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Pope's new abuse commission is another promise waiting to be broken

Thomas P. Doyle | Mar. 25, 2014 Examining the Crisis

The countless victims of clergy sex abuse have been waiting for 30 years for the Vatican to show it really understands the depth of the problem and is willing to do something real about it. Judging by the latest move, naming members of a pontifical commission [1], victims will have to keep on waiting. Those who have been deeply involved in this issue for the long haul had little hope the promised commission would make a difference, and we probably won't be disappointed.

Putting Marie Collins on the commission was a brilliant decision. She is probably the only one with true credibility among the victims, who are clearly the most important people in this equation, not the bishops. She is also probably the only member who is independent and courageous enough to call out the real issues. Child protection in the future and seminary training are peripheral. Compassionate care for the countless victims should be the foremost concern, followed by drawing up an expeditious plan to fire the more egregious offenders from among the cardinals, archbishops and bishops who have enabled and continue to enable perpetrators.

While it is not totally clear what the commission's mission is, a recent interview [2] with Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, one of the members, gives some clues. He said some nice things about putting victims first, but the victims have been hearing that from the last pope and from cardinals and bishops for years. They still aren't first. In fact, they aren't even in the lineup.

However, later in the interview, Zollner said the commission will look into church law to see what has worked then make recommendations. That says it all. The pope and the commission could save a lot of time and effort because this has already been figured out, and the answer is short: Not much has worked. Elsewhere, media stories said the commission will advise the church on best policies to protect children and keep abusers out of the clergy. So it seems that to avoid having to confront and do something about the real issues facing the church, the commission will be asked to reinvent the wheel.

Over the past three decades, a massive amount of research has been done into every aspect of clergy sex abuse. The library of scholarly articles and books is significant. It runs the gamut from the unique effects of clergy abuse on Catholic children to the ecclesiological factors that help explain why the Catholic bishops covered it up.

The vast majority of this research has been done and continues to be done in the United States. The whole nightmarish cesspool would not have been uncovered were it not for the bravery and determination of the American victims. Yet the only American on the commission is a cardinal.

Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley's appointment, quite contrary to John L. Allen Jr.'s opinion [3] in the *Boston Globe*, does not bring instant credibility to the effort. If there really is to be an effort to put victims first, then the appointment of O'Malley or any other cardinal or archbishop to the commission is a clear contradiction to that claim. Probably the only bishop on the planet with the authentic qualifications to serve, if the goal really is to help victims and help the church, is Bishop Geoffrey Robinson [4], retired auxiliary bishop of Sydney.

The church doesn't need a commission with more meetings and more documents and more sympathetic statements to victims. The church -- and by "the church," I mean the most important members of the People of God, the victims and their families -- needs and wants action. They have been drowning in meaningless words for decades.

They got nothing from their local bishops, so they went to the courts, and the courts proved to be the adversary that was more powerful than the hierarchical empire. Through the thousands of cases, a massive amount of information has been produced and an equally massive amount of research has been accomplished into some of the key questions, such as the unique kind of trauma experienced by clergy victims, the inability and unwillingness of the church's governmental system -- a monarchy -- to deal with the problem, and the disastrous effect of clericalism. This is the kind of information the pope and the Curia need to study, internalize and use as a basis for meaningful change. But this is also the kind of information that poses the greatest threat to the clerical/hierarchical establishment.

The worldwide plague of sexual abuse of the vulnerable by clerics, from deacons on up to cardinals, is the worst disaster the Catholic church has had in a thousand years. It is a disaster the institutional church -- the clericalist establishment -- has brought upon itself. Another commission, even though it's a papal commission, will only prolong the agony.

Finally, it is true that the church is responding effectively to this debacle, but it's not the institutional church, nor is it the clergy. It is the People of God, the victims, their families, their supporters, and a very few clerics and religious who have risen to the occasion. The hope for the future rests with them.

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