News
Opinion
Editorial

by NCR Editorial Staff

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

February 20, 2019
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Reasons immediate and remote have merged to force a first meeting of its kind — the gathering in Rome in February of the heads of bishops' conferences around the world to discuss the global clergy sex abuse scandal.

John Carr, who directs the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University and who has spent most of his life working for bishops, had an apt characterization of the Feb. 21-24 event: It should have happened a long time ago, and it's a miracle it's happening.

Indeed, the scandal has been around a long time and, in hindsight, perhaps a progression can be detected as hierarchy and people moved through stages of denial to realization and accountability.

It has become clear during the past half-year that two occurrences caused the scandal to take hold of people's imagination in an entirely new way. The first was the revelation that the highly regarded former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick had acted inappropriately with seminarians and was credibly accused of sexually abusing a child. The second was graphic accounts of abuse in the Pennsylvania grand jury report, including details of episcopal cover-up.

These were old incidents newly revealed, but they served to finally raise awareness that this was not a problem isolated in a dark corner of the church or the problem of "a few bad apples," or even the result of misunderstanding and mistakes.

It was instead, and remains, a systemic malady with its roots deep in a clerical culture that valued secrecy, privilege and power over the welfare of child victims and their families.

Something has definitely changed since last summer. Theologian and lawyer Cathleen Kaveny of Boston College, during a panel discussion last November, said, "I think that this iteration of the crisis has marked a turning point in how Catholics, especially American Catholics, are perceiving the church. … Many people now are not seeing the sex abuse crisis as an aberration within the system, but they're seeing it as something that runs throughout the system. That it is enabled by the system."

The disturbing question that follows, she said, is: "What would have to be true of the church and its culture for sex abuse like this not to be an aberration but to be something that's running through it?"

She went even deeper, saying we need "theological language" in discussing the scandal and a way "of reimagining our common life."

Advertisement

Such steps are for farther down the road. For the moment, it will be enough that the global church square up with the truth.

No four-day meeting in Rome could deal adequately with decades of crime and cover-up, much yet to be revealed in parts of the globe.

Some concrete measures must be taken, however, if the church is to find the path to healing and credibility and if trust between hierarchy and the rest of the community is ever to be restored. Those measures must include a firm, clear, global definition of zero tolerance and what happens when a member of the clergy is accused. Leaders must define clearly, for the worldwide church, what happens should an accusation be found credible. They must also include a new mechanism that is continually examining bishops worldwide and then holding them accountable when they do not handle an accusation appropriately.

The U.S. delegation takes a lot of hard-earned experience to the Rome conference. They should also carry another of Carr's messages that would be affirmed by a lot of Catholics: "The patience of the people of God is exhausted with the episcopal and

clerical culture that puts itself first."

A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 22-March 7, 2019** print issue under the headline: Systemic malady has deep roots in clerical culture.