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+Gomez Breaks the Omerta

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 1, 2013 Distinctly Catholic
LA abuse cases

?I find these files to be brutal and painful reading,? wrote Archbishop Jose Gomez in a letter to the clergy and faithful of Los Angeles [1]that was released last night. ?The behavior described in these files is terribly sad and evil. There is no excuse, no explaining away what happened to these children. The priests involved had the duty to be their spiritual fathers and they failed.?

?If in hindsight we also discover that mistakes may have been made as regards prompt removal of priests and assistance to victims, I am deeply sorry,? wrote Cardinal Edward Egan in a letter to the clergy and faith of the Archdiocese of New York in the spring of 2002. You will note how far the pronoun ?I? is from the word ?mistakes? and how the use of the passive voice adds further distance from the horror.

Archbishop Gomez?s voice is the voice of moral authority. Cardinal Egan?s voice was the voice of moral complicity, the voice of the dodger. Gomez did more than speak. He informed Cardinal Roger Mahony that he was relieved of all administrative and public duties within the archdiocese and he removed auxiliary bishop Thomas Curry as episcopal vicar for Santa Barbara.

The news from Los Angeles is stunning. After years of prevarications, years of excuses, years of enormous expenditures on lawyers trying to cover-up the cover-up, Archbishop Gomez has broken the omerta that has surrounded the hierarchy since the sex abuse scandal broke. He has told a cardinal, a Prince of the Church, that he is relieved of all his administrative and public duties. He has told one of his auxiliary bishops to step down. They did not abuse any children personally, as was the case of Cardinal Groer in Vienna. Their removal from public duties within the Church is a consequence of their failure as administrators and leaders, a failure that has been sadly but conclusively documented for all the world to see. Finally, after so much sulfur clogging the nostrils of the Church, we have a whiff of accountability.

Cardinal Mahony has had his detractors over the years. There were some conservative Catholics who resented his deep and abiding commitment to justice for immigrants. Mother Angelica famously considered Mahony a bit of a heretic for a pastoral letter on the eucharist that he wrote, a letter that was perfectly orthodox. (As a result of her charge, Mother Angelica received an apostolic visitation, long before the apostolic visitation of other women religious. And she was removed as head of her abbey: In the wake of the more recent apostolic visitation of all religious houses in the U.S., I think the only consequence was the removal of one mother superior at one house.) But, the fact that Mahony was good on immigration does not excuse the fact that he was horrid on covering up the sexual abuse of children. And, while none of us would wish to be judged by our worst moment or our worst decision, the fact is that some decisions are so bad, they simply make it impossible for the person who made it to continue in any type of leadership role. Forgiveness, yes. Leadership, no.

Which raises a direct question for the Holy See. If Archbishop Gomez is willing to remove a cardinal and an auxiliary bishop from their leadership roles in his archdiocese, why is Bishop Robert Finn still the Bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph. Unlike Mahony and Curry, Finn has been convicted in a court of law. Unlike Los Angeles, the diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph has been forced to grant a civil court extraordinary oversight

over its internal functioning ? talk about a threat to religious liberty! And one brought on solely by Finn?s failure to follow the procedures laid out not only by the bishops in their 2002 Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children, but to follow the requirements of Missouri law. And, most obviously, Finn?s failure to report Father Shawn Ratigan to the authorities came ten years after Dallas, not ten years before, as in the cases emerging from the documents in Los Angeles.

After the Battle of El Alamein, Winston Churchill gave a speech at Mansion House in which he said, ?Now, this is not the end. This not even the beginning of the end. But, it is perhaps the end of the beginning.? I understand that removing a bishop from office, like defrocking a priest, should only be undertaken for the gravest of reasons and that our conception of Holy Orders, which like all sacraments imparts divine grace, cannot be tarnished by the behavior of clerics. What Gomez?s bold announcement hopefully suggests to the entire Church, and especially to the authorities in Rome, is that it is not the removal of a bishop from office that tarnishes our conception of Holy Orders, but the maintenance in office of those who have disgraced that office which does the tarnishing. If Mahony is gone, and Curry is gone, Finn should go.

And, any other bishop who, through poor judgment or worse, fails to abide by the Dallas Charter should go. Not because they are evil men. Not because their ordination was invalid. Not because we doubt the infinite mercy of God. But, because leadership in the Church requires in every age a commitment to protect the vulnerable, a commitment to candor and a willingness to be subject not only to the judgment of God but to a reasonable degree of accountability for one?s exercise of leadership. Cardinal Mahony is not a bad man. Bishop Curry is not a bad man. Bishop Finn is not a bad man. But, leadership in the Church requires more. If you want to see what leadership looks like, re-read Archbishop Gomez?s bold, succinct, unaffected, rigorous letter.

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