

What Public Administrators Can Learn from the Catholic Scandal
Review of Article by Tom Barth
Theresa Lynn Sidebotham, Esq.
Telios Law PLLC
tls@telioslaw.com

Mr. Barth believes that public administrators can learn a great deal from the abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, given that the guiding principles for large bureaucracies are similar to the large religious organization. His article on “Crisis Management in the Catholic Church: Lessons for Public Administrators” can be found at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2010.02205.x/abstract>. While Mr. Barth does not refer to the studies that show the rate of child sexual abuse is disturbingly high in public institutions, his work is surely relevant to that problem.¹

Mr. Barth begins with the background of the crisis, and explains succinctly the development of the Church’s initial and then later response to the crisis. Then he analyzes the scandal with reference to several principles. The first is crisis management theory, and he discusses the shortcomings of the Church’s actions under this theory. Next, he reviews various reasons why organizations tend to fall short in crisis management. Third, he discusses some principles of how to implement effective crisis management practices. One weakness of the article is that it dwells heavily on previous shortcomings, but less on the many things the Church has done to become one of the safest—perhaps the safest—organization for children in the United States.

Mr. Barth comments that values-driven organizations, like churches, are held to a higher standard of expectation. Because elected officials also “bear a sacred trust,” he believes they too should accept the burden of higher expectations.

In discussing accountability and trust, Mr. Barth refers to the tendency of some large, hierarchical organizations to show “tyrannical and authoritarian traits,” and for their leaders to be “full of their own self-importance and buttressed by elite privileges,” so that they do not feel accountable to anyone but themselves.

¹ See for instance: “Report on Sexual Victimization in Juvenile Correctional Facilities,” http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CDEQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ojp.usdoj.gov%2Fpreviewpanel%2Fpdfs%2Fpanel_report_101014.pdf&ei=zBB4Uu-QG8iIyAH4-ICoBA&usg=AFQjCNGatnM6BW3wS3NUT75LmsF29gvNPA&sig2=Mtq7KGLYN3fH8mzp2MmqIw&bvm=bv.55819444,d.aWc

“Educator Sexual Misconduct: A Synthesis of Existing Literature,” http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CDEQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww2.ed.gov%2Frschstat%2Fresearch%2Fpubs%2Fmisconductreview%2Freport.pdf&ei=jA94UpWhDeOIyAGWmYGgDg&usg=AFQjCNFUnc6mY_Ct3sGhWayDbpRx7-eyQA&sig2=obq1DMDEK9JGpFiUvZ3RwQ&bvm=bv.55819444,d.aWc

Recent problems with government amply demonstrate these particular traits. He also cites research showing that in organizations with “weak public accountability cultures,” scapegoats will be sacrificed without the root causes being addressed.

To date, public administrators have often not been held responsible for the high rate of child sexual abuse in their organizations, or for their other failures towards their constituencies. As Barth concludes with reference to the Catholic scandal, “Public administrators should continue to watch and learn.”