News
Opinion
Guest Voices



A Mass in Austin, Texas, in 2012 (CNS/Donald R. Winslow)



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During a listening session after the 6 p.m. Mass on Sunday, our pastor, Paulist Fr. Michael McGarry, offered what seemed like a pretty radical suggestion.

Listing several possible reactions that Catholics might have to the latest outrages in the clergy sexual abuse scandal, he said he'd be especially heartbroken if people became so repulsed by the institution that they'd lose their focus on the teachings of Jesus.

"Follow your conscience," he urged us. If you feel like you no longer want anything to do with the Catholic Church, he said, please find some way of staying connected to a gathering of followers of Jesus.

If that means joining the ranks of an Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Evangelical or other Christian church, he urged us to go for it. "We'd miss you around here," he added, "but just don't give up following Jesus."

He raised this idea not in "love it or leave it" fashion, but as a genuine alternative for disaffected Catholics tempted to walk away from participation in a church of any sort.

The thought has crossed my mind, and I appreciate Mike's focus on what really matters.

But I find myself aligned, instead, with the conclusion that my wife, Carol, articulated as we made our way home from the hour-long listening session.

"I'm too stubborn to leave," she said. "I'm just not going to let them take my church away from me."

By "them," of course, she was referring to the leaders of the Catholic Church in the United States, the 456 active and retired bishops who have so utterly failed to hold themselves accountable for the scandal that has brought the church to its knees.

We showed up at the listening session the day after signing the statement* hosted by Daily Theology calling on all U.S. bishops to submit their resignations to Pope Francis, just as all of Chile's 34 bishops have done.

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Under different circumstances, seeking the resignation of every last one of the bishops might be dismissed as a provocative stunt by a cabal of activist theologians.

In the wake of the Pennsylvania grand jury report documenting the sexual abuse of more than 1,000 young people by hundreds of priests, their challenge reads more like a respectful invitation.

It's an invitation, most importantly, to the bishops themselves.

Nobody knows how many of the resignations Francis would ultimately accept (so far, he has accepted only five of the 34 Chilean resignations).

As the Daily Theology statement points out, though, offering their resignation would provide the U.S. bishops with the chance to demonstrate with action the level of remorse they claim with their words.

"As a collective body, the bishops have given the faithful little indication that they recognize and take accountability for the breathtaking magnitude of the violence and deceit that has continued unabated under their leadership," the statement asserts.

"Thus, we call on them to follow Christ's example in offering to the people a willing abdication of earthly status. This is a public act of penance and sorrow, absent of which no genuine process of healing and reform can begin."

After Communion Sunday night, McGarry read a statement from Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, who as head of the Pontifical Commission on the Protection of Minors serves as the pope's top advisor on clergy sexual abuse.

"While many perpetrators have been held accountable in one way or another for their crimes," the cardinal said, "we have yet to establish clear and transparent systems of accountability and consequence for Church leadership whose failures

have allowed these crimes to occur."

That's a stunning admission that O'Malley also delivered to the pope, face to face, on July 23. Good for him for owning up to it. But words by themselves ring hollow.

O'Malley and his fellow bishops have had 16 years since the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (commonly referred to as the "Dallas charter") to come up with "clear and transparent systems of accountability and consequence for Church leaders." Although the charter was revised as recently as two months ago, its 17 articles still include no remedy for a core problem in the crisis from the start: the cover-up and mishandling by bishops of abuse by priests in their charge.

At the parish level, this is hard to take. Archdiocesan officials find time to hassle us about lay preachers not offering "homilies" but only "reflections" after the Gospel. When our Communion bread tastes a bit too sweet, we're cautioned to use only the approved recipe. We hear about it when a participant in our marriage prep program complains to the archdiocese about something we say that they regard as insufficiently orthodox.

Please. The bishops — including our own — need to get their priorities straight.

Offering their resignations would be a reasonable first step, followed by a commitment to empowering the role of women in church governance and a host of other reforms focused on what really matters. But the offer to resign would demonstrate, finally, that clinging to their "earthly status" matters less than backing up their words with action.

There's still time for them to add their signatures to the document that their failures made necessary.

* *Daily Theology is not the author of the statement; the site is hosting it.*

[Bill Mitchell is a member of the pastoral council at the Paulist Center in Boston and a former NCR board member.]