On April 18, *CFN* covered in our *Weekly News Roundup* the sad story of Fr. Arnaud Rostand, who was the subject of a criminal trial in France involving allegations of sexual behavior involving children. Although other instances of such scandal have been revealed in past years, this story hit very close to home for our American and Canadian viewers and readers since Fr. Rostand served as district superior of the Society of St. Pius X for several years in both countries. In this article, I would like to focus on how we should absorb and react to this sad scandal. We will attempt to assess this revelation and what it should mean for traditional Catholics. First, we will lay out some principles that should guide our reaction to priestly scandals. Secondly, we will look at what we know about the facts of the case, and then finally attempt to reach a reasoned judgement of an appropriate reaction to such scandal for a traditional Catholic.

Scandals Will Come

Our Lord warned us when physically present on this earth that such a sad event would occur. He taught His followers: “Woe to the world because of scandals. For it must needs be that scandals come: but nevertheless woe to that man by whom the scandal cometh” (Matt. 18:7). Just as St. Paul warned us that a time would come when the authorities in the Church would not tolerate sound doctrine (cf. 2 Tim. 4:3), so too Our Lord warns us not to delude ourselves into thinking that the Redemption will mean Christians will not fall into grave scandals. We know His perfect act of Redemption has the potency to save “all” people, but we also know that it will in fact only save “many.” Likewise, we know that His grace is sufficient to overcome all temptation (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9); we also know that some will not make use of that sufficient grace to avoid serious sin. To acknowledge this fact does not excuse or exonerate the sin. Our Lord makes this fact clear when He says: “nevertheless woe to that man by whom the scandal cometh,” while at the same time acknowledging that scandals will come. Thus, we should not be demoralized or discouraged by scandals, even among the clergy. By avoiding disillusionment, we are not excusing the cause of the scandal but rather being realistic.

I was reminded of a conversation with a traditional priest many, many years ago over dinner with a few other Catholic families. Many of us were just coming into the care of traditional priests. One of the dinner guests remarked how relieved he was to be in a traditional parish since we had been scandalized by the shocking behavior of other priests. The traditional priest gave us a strong warning. He explained that if we were entering into Tradition thinking that all the priests would be saints and free of serious sin, we were setting ourselves up for a serious disappointment. We needed to be on guard against such an expectation because the disappointment resulting from this expectation being shattered could dangerously tempt us to waver in the Faith.

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He kindly reminded us that all of us live in a time of great crisis in the Church and secular world. The proliferation of evil and temptation and error is enormous, and we should not think priests are supernaturally protected from the deleterious influences of such times. He told us that some traditional priests have fallen into grave and scandalous sin (he referenced some who had abandoned the priesthood and, like Thomas Cranmer, taken a wife). He said that sadly there would be more in the future. He did not excuse these past and future priests who had fallen, but wanted to remind us that ordination was not some kind of forcefield protecting priests from serious falls. He said it was important that we cling to the Traditional Mass and Sacraments as well as dogma and praxis for their own sake and not because we thought this or that priest or group of priests were all perfectly saintly. He reminded us that Traditional Catholicism is not a cult of personality. It is not true because of any one priest (or bishop) but priests and bishops adhere to it because it is true. He reminded us that every Modernist at Vatican II offered a Traditional Latin Mass in the morning and worked to dismantle the liturgy and clarity of doctrine throughout the day. Priests who daily offered the Traditional Mass fell into grave sin long before Vatican II. We must adhere to Tradition not because of any particular cleric but sometimes in spite of some fallen ones.

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The Case of Fr. Arnaud Rostand

Fr. Arnaud Rostand was raised form a young age in the fight for Tradition. I met him several times and dined with him on several occasions when he was district superior of the United States. He shared stories of being a little boy in St. Nicholas de Chardonnay when traditional priests and faithful occupied the Church for Tradition. He talked with great love and respect for Archbishop Lefebvre and the Society he founded. I can truly say, having met Fr. Rostand over many years, that if I had been told at the time that over a decade in the future a priest that I knew would admit to sinful actions involving children, Fr. Rostand would not have appeared on a list of suspects of the identity of such a priest. He gave no signs or indications of any tendency in such a disgusting direction. He always seemed happy, at peace, devout, and always exuded what seemed to be a deep concern for the welfare of the faithful entrusted to the SSPX. I relay these personal reflections because it is always easy to accuse people after the fact of having looked the other way or not suspected

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such evil behavior. Certain signs or indications of a particular proclivity may indeed occur in some cases, but I can affirm that in all my experience with Fr. Rostand, I would never have suspected it. He served as a priest in Asia, Europe, and as district superior in Canada and America.

According to a report in the French news outlet *La Provence*,[1] Fr. Rostand admitted to a criminal court in Gap, Fance to sexual misconduct involving seven boys. The French report quotes from alleged victims who claim that they were touched in inappropriate ways and places. Fr. Rostand reportedly asked for "forgiveness" and claimed that "he regretted profoundly" his misdeeds. He appeared to claim that his behavior did not result in the culmination of a sexual encounter. He is quoted in *La Provence* as saying that "I never engaged in an amorous relationship." This is not to suggest that touching a child in amorous ways or even touching particular organs is acceptable or legal. Yet, when dealing with a matter it is important neither to downplay nor exaggerate it. It would seem that the prosecutor did not dispute the nature of Fr. Rostand's conduct because the prosecutor "requests that the defendant be sentenced to four years of judicial follow-up (roughly equivalent to probation in the US) and an injunction against caring for people, and a permanent legal bar from exercising any activity with minors, whether in a professional or voluntary capacity [essentially an injunction from exercising any priestly or other ministry with children], as well as asking for compensation to be paid the victims." Such a request not including prison time would appear proportionate to the acts admitted by Fr. Rostad and suggests the prosecutor accepts the admission as encompassing all the acts committed. In other cases in France, when even more outrageous acts have been admitted or proven, the convicted person was dealt with under a different legal regime for sexual predators and sentenced to significantly long prison terms.

Now some have demanded more details about what acts exactly were committed. Here is where the Catholic distinction between necessary knowledge and prurient interest must be considered. It is not necessary that the details of the abuse be publicized and known generally. In fact, some care must be taken to minimize the pain of the victims which is already so great. Some simply "want to know," but that desire in and of itself is not sufficient. If we simply wish to know out of curiosity, then our desire is sinful. It is enough to know he has admitted to, and, pending the court's judgment expected in June, will be convicted and sentenced for crimes against seven children.

Two other details have been called into question as a result of this sad scandal. First, some people have asked why Fr. Rostand is not being subjected to ecclesiastical penalties. Some have jumped to the conclusion that the SSPX has simply turned him over to the French authorities and leave all in their hands. Such rash conclusions are a result of not

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understanding the unfortunate relationship that now exists between Church and State since the Church has been subordinated to the State in almost every country. In the Age of Christendom, the Church would take primarily responsibility for the trying and punishment of her clerics. The civil government was not competent to judge clerics who were subjected to trial in an ecclesiastical court. It was for this principle of independence of the Church as a distinct perfect society that St. Thomas Becket was martyred. Since the errors of the French Revolution, the secular states that succeeded to Christendom do not recognize the rightful independent jurisdiction of the Church. This situation is not ideal but the Church, which will endure until the end of time, must continue to function in all types of circumstances (as she did when subjected to the pagan Roman empire). Thus, the practice for decades has been to initiate canonical trials of clerics under canon law only after the completion of secular law proceedings. Since the Church no longer has the independence to require the handing over of her clerics from civil rulers and secular states impose on the Church the obligation to report and surrender clerics to its authority, in prudence the Church has been forced to accept this arrangement de facto.

Thus, it is false to conclude that because Fr. Rostand has not undergone a canonical trial nor received canonical criminal sanctions (which could include such measures as laicization) that the SSPX is somehow thwarting these measures. This is simply unfair as the criminal court in Gap will not have completed its proceedings until June. In the other few sad cases of which I am aware of an SSPX priest being convicted in a secular court, the priest did undergo a canonical proceeding. The timing and functioning of any canonical proceeding are not solely in the hands of the SSPX superiors. It is under the jurisdiction of the applicable organ of the Roman curia. Bishop Fellay has relayed publicly examples in which the Vatican Curia has delegated authority to the SSPX to conduct the initial proceeding and in other cases has not. Ironically, there are those who claim that the SSPX is “outside the Church,” yet Bishop Fellay has relayed stories of such sad incidents to demonstrate that the Roman Curia does not treat the SSPX as such. If they were truly “outside the Church,” the Curia would not delegate jurisdiction to the SSPX nor even initiate a case themselves against an SSPX priest if they were “outside the Church.” The juridical arm of the Church has no jurisdiction over people outside the Church. Thus, ironically, people who are presently criticizing the SSPX for not taking canonical action against Fr. Rostand at this time fail to recognize the SSPX does truly respect the legitimate authorities of the Church and is not a schismatic or parallel church. Thus, critics cannot have it both ways, claiming the SSPX is “outside the Church” on the one hand but then criticizing them for waiting for the authorities in Rome to act first in a matter of jurisdiction. In addition, it is possible for Fr. Rostand himself to petition for canonical consequences himself, such as laicization, and in such a case the matter would proceed differently. It is simply too early to conclude how any canonical case or consequences will arise at this point in time.

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Secondly, according to *La Provence*, in court Fr. Rostand is reported to have claimed that he wrote a letter in 1998 to his superiors (without identifying this particular superior's identity) in which he alerted the recipient to "this tendency." This reported claim has caused some people to call into question the assertion of the SSPX US and Canadian districts who issued a joint communiqué on the French trial.[2] The communiqué asserts that the SSPX responded quickly when becoming aware of "ambiguous and inappropriate attitudes" in 2014. I have spoken to several people who were aware of the situation of Fr. Rostand in 1998, which information, together with comments Fr. Rostand himself made to me about his work at that time, has led me to conclude that it is not just or fair to conclude from his vague statement in court that the superiors in the SSPX were aware specifically of the danger he posed to children as a result of the letter.

In 1998, Fr. Rosand was stationed in a third-world country in Asia and living under what he and other priests who were stationed there during that time period described as extremely difficult living conditions. Americans, so used to basic sanitary and living conditions, cannot

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even begin to imagine living in poverty and squalor, without basic sanitation or hygiene and being surrounded by the inescapable assault of insects. Priests to whom I have spoken admitted to having to consume more than one insect from the chalice during Mass (despite taking extraordinary precautions to prevent insects from entering) and fighting distractions throughout Mass due to mosquitos and other insects flying up their cassocks and other vestments. I have confirmed from reliable first-hand sources that Fr. Rostand did write a letter indicating severe difficulties and requesting a timely transfer back to his home country of France. I have also confirmed that this relief was sent and he was transferred back to France with great speed. Without seeing the exact letter itself and reading it in the appropriate context, it is difficult for us to know what the superiors who received the letter should have reasonably concluded. All we can conclude is, they did take some action to render him aid. We do not have enough public evidence to determine if a recipient of this letter should have seen it only as a call for help from an extreme situation or as the admission of a deep-seated attraction or inclination to actions that would endanger children. In the absence of this evidence, it is difficult to conclude more. It would be reassuring if the current superiors would address this issue and indicate what was in the letter and what could be reasonably concluded from it. In assessing a proper reaction to the superiors in 1998, we also have to remember what was understood in 1998 about such dangers. This date is before any news of alleged and proven crimes of priests against children became known. Is it possible that after all the water under the bridge and raising of awareness in the past 26 years such a letter would be understood somewhat differently than when read at that time? Certainly, that is possible, but it is not fair to judge decisions of 26 years ago in light of awareness and information only available now.

What the SSPX has said in the communiqué is that in 2014 when the superiors were made aware of “ambiguous and inappropriate attitudes” of Fr. Rostand, they removed him from his assignment as district superior and placed restrictions upon him. I can personally attest that it was in 2014 that Fr. Rostand was surprisingly moved from the United States as district superior. It was a change that seemed unexpected both by him and those who worked with him, especially given the great growth and stability that seemed to have come to the district during his administration of it. I recall at the time that there was some confusion at the time by what appeared to be an unplanned switching of superiors. In retrospect, these observations from the time seem to confirm the claim of the communiqué that the superiors took appropriate action in 2014 upon becoming aware of these attitudes.

Now some have criticized the response listed in the communiqué — moving Fr. Rostand to a purely administrative position without authority and under supervision. At this point, we need to remind ourselves of the appropriate balance that a Catholic must have in such circumstances. There must be an appropriate balance between protecting the vulnerable

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(which is a necessity) and not treating those suspected as having a potential for harm as if they are proven guilty. We would live in a sad world and Church if anyone could be completely destroyed based on mere observation of "attitudes" even if ambiguous and inappropriate. Such a world would constitute a police state in which punishments could be meted out without proof. At the same time, there is a duty to protect the vulnerable. After removing him from his position in 2014, the communiqué claims that the Society of St. Pius X became aware of illegal actions in 2019 and turned the matter over to the authorities in France. It is not clear from public information what the superiors knew or understood about Fr. Rostand between 1998 and 2014. It would certainly be helpful if this could be clarified.

More importantly, based on conversations with superiors in SSPX seminaries and in other positions of authority, some of which occurred even before this recent scandal, I have been convinced that regardless of what happened in 1998, if today a priest admitted an inclination to anything inappropriate or immoral relating to children or other vulnerable people, a response would be rapid and would involve the intervention of psychiatric testing and, if appropriate, treatment and the removal of the priest from all contact with children (or other identified vulnerable group). If he is a seminarian who admits to or is observed to have any inclination to homosexuality or pedophilia of any kind, he would never be admitted to Holy Orders, as the SSPX considers even such inclinations an impediment to ordination, and he would be dismissed from the seminary. We must be realistic: Not even the most steadfast adherence to such measures can present an ironclad guarantee that no priest or seminarian will be able to conceal such a tendency and slip through the system. As the case of Fr. Rostand demonstrates, those who perpetrate such acts do not always manifest such tendencies exteriorly. We must remember that only God can see the inner sanctum of the operations of the soul. We humans, including superiors with a grace of state, can only judge interior dispositions based on the evidence of exterior manifestations. Whereas God judges all things perfectly, we cannot. Thus, we must expect superiors to act appropriately and with due care, but we cannot expect that scandals will always be prevented.

Final Reflection

We must not forget the seven identified victims of these acts. Even if the court does judge their gravity to be lower than those acts of other criminals, any damage to the innocence of a child is a grave matter, especially when that innocence is destroyed by a priest. The long-term effects on a child's future life are immeasurable. Ultimately, Fr. Rostand will have to answer for these long-term consequences not to a court in France but at his particular judgment after death and the general judgment at the end of time. In the interim, we must pray for healing for these young people and those close to the situation must provide what aid they can to assist their healing so that the devil does not exploit this grave sin to drive

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these victims away from the Church and the sacraments, as sadly can happen in such cases.

Yet, God can always bring something good out of even the worst evil. In this case, that good could be a renewed opportunity to meditate on the nature of the ordained priesthood. Scandals like these, in which priests admit to acting in a way antithetical to the gift of their ordination, can remind us of the great mystery of the union between Christ and His ordained priests.

The union of Christ with His *alter Christus* in ordination is analogous to the Incarnation but is also distinct. In the Incarnation, Christ united human and divine nature in a single Person. Christ is one Person and therefore His human nature is incapable of departing from His divine nature. Although His human nature possessed the reality of free will (with its possibility of sin), Christ the Person was not capable of sin due to His united divine nature. The priest likewise is a bridge (one Latin word for priest, *pontifex*, is derived from the Latin words "to make" [*facere*] and "a bridge" [*pons, pontis*]) between the human and the divine. Christ so unites Himself with the ordained priest when exercising Christ's authority that it is in fact Christ Himself Who offers the Sacrifice of the Mass or forgives sins. When Father Smith says, "*I* absolve you of your sins," or, "This is *My* Body," he does not refer to Father Smith as the actor absolving or to Father Smith's body. The words refer to Christ Who in that moment is united with the priest so intimately that Christ is speaking through the instrument of the mouth of Fr. Smith. Unlike the hypostatic union of the Incarnation, however, this union is not fused in a single person. Christ can make use of the hands and mouth of Fr. Smith without destroying the distinct person of Fr. Smith. At one and the same time, Fr. Smith can be so united to Christ that it is Christ Who acts using his members merely as a tool, yet so distinct that Fr. Smith's intellect and will are completely his own.

The great mystery of this reality of the union of Christ with His priest is evident to any parent of a priest. As the father of a priest, I have seen this most clearly after my son's ordination. When he stands at the altar, it is evident that he is not acting himself but is being used by Christ to act. Yet, when not at the altar he is still the same child of mine with the same personality, likes, dislikes, sense of humor, and other characteristics of the child I have known since birth. This mystery is truly incredible. Christ can be so united to the ordained priest so that the actions and words of that priest become in the sacraments the actions and words of Christ; and yet, the priest can retain his own distinct personality and traits, good or ill. In condemning the heresy of Donatism, the Church affirmed that we must believe that the personal sinfulness of the ordained priest does not diminish the actions of Christ acting through them even in a state of sin. Certainly, a priest's scandalous and sinful actions can affect those around him, yet they cannot harm the perfection of the acts of Christ through him. The Donatists denied this reality. They claimed that the apostasy of

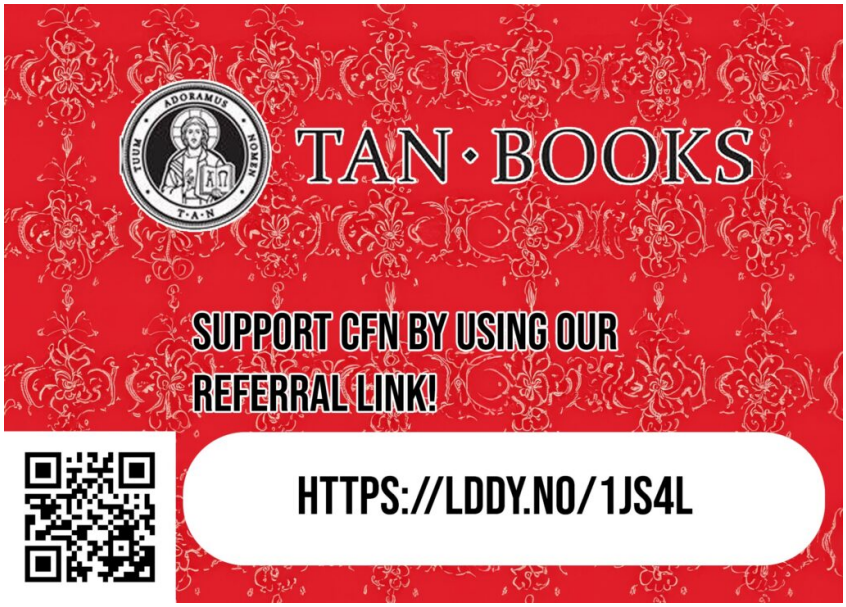
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those who denied the Faith or handed over sacred books to the Roman persecutors affected the validity of the sacraments and even their own ordination. Yet, the Church affirmed that the sacraments operate in themselves (*ex opere operato*) independently of the holiness or sinfulness of the priestly instrument. This Catholic faith makes this mystery even more great. Humanly speaking, it is easy to believe in the efficacy of the sacraments administered by an evidently saintly priest like St. John Vianney. It is a greater act of faith to believe in their efficacy when administered by a fallen and known sinner.

It is for this reason that priests can fail, not in their sacramental work, but in their life as a distinct person, and that exhortations to "pray for priests" are not mere platitudes. Their union with Christ permits their individuality to fail and act contrary to that union. The devil knows that he can exploit a scandalous divergence between the person of the priest and Christ who acts through him to drive innumerable souls from the Church. Christ needed no person to pray *for* Him. Although His human nature contained a soul like ours with the capacity of free will, Christ the Person, by virtue of union with His divine nature, needed no prayers of aid to avoid sin. Yet, His priests *do* need such prayers and sacrifices. That is why, in addition to praying for the victims and those who are tempted to abandon the Faith due to this scandal, I am resolved to pray for Fr. Rostand. Even if laicized in a subsequent canonical procedure, we know that such punishment merely removes the juridical right to act as a priest, while the priestly mark on his soul remains indelible. All are ordained a priest "forever according to the order of Melchizedek." Thus, we should pray that he receives the grace of repentance and forgiveness of his sins so that at his death the devil does not garner another priestly soul for his realm of darkness.

Some I know have been enraged and scandalized by such a statement. They seek only vengeance against perpetrators of such awful acts while forgetting that vengeance is the Lord's. In this, our model should be the holy child martyr for purity St. Maria Goretti. Her dying breath was spent forgiving the man who killed her when she resisted his attempt to rape her. Her mother Assunta — and who can understand the grief of parents whose young child is snatched from them? — forgave her assailant and even attended together with him the canonization of her daughter. So let our prayers rise up to God for the healing of the victims of all such scandals, as well as for the repentance and forgiveness of the perpetrators. Let us remember that we hold to the principles we do not because of attachment to any mere human being, even a priest. Our faith in Tradition must transcend all human attachments and rest on principles. This will enable us to pass through the trial and temptation of such scandals that will be with us, unfortunately, until the end of time. We should not be attending the Traditional Mass or a traditional school because of any single priest, no matter how good they may seem. We must do these things because they are the right thing to do.

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[1] See https://www.laprovence.com/article/faits-divers-justice/48322615791546/un-prete-traditionnaliste-suspecte-davoir-touche-le-sexe-de-sept-enfants-dans-les-hautes-alpes. All translations are my own. I went to the French reporting because various English articles appeared contradictory in the terms used.

[2] https://sspx.org/en/news/communique-society-saint-pius-x-44179.

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