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Editorial

by NCR Editorial Staff

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Editor's note: *The following editorial was written and will appear in the Aug. 24-30 print issue of NCR, which went to press the day before Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, revealed that the bishops were inviting the Vatican to conduct an apostolic visitation to the country to lead a "full investigation" into questions surrounding Cardinal Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, that the bishops will take steps to create channels for easier reporting of abuse and misconduct by bishops, and that the bishops will push for better procedures under canon law to resolve complaints made against bishops.*

We welcome yesterday's announcement as a good first step in resolving the crisis that has enveloped the Catholic Church. Particularly encouraging is that the bishops have listed "substantial leadership by laity" as one of the criteria for meeting their goals. That, too, is a step along the way.

Cardinal DiNardo's statement is addressed to "Brothers and Sisters in Christ" and ends this request: "Let me ask you to hold us to all of these resolutions." The bishops should know that we will be watching.

With what we have learned about the abuse of minors and seminarians perpetuated by Theodore McCarrick and his parallel rise through the ranks of the church, coupled with the scathing grand jury report out of Pennsylvania that chronicles in vivid detail the rape of children and the culture of secrecy that enabled the abuse to continue

for decades, what are Catholics feeling?

Anger and disgust don't seem strong enough words. Revulsion? Horror? Betrayal?

The revelations of the last two months make undeniably clear that it is time for the laity to reclaim our ownership of this church. We are the body of Christ, we are the church. It is time that we demand that bishops claim their true vocations as servants to the people of God. And they must live that way.

At this time, it seems laity can do very little to effect the changes needed to bring about the solutions to the large issues that plague the church now — careerism, abuse of power, lack of transparency, no accountability. The fact is laypeople in our church today have little power.

That said, as any community organizer would tell you, we have the power of the collective. Now more than ever, we — the laity — need to speak with a united voice. We must turn our anger into resolve.

It is shocking that after decades of revelations of sexual abuse of children, there is still no clear accountability for bishops. We must demand change.

First, tell our bishops that we no longer trust them, individually or collectively. The trust we may have had is now shattered.

Second, tell our bishops that regaining our trust requires reform in how the church as an institution operates.

In the next weeks and months, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops will be studying the issues that arise from the McCarrick case. The conference will appoint committees, authorize studies and make plans. We must demand and be given full lay participation in all the committees and study groups, and we must have full transparency of all that these committees and groups see and do.

Furthermore, we must demand and receive full lay participation in whatever tribunals, councils or visitation teams result from these efforts. We won't settle for tokenism or mere "advisory roles."

If canon law doesn't allow the lay involvement we would seek, we respond: Change the law.

Furthermore, women should be as equally represented as men in these study groups, commissions, tribunals and councils. We would especially recommend reserving places in these groups for women religious. There are many leaders of women's congregations who are more than qualified to serve on any of these bodies, particularly those in the U.S. who endured years of Vatican scrutiny under the apostolic visitation and the doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

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Indeed, if the effort the Vatican had expended on such baseless examinations had instead been focused on cleaning house of abusive or complicit bishops and priests, how much further along might we be in healing from the cancer of sexual abuse that weakens the church among its followers and erodes its moral standing in the world?

What plagues the church today — as the Pennsylvania grand jury demonstrates — resulted from the lack of accountability of bishops and religious superiors. Any Catholic has the right to petition their bishop, a major superior, the apostolic nuncio, the appropriate dicasteries in Rome, even the pope. But from the local level all the way to Rome, there is no accountable, transparent process to ensure that grievances are received, let alone acted upon.

We know, for example, that staff at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith refused to send acknowledgements that they had received letters from victims of clergy sex abuse. Such an attitude perpetuates a culture of impunity that must change.

The next time you go to Mass and as you kneel in that silence that envelops the church just before liturgy begins, utter a prayer for this battered and wounded body we call the church. Pray for a renewal and inspiration from the Holy Spirit, and pray for a reform of our broken system. Then glance to your left and your right. Kneeling beside you are likely the strongest allies you have in rebuilding a church so badly in need of reform.

This affects all of us — the people of God. It's more than past time that we the laity demand more of our church leaders.