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The interior of St. Joseph Cathedral in the Diocese of Buffalo, New York (Wikimedia Commons/Jfvoll)

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An immigrant is sexually assaulted by a work supervisor. He goes to a higher authority to complain, but is told to shut up or he can expect to be deported.

A tale from a sleazy slaughterhouse? The underbelly of existence for undocumented restaurant workers in any big American city?

No, it happened in the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo, New York, if Fr. Ryszard Biernat's story is to be believed.

Considering the cascade of tales that are bewildering and disgusting Catholics from the Niagara Falls region, Biernat's story retains at least some credibility, considering the woeful succession of reports of coverups, including incomplete lists of clerical wrongdoers issued by Bishop Richard Malone.

In the ugliness coming out of Buffalo, Biernat's story calls for a special dose of outrage, unless Catholics have become so numb that this will be just another story in an ugly catalogue.

"If you don't stop talking about this, you will not become a priest," Biernat said he was told by Buffalo Auxiliary Bishop Edward Grosz in 2004, after he told the bishop he was assaulted by Fr. Arthur Smith in a parish rectory. The quote is from the Buffalo News, part of a local media that has been all over this story. Grosz has denied any blackmail threat. Biernat said the threat of forbidding ordination was also a threat to deport him.

Questions remain: Much of the anger has focused on Malone, but Biernat's account points to a deeper rot in the diocese that precedes Malone, the current bishop who was appointed to Buffalo in 2012.

Church law mandates that such blatant corruption should be investigated by the metropolitan of the region, in this case Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York. At their last national meeting, bishops agreed that that they should be the ones ultimately placed in charge of disciplining their fellow church leaders who go astray.

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We lack confidence in the model. First, the right questions need to be asked. Can they be asked by investigators beholden to church authority (that would include priests and lay employees)? Is Biernat's charge evidence of a criminal matter? Is there something corrupt in the current system of bringing seminarians from overseas, spiking enrollment numbers for institutions in desperate need of students? Is Buffalo part of a wider pattern, or is there something peculiar about it that brings forth this sordid tale?

Questions need to be raised about the circumstances of seminarians from overseas. The Buffalo case suggests the worst — vulnerable new arrivals subjected to threats and intimidation. But it also raises concerns about numbers: How many are there? Where do they come from? Why are they planning to minister here instead of in their home countries? Do they expect to be incardinated into a diocese or are their stays temporary? What do bishops in their home countries have to say?

Biernat's case argues that at least some bishops have abdicated their authority by looking the other way and engaging in aggressive coverups. This Buffalo case cries out for an independent authority to investigate alleged crimes of sexual assault against adults, particularly the vulnerable. Seminarians, so dependent upon the good will of their bishop leaders, are particularly endangered by clerical corruption, even more so if their very existence in the country is dependent on maintaining their vocation status.

Biernat, who served as priest secretary to Malone, said he felt finally free to talk about his ordeal after becoming a U.S. citizen in July. "I feel so liberated. Now I can speak," he told the Buffalo News. American Catholics are not so encumbered. May their outrage be heard, as we watch if the processes the bishops have embraced are up to the realities of dealing with this continuing crisis.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 20-Oct 3, 2019** print issue under the headline: Bishop's alleged blackmailing of immigrant deserves outrage.