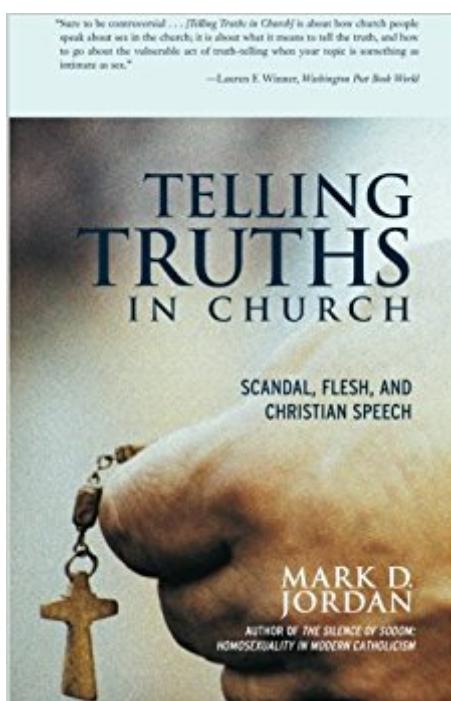


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Telling Truths In Church: Scandal, Flesh, And Christian Speech



Synopsis

Is the reform we have seen in the wake of the pedophilia scandals in the Catholic Church meaningful? Have our conversations about the causes of these scandals delved as deeply as they need to? For those questioning the relations between hierarchical power, secrecy, and sexuality in institutional religion, Mark D. Jordan's eloquent meditations on what truths about sexuality need to be told in church-and the difficulty of telling any truths-will be a balm and a revelation.

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Customer Reviews

The secrecy and cover-ups in the priestly pedophilia scandals are a symptom of the Catholic Church's wider suppression of discourse about homosexuality, according to this heartfelt but occasionally tumid book. Gay Catholic theologian Jordan (*The Silence of Sodom*) argues that the Church "solicits same-sex desire, depends on it, but also denounces it and punishes it." The Church's "ways of silencing disruptive truths" function mainly at the rhetorical level, Jordan feels, where open discussion of the Church and homosexuality gets dismissed by officials as anti-Catholic prejudice or scandal-mongering. In the same vein, Jordan asserts that disputations of homophobic Church doctrines are self-defeating. Instead, gay Catholics should deploy more visceral rhetorical styles-testimonials by gay priests, "provocative analogies" between the Church and secular gay sub-cultures, even satire-to get the Church to acknowledge what Jordan sees as its blatant homoeroticism. The exploration of new discursive modes by gay Catholics can also enrich Church teachings. Gay and lesbian fiction and poetry might clarify Church theology about same-sex unions,

while frank consideration of the body (specifically, the genitals) of Christ might lessen "sexual shame" and enlighten Christians about the sanctity of eroticism. Jordan's call for truth-telling about the Church's relationship with homosexuality is provocative, but his insistence that language and rhetorical style matter more than Church doctrine or governance distances him from what many feel are the most crucial issues in that debate. His own discursive style, combining theology with critical theory, wavers between elegance and abstruseness. This feels more like a series of meditations (the book is based on lectures Jordan delivered) than a volume likely to spark productive debate. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Sure to be controversial . . . [Telling Truths in Church] is about how church people speak about sex in the church; it is about what it means to tell the truth, and how to go about the vulnerable act of truth-telling when your topic is something as intimate as sex. --Lauren F. Winner, Washington Post Book World "This is a major contribution to the telling of truth and truths. Jordan's analysis lays bare the fear and anxiety behind the silence and spins of church authorities; it is a profound and provocative book." --Donald Cozzens, author of *Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church and The Changing Face of the Priesthood*. "[A] profound normative theological statement, of what incarnational faith must entail . . . [Telling Truths in Church] is well read as a spiritual guide to theologians and other Christians who still believe there is a point to Christian speech." --Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Conscience*

This review appeared in White Crane Journal #60, Spring 2004 The evocative and provocative title of this book, almost by itself, calls out to the reader to pick it up and find out what the truths are. And the exercise would be more than successful, though it turns out the truths Jordan is talking about are not a series of literal propositions, but an attitude to openness to human life--and especially the passion of human life called eros. Mark Jordan is a professor of religion at Emory University in Atlanta. He's made himself a reputation for challenging naive assumptions about the veracity of Church teachings, especially about sexuality and homosexuality. His previous book *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* opened with a meditation on daily life around the Vatican that truly should be required reading for all Catholics. In that meditation, Jordan posed the question: what if the Holy Spirit reveals to the Pope and Vatican officials that the Church's position on homosexuality is in error? How would the Pope or the Cardinals ever

manage to bring themselves to talk about this realization during the morning meetings? At every stage, they'd be frightened of revealing too much about themselves (and maybe their previous night's indulgences). No one would be able to broach the subject. With similar awareness of how the inertia of orthodoxy prevents honest discussion, *Telling Truths in Church* describes the difficulties of creating modern, sensitive, psychologically aware theologies of sex. And yet it is incumbent on the Church to do so; changes in culture, developments in reproductive biology, not to mention scandals involving priestly sexual behavior, require religious institutions to evolve and update the expressions of doctrine. And yet they are generally loathe to do so. And, in fact, usually satisfy themselves with reiterating what they claim to be age-old, immutable orthodox truths. The condemnation of modern homosexuality is a standard in this enterprise. Now the one man-one woman theology of Christian marriage has become another. Yet the truth is that the styles of marriage have changed dramatically over the thousands of years of Judeo-Christian practice. And Jesus himself was hardly an advocate of heterosexuality and the modern nuclear family. This brief, but packed, little book is based on a series of lectures Jordan gave at Boston University, and the rhetorical style sometimes shines through most pleasantly. You can almost hear the passion and innocence in the author's (gay male) voice behind the written words. Coincidentally, the priestly pedophilia crisis, starting in Boston, broke just shortly before these lectures were to be delivered. *Telling truths in and about the church* suddenly took on new meaning. Pedophilia and gay marriage are major examples of how Church truths are shaped and sometimes corrupted to fit political realities. The Church, after all, has its own survival and organizational maintenance to look out for. We've all observed how blaming the homosexuals is a convenient way to redirect attention. Jordan's discussions of these issues are fresh and insightful. He generally avoids the political and theological rhetoric, observing that the usual arguments obscure the actual human and personal issues involved. He writes, for instance, of the two men or two women who come to the Church to seek and declare God's blessing on their commitment to one another, only to be turned away because of political strategies and institutional quarrels that have nothing to do with the love and faithfulness the two of them feel and strive to strengthen. (Jordan makes the astringent observation that it is not the priest or pastor today who determines the style and iconography of marriage, but rather the wedding planner, followed closely by the photographer, florist, and caterer.) Perhaps the most interesting section of the book is a treatise on apophatic theology, that is, the tradition that nothing can really be said in total truth about God and God's reality because anything about God is necessarily beyond human thought. Talk about God is really always talk

about humans and their concerns and conflicts. Frankly, I'd go a step further than Mark Jordan does and challenge the belief that the Church and religion tells about the factuality of religious doctrines, especially afterlife. Threats of hellfire are used to manipulate human behavior in ways that our modern psychological awareness now shows us are truly morbid and crazy-making. The suicide bombers in Israel who think they've earned their way to deflower seventy virgins is but a notably contemporary example. The homosexuals burned at the stake down the centuries must not be forgotten when we evaluate the belief in the truth of Christian teaching. But most importantly delaying the heaven until after death is literally closing the gates to the realization of divine presence in this life here and now that Jesus had tried so hard to open. This is a lovely book. It truly got me thinking. It's challenging, but eminently readable. You're likely to come away from it wishing you'd had a pastor more like Mark Jordan. Reviewed by Toby Johnson, author of *Gay Spirituality: Gay Identity and the Transformation of Human Consciousness*, *The Myth of the Great Secret: An Appreciation of Joseph Campbell* and other novels and books

To those who have not yet read it, Mark D. Jordan's "Telling Truths in Church" may seem like a reaction to (or even an exploitation of) the Catholic Church scandals revolving around priestly abuse and its cover-up. But in fact, Jordan's slim but crucially important volume is actually the transcript of a series of essays that were prepared before the scandals started to hit the media. This is not to state, however, that the scandals have nothing to do with the topics Jordan addresses. It is Jordan's contention that speech in the Christian churches (and Jordan refers not only to the Catholic Church but to other Christian churches) has become narrowed and self-censored in such a way that it has seriously compromised the Churches' ability to speak truthfully about people's lives and faith experiences. In a series of essays, Jordan discusses several topics: Church reform, Christian marriage, the practice of theology, and Jesus Christ as a fully human and sexual being. Jordan asserts that the Churches fail in speaking truthfully about these topics, and also that the Churches try to silence or discourage additional points of view that speak to the range of human experiences not addressed in "official" speech. To put it more simply, current Church talk doesn't give us the whole story, and it's up to us as people of faith to speak up and fill in the missing pieces. Jordan's book is full of insights and observations that make it ideal for public discussion or private, prayerful reflection. The book is particularly important in an age when the task of theology is often misunderstood: some Church authorities, with the current emphasis on "obedience," feel theologians should supply believers with authoritative propositions to be memorized, rather than

questions to help guide our reflection on God's mystery. As Jordan states in the concluding essay, "obedience [should] mean not that you take as true whatever you are told, but that you commit yourself to consider carefully what is said to you." In other words, the lived practice of theology--the process of "telling truths"--becomes a loving task for all believers, not just for leaders who think they have all the answers!

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