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Don't expect accountability from the last feudal system in the West

Donald Cozzens | May. 17, 2010 Examining the Crisis

Miters somewhat askew, the recent queue of bishops from Ireland to Germany, and beyond stepping forward to offer apologies for sexual abuse by their priests is unprecedented for the European Catholic church.

Even as the apologies pile up and policies for dealing with abuse allegations are tightened and meetings with victims are promised, something remains amiss that takes the heart out of the bishops' *mea culpa*.

There is no real accountability for bishops who abetted sexual abuse by failing to remove predator priests from access to children or for bishops who failed to comply with civil laws requiring reporting of abuse of minors.

Nor will there be soon.

Two explanations surface; one might be considered divine, the other, thoroughly human.

Bishops are jealous men. They are jealous of their responsibility as divinely appointed teachers of the Catholic church. To their way of thinking, anything that might weaken their God-given, divine authority as teachers and guardians of the faith merits immediate and fierce resistance. From this point of view, calls to hold bishops accountable save to the pope himself, offend the dignity of the bishops' office and are framed by Vatican officials as attacks on the church. Instead of accountability, we are told that mistakes were made, sometimes tragic in their consequences. But, it is explained, they were mistakes made in the best interests of the church. Anything more, the Vatican fears, would undercut the authority of the bishop's teaching office and diminish his credibility.

The other explanation rests on more humble, though still lofty, grounds. Bishops are princes. We need but look at their ermine-trimmed robes and catch the ring of their courtly titles, "your excellency," "your grace," "your eminence." As elite members of the last feudal system in the West and one of the last absolute monarchies in the world, we shouldn't be surprised if bishops, as princes of the realm, are answerable only to their sovereign, the bishop of Rome.

If the hierarchy's royal accruements were simply vestiges of their medieval past, they might be harmless enough. But these episcopal conceits have forged a culture of privilege, secrecy, and exemption that is now exposed as a detriment to both their teaching and pastoral roles.

Even armchair psychologists can imagine how insular the life of royalty inevitably becomes -- and how dangerous the royal power can be even in the best of men. A sobering insight follows: It remains exceedingly difficult for anyone in power to feel the pain of others, even the pain of young victims abused by their pastors. It's the exceptional bishop who maintains real contact with members of his flock, who listens to the laity as one disciple to another, who lets the pain of the abused rend his heart. Sadly, it appears that it's the exceptional bishop who puts the good of the children ahead of the good of the institutional church.

More than a half century ago, the Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich wrote that any religion that took upon itself

the right to judge the values and mores of the world must be ready to subject itself to the same standards of judgment by which it judged the secular sphere. If a religion failed to do so, he warned, it rightly stood subject to the judgment of the world.

Then, Tillich added, this is the particular danger of the Catholic church.

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