News



U.S. bishops receive Communion during Mass in the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception at Mundelein Seminary Jan. 3 at the University of St. Mary of the Lake in Illinois, near Chicago. (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Michael Sean Winters

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What will 2019 bring in the life of the church? Will Pope Francis be able to lead the way to a new era of episcopal accountability? If so, how will that cohere with other of his objectives such as increased synodality? Will the church in the United States begin to confront the degree to which some of its ministries have become a counterwitness to the Gospel and others a mere extension of the Republican Party, with all the ugliness that entails in the Age of Trump? Will the bishops even begin to know how to cope with the decline of Trump, in whatever form that takes, and prepare for the tsunami that awaits them once he is hurled from office? Will the Catholic left mature into the kind of force that can remain distinctively Catholic but also make an impact on the life of both church and state?

The clergy sex abuse mess has prompted more heat than light in the year just past, but I anticipate we will see a clear rejection of faux and foolish reform efforts and an embrace of some real ones. Nothing will come of the efforts of conservative zillionaire Tim Busch, who organized a conference on "authentic reform" of the church in which laypeople like himself, well-heeled in the wallet and a little light in theological depth, would come to the rescue and make the church in the U.S. into their own image, an image they know well from admiring it so much.

Equally barren will be some of the calls for reform from the left, such as that of former Rep. Tim Roemer whose solutions veered remarkably close to advocating lay trusteeism, which doesn't work and isn't Catholic. Fr. James Connell gets the prize for the worst single idea: He wants to take away the inviolability of the confessional. His argument rests on canonical analysis, not theology, most especially the theology of conscience which Pope Francis is so keen to revive. I can confidently predict that the pope will not let our venerable sacramental theology be tossed overboard by ideologically driven canonists.

Instead of these faux reforms, I will echo Mark Silk's prediction at RNS: I am betting Pope Francis is going to find a way to make the February meeting of the presidents of all the episcopal conferences in the world work. I predict that meeting will yield some concrete proposals for adoption, with some variation, by local episcopal conferences and that in the course of the year, some clearer methods of holding

bishops accountable at the Vatican will emerge. The February meeting may disappoint some in the U.S., even though it may advance the cause of child protection throughout the world. That may say more about the myopia of the U.S. church than it does about the pope's determination to protect children.

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A critical issue that must be dispensed with once and for all is the idea that an "independent" body could be effective at disciplining bishops. The curia has been at this for centuries and an independent body, especially one led by laypeople, would be blocked and thwarted without even knowing it. If the Council of Cardinals, the C-9, which is now the C-6, is really wrapping up the reform of the curia, why not let them serve as the standing body to handle charges of negligence against bishops? Charges of actual abuse can be tried at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, as was done in the Jozef Wesolowski case.

Most importantly, I think 2019 will be a year in which the pope doubles down on the reform efforts he has been calling for since his election. The thing about the sex abuse crisis is this: We did not learn anything in 2018 that we did not know before. It is false to assert that children are no more safe today than they were in the last decades of the 20th century, although that falsehood seemed to overwhelm the capacity of anyone, including us in the media, to draw necessary distinctions. Let the distinctions begin. What the 2018 iteration of the crisis exposed was that there is still something sick in the clerical culture, and it is most manifest in the inability to create any means of episcopal accountability. In short, there is not a sex abuse crisis so much as there is an ecclesiological crisis.

One of my favorite religious sisters exchanged emails with me over the holidays about the crisis. "The bishops need to get their act together and get an agenda that reflects the gospels. Or they will never be able to solve any problems," she wrote. "When the hierarchy turned their backs on the poor, the suffering, the marginalized, the refugees, the environment, when they turned their back on peace and capital punishment, and they chose to go for the culture wars (all connected to human sexuality) they made such a huge pastoral mistake." Her indictment continued: "Also they investigated gays in our seminaries in the United States; they investigated

nuns in the United States. The U.S. hierarchy allowed those things to happen. Classic misdirection. They didn't stand up for the nuns, they didn't stand up for gay people living good lives in the priesthood and religious life. There is some betrayal in there, some betrayal of the trust that the people of God place in them — or used to." I hope that as the bishops gathered at Mundelein this week, I hope the Spirit breaks through the "business as usual" clericalism that the crisis last year exposed. I hope they can muster some of the candor of my friend.

Another friend sent me this quote from Cardinal George Mundelein. "The trouble with [the Church] in the past has been that we were too often allied or drawn into an alliance with the wrong side," said the bishop who gave his name to the seminary where the bishops are gathered. "Selfish employers of labor have flattered the Church by calling it the great conservative force, and then called upon it to act as a police force while they paid but a pittance of wage to those who work for them. I hope that day has gone by. Our place is beside the workingman." If the bishops had, like Mundelein, stayed close to the working people of this country, they would not be in the mess they are in.

Pope Francis understands the need for this deeper kind of reform. Writing to the U.S. bishops as they began their retreat, he observed, "This requires not only a new approach to management, but also a change in our mind-set (*metanoia*), our way of praying, our handling of power and money, our exercise of authority and our way of relating to one another and to the world around us. Changes in the Church are always aimed at encouraging a constant state of missionary and pastoral conversion capable of opening up new ecclesial paths ever more in keeping with the Gospel and, as such, respectful of human dignity." He said the church needs "bishops who can teach others how to discern God's presence in the history of his people, not mere administrators."

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Part of the reform, then, and a large part, must come from breaking with the extant means of, and Vatican connections for, selecting bishops. It is not only that some bishops have ceased to know their flock, and have warmed to the high life of a few wealthy donors. Some think of themselves as princes, true, but the bigger problem is that so few of them have the courage to confront situations when a confrontation is demanded. They behave as yes men to those above and expect to be treated the same way by those below. They have *minutante* to turn the pages of their

Sacramentary and take the zucchetto off their head. Is this princely behavior? Perhaps. I see it as a kind of infantilization.

Too many were selected as bishops because they have been promoted by a powerful patron. For example, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo became a cardinal because he had Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re as his patron, as did Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò. Such patronage explains why DiNardo, whose incompetence in his dealings with Rome have been recently revealed, became a cardinal. The large number of mediocre bishops produced by the Re and Sodano networks will stalk the church for years.

The Congregation for Bishops needs to find candidates whose tenure as a pastor and/or missionary is central, not their experience as an apparatchik in the curia. A good first step was the drawing up of a new questionnaire for those who are evaluating candidates. More needs to be done. I anticipate such reform will only be partially successful in 2019 and that come next November, when the bishops gather in Baltimore, a majority will still be resisting Pope Francis and the elections of committee chairs and conference officers will reflect that resistance.

It is this avoidance of confrontation that has allowed the situation at The Catholic University of America and EWTN to get worse and worse, as both institutions continue to pursue a sectarian path. Will a new archbishop in Washington address the situation at CUA? I doubt it. Will the new bishop in Birmingham, Alabama, tackle EWTN? Perhaps. And who will take over in Philadelphia, the home base of clericalism, fortified in the past decade by the culture warrior instincts of the incumbent archbishop? It appears that the Holy See is punting on Washington, not going for a game changer, but for continuity and conciliation. (And there is something to be said for that in normal times. These are not normal times.) Of the three, I actually think Birmingham is the more important because of the reach of EWTN. How many homebound, especially elderly people are led astray by its amateurish theology and Trumpish politics?

The U.S. bishops' conference is a comedy of errors in real time. As noted above, the publication of Cardinal Marc Ouellet's letter to Cardinal DiNardo, insisting the conference not vote on its proposals to confront sex abuse, shows what a train wreck the leadership has become. Their flatfooted coping with clergy sex abuse is another. Their pitifully weak response to the Trump administration's anti-immigrant policies is a third strike. Alas, unlike baseball, DiNardo and his team are not out. Here is a fourth issue that the bishops should ponder before they elect committee

chairs and officers next November: What has the conference leadership and staff done to prepare the Catholic Church for the morrow of the Trump administration, which will likely give the Democrats the kind of complete control of the organs of government they enjoyed after Watergate in 1974. But, today's Democratic Party, unlike 1974, wants payback for being labeled the "party of death" by leading bishops. The foolhardy fight over the contraception mandate made many enemies. Does Msgr. Brian Bransfield, the general secretary of the bishops' conference, have a relationship with any prominent Democrats? Do any of the associate general secretaries? Have they reached out to religious women like Sr. Simone Campbell or Sr. Carol Keehan, people who do have such relationships, and asked for their help, or do they still treat those religious sisters badly?

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Will the Catholic Left mature into something consequential? Sadly, I doubt it. Many progressive Catholics have left already and many of those who stay seem stuck in the 1970s in their concerns and their solutions. There is great concern about human sexuality and LGBT issues but a dearth of intelligent, informed writing on the topic, very little that stands out as something only a Catholic could write. Even our concern for social justice has been tempered by upper middle-class concerns like getting our already privileged children into Harvard or Yale. Latinos are the future of the church in this country but where are their leaders? I can think of a handful of up-and-coming Latino clergy but more must be done to cultivate dozens of future Latino pastoral leaders, clergy and lay alike. There are a few stars in the academy, people like Hosffman Ospino at Boston College, but many have fallen down the rabbit hole of identity politics: They not only fail to speak for the people in the pews, they are not even speaking the same language as the people in the pews.

If all this seems pessimistic, it is. I do not see good times ahead for the church in the United States. The church in the rest of the world? Unencumbered by material wealth and centuries of bad, Jansenistic theology, I think the church in the rest of the world will flourish. Their bishops do not hate the pope. The churches in Latin America, Asia and Africa have not handed over control of their communications to right-wing groups and well-funded conservative ideologues. They have their challenges, to be sure, but their cultures remain more spiritual and less materialistic than our own. Once the church in North Africa was vibrant, but today it is no more.

"The wind blows where it wishes," we read in John 3:8. "And you hear its sound but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." Then again, I could be entirely wrong and the church in the U.S. could be about to blossom in ways impossible to foretell. After all, things were really grim for Holy Mother Church in the Middle Ages until, one day, Francis kissed a leper.

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

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