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Does the hierarchy's getting together mean it's falling apart?

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Feb. 9, 2012 Bulletins from the Human Side

"It's not easy being green," they sing on the soothing fantasy byway of Sesame Street. It is even harder being violet or crimson for church officials struggling to extricate themselves from the pile-up car wreck of the sex abuse crisis on the all-too-real road to Rome.

This gathering of hierarchs to discuss the still-unsettled problem comes a decade after *The Boston Globe* exposed the depth, extent and ecclesiastical chessboard, move-them-here-and-move- them-there handling of priests accused of sexually abusing those in their charge.

It has been 10 years since Pope John Paul II, acting as shocked as Casablanca's Capt. Louis Renault on discovering gambling at Rick's Place, summoned American cardinals to Rome to express his dismay at the revelation of what high-powered churchmen, including then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, blamed alternately on America or the media or a combination of both.

Now leaders of the church have gathered at a meeting at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University to hear, as if for the first time, that child abuse is a crime that should be reported to and handled by the police. This is hardly a startling piece of news for anybody with at least an eighth-grade education and is the principle American bishops rallied around at their June 2002 meeting in Dallas to discuss and be instructed on the subject.

Now Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which handles sex abuse cases, gives a keynote talk in which he states that the hierarchs "are learning" more about the problem, and Msgr. Stephen Rosetti, repeating suggestions for policies and programs that have been initiated many times under different titles in the last 10 years, offers the hardly electrifying insight that the church should put victims first and keep children safe.

The assembled hierarchs, like sinners coming down at a Billy Graham crusade to be saved, attended a service at which "we implore," in the words of Canadian Cardinal Marc Oullet, "forgiveness for those who have abused in various ways."

Oullet, according to Religion News Service, also said that "this evil is within us and severely tarnishes our testimony."

Marie Collins, an abuse victim from Ireland, told those gathered at the meeting [1] that her archbishop had been more interested in protecting her abuser than in understanding her suffering. This kind of response, she said, had led to the "death of respect for church leaders."

There is no doubt that the hierarchs present are sincere -- they are good at sincerity when the need arises -- but this conference places them before us as if they were Rip Van Winkles rubbing their just-opened eyes to learn about the sex abuse crisis as if they had slept through the last 10 years of revelations. These hierarchs, who already have at least as many guidelines as there are relics of the true cross for handling this crisis, have now adopted new ones. Like generals who drop a bomb when you ask them how to achieve peace, members of the

hierarchy who believe that the path to heaven is paved with paper bomb us with new guidelines whenever they feel cornered about their inability to address the deeper problems of which sex abuse is but a symptom.

There is something immensely poignant about these administrators coming together back at square one, still fighting a rear-guard action about a problem whose dimensions have been explained to them on many occasions. They are good men who want to do the right thing but cannot because they are caught up in a hierarchical system that holds them like hostages to its own survival. The system demands that they sacrifice their own feelings as well as their own common sense to protect its crumbling architecture and its medieval procedures.

The headlines may indeed tell of convening high-ranking churchmen in Rome to do something about the sex abuse crisis that is arguably the church's gravest challenge since the Reformation, but other news stories in recent days document a system in decline. The late Cardinal Archbishop Anthony Bevilacqua of Philadelphia ended his days mired in a mismanaged sex abuse scandal that attracted the attention of a grand jury. His successor arrived to find that millions of dollars had been embezzled by an archdiocesan employee. A trial date has been set for Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City, Mo., for possible criminal action because of administrative failures in monitoring a sex abusing priest.

The archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, says something that would once have been unthinkable in the land of saints and scholars that has turned out to sound more like the country of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ireland, Martin says, is not ready to receive a visit from Pope Benedict XVI. His coming "would have to fit into the overall timetable of the renewal of the Church in Ireland."

That's Irish-speak for: "We haven't really dealt fully with the sex abuse problem yet."

Meanwhile, the Vatican, issuing defenses as if they were plenary indulgences, is embarrassed by a leaked letter from Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, former secretary of the Vatican City-State governing body, that charges financial mismanagement and "cronyism." The Vatican once more expressed its confidence that all the contracts were bid fairly with no fixing, and everything is just fine.

While hierarchs at the big Rome meeting ask once more for "forgiveness" for mishandling the sex abuse crisis and mistreating its victims, the retired archbishop of New York, Edward Egan, announced he is taking back his 2002 apology for the way he handled the sex abuse crisis. He claims that his dealing with the problem was "incredibly good" and, saying that "I don't think we did anything wrong," issued a challenge to name a bishop who did a better job than he did. This is called unrepenting at leisure, and if he is serious about his challenge, he had better stand out of the doorway when something like the Oklahoma land rush heads his way with responses.

On almost the same day, we learned that the archdiocese of Milwaukee is asking the bankruptcy court judge to dismiss the cases of 540 victims who claim to have been sexually abused by priests. In the same news cycle, we learned that Poland, cited as the bulwark of old-fashioned Catholic faith, has had a serious problem of sexual abuse by priests who, according to a report in the *National Catholic Reporter* [2], usually "receive light sentences" and that "most still serve in parishes."

Before anyone can inhale, the *Vatican Insider* reports that at the ongoing Vatican meeting, the prelates learned that "According to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Asian Catholic Church is finding it hard to fight pedophilia 'because of the cultural differences' that exist' and 'the varied interpretations of what child abuse constitutes.'"

Msgr. Charles Scicluna, who just held a closed-door meeting with Asian church leaders, explained that, in educating these countries, "the first goal is "to create awareness." Well, yes.

Scicluna also recalled the words of Pope John Paul II to the American cardinals 10 years ago: "There is no room in the ecclesiastical ministry for people who can harm young people and cause a scandal among them."

These revelations are symptoms of the ineffectiveness of the imploding hierarchical model, the heights of whose heavily privileged clerical plateau provided the breeding ground for the problem as well as for the defense of its supposedly sacred structures. As long as its defenders remain unaware of the disintegration of the hierarchical style and continue to cooperate with the pope in attempting to restore it as a major aspect of the reform of the reform, the problem will never be understood while new guidelines will fall like the tears of longsuffering victims from gatherings such as this.

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