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Editorial: An engaged laity demands answers on finances, abuse

NCR Editorial Staff | Apr. 10, 2014
Editorial

This issue brings together two strains of church life that *NCR* has been tracking for some 30 years: the sexual abuse of minors by clergy, and the finances of dioceses. It is in these two areas that church leaders are at their most vulnerable.

The sexual abuse of minors by clergy and the subsequent cover-up by those in the church leadership structure have sapped the hierarchy of much of its moral authority. Many times, the church has seemed to be moving on from the immediacy of that crisis, and then something happens -- a priest in Newark, N.J., who is supposed to be on restricted ministry is found on youth retreats, or leaders in the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese ignore their own guidelines and the Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People -- and we are plunged headlong back into that morass.

The unprecedented appointment of the new Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors should have been greeted with jubilation -- a commission of experts with direct access to the pope is something that could not have been imagined even three years ago. Instead, the announcement comes with many unanswered questions: Who will lead the commission? Where will it fit in the Vatican bureaucracy? What is its exact mandate? Sources have been telling *NCR* since December that this commission would be decisive in answering concerns of victim advocates, particularly in producing procedures to censure bishops who violate church law on clergy sex abuse. What could have been a watershed moment has done little to assuage critics. It is more than an opportunity wasted. It is the surest sign yet of the tremendous resistance that Pope Francis and his Council of Cardinals are meeting inside the church bureaucracy.

The sexual abuse of minors by clergy cost the U.S. church $109 million in 2013 and a total of $2.74 billion since 2004. But don't look to the bishops' annual report on compliance with the Dallas Charter to learn how much your diocese paid into that lump sum; the report doesn't break down any data that way. Such fundamental information, which Catholics who support their church have a right to know, isn't available because the bishops don't want to share it. No national norms require financial disclosure and no mechanism holds bishops accountable.

Which is why, for the 10th time, the Lincoln, Neb., diocese and three Eastern Catholic eparchies (the Chaldean Eparchy of Saint Peter the Apostle of San Diego, the Eparchy of Our Lady of Nareg in New York for Armenian Catholics and the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Stamford.) have refused to comply with audits [1] mandated by the bishops' own charter. It is no surprise that each of the annual reports describing the audit displays an increasing frustration on the part of the laypeople commissioned to write them. "Total participation in the audit is one of the few ways to demonstrate to the faithful the commitment of the bishops to right the horrific wrongs done in the past and to do all that they can to prevent such abuse from happening again," National Review Board president Francesco Cesareo wrote in his introduction to this year's report. One hundred percent participation is still the goal, he wrote. "This is a matter of utmost importance in the protection of our children and the restoration of the bishops' credibility."

Nine U.S. diocese have declared bankruptcy since 2004, directly as a result of the sex abuse crisis. But other trends in demographics and society are also straining church finances, especially in the East, Northeast and upper Midwest, where news comes regularly of church and school closings, parish consolidations, and cutbacks in diocesan staff and programs. In most dioceses, annual appeals and fundraising drives have become slickly orchestrated operations, more often than not run by professional consultants. Bishops can come to resemble politicians, in constant begging mode for campaign financing, just to keep the coffers from going empty.

This may be one of the reasons why stories about bishops building mansions causes swift and angry responses from the people in the pews, as we have seen in Camden, N.J., Newark, and Atlanta. The questions that follow echo the questions from the sex abuse crisis: What were the bishops thinking? Why don't they get it?

The answers to those questions also echo the sex abuse crisis. The bishop is the lord of his domain, and he can do what he wills. For bishops' compensation, guidelines and best practices exist, as our story [2] shows, and most bishops follow the rules. The trouble is, as Bishop Tom Gumbleton says about his retirement benefits, "nobody ever asks any questions. If I wanted to live in a big house ... I guess I could do it, and nobody would say anything about it. ... I get what I ask for. And each bishop does."

Out of weariness, one is tempted to look at news about sex abuse and church finances and conclude that the system is broken. In reality, what is broken in this 2,000-year-old church that has weathered many crises is the clerical system that has dominated it in the last few hundred years.

The good news out of Newark and Atlanta is that in the information age, people could learn what their archbishops were doing and could respond in a strong voice that demanded answers to questions. To his credit, Atlanta Archbishop Wilton Gregory heard the criticism (albeit after it became front-page news and led local TV newscasts) and is trying to make amends. "What we didn't stop to consider ... was that the world and the church have changed," Gregory said. Meanwhile, Philadelphia seems to be giving financial transparency a try [3].

The times have changed. An educated and engaged laity is demanding answers and accountability. There can be no going back.

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