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The Dallas Charter Is On Life-Support

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 2, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

First came the revelations in Philadelphia, then Kansas City-St. Joseph. Now, the diocese of Gallup, New Mexico is in the spotlight with a series of articles in the local paper [1] about how Bishop James Wall has failed to fulfill the promises he made to the people and clergy of Gallup to live up to the Dallas norms.

Later this month, the bishops of the United States will gather outside Seattle for their summer meeting. At the top of the agenda is an examination of the Dallas norms, adopted in 2002 to put an end to the scandal of clergy sex abuse. This was a solemn pledge made to the Church of the United States by her bishops. In effect, the bishops promised: We can't undo what has happened already, but we promise we will not let it happen ever again.

Of course, Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz of Lincoln refused to comply with the audits mandated by the Dallas charter and he is still sitting in the cathedra in Lincoln. One of his vicar generals, Robert Vasa, was made a bishop and recently promoted to the diocese of Santa Rosa, even though he, too, failed to comply with the audits. Then, it turned out that in Philadelphia, Cardinal Justin Rigali played fast and loose with the procedures adopted at Dallas and Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City also failed to fulfill the obligations set forth in the Dallas charter. Now, Gallup. I will also note that the bishop of Gallup was previously a chancery official with Bishop Thomas Olmsted of Phoenix.

Next month's meeting of the USCCB will be the first led by Archbishop Timothy Dolan, the President of the conference. His leadership will be sorely tested and I do not envy him his task. Every bishop who has scrupulously abided by the Dallas norms must be justifiably furious with Cardinal Rigali and Bishops Finn and Wall. Who can take any bishop at his word in the face of such obvious breaches of the promises made at Dallas and since Dallas? It will be Archbishop Dolan's responsibility, in consultation with the papal nuncio, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, to craft some kind of strategy for applying a tourniquet to these newly inflicted wounds. I have a suggestion: The Holy Father should demand the resignation of all of them: Rigali, Finn, Wall, Bruskewitz and Vasa. The last two can stay if they comply with the audits. Otherwise, send them packing.

Many have questioned the Dallas norms, especially the fact that there was no mandated oversight of the bishops themselves. I have considered myself one of those willing to give the bishops the benefit of the doubt, confident that they would understand that their credibility is at stake and that the good of the Church required them to live up to the promises they made. Those promises have been broken in five dioceses.

In our canonical system, only a Pope can judge bishops and remove them from their sees. This is an extreme step, taken only on rare occasions. In the United States, the only recent case has been the removal of Bishop Martino in Scranton. But, the time has come for the American bishops to recommend this extreme step to the Holy Father and for the Holy Father to take action. "If your right eye offends you, cut it out," said the Master. The right eye offends. It should be cut out.

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[1] http://www.bishop-accountability.org/news5/2011_05_24_Hardin_Burrola_Diocese_Fails.htm