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Opinion



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The Pennsylvania grand jury report, coming as it is on the heels of the revelations of sexual misconduct by former cardinal Theodore McCarrick, has once again exposed the painful truth: For decades, the Catholic Church harbored priests whose depravity is almost impossible to get one's head around, and it covered-up their crimes out of a sense of institutional self-preservation, caring more for the clerical abusers than for their child victims. The statement from Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, though vague about their plans, nonetheless got it right when he said this was a "moral catastrophe."

It is a defining quality of the clergy sex abuse crisis, that while people were always disgusted by the horrific things that were done to children, it was the lack of a response to that horror by the church's shepherds that really caused us to feel not only sick to our stomachs but angry. During Attorney General Josh Shapiro's press conference Tuesday, the moment that captured this core of the crisis was when he described a priest of the Scranton Diocese, who had impregnated a girl and then offered to pay for an abortion. Shapiro read a letter from the former Scranton Bishop James Timlin, in which the bishop expressed his concern and promised his prayers. The letter had been sent to the priest, not to the victim. It was hard not to throw something through the TV screen.

Timlin retired in 2003. Almost all of the deeds catalogued in the grand jury report were from many years ago. Since the adoption of the Charter for the Protection of Children in 2002, also referred to as the Dallas Charter, the instances of new allegations of child sex abuse have diminished every year. We can now see that the cases peaked in the 1970s and 1980s, when most parishes were staffed by clergy who had been part of the mid-century glut of seminarians, an unprecedented peak in vocations, the origin of which is complex. A significant percentage of those men were not just criminals but monsters. Others were not monsters, but they were creeps. Many had arrested psycho-sexual development.

But it is hard to draw distinctions or examine strategies for successfully confronting the crisis after you have read about a boy being raped in tag-team fashion by several priests or about an entire family of young women being sexually tormented by the same priest. We know some bishops did not look the other way, did not make

excuses for the priest but, instead, took swift action to remove them from ministry. We know some bishops were ahead of the curve and others never learned. None of it seems to matter. Nonetheless, we have to move forward, and DiNardo's statement actually does a good job balancing the enormity of the moral ugliness with the need to take practical steps to confront it. As my colleague Josh McElwee reports, canon lawyers have varied and important ideas about how the law itself provides resources for the bishops to deal with this crisis.

DiNardo pledges to involve the laity in the reform efforts for which he calls. It is hoped that they can pierce through the clerical culture that allowed sex abuse of minors to go unaddressed for so long. In prosecutions of a bad cop, district attorneys have to pierce the "blue wall." Men and women who put their lives on the line better learn to have each others' backs. Soldiers, similarly, learn to support each other, to never leave a man, or woman, behind, develop lifelong bonds, and enjoy special and shared status in the broader culture because of the challenges they face. But even they do not take perpetual vows and promise obedience to their superior. The sense of camaraderie that is appropriate in the military or in a police force is even greater among clergy who know they will spend the rest of their lives with each other, for whom there is no family making prior demands on their loyalties, and who are given the awesome and humbling power to change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. But that same sense of camaraderie can be deadly when trying to ferret out wrong-doing.

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It is not fair that so many good priests must this week feel ashamed to wear their collar. It is not fair that good bishops who did not shuffle around pedophiles or excuse child rape must stand in the dock with those who did. It also was not fair that Jesus should carry our sins to the cross.

The bishops of the Catholic Church in the United States are the leaders of our church, and they must now act like leaders. They must accept corporate responsibility for the sins of their brothers. They must continue to work to change the clerical culture so that the violations against a child are always seen in their full horror. And they must give their people the language and the lessons to make sense of this moral and spiritual ugliness that has been exposed to the light yet again. In all this, DiNardo's statement is a step forward.

They must go beyond making statements. The bishops should don their sackcloth and ashes and lead the church in contrition and penance. Too many bishops this week sounded defensive, legalistic, like they had been coached by PR experts, not like bishops. Sept. 14 is the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. All the bishops of the United States should preside over services of reparation and sorrow in their cathedrals that day, prostrate themselves before the altar as they do on Good Friday, beg forgiveness of God and his people for the sins that the leaders of the church committed, read psalms of sorrow, venerate the cross, sing the Lamentations of Jeremiah. We are Catholics, and our liturgy is prior to our canons and our policies.

DiNardo suggests that the bishops' conference plan to devise concrete policy proposals that they can lay before the full body of bishops at their November meeting for action. People complain that the bishops too quickly move the discussion to policy, and away from moral shame, and the criticism is warranted. But policies are how you shape and change culture. But here is where DiNardo's vagueness gets in the way.

They have asked the pope to appoint an apostolic visitor to look into the sexual misconduct of ex-cardinal Theodore McCarrick. This visitor must be a cleric of unimpeachable integrity and extraordinary competence: His name is Archbishop Charles Scicluna. He can be aided by lay people with experience in investigatory work, but his investigation will lead him to the Roman curia, and the pope must support him in his efforts to unearth whatever evidence he can and make it public. He is being appointed not to an organization, as would usually be the case, or to a region, but to an event, the rise of McCarrick in the hierarchy.

Second, one of the most overlooked statements made by the U.S. bishops in 2002 was their "Statement of Episcopal Commitment." This was a kind of addendum to the child protection charter, but frankly I had forgotten all about it. DiNardo mentions it now because he notes that it did not make clear precisely how people were to register a complaint against a bishop, or to whom. Yet sources tell me when Cardinal Timothy Dolan received the allegation of sexual misconduct against a minor, he noted this same statement in asking the pope to give him permission to proceed as he would against any other cleric. The pope agreed, and the Dallas norms worked exactly as intended: Within months, the investigation deemed the allegation credible, McCarrick was removed from public ministry, and public notice was given of the finding, this led additional victims to come forward. They should

formalize the fact that the Dallas Charter applies to them.

Third, Dinardo says the bishops "also need to develop and widely promote reliable third-party reporting mechanisms. Such tools already exist in many dioceses and in the public sector and we are already examining specific options." I am not sure what he means here precisely. They can ask a team of lay people to examine state laws and policies at different organizations. Sexual misconduct by a bishop against a seminarian, or a priest against a parish secretary, should be treated very harshly, perhaps even with a zero-tolerance policy as we have for abuse of minors. On the other hand, a priest who stumbles in his vows with someone who is in no way his subordinate should be encouraged to persevere in his priestly vocation, just as we do not counsel a married couple to head to divorce court when one or both of the partners has an affair. But repeated offenses should lead to the priest's leaving ministry. A kind of personnel board, with clergy and laity, should exist in every diocese to look into these issues, which have more grey in them than do cases involving minors. It could also consider non-sexual problems, such as a priest with a drinking problem or a gambling problem.

Finally, the bishops need some kind of office to examine situations like the McCarrick case in which there are no formal allegations by victims, but there is simply so much smoke that someone needs to look into what is the truth of the matter. We have to be very careful here. There are malicious groups like Church Militant and the Lepanto Institute that would seek to turn such an office into an ecclesial version of the House Un-American Affairs Committee. I confess I have not figured it out. I can tell you people are really angry that so many clerics were apparently gossiping about McCarrick and not doing anything about him.

I also am concerned about the call from DiNardo — and from many other bishops — about lay involvement. Tim Busch, founder of the Napa Institute, issued a statement announcing the organization was severing ties with Archbishop John Nienstedt. The group also announced they are "gathering together lay leaders to chart a new way forward that is both faithful to the Church's hierarchical structure and committed to holding Church leadership accountable. These leaders are working on concrete proposals for governance changes to avoid future scandals. As part of this effort, the Napa Institute will be hosting a conference in Washington, D.C. on October 2, 2018 on authentic reform and the universal call to holiness."

I urge the bishops to send someone to Busch's conference, write down the names of all the attendees, and bar them from any participation in the church's reform efforts. The last thing the church needs is for fat-cat businessmen to try and use this crisis to increase their influence over the church, an influence Busch has not been shy about cultivating.

Above all I say to all the bishops: Before you start examining different policy proposals, remember that you are chief pastors of the local church, shepherds to the flock, fathers to your priests. And that flock is hurting. People are asking why they should stay. The cumulative effect of the scandals is taking its toll. You must drop the management lessons and the communications strategies and be forthcoming about what happened, penitential about what happened, and lead your people in prayer and penance. The betrayal of the community was profound, and the wound has been reopened. "How could this have happened?" is the question again on all lips. Before giving an interview or issuing a statement, re-read this powerful testimony by Patricia McGuire, president of Trinity College, which details how deep the sense of betrayal runs. Meet with more victims. Make sure you are never far from the pain your brothers caused.

Ultimately, the only reason to stay in the church is because the tomb is empty. But how can you, bishops, witness to the Resurrection when you, as a body, were incapable of stopping the rape of children in your midst for decades? How can you pretend to moral leadership when a concern for *bella figura* still prevents you from speaking honestly about the actions of your brother bishops? How can you, bishops, be leaders of the faith community, without first reminding us you are human beings who, like the rest of us, are sickened to the core of your being by the filth contained in the grand jury report? How can you lead? Only if, like Peter who also betrayed the Lord, you first weep bitterly and let your people see your bitter tears.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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