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# The Vatican's Commission on Child Protection

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 25, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

The announcement of the Vatican?s commission on the protection of the children was highly anticipated, especially here in the United States where the clergy sex abuse crisis has plagued the Church for more than two decades. But, the issue is not unique to the U.S. and the new commission must help all the local churches avoid some of the troubles we have encountered here ? and which we continue to encounter.

Still, the announcement caught many people by surprise because of the make-up of the commission. Most conspicuously, one of the members, Mary Collins, is herself a victim of clergy sex abuse, a woman who had to work long and hard to see the man who abused her brought to justice and who has become an advocate for victims since. Any of the many excuses for the scandal ? that it is ?an American problem? or that it was all caused by the media or the trial lawyers ? these excuses will not get a hearing on this commission: Even the most powerful prelate, steeped in denial and committed to perpetuating the culture of cover-ups and avoidance of responsibility, will probably lack the courage to voice his objections to Collins? face.

The other name that jumped at out at everyone was, of course, that of Boston?s Cardinal Sean O?Malley. He is the only prelate on the commission and is a member of Pope Francis? ?kitchen cabinet,? the Council of Eight Cardinals who advise him on the governance of the universal Church. Access to the pope, if the commission encounters bureaucratic obstacles, will not be a problem. More importantly, O?Malley has become the cavalry on the issue of clergy sex abuse, being sent to Fall River in 1992 to deal with the fallout from the case of Father James Porter, the first serial pedophile to make international headlines when he admitted sexually abusing more than 100 minors. In 2002, he was dispatched to Palm Beach, to replace the first U.S. bishop who had resigned because he had previously abused children. The next year, when Boston was in complete meltdown, culminating in the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law, O?Malley returned to Massachusetts as Boston?s archbishop. He subsequently served as the apostolic visitor to Dublin when that city?s archdiocese confronted their sex abuse crisis. O?Malley knows more about this issue, has met with more victims, has dealt with more settlements, has heard more excuses ? and rejected them, than anyone Pope Francis has in his circle of advisors. The fact that the pope assigned O?Malley to this new task shows the pope is serious about confronting the issue.

Another aspect of the commission that leaps out is the fact that four of its eight members are lay women and, just so, are not a part of the clerical culture that for too long protected pedophiles and ignored the needs of victims. The cultural rot went deeper, however, into the minds and hearts of the clergy. When confronted with an allegation of clergy sex abuse, too many bishops had, as their first response, the thought ?poor Father.? That is not the first thought of a mother when confronted with such an allegation. And, it should be noted, these women are no blushing violets inclined to defer to the clergy. A former Attorney General and Prime Minister of Poland tops the list!

I saw in a news report that someone from SNAP, the victims? advocacy group, urged the pope to move quickly on the issue of eradicating clergy sex abuse of minors. I quibble with the adverb. It is far more important that the pope move wisely and effectively than that he move quickly. The new commission will need to establish its own norms, add more members, and recommend to the pope ways the Church can more comprehensively deal with

protecting children. Certainly, they will recommend that bishops? conferences develop certain policies. Certainly, they will advocate for training programs for all Church ministers, clerical and lay, who work with children. There will be little controversy here.

The controversy will come with the so far missing piece of the Church?s response to the sex abuse mess: holding bishops accountable when they violate their own child protection policies. Here, whatever policies the commission recommends will entail stepping on big toes, getting in the middle of Vatican turf wars and touching on the deepest, most entrenched part of the culture, the idea that once a man has a zucchetto on his head, he is answerable to no one. You see, the sex abuse scandal was really two scandals. There was the horror of child rape. And there was the fact that too many bishops did not react to this horrific fact with horror. They reacted by trying to cover-up the abuse. When caught out, they reacted with legalisms and lawyers. Prelates should not be expected to react the way a parent would, but they should be expected to react the way a pastor would. And ? this is critical ? these reactions were not the result of the bishops being bad men. The reaction was conditioned by the culture in which they live. It is that which must change.

The new commission must recommend a process, perhaps even due process, by which bishops are held accountable when they fail to protect the children in their diocese from predators. In the event, there will be an easy way to discern if this new process is working. If Bishop Robert Finn is still the Bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph one year after the process is set up, it is not working.

It is also imperative that the Holy Father meet with victims. I say this not because the symbolism is important, although it is. I say this because only by meeting victims will the Holy Father grasp the horror of child abuse and, only then, realize how greatly the clerical culture that hid that horror must change. The pope has repeatedly denounced the culture of clericalism. Appointing a commission with half of its members being lay women shows a willingness to confront that culture of clericalism, and gives evidence of what the pope means when he says we should not clericalize the laity. Pope Francis sees the problems with that culture as it affects the governance of the Church first hand, every day. In some of his most high profile statements, he calls for an end to in-fighting and gossip, which provides a window into what he confronts daily. But, the clergy sex abuse crisis affects the whole Church, not just the curia.

The greatest wound the Church has sustained in my lifetime was entirely self-inflicted. The composition of the new commission is a large first step in the right direction, but it is only a first step. Too many bishops suggest the crisis is a thing of the past, when events in Kansas City and St. Paul instruct us that the crisis is on-going. And, who knows what is going on in the rest of the world? One thing is obvious: The issue of protecting children is a threshold issue for the Church and for Pope Francis. If he does not get this right, nothing else will matter. The people of God, quite rightly, will not listen to men who refuse to protect children. No bishop in the entire Church understands this as well as Cardinal O?Malley. It falls to him and to the other members of the commission to make sure their work is not impeded by vested interests and deeply ingrained cultural impediments. The victims deserve a reckoning and, at long last, the reckoning may finally begin.

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