Repent!

EDWARD T. OAKES

Nowadays most Christians labor under the impression that Saint Augustine was a rigorist. No doubt this is partly due to his strict sexual ethics, which arm-chair psychoanalysts too easily ascribe to an alleged "reaction formation" following his own mistress-filled past. But there is also his apparently harsh view of predestination and free will, with grace being absolutely necessary to salvation, yet restricted to the Christian dispensation—such an ironic and stingy position, it would seem, for the theologian who later became known as the Doctor of Grace.

But this is not how matters were perceived in Augustine's own time: it was his opponent Pelagius who was seen as the rigorist, including by himself. In a famous letter to Demetrias, a wealthy Roman matron who had decided to forsake her wealth and become a nun, Pelagius said that "since perfection is *possible* for humanity, it is *obligatory*." Frailty, then, is no excuse.

Augustine knew better. He saw (in his own life, to be sure, but also in the lives of the members of his diocese of Hippo) how much sin has infected the human soul, impairing our very ability to fulfill the moral law. Indeed, in his polemics against Pelagius he even compared the church to a hospital, where fallen humanity could recover its strength and find healing for its failings by growing in holiness through grace.

This image of the church as hospital came to mind last year when I first heard the news of the sex scandals at the minor seminary in Santa Barbara, California. Only it came with a rather sardonic twist: Has the church now become a hospital where it is mostly the doctors who are ill and where patients get sick from the ministrations of their physicians?

This unsettling thought emerged most clearly the day after the news of the scandal broke, when a reporter for the *New York Times* interviewed one of the former junior seminarians. "This morning, liberated by the release of a detailed report about the sexual abuse he and other students suffered for years at the hands of Franciscan friars, Michael Higgins danced. He danced to the music of the Grateful Dead....The music was about all the things his abusers took away from him: 'It's about women and meeting teen-aged girls and just dancing and having a lot of fun,' he said. 'It's about the stuff that would have made me feel normal, feel part of society.' Like other former students, Michael Higgins said his life has been a chaos of drugs, alcohol, broken relationships, and shameful secrets since some of his teachers and religious mentors at the seminary made him their sexual plaything."

America magazine recently published [January 22, 1994] an interview with Joseph P. Chinnici, O.F.M., the current provincial superior of the Santa Barbara Franciscan province, who had the unenviable task of investigating the long history of abuse in this seminary and then releasing a report to the public. Due to the exigencies of confidentiality, etc., his position no doubt carries with it a lot of restrictions on what he can say; nonetheless, the interview made me uncomfortable, with its talk of this crisis being a time of "painful grace," an opportunity to "grow in our preferential option for the poor."

Far better, it seems to me, than this fillip of post-Vatican II rhetoric would be Augustine's image of infection and disease. It is an image to which John Henry Newman returned time and again in his *Parochial and Plain Sermons*: "Just as a man may be in good health, may have his arms and hands his own, his head clear, his mind active, and yet may just have one organ diseased, and the disease not at once appear, but be latent, and yet be mortal, bringing certain death in the event, so may it be with [Christians who tolerate habitual sin in themselves]."

And from that rather unnerving image Newman draws conclusions that probably will strike some people as unduly "rigorist," but which, in fact highlight why people are admitted into a hospital in the first place: to get well. But that can never happen if the infection is not only left untreated but is actively tolerated. So Newman concludes: "Never suffer sin to remain upon you; let it not grow old in you; wipe it off while it is still fresh, else it will stain; let it not get ingrained; let it not eat its way in, and rust in you. It is of a consuming nature; it is like a canker, it will eat your flesh."

No one denies, from whatever perspective of ecclesiastical opinion, that the church is now going through a period of extraordinary crisis. Any hopeful prognosis of that crisis, however, will first depend on an accurate diagnosis. And this is why the voice of Newman is so crucial: "Sin neglected not only stains and infects the soul, but it becomes habitual. It perverts and deforms the soul; it permanently enfeebles, cripples, or mutilates us....Do not stop to ask the degree of your guilt, whether you have actually drawn back from God or not. Let your ordinary repentance be as though you had. You cannot repent too much." □

Edward T. Oakes, S.J. teaches in the Religious Studies Program at New York University.