Vatican



Pope Francis pauses while answering questions from journalists aboard his flight from Lima, Peru, to Rome Jan. 21. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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January 24, 2018

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Reading Pope Francis' comments at the press conference on the flight back to Rome, regarding clergy sex abuse and the allegations against Bishop Juan Barros Madrid, and rereading them again and again, I confess I cannot make heads or tails out of them.

Pope Francis said at one point: "The word 'proof' was not the best, I would rather say 'evidence.' In Barros' case, I have studied and restudied, there is no evidence to condemn him. And if I condemned without evidence or moral certainty, I would commit a crime of bad judgment."

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Later, in response to a follow-up question, the pope said, "I must apologize for what the abused feel. The word 'proof' has hurt many of them. They say: Do I have to go look for a certification? I apologize to them if I hurt them without realizing it, I didn't mean to. And it causes me so much pain, because I meet them: in Chile two meetings are known to the public, the others have not been disclosed. In every trip, there is always a chance to meet the victims, the meeting of Philadelphia went public, but not the other cases. To hear that the Pope tells them: 'bring me a letter with proof, is a slap' I realize that my expression didn't come out very well, and I understand, as Peter writes in one of his letters, that the fire has risen. That's what I can honestly say."

When asked about the remarkable statement from Cardinal Sean O'Malley, in which the cardinal bluntly spoke of the hurt caused by the pope's earlier comments on this case, Francis said: "O' Malley said that the Pope has always used 'zero tolerance'... Then there is that 'bad choice of words,' I spoke of calumny, to say of someone who says something with pertinacity without having evidence. If I say: you stole, and you have not stolen, then I am libeling, because I have no evidence. It was an unfortunate expression. But I have not heard any victim of Barros. They did not come, they did not show themselves, they did not give evidence in court. It's all in the air. It is true that Barros was in Karadima's group of young people. But let us be clear: if you accuse someone without evidence with pertinacity, that is calumny. However, if a person arrives and gives me evidence, I will be the first to listen to

them. O' Malley's statement was very right, and I have thanked him. He spoke about the pain of victims in general."

Can anyone make sense of these seemingly contradictory claims? I can't.

What is the deal with Pope Francis and the whole subject of clergy sex abuse? Like his immediate predecessor, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, and unlike St. Pope John Paul II, Francis has abided by a zero tolerance policy towards clergy sex abuse. But, how to reconcile that claim with the fact that there are at least three people who have publicly stated that Bishop Barros was a witness to their abuse by Fr. Francisco Karadima, even though he was not himself abusing them. And, why, if not re-abusing the victims is, and must be, a priority for the church, in Chile and elsewhere, why did Francis twice decline to accept the resignation of Bishop Barros in the interest of healing?

My former colleague Tom Roberts has written passionately about the link between clericalism and the clergy sex abuse crisis. I do not agree entirely with Roberts' analysis — if we all learned anything from Danny Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* it is that there is a danger in assessing moral culpability in sweeping cultural terms. But I agree with much of Roberts' linkage of clericalism with the criminal response to the clergy sex abuse crisis by so many bishops. Still, Pope Francis has shown himself to be not only immune to clericalism in other ways, but acutely aware of the corrupting influence clericalism can exercise on the life of the church. Why, then, do his responses here have at least a whiff of the "poor father" clericalism that for so long characterized the response of bishops when confronted with evidence of sexual abuse by their priests?

Writing at Crux, Austen Ivereigh observes:

> *But the pope said on the plane flying him home to Rome that he has examined the evidence, and judges it inconsistent and incoherent. "There is no evidence of guilt, and seems there won't be. The coherent [evidence] points the other way [ie. innocence]," he told reporters. He thinks Barros has been condemned because of what he symbolizes, not what he did, and that the two have been confused in the victims' narrative.*

Ivereigh's words may be true but he overlooks the central problem in this explanation: None of us knows what evidence the pope has seen. The reason none

of us can find ourselves wholeheartedly agreeing with Francis about the innocence of Barros is that none of us have seen the evidence, and the whole system lacks transparency.

Ivereigh goes on to say, "His objective in Chile was not a communications strategy designed to satisfy public hunger for sacrifice, but to force the Church to deal with the real cause of the Karadima crisis: Clericalism, and attachment to power." And, later, "This is not a stance that closes off further reform and learning." This last point is undoubtedly wrong and Ivereigh's article is an example of why that is so: The only thing being reported about the pope's trip is the controversy surrounding Bishop Barros.

I do not know what to think. I do not think any of us knows why the pope seems so contradictory in his statements. Does Pope Francis know a fine priest who was falsely accused of clergy sex abuse? Was he falsely accused? Did he himself falsely accuse someone of some crime in the past? Why this parsing of the difference between "proof" and "evidence" and the willingness to apologize for hurting the victims of clergy sex abuse with his careless choice of words, only to repeat those words again? Pope Francis has made "mercy" a central theme of his pontificate, but surely he knows that there is nothing merciful in allowing perpetrators to commit more crimes, which is why we have the zero tolerance policy in the first place.

Let us be clear, as well, that dealing rigorously with clergy sex abuse is not one issue among many. We might often say of a parish priest, this one is good with money and that one is a fine preacher and a third is the one you want to visit you in hospital, and we might define different strengths of different popes in similar ways. But, given the enormity of the crimes committed by leading churchmen, the pervasive failure to confront the cancer that had grown within the clergy, confronting clergy sex abuse is like confronting anti-Semitism: So great is the cancer, that nothing but a total, uncomplicated commitment to rooting it out will suffice.

That said, I have no patience for people who, having looked the other way when John Paul II was pope, now call for Pope Francis's head on a platter. Similarly, those who try and use the pope's problematic comments as an excuse to denounce him on other grounds are merely using the suffering of the victims to advance ideological aims. There are special punishments in purgatory for them too. But, the Holy Father should know that his critics will stop at nothing to bring him down. The sex abuse crisis should be confronted on the merits, but the consequences of failing to confront it are plenty disturbing too.

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I do not begrudge the pope's presence at the funeral of Cardinal Law: *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*. None of us wish to be judged by our worst decisions and while those in power must be so judged, the dead can be left to the judgment of God. I think too many are making too much over the fact that it is taking longer for the Vatican to approve the new members of the papal commission on clergy sex abuse: I grant it is an avoidable bad optic but I do not perceive that it shows any relaxation in the pope's commitment to address this issue.

The Barros situation is different. I wish I knew what it was about Pope Francis that makes him fail to grasp the situation with Bishop Barros, the pain caused to the victims and the damage done to the church. I am gobsmacked that the pope twice declined to accept the bishop's resignation. But, I know, too, that unless there is more evidence of papal indifference on this score, I am sticking with Francis.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about the nexus between religion and politics.]

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