License to Sin* (both from Spence Publishing). Dr. Podles and his wife have six children and live in Naples, Florida. He is a senior editor of Touchstone.*



“Unhappy Fault” first appeared in the [July/August, 2009](#) issue of *Touchstone*. Click [here](#) for a printer-friendly version.

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