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Bishop asks people not to trust him?

Bill Tammeus | Jun. 2, 2011 A small c catholic

It has taken me some time to think through and identify the worst error that Bishop Robert W. Finn made in the case of a Kansas City priest [1] accused of possessing child pornography.

Yes, it was egregious not to notify police authorities -- or even the diocesan board of review -- as soon as Finn learned about the images on the priest?s laptop computer. To his credit, Finn has acknowledged that and apologized. There were other tactical errors, too, the result of which meant children may have been in jeopardy.

All that is serious and its long-term effects may be devastating.

But I found the saddest and most perplexing error was reflected in these words from Finn when he spoke to outraged parishioners: ?Don?t trust me. Trust our Lord Jesus Christ, trust his church.? [2]

Does Finn not understand that the church he?s asking people to trust is not buildings, not hierarchical structures, not even a collection of doctrine and holy writ? Rather, the church is the people, including the people whom members entrust to be their leaders. And those leaders include, of course, Finn and every other bishop, some of whom have outrageously mishandled this heart-breaking sex abuse scandal.

When I used to teach sixth- and seventh-grade Sunday school in my Presbyterian church [3], I?d sometimes ask students to draw a picture of the church.

Inevitably they?d show me their rendering of our building.

?No,? I would say. ?That?s not the church. Try again.?

Eventually one of them would get the point and draw a group of people.

?Yes, yes,? I would say. ?You and I are the church. You and I are responsible for caring for one another, for sharing the gospel, for finding our place in the revolution of love and grace proclaimed by Christ Jesus.?

And yet Bishop Finn asks the people whom he?s let down not to trust him but to trust Christ and the church.

Catholics and Protestants have some different ways of expressing how we come to know Christ, experience his presence and get transformed into being Christ for one another. But surely trusting Christ and trusting the church finally mean we must rely on real people to tell us the gospel story, to be the trustworthy hands and feet of our Lord on earth, to help us acknowledge our sinfulness, our need for redemption and to recognize that our leaders must have our best interests at heart or they will fail the very people they are pledged to protect and guide.

Soon after Finn was installed as bishop of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph in 2004, I interviewed him in his office.

I asked him what the sexual abuse scandal had taught him.

Part of his answer: ?...it?s been and continues to be a painful experience because we all feel degraded and embarrassed and hurt. It?s appalling, the difficulties that so many have gone through at the hands of priests and others in the church ... I think it will always change us in terms of being more vigilant.? If only.

I then asked if he thought the gates of the church are well guarded now to protect children from abuse:

?Well, as well as (they) can be. I don?t think that we can ever become complacent or so confident that that?s all taken care of because these problems are deep-seated and there?s a lot of denial, there?s a lot of hiding and secretiveness and so forth...?

Denial. Hiding. Secretiveness. Aren?t those good descriptions of what Finn himself fell into by not alerting police or diocesan authorities about a priest who may have been committing crimes against vulnerable children?

I finally have to conclude that this damaging failure is connected to the puzzling reality that the bishop saw himself as somehow separate from the church: ?Don?t trust me. Trust our Lord Jesus Christ, trust his church.?

Those words should raise red flags all the way to Rome.

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