Opinion
Guest Voices



A cross outside the U.S. bishops' Office of Child and Youth Protection is covered with photos and prayers for the victims of clergy sexual abuse in a 2011 file photo. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)



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If we are going to have a prayer of curbing sexual abuse crimes and cover-up in the Catholic Church, the next pope should be an American.

This might sound not just provincial but preposterous. Conventional wisdom holds that a U.S. cardinal will never be elected pope. That likely is truer than ever now, given the upcoming conclave's large number of cardinal electors from the Global South.

And even if it were possible, who among the U.S. cardinals would be worthy? None of them stands out as a remarkable protector of children or healer of victims. Cover-up still happens here.

But here's the stunning reality: Thanks largely to the United States' unique civil justice system and robust free press, bishops here have been forced to adopt more prudent policies on abuse than bishops in any other country have.

U.S. bishops have become accustomed to two practices in particular that the next pope must make universal in order to protect children.

First, zero tolerance.

The U.S. Catholic Church has the strongest policies requiring the permanent removal of priests proven guilty of child sex abuse. Incredibly, universal Catholic Church law still lets bishops reinstate proven and admitted child molesters to parish posts and other ministries.

Let that fact sink in. A staggering number of children worldwide, easily tens of millions, attend Catholic parishes, schools, camps and day care centers or reside in Catholic orphanages. *And yet under universal church law, it is still okay under certain conditions for child molesters to resume or stay in priestly ministry.*

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Second, public disclosure.

In the U.S. church, it is now the norm to publish the names of credibly accused clergy. Four-fifths of the 178 U.S. bishops post such lists. None provide sufficient detail, and all are incomplete — and yet we've seen nothing close to this level of disclosure by bishops anywhere else in the world.

Notifying the public of abusers' names is crucial. It enables a community to protect its children, it validates victims, and it makes bishops accountable to their flocks.

Pope Francis refused to change church law to enact either permanent removal of abusers or public release of their names. In fact, although he often proclaimed "zero tolerance," he advocated behind the scenes for what he called "proportional" penalties for sex offenders. The results have been devastating. In every country BishopAccountability has researched (the most recent being the Philippines), we find multiple proven or likely child molesters still in ministry.

The late pope's resistance to real reform should not have surprised us. Back in 2013, when he was elected, taking either of these steps would have required a huge cultural shift for any pope from outside the U.S.

Related: Francis' clergy abuse law, 'Vos Estis,' isn't working. Here's how to fix it.

Sadly, from what our research tells us, this remains the case in 2025. For the papal contenders from outside the U.S., the notions of permanently removing all sex offenders and publicly releasing their names are certainly foreign and likely unthinkable.

Take, for instance, the two cardinals who top just about every serious list of papabile: Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle and Cardinal Pietro Parolin.

Tagle, the most influential bishop from the Philippines, occupies a powerful Vatican post (or rather, he did occupy — his tenure ended with Francis' death). As pro-prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization, the former Manila archbishop oversaw more than 1,000 dioceses and other entities in Africa, Asia and South America — nearly the entire developing world.



Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle (CNS/Paul Haring)

Gentle and friendly in demeanor, Tagle has wept publicly about the plight of clergy sex abuse victims. Yet it seems he's done nothing to fix the wretched state of child protection in the Philippine church.

Moreover, Tagle has stated publicly that he believes in neither public disclosure of crimes nor permanent removal of known abusers. In a 2012 interview with UCA News, Tagle explained that the "Asian approach" to clergy sex abuse is pastoral, and therefore opposed to "exposure" of abusers through media or legal action. "I think for us ... exposing persons, both victims and abusers, to the public, either through

media or legal action, that adds to the pain," he said.

Italian cardinal Pietro Parolin, considered a front-runner in the papal election by many, has opposed the release of information about abusers more concretely.

As the Vatican's secretary of state from 2013 until the death of Francis, he has fielded requests from civil governments for information about predatory priests. In 2018 and 2019, Chilean prosecutors asked repeatedly to see the 2,300-page abuse report on the Chilean church compiled by the pope's investigators; in 2021, Poland's state Commission on Pedophilia requested files on abusive priests in that country; in 2024, the attorney general of Bolivia sought the Vatican's files on abusive Bolivian clergy. Parolin refused all of them.

Would Parolin have the stomach to oust sex offenders from priestly ministry? His relationship with then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick raises that question. During Parolin's tenure as secretary of state, McCarrick traveled to China repeatedly to negotiate with the Chinese government on behalf of the Holy See. He kept Vatican officials, especially Parolin, informed of his activities and contacts. Parolin had to have known of the allegations against McCarrick, as well as the informal restrictions put on him by the Congregation for Bishops. Yet he allowed McCarrick's China-related projects to continue.



Cardinal Pietro Parolin, left, and then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, right, arrive for Pope Francis' celebration of Mass in Revolution Square in Havana Sept. 20, 2015. (CNS/Paul Haring)

If these top papal contenders should be disqualified based on their poor response to abuse allegations, with whom does that leave us? I claim that an American pope would do better, but the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests just published complaints about the American prelates considered as possible candidates.

There is, however, one U.S. cardinal who is appearing on nobody's papabile list this time around, perhaps because of his age. He's 80 — too old to vote in the conclave but, under canon law, not too old to be pope.

He'd be the least bad of many bad options. For the last 12 years, he has focused on the needs of clergy sex abuse victims around the world. He hasn't been heroic, and he's a secret-keeper in his own right, but he has one big advantage over all other cardinals: He would face no learning curve. He's been forced to get educated about

the status of abuse prevention and cover-up on every continent.

Cardinal Sean O'Malley for pope, anyone?

This story appears in the **Who will be the next pope?** feature series. View the full series.