

TO AZAZEL: THE GOSPEL OF MERCY AND THE DIOCESE OF MANCHESTER

By Ryan Anthony MacDonald

"Aaron shall lay his hands on the head of the live goat and confess upon him all the sins of the people of Israel. The goat shall bear all their sins to a solitary place in the wilderness - to Azazel." (Leviticus 16:21-22;28)

From his cell in the New Hampshire State Prison, Fr. Gordon MacRae wrote a letter last month to a priest of his diocese asking for help with a few questions about a parish where they once both served. Though the letter to his brother priest was courteous, it was also cautious, and for good reason.

During the 14 ½ years Fr. MacRae has been in prison, the Diocese of Manchester has had both public and private faces in his regard, as well as a pre-2002 disposition and a post-2002 disposition. One needs a scorecard to keep track. For years, the diocese has vaguely insisted that the imprisoned priest, through unnamed third parties, refused contact with other priests despite their efforts to be supportive. MacRae merely blankly stared when asked about this. The response of the priest to whom he recently wrote, however, reflected the more private, post-2002 demeanor of MacRae's diocese. Written on church stationery, the priest's reply was chillingly brief: "I can't help you, and don't see the necessity of entertaining any further correspondence."

A few years earlier, Fr. MacRae wrote to another New Hampshire priest who published an op-ed article calling for a change in canon law so that accused priests can be administratively laicized by their own bishops - a sort of ecclesiastical equivalent of lethal injection. It took a degree of courage for the imprisoned and thoroughly vilified Fr. MacRae to write to that priest asking for an opportunity, from the point of view of the accused, to present a case for why the canonical rights of priests must be protected in these typically decades-old claims. Fr. MacRae's letter came back to him unopened with a terse note attached: "Communications with you are neither prudent nor welcome." ¹

A year later, an interested writer traveled from Washington to visit Fr. MacRae in prison. When the planned visit was derailed because of an unannounced change in prison visiting rules, the writer instead attended Mass at a Catholic church in sight of the Concord, NH prison. After Mass, the writer asked the priest if he had ever visited Fr. MacRae in prison. Reportedly, the priest's demeanor changed instantly. "You should stay *away* from MacRae," the priest hissed. "He can't be trusted. He abandoned his faith and has no interest in seeing the bishop or other priests." When asked if he had ever even met Fr. MacRae, the local priest admitted that he had not. Asked the source of his opinion, he said it is common knowledge in the diocese.

There are other examples, mostly of unresponsive silence from the priests in his diocese to whom Fr. MacRae has written over the years - with two brief but graceful exceptions. But even those replies seemed in no way to appreciate the reality - the utter, inexcusable scandal - that Fr. MacRae has been in prison for more than 14 years just 15 miles from the Chancery Office of his diocese, and yet he has never been visited by a priest of his diocese. Long time prison chaplain Russ Sweeney *now* retired, refutes the impression that Fr. MacRae refused visits from other priests:

"I have been told by priests that Diocesan officials claimed Fr. MacRae refused, through unnamed third parties, to be visited by any priest. During my ten years as [prison] chaplain, no one in the Diocese of Manchester ever asked me to arrange a visit with Fr. MacRae who often expressed bewilderment at the lack of contact. It remains my belief that Fr. MacRae is for some reason viewed differently from other priests *who* have been incarcerated."

Why he is viewed differently is unknown. Those who know him say that throughout his ordeal he has declined to say or write a single word criticizing his bishop or fellow priests in public. The only apparent difference between the MacRae case and three other New Hampshire priests who have been in prison - and the fifty others who have been accused - is that Fr. MacRae is the only one who has maintained that the claims against him were a fraud. He is serving a sixty-seven year sentence imposed after he three times refused a "plea bargain" in which he was offered a sentence of one to three years.

It should be noted that Bishop McCormack visits Fr. MacRae once per year, his last visit being a spontaneous 15 minute meeting after an Advent Mass at the prison. Bishop McCormack does not respond or responds "unresponsively," to most of MacRae's mail. Recently, Fr. MacRae wrote to his bishop and the New Hampshire Attorney General asking for information about the process by which communications he thought were privileged ended up published on-line.

The Attorney General responded with a detailed explanation. Bishop McCormack did not respond at all.

The previous Bishop of Manchester, the late Bishop Leo O'Neil, never even met Fr. MacRae during the five years that his tenure overlapped with the priest's imprisonment. Auxiliary Bishop Christian has not seen or spoken with Fr. MacRae for over 14 years.

The demeanor of the two Manchester priests, who responded as they did to Fr. MacRae's letters, though certainly not reflective of the Gospel, might even be understandable to the more vindictive among us if Fr. MacRae's bishop and diocese indeed believed him to be guilty. That is by no means clear, however. Documents released by the diocese and the state as a result of a 2003 agreement with the New Hampshire Attorney General - the first of its kind in the nation - reveal significant doubt, and much duplicity, about the matter of Fr. MacRae's actual guilt. At the time they wrote those memos, church personnel clearly did not anticipate that the memos would ever see the light of day.

In a 2001 confidential memo to Bishop John McCormack, diocesan attorney Bradford Cook wrote: "There were certainly imperfections in the judge's handling of [MacRae's trial]." In regard to the actual claims against Fr. MacRae he wrote: "Whether it was all trumped up or totally manufactured is impossible to know That it was embellished is clear." The diocesan attorney cited that a number of other priests where Fr. MacRae served were also accused - some by the same people who accused Fr. MacRae: "It is impossible to discount that one or more of them may have been involved with one or more of [MacRae's accusers]." ²

In another confidential 2001 memo, diocesan Chancellor Fr. Edward Arsenault noted that errors occurred in Fr. MacRae's trial, and cited the unfairness of the diocese's refusal to assist him with an appeal forcing him to rely on a public defender for his only remaining hope for justice. Arsenault recommended that the diocese deal with the matter of funding an appellate defense for Fr. MacRae by coming up with a remedy for "the lack of base remuneration" from the diocese as required by Church law. On the very verge of his diocese's finally stepping up to the plate, the 2002 national scandal implicated Bishop McCormack and cast Fr. MacRae back into the abyss.

Two persons, a New Hampshire attorney and a former television news producer, have attested under oath that in 2000 Bishop McCormack told them of his belief that Fr. MacRae is innocent of the claims for which he is in prison, then demanded secrecy, saying, "None of this can ever leave this room."

After spending ten years providing spiritual counseling to Fr. MacRae behind bars, former prison chaplain John Sweeney wrote to a Church official in 2004:

"Fr. MacRae has consistently put the perceived needs of the Church and priesthood above his own. I remain concerned that Fr. MacRae may not have fully defended himself because he feared compromising other priests and Church officials."

Guilt or innocence is irrelevant to mercy. The sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic priesthood was the result of a blatant, widespread failure of fidelity and leadership. It was a failure by bishops to discipline their priests and to protect the most vulnerable among us according to the laws of the Church. It was a failure by priests to engage in fraternal correction as they are bidden to by Scripture and the Church. It was a failure by some priests to put the needs and well-being of the Church's citizens above their own. It was a failure of the institutional Church to place integrity and justice above image and the status quo clerical culture with its, at best, opaque machinations.

Now here we are some six years and two plus billion dollars later, and the failures of our spiritual leaders are now compounded by a failure of mercy, a failure to live courageously the mandate of the Gospel of Mercy. In a defensive missive to Rome, Bishop McCormack wrote that he and the diocese would risk public ridicule if they helped Fr. MacRae. So be it. If bishops and priests are so prepared to abandon their own, what hope is there in the Church for any of us?

The pretense in New Hampshire that Fr. Gordon MacRae is somehow the poster priest for abuse is absurd. With but a few heroic exceptions, the conduct of priests toward their accused brothers in prison - some of whom are guilty and some apparently not - has been appallingly self-serving and scandalous. Our Church deserves better stewardship of the Gospel of Mercy.

Hebrews 13:3 exhorts us to, "Remember those who are in prison as though in prison with them." The two priests who responded to Fr. MacRae's letters by throwing them back in his face - and others who have scapegoated the accused among their brothers - need a long, reflective retreat. They have brought scandal upon the faithful.

Endnotes

- 1 Father MacRae shared the two priests' responses on condition that their names are withheld.
- 2 An extensive review of the case against Father Gordon MacRae can be found at www.GordonMacRae.net, a website sponsored by The National Center for Reason and Justice (www.ncrj.org).

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