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## ***That Which Is Great and Good, and Obscured by Scandal***

**By Leonard Fein**

It is a rather strange thing to say these days, but I have long been a fan of the Catholic Church. That does not mean I am drawn to its theology, attracted by its ritual or indifferent to its moral and political lapses — and worse — over the centuries. Nor does it mean I admire either its hierarchical organization or its devaluation of women.

That said, a reader might well ask, “What’s left?” The answer is that at its best the church struggles valiantly and often successfully to improve the human condition, to engage in *tikkun olam*. This will, I know, puzzle, even offend, those who believe, as I do, that the church’s position on abortion is an offense against human rights. But that, plainly, is not the whole of the church’s agenda, as witness just a few statements:

In 1999, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a document entitled “In All Things Charity,” wrote: “No man or woman of good will should stand as an idle witness to the complex social problems of our day. Equally deserving of our attention and care is the private suffering of countless children, women, and men who do not have enough food to eat; who are deprived of adequate education, housing, or employment; or who suffer the trauma of abuse or neglect.” This is not novel language; for a hundred years and more, it has been emphatically repeated.

In 2002, the American bishops issued a pastoral letter entitled, “A Place At the Table,” which held: “As Catholics, we must come together with a common conviction that we can no longer tolerate the moral scandal of poverty in our land and so much hunger and deprivation in our world. The principle of solidarity reminds us that as members of one human family, we see

every ‘other’ as our neighbor, who must share in the ‘banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.’ In the Catholic tradition, concern for the poor is advanced by individual and common action, works of charity, efforts to achieve a more just social order, the practice of virtue, and the pursuit of justice in our own lives. It requires action to confront structures of injustice that leave people poor.”

Those words, and the actions they imply, command respect. As anyone engaged in the pursuit of justice in America knows, the Catholic Church is an active partner in that pursuit. So, too, in the more straightforward work of simple charity.

Alas, it is no secret these days that the mission of the church has been eclipsed by the scandals of the church. The teachers and nurses and advocates, the seekers of justice, stay at their posts, but even they are demoralized by the scandals. It is as if social justice, the pride of the church, has been swallowed up by sexual predation and the absence of a timely response in dealing with it. There are those who question the very legitimacy of the church as an actor in the public square.

Which brings me to Israel, home to high-tech start-ups and world-class universities, distinguished in science and the arts, a nation yearning to be, somehow, both a *goy k'chol hagoyim*, a nation like all the other nations of the world and at the same time an *or l'goyim*, a light unto the nations. A nation, in short, with so very much to be proud of.

But here, too, the prideful story that commands respect is swallowed up by shameful scandal, principally the scandal of the occupation. Shout the great and good story from every rooftop, and it will not be heard — not because those who draw attention to the scandal shout louder, but because the occupation is so base, so degrading, so corrupting. And yes, there are those who because of it question the very legitimacy of the State of Israel as a member of the family of nations.

There are, of course, critical differences between the situation of the church and Israel's situation. No one in the church claims that sexual predation ought to be permitted or endorsed, but there are more than a few in Israel who hold firmly to the view that the word “occupation” simply does not apply, that Israel is entitled to be sovereign in all the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. Nor can the actions required to put an end to the two

scandals be compared. The one is a matter of summoning the will to confront abuse; there is no downside. The other is immensely more complicated, since there are potential downsides galore.

Still, in neither case is *hasbara*, public relations, the answer. First, stop the ongoing abuses.