

“The Church’s Greatest Crisis”

REV. JAMES V. SCHALL, S.J., OCTOBER 8, 2018

On September 21, the well-known German magazine, *Der Spiegel*, featured a long article on the whole career of Pope Francis under the title “The Greatest Crisis in the History of the Church.” The immediate issues brought up concerned the pope’s handling of abuse issues while he was still in Argentina. Most people are by now also familiar with the issues in this same area brought up by Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò’s testimony concerning former Cardinal McCarrick’s unfortunate record. In a situation such as this, most people also want to be as fair as possible to the pope. And most people want to know the facts.

People are also puzzled by the pope’s refusal to answer what seem to be quite legitimate and straightforward questions about what he teaches. Common sense would normally suggest that, if someone is not guilty, he would be anxious to state why, to clear the record, as it were. The pope’s silence, fairly or unfairly, suggests to most people of good will that something was covered up, something is not quite right.

People at all levels and particularly Catholics strive to know what is at stake. They are not interested in gossip or innuendo. They rightly want to know the truth; they want to hear a fair assessment of the situation from the pope himself; but they do not want their concerns dismissed. Their spiritual wellbeing depends on a Church sound enough to proclaim the truth, including the truth about its own members who are sinners. Catholics are not afraid of sin unless they cease to believe in the Church’s major teaching about sins, namely, that Christ came not to deny them but to forgive them. Even if the Church is no longer credible, we still remain in sin. That is good Pauline teaching.

Admittedly, this on-going saga brought up by *Der Spiegel* need not be the greatest crisis in Church history. Whatever ranking we want to give it—the worst, the second worst, the tenth worst, or a minor glitch—in the public eye, it certainly is a crisis of major proportions that challenges the credibility of the Church on its own terms. We would all like to see it just go away. Indeed, we would all like to think it never happened. But we are realists. What happened, happened. We must deal with it, but not before knowing the truth of what went on.

Pope Bergoglio himself seems willing to talk about almost every subject but his own beliefs and record. They seem most at issue. The crisis at this stage, whether we like it or not, is precisely about the present pope, what he believes and which decisions he made. It is not directly about whether Catholicism is objectively true or not. Rather it is a question of whether the Catholic Church, in its own testimony about itself, is consistent with its own teachings.

As the reporting in *Der Spiegel* and the *New York Times* shows, people from outside the Church, not just Catholics, are now carefully watching this drama. They realize the long-term implications to our culture if Catholicism can no longer claim for

itself a consistency with its past or with the integrity of its teaching. It is analogous to a question of whether, say, the Communist Party in its hay-day was consistent with its own tenets, and whether it was objectively consistent with its own premises or not.

The headlines in the September 7 issue of *L’Osservatore Romano* presented the pope’s Letter on the World’s Day of Prayer for Creation. The Letter is about access “to clean water.” The ancient Romans were famous for building aqueducts to bring water into cities. If anyone lacks water today, it is not because we do not know how to purify and distribute water resources. It is almost entirely due to economic and political choices. The technical means or know-how for providing water is not a major theological concern of Christianity as such. Christ walked on water, turned water into wine, helped a woman at a well draw it up, and was baptized with it in the Jordan. He never designed a dam to provide water for Nazareth or Jerusalem. He evidently assumed that men could eventually figure this task out without the need of revelation.

A pope can mention the problem of water availability or other such issues, but his is not the task to provide technical solutions even if he had a doctorate in water engineering. One can question whether the pope’s views of economics and politics that tend toward socialism encourage a system that easily provides water on a large-scale basis. Many people of good will wonder why, if the pope can talk of clean water, he cannot talk about his own record or the views he holds on issues that certainly do fall within his competency. These latter issues are what perplex people and give impetus to the reportage of *Der Spiegel*.



II.

We might reasonably ask ourselves: “What would the Church’s ‘greatest’ crisis be, if it were to have one?” It would have something to do with pride, as in placing a human opinion over a divinely revealed or rational teaching. It would have to be an embracing of “this world,” spoken of in John’s Gospel as a world that rejects Christ’s coming and his Cross.

Passages in 2 Timothy and in Matthew 25 do indicate that a serious crisis can erupt when unworthy priests and prelates are found within the Church itself. The pope speaks much of clericalism and Pharisees in the Church itself. People are fond of citing Paul VI’s “smoke of Satan” in the Church. Ezekiel and St. Augustine give us warnings that unworthy shepherds might prevail among us. On the other hand, at least the papacy was supposed to have been a place where “the gates of hell” did not prevail. Popes could be sinful in their personal lives but still would not teach false doctrine or approve immoral activities.

By implying that this crisis is the “greatest” in the Church’s history, *Der Spiegel* is taking the Church at its own word. It compares the Church’s own teachings with what is practiced or proposed by Pope Francis. Ross Douthat’s book, *To Change the Church*, is along these lines also. The implication is that the crisis is of the Church’s own making. It is not due to some barbarian invasion, a Masonic plot, or some other outside force imposing on it or threatening it. It is being threatened by its own ministers not only for not living according to Christian moral standards but also in not teaching what is good. The irony, to be specific, is that disordered man-man sexual relations have become a civil “right” in many countries but the same relationship is a natural law aberration according to Church teaching.

The world watches to see if the Church will join the world in approving these relations as “rights” in the public order and in the Church. Or will it reject them? In other words, the Church is being watched to see if it upholds the natural law in its own teachings and practices or whether it joins the world and thereby undermines its claim to consistency and truth of doctrine since its beginning.

The “greatest crisis” of the Church, then, would not be the discovery that clerics are themselves sinners. Christ was sent not for the just but the unjust. He was sent to grant forgiveness to whoever asked for it. But he also told us to stop sinning. Therefore, the fact that sinners populate the world and the Church, even after Christ established rules to live by, cannot surprise anyone.

There are, of course, many kinds of sin. The current flair-up is over the sixth commandment in its many consequences. They all relate to the integrity of the family and its members.

Indeed, the current issue is largely the result of ingrown, acquired habits that are difficult, but not impossible, to break. Generally speaking, in seeking to make a fair judgment on priest and bishop sinners, their victims were neglected. This latter concern is now central, as it should be. The greatest “crisis” is not about the fact of sin or sinners. It is about the internal order of the Church itself, whether it believes and upholds its own doctrines, whether true or not.

Many do not think that the aberrations some priests and bishops are accused of committing are sins or disorders. But even these realize that the Church is the last bastion of moral integrity as seen in its classical philosophic and religious form. They also see that the serious troubles the Church itself is in are primarily due to its own actions.

We can say that the issue is not over whether the pope is a sinner, naïve, or weak, but whether he has approved teachings or moral behaviors that he is obliged to oppose. If he has taken this step in some obviously authoritative way, then *Der Spiegel* will be proved right. A reversal of fundamental teaching at the highest levels of the Church would constitute the “greatest crisis” in Catholic history. It is an act of faithfulness to respectfully hope Pope Francis clarifies his own teachings. It does not seem like too much to ask and many, including *Der Spiegel*, are asking it.



Tagged as [Clergy Sexual Abuse](#), [Der Spiegel](#), [Pope Francis](#)

514

By [Rev. James V. Schall, S.J.](#)

Rev. James V. Schall, S.J., taught political science at Georgetown University for many years. He is the author of *The Mind That Is Catholic* from Catholic University of America Press; *Remembering Belloc* from St. Augustine Press; and *Reasonable Pleasures* from Ignatius Press. His newest books include [A Line Through the Human Heart: On Sinning and Being Forgiven](#) (2016) and [On the Principles of Taxing Beer and Other Brief Philosophical Essays](#) (2017). His most recent books are *Catholicism and Intelligence* (Emmaus Road, 2017) and *The Universe We Think In* (CUA Press, 2018).