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Editorial: The Vatican is unable to find the church's real scandal

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Editorial

It would be difficult to develop a script more revelatory of the confounding priorities of the Vatican than that contained in the news of recent days. Real scandal -- covering up the rape of children, compromising the church's reputation with bizarre behavior and sexual shenanigans by its priests -- is met with either silence from on high or unpersuasive explanations.

Meanwhile, advocates of open discussion about church teaching on women, celibacy, contraceptives and homosexuality -- advocates who have advanced questions, not scandal -- are met swiftly by the long arm of the law in the form of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

What the church finds deserving of its wrath in light of what it will tolerate to preserve the clerical culture and protect bishops is increasingly inexplicable to anyone outside that culture.

The record grows more grotesque by the week:

- Cardinal Roger Mahony's long and expensive battle to keep secret files showing how priest sex abuse cases were handled in the Los Angeles archdiocese has come to an end [1]. The files dealing with dozens of cases have finally be released. Mahony succeeded in diverting the spotlight from the truth of the matter long enough that it will probably be impossible for the legal system to do anything about what it finds in the documents.

  A separate release of internal files on 14 priests showed [2] that the cardinal and other archdiocesan officials protected priests from prosecution, hiding at least one they knew had raped an 11-year-old boy and abused as many as 17 others.

  In a 2010 memo, according to the AP, investigators had already concluded that the documents "showed 'the possibility of criminal culpability' by members of the archdiocese leadership, but a criminal conspiracy case was 'more and more remote' because of the passage of time." One of those officials was then-Msgr. Thomas Curry. He's now an auxiliary bishop who resigned from his official ministry Feb. 1.

  The cardinal and his staff went to great lengths and enormous expense to hide the truth from civil authorities and the Catholic community. The cardinal would try to convince us that we should judge him on what he didn't know rather than what is becoming clear he did know.

  And on these matters? Silence from the doctrinal congregation and the rest of the hierarchy. The secretive, all-male clerical club would have it no other way.

- In Bridgeport, Conn., the former pastor of St. Augustine Cathedral, Msgr. Kevin Wallin, 61, was arrested

recently for possession with intent to distribute and distribution of methamphetamines. The indictment claims that Wallin made up to $9,000 a week peddling the highly addictive stimulant.

Wallin resigned as pastor in summer 2011 and was relieved of his priestly duties by William Lori, then bishop of Bridgeport. Church officials say they learned, after suspending Wallin, that he sometimes dressed in women's clothing, entertained other men similarly dressed, and that the rectory was the setting for sexual activity among them. Reports say that Wallin has since purchased a store in North Haven that sells sex toys and X-rated DVDs. Wallin was once secretary to then-Bishop Edward Egan, with whom he regularly socialized, and later Lori appointed him to the high-profile position of pastor of the cathedral. Egan went on to be cardinal archbishop of New York before he retired. Lori is currently archbishop of Baltimore.

Once again, we are asked to believe the inexplicable -- that within the gossipy culture of Catholic clergy neither of these men was aware of Wallin's proclivities until his activities became so public they were impossible to ignore. Wallin was but one of the latest in a string of clerical disasters in Bridgeport ranging from sex abuse to theft by priests who used money to finance lavish lifestyles.

The response from higher-ups to the ineptitude in appointments and management? Promotions to higher posts.

- The most egregious and glaring example of a lack of accountability among the hierarchy is Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo. Finn was convicted last year of one count of failing to report suspected child abuse after neglecting for months to notify civil authorities that pornographic photographs of children taken by one of his priests had been found on the priest's computer.

  Add to the criminal conviction the fact that Finn violated, in several ways, church law established by the U.S. bishops, and the result would seem inevitable -- removal from his position running a diocese. But he remains a bishop in good standing, even though under court-ordered restrictions and supervision in two jurisdictions imposed as part of bargains designed to keep him out of jail.

- Cardinals Bernard Law, Anthony Bevilacqua and Justin Rigali did inestimable damage to the churches in Boston and Philadelphia with their incompetent and, in some instances, criminal handling of the sex abuse crisis. Everyone knows it. The record is beyond abundant. And the silence from the doctrinal congregation is deafening. To make matters worse, bishops who decide not to implement child safety programs or participate in safety audits, as mandated by the U.S. bishops' conference since 2002 and confirmed by the Vatican in 2006, face no consequences.

The protectors of doctrine have been too busy to notice, perhaps. Too busy investigating sisters and elevating the illegal thoughts of priests like Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois and Irish Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery to capital offenses. These sisters and priests have lived long lives of exemplary service, lives that have brought them to a point where certain questions are inescapable. What about women? Can we rethink contraceptives? Should the gift of celibacy be mandatory? Is the church right about homosexuality?

Irreparably damage the church by hiding criminal activity against our children, and no one will disturb you. You might even get promoted.

Ask questions that are on the minds of Catholics around the world? That'll get you marginalized, even banished.

The script's conclusion is inescapable: The leadership of this institution is in terrible disarray.

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