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# The Tragedy in St. Paul

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 18, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The meltdown in the Archdiocese of St. Paul is tragic in the strict, Shakespearean sense of the word. In a Shakespeare tragedy, either circumstances conspire to ruin the protagonists (think ?Romeo and Juliet?), or the character flaws of the protagonist bring about his ruin (think ?Julius Caesar?). In this case, both the circumstances and the character flaws are operative and profoundly tragic.

Let me start by saying that nothing I write today should be understood as lending credence to the charge that Archbishop Nienstedt touched a young man inappropriately on the buttocks. The charge smells fishy to me and, besides, all are presumed innocent until proven otherwise. Nonetheless, false or not, the charge exposes the deeper and more consequential reasons why Archbishop Nienstedt must resign.

The bishops of the United States, as a body, now lack the credibility on the issue of clergy sex abuse that they have tried for eleven years to fashion for themselves. The lack of accountability for bishops who violate their own rules, set forth in the Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children, has been so pronounced that the people in the pews are, sadly, prepared to believe the worst about a prelate who is accused of either engaging in inappropriate conduct or of covering up such conduct on the part of others. If Bishop Robert Finn has been sacked the day he pled guilty to the charge of criminal negligence, things might be different. If Bishops Bruskewitz and Vasa had been told that they must either comply with the annual audits of their child protection procedures or resign, things might be different. If Archbishop Myers had been told to resign, rather than to accept a coadjutor, things might be different. But, none of those if?s came to pass and we are where we are.

Earlier this month, the Vatican announced a commission to help address the issue of clergy sex abuse. At the press conference announcing the new commission, Cardinal Sean O?Malley was asked by *NCR* [1]whether or not the new commission, or some other body, would be tasked with holding bishops accountable. He said that this needed to be done but that it was unclear, as yet, how and who would undertake that work. It is imperative that at the February meeting of the Council of Cardinals, followed by the meeting of the full consistory, a process and a procedure ? preferably with due process and transparent procedures ? be rolled out for assessing charges that a bishop has failed to follow the norms for handling sex abuse case and disciplining those bishops who are determined to have so failed.

As I have written before, the issue of holding bishops accountable for the way they treat charges of child sex abuse is not the only issue of governance facing the Church. It may not even be the most important issue. But, here in the United States, it is the threshold issue. If the Church doesn?t get this right, the people of God will, quite rightly, refuse to recognize the moral authority of the bishops as a whole or as individuals. That may not be entirely fair. It may not be entirely true. But, it is undeniably the fact and it is a fact of their own making. Nothing, absolutely nothing, has so damaged the reputation of the Catholic Church as clergy sex abuse. And, at this moment in time, when the Church has fresh wind in its sails, we must not deflate those sails, being dragged back again and again by this issue as we are today by the happenings in St. Paul.

So much for the circumstances. Archbishop Nienstedt must also acknowledge the ways his own actions and words have helped erode the confidence of the people of his archdiocese in his capacity to lead them. When

Jennifer Haselberger, a chancery official dealing with these case brought him her concerns that the sex abuse cases were not being dealt with properly, he would not listen. In frustration she quit.* The dealings with Ms. Haselberger showed that the bonds of clericalism are still stronger than the bonds of charity.

Three days ago, Archbishop Nienstedt went to a parish and publicly apologized for his handling of the sex abuse mess. Well, that is not quite right. What Archbishop Nienstedt did was start by blaming everybody else but himself for the mess. ?When I arrived here seven years ago, one of the first things I was told was that this whole issue of clerical sex abuse had been taken care of and I didn?t have to worry about it,? he told reporters after the Mass. ?Unfortunately I believed that. ? And so my biggest apology today is to say I overlooked this. I should have investigated it a lot more than I did. When the story started to break at the end of September, I was as surprised as anyone else.? Watch the entire video by clicking here [2].

Archbishop Nienstedt stood before the reporters clad in all the vestiture of his office, still in his chasuble, miter on his head, crozier in hand. But, his words spoke a different language. If your teenager gave an apology that began by blaming others, you would sit him or her down and explain what a real apology is like and why the blame game nullifies it. Nienstedt has said he would ?do anything? to help heal the situation but, at the very beginning of the video clip, an aide announces ?no questions,? so the archbishop is not willing to do anything is he? He is not even willing to take questions. There is an immaturity at work here, the sense that this man, so far from being a leader, is more like a scared little boy. I

Finally, and it pains me to remind readers of this fact, but Nienstedt has demonstrated before that on issues related to human sexuality, something is not quite right. In 2006, while serving as the Bishop of New Ulm, Nienstedt wrote a column in his diocesan newspaper urging his flock not to attend the movie ?Brokeback Mountain.? Nienstedt wrote of the movie, ?The story is about two lonely cowboys herding sheep up on a mountain range. One night after a drinking binge, one man makes a pass at the other and within seconds the latter mounts the former in an act of wanton anal sex.? I must say that I never in all my years expected to read the phrase ?wanton anal sex? in my diocesan newspaper. In my experience, diocesan newspapers tend to be read by an older, largely female, demographic. Did they really need to read that phrase? Why did he feel the need to include it? Am I the only person who thinks that column about that movie, combined with what we now know about Nienstedt?s handling of the sex abuse cases, indicates that there are some profound issues of psycho-sexual development, and likely some self-hatred, at work here?

The entire episode in St. Paul also indicates why the nuncios of the world must find a different way of vetting candidates for bishop. Did that column not land on anyone?s radar screen? Or, sadly but more likely, did that column convince the powers that be that Nienstedt was the kind of culture warrior needed at this moment in the life of the Church? The announcement on Monday of the shake-up at the Congregation for Bishops is an opportunity for the entire Church to hit the reset button on episcopal appointments. Who cares that Nienstedt may have been a good cardinal?s secretary. The man should never have been a bishop and certainly no nuncio should solicit the advice of someone like Nienstedt about other candidates.

It breaks my heart to see the once vibrant see of St. Paul come to this moment in its history. One of my heroes was the first Archbishop of St. Paul, Archbishop John Ireland, the ?consecrated blizzard of the Northwest? as he was known. But, we are where we are. There is no way that Nienstedt can turn this situation around, as his faux apology, far more than these charges announced yesterday, reveals. The good of the Church, not just in St. Paul but in the entire country, requires he relinquish his office and give a new man a new start at righting the situation. That may be unfair. It is certainly unfortunate. But it is also, now, unavoidable.

***Correction:** An earlier version of this article mistakenly said that Jennifer Haselberger was fired by the archbishop. That is not correct. NCR regrets the error.

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