



Bishops from around the United States gather at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore Nov. 10, 2025, for the opening Mass of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' fall plenary assembly. (OSV News/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)

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Bankruptcy courts and mediated agreements are venues of cold calculation designed to bring a measure of justice in the form of financial settlements, a term seductively suggestive of conclusion. When employed as a tactic in the Catholic Church's ongoing sexual abuse scandal, however, it is clear that such settlements leave the faithful with far more questions than answers.

The legal processes accomplish what they are designed to do, exact a bit of retribution on behalf of victims. They do not, however, restore or transform survivors. They don't erase haunting, debilitating memories. And they do little to address the most searing questions for which the faithful still await an answer: How did this happen? How could the chief shepherds allow the most vulnerable in the flock to be preyed upon?

As Charles Nadeau, a court-appointed representative of survivors, [explained](#): "Bankruptcy is not inherently unjust. It exists to ensure some measure of fairness when resources are limited. But when applied to clergy sexual abuse, it risks becoming something else — a substitute for moral accountability."

The San Francisco Archdiocese, faced with [a \\$359 million settlement](#) to hundreds of victims of sexual abuse by clergy, explained that its distribution of financial pain among its parishes was essential to "enabling our local church to emerge from bankruptcy and move beyond this difficult chapter in our history."

The wish to "move beyond this difficult chapter," entirely dependent on heavily taxing those who had nothing to do with creating the problem, is a telling sentiment.

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It is thoroughly human to wish to leave an ugly past behind, to want to find the door that we can close behind us. But that isn't possible, nor should it be our wish. Such a rationale resides within the domains of secular negotiation and jurisprudence. It is not the language of a mature spirituality that realizes the path of faith is never a desperate flight seeking to leave a difficult moment behind. Rather, faith's guidance leads us to the hard work of transforming such moments.

Months before the San Francisco announcement, the Diocese of Albany, New York, reached [a \\$148 million settlement](#) with some 440 victims. The response there was quite different from most we've seen. Bishop Mark O'Connell, who said his life was

changed because of his long involvement dealing with abuse victims, was forceful when asked if the payout would allow the diocese "to move past this."

"Excuse me for being strong in this answer, absolutely not. We are not moving past this. This will be part of my time in Albany as long as I'm here," he said. "And speaking from my heart, we're not moving past, we are meeting what was asked for in a humble way with an apology and doing what we can, but what we're doing can't be enough. ... I feel strongly that this is not in the past."

O'Connell said he had spent 25 years dealing with the issue, including "in the eye of the storm in Boston" and as a chief judge and prosecutor on the archdiocesan tribunal.

"I have been in every part of this. It has changed my life, it has changed my perspective and every part of me is sorry that our church collectively did this to these poor people who were hurt deeply. Every part of me is sorry."

It is rare to hear such raw compassion born of experience from a U.S. bishop, but even O'Connell's passionate response misses the larger point. For it wasn't "the church collectively" that did this. It was the clerical/hierarchical culture. That culture has yet to collectively square up with the reality that the abuse crisis in the church was a betrayal of the community at a sacramental level. It is a level of betrayal that can't occur in any other circumstance.

**[Related: 'With all my heart I want to say how sorry we are,' says Albany bishop as abuse settlement reached](#)**

In a June 2002 [statement](#) at the meeting that resulted in the initial version of the [Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People](#), then-Bishop Wilton Gregory, who was president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and speaking on its behalf, set out what should have been the central guideline for a hierarchical culture that had been complicit in the destruction of thousands of young lives.

"What we need is a reconciliation that heals ... one that begins with the love of the truth that is Jesus Christ, one that embraces fully and honestly the authentic elements of the sacrament of penance as we celebrated in the Catholic tradition."

"The penance that is necessary here," he continued, "is not the obligation of the church at large in the United States, but the responsibility of the bishops ourselves."

That plea never seemed to have been fully embraced by bishops.

The richness of our tradition, represented in our sacramental life, unlocks the door not to a "getting beyond" moment, but to transformation. The latter requires a degree of truthfulness and specificity that can be painful and requires genuine humility. Our bishops have done everything but move to that level of accountability.

Pope Francis recognized the stakes involved when he sent the preacher for the papal household to [conduct a retreat](#) for the U.S. bishops in 2019. "The Church's credibility has been seriously undercut and diminished by these sins and crimes, but even more by the efforts made to deny or conceal them," Francis [wrote](#) in a letter to the bishops.

Francis acknowledged that "the sins and crimes that were committed, and their repercussions on the ecclesial, social and cultural levels, have deeply affected the faithful."

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While many of the bishops left the retreat feeling renewed, the sessions did not produce at the conference level the big-picture changes that Francis outlined in his letter: "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."

The cold reality is that the laity are left to foot the bill, financially and otherwise, for the depraved behavior of their bishops. They are left with struggling parishes, diminished resources for ministry, and the church's loss of credibility in the wider culture.

We know now that the coverup was not the work of an isolated bishop; it was not the province of liberals or conservatives. It was the result of a hierarchical culture that had developed in a way that allowed its members to think they were above reproach or accountability for even the most egregious behavior.

Today's leaders are the inheritors of the legacy of such figures as Cardinals [Anthony Bevilacqua](#) of Philadelphia, [Bernard Law](#) of Boston, [Roger Mahony](#) of Los Angeles, Archbishop [Rembert Weakland](#) of Milwaukee and Bishop [Charles Grahmann](#) of

Dallas. They are but a few of the more notorious figures whose use of money, power and privilege in the earliest days of the scandal exemplified the diseased culture. Their excuses, rationales and elaborate strategies intended to protect the church's treasury and reputation withered quickly when subjected to the light of truth.

Is there anything more defiant of the Christian Gospel than priests and bishops complicit in the destruction of children?

The church deserves to hear a full confession. It needs to hear details of how our leaders intend to transform the clerical/hierarchical culture. The bishops need to turn one of their national gatherings into a deep exploration of those questions. They need a full-on, uncompromising, unadorned examination of the sinful and criminal activity of their predecessors, of the culture they've inherited that allowed such sin and crime to fester for so long.

We will continue to hear expressions of sorrow and learn of monumental payouts, as well as refinements of institutional procedures. What remains undone is the sacramental work. The bishops can't assign that to anyone else.