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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. The bishops were on retreat to work to rebuild trust among the faithful as questions continued to revolve around their handling of clergy sex abuse. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)



by Sr. Christine Schenk

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Pope Francis's recent acknowledgment that bishops and priests have raped and sexually abused Catholic sisters ignited yet another media firestorm about the egregious lack of clerical accountability in the Catholic Church.

Kudos to long time Rome Associated Press reporter Nicole Winfield for raising the issue with the Pontiff on his flight back from the United Arab Emirates. In a 23 minute New York Times podcast, veteran religion reporter Laurie Goodstein cited NCR's 2001 investigative exposé by John Allen and Pam Schaeffer that first broke this story. Their courageous reporting was also cited by Winfield last July. I gave an interview to National Public Radio on February 7.

Kudos and thanks to NCR for factually grounding a story of sister abuse that would otherwise seem unbelievable to faithful Catholics. Unbelievable that is, until 2001, when the clergy sexual abuse of children hit the headline s— a story NCR also broke in 1985 based on reports by investigative journalist Jason Berry.

How long O Lord? How long must we wait for both clergy and laity to recognize that incremental change will not work?

We need wide-ranging structural reform. We need checks and balances rather than the feudal governance we have now in which each bishop is the undisputed master of his diocesan fief.

Catholic patience is (finally) running out. And many Catholics are working to find solutions rather than enable the present moribund clerical system.

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Here is a sampling of the creative activity of various groups and individuals in advance of the Feb. 21-24 Vatican summit of 100 heads of the world's bishops'

conferences to discuss the sex abuse crisis.

- Kudos to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious forrecommending the creation of compassionate mechanisms for reporting abuse and a refashioning of "the leadership structures of the church to address the issue of clericalism and ensure that power and authority are shared with members of the laity."
- The Leadership Roundtable's Catholic Partnership Summit of 200 church leaders from 43 dioceses met in small groups for two days to hammer out a list of summit recommendations addressing the "twin crisis of abuse and a crisis of leadership failures." This high-powered yet pragmatic group included three cardinals, twelve bishops, abuse survivors, assorted theologians, canon lawyers, and various experts from across the U.S., papal nuncio Archbishop Christophe Pierre, and Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, the head of the office of child protection at the Vatican.
- A Feb. 6 academic conference at Catholic University of America contextualized the accountability crisis in light of other crises of authority throughout church history. Benedictine theologian Sister Nancy Bauer, suggested canon law could be a "powerhouse" of lay rights insofar as canon 215 provides the right of association and canon 212 stipulates that Catholics have both a right and a responsibility to voice their opinions on "matters pertaining to the good of the church."
- Marie Collins, a prominent survivor and former member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, submitted seven recommendations to organizers of the February gathering. Among other things, she demanded clear definitions of sexual abuse of a minor and of "zero tolerance" as well as a review of church law about abuse of vulnerable adults, taking care to keep that separate from the abuse of minors.
- An array of Catholic reform organizations have launched a Time's Up initiative calling on ordinary Catholics to organize a peaceful witness during the Feb. 21-24 gathering and to wear a blue armband to the Feb. 23 vigil Mass in their parish. The armband symbolizes the need to include survivors, lay people, women theologians and groups working for survivor justice in all church conversations about reform.

One realistic outcome of the summit is to convince every national bishops' conference of the absolute necessity of adopting a zero tolerance policy. Father Thomas Reese cautions that while the conference may be helpful for bishops in the

global South, those expecting accountability structures to remove bad bishops will be disappointed.

While bishop leaders will hear from survivors at the Vatican summit, the gathering suffers from its unrelieved homogeneity. No lay person, survivor or woman will have decision-making voice.

Once again, we are asked to believe that the clerical system is capable of governing itself. For most Catholics, that ship has sailed.

The present clerical governance was not built in a day and a renewed church governance will not be built in a day either. But we must begin.

Reform starts with ordinary Catholics. We are the ones, after all, who financially support the present failed system. We are complicit in the sins of that system if we are not involved in creating inclusive structures of accountability.

On a practical level, this could mean educating ourselves, through innovative podcasts such as FutureChurch's "Power to the People: From Clericalism to Collaboration." It may also mean serving on parish councils, finance committees, and diocesan pastoral councils with the expectation of having decision-making (not just advisory) voice. It could mean joining and becoming active in a local or national church reform/renewal organization.

I am impressed with the initiative demonstrated by the Leadership Roundtable's Partnership Summit. I am encouraged by the openness of Cardinals Cupich, Tobin and O'Malley who attended the summit and know lay leadership is indispensable to building credible governance structures for the church of the future.

If we are to build a church in which all the people of God decide about issues affecting all the people of God, we must move forward together.

There is no turning back.

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.]

Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Christine Schenk's column, Simply Spirit, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions:* *Email alert sign-up*.

This story appears in the **Vatican Abuse Summit** feature series. View the full series.