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Thinking globally about sex abuse crisis

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By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Here's an object lesson in what it means to think globally about issues facing the Catholic church, in this case the sexual abuse crisis.

Since the beginning of the most recent round of the crisis, which erupted in Ireland and then spread across Europe, critics have wondered why Pope Benedict XVI has not imposed a uniform global policy of cooperation with the police. In the United States and Europe, where one can generally assume a level playing field and the integrity of police and prosecutors, such a policy seems a no-brainer, and the pope's failure to impose it across the board has often been touted as evidence of foot-dragging and denial.

Yet there are parts of the world where the wisdom of such a policy is by no means so clear. The state of Karnataka, in South West India, offers the most recent example.

There, in the Bangalore suburb of Whitefield, a Holy Cross brother was beaten on Oct. 23 by a mob of some 300 people, with local TV stations filming the assault and police standing by and allowing it to happen. Many in the mob were reportedly wearing the saffron scarf indicative of Hindu nationalist sentiment.

Brother Philip Noronha, the victim, was hospitalized with severe facial injuries. Although the attack was captured on film, police apparently investigated only reluctantly, and no arrests have been made.

The excuse for the attack was a rumor that Noronha had used "bad language" in class, but most observers say the real motive was a land dispute. A Hindu temple is going up near the Holy Cross school where Noronha serves as vice-rector, and he had spurned demands to give up some of the school's property in

order to accommodate an access road for the temple.

Yesterday, local police detained Noronha for more than two hours and released him only on bail, this time on charges that he had sexually harassed female students. The Holy Cross superior in the area has called those charges "unfounded infamy," and said that police harassment amounts to "a serious violation of human rights."

A local Jesuit, Fr. Ambrose Pinto, has posted a lengthy report on the campaign against Noronha, asserting that "we are witnessing a total disregard to the process of law."

"It was a horrible sight to watch that in the presence of the police a person is assaulted, slapped and insulted, and the police remain mere spectators or even join the attackers," Pinto wrote. "When the protectors of the state law turn into violators of individual rights to please vested interests in society, what are the avenues left to individuals for justice?"

From a distance, it's impossible to assess the merit of the charges of sexual harassment. Given the context, however, it's easy to understand why local Catholics have precious little confidence in the impartiality of the police, and why they're not exactly eager to cooperate.

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It's also easy to understand why a papal mandate of full compliance with every request from the police and civil prosecutors would probably strike the Catholics of Karnataka as a death sentence.

None of this, of course, excuses the Catholic church for having failed for so long to come to grips with the reality of sexual abuse by its clergy, and neither does it mean that the church shouldn't do everything possible to make sure these crimes are prosecuted vigorously.

The Noronha episode, however, does offer a caution about the difficulties of imposing across-the-board policies in a church that has to take account of wildly different realities in different parts of the world. Solutions that seem stunningly obvious to Americans and Europeans don't seem such a slam-dunk when seen in a global context.

That's a point worth bearing in mind, especially in a church in which Americans represent just six percent of the global Catholic population, and two-thirds of our people live outside the West.

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