

New archbishops and the abuse crisis

Tom Roberts | Jul. 2, 2009 NCR Today

Colleague John Allen, who covered the recent pallium ceremony in Rome, has given us a good look at some new leaders in the U.S. episcopacy with his interviews of Archbishop George Lucas, who will be installed in Omaha July 22, and Archbishop Gregory Aymond, who will be installed as the head of the church in New Orleans Aug. 20.

Both men seem, at first reading, to be more moderate and less the ideological campaigner than many of those appointed, especially during his final years, by the late John Paul II. And they seem to have an ease ? perhaps the product of unfortunate familiarity ? in speaking about the sex abuse crisis and what is required of this new generation of church leaders in the United States.

By now it is clear that people at their level have the talking points in order about the charter, about the unfortunate circumstances of the accused, about those who suffer the injustice of false accusations, about victims, about assuring diligence. By now, of course, all Catholic leaders should have those talking points in place, and that is not to suggest that deep personal convictions do not undergird those points.

But I am left wondering ? at the risk of sounding the common scold ?if any of them really understand the depth of damage done to the Catholic community. I am left wondering if we will ever hear a bishop in this country use the language of our sacramental reality, which would require (if we are to believe the teaching about forgiveness and reconciliation) a far deeper accountability to the community. They might look to Ireland and what is happening there.

When asked about the disclosure of documents, Archbishop Aymond expressed reticence:

?'I have some real concerns about that,' he said. 'I guess it depends upon what documents. If it's the psychologicals, there are obvious confidentiality issues. There are dioceses that have released all the names of everyone who ever had an accusation, but I would not go that route ? I think we have to be more discerning. To just release all the names in all the files can create some serious problems.'

The unfortunate presumption in that answer is that releasing documents or giving a fuller accounting would require divulging psychological profiles or all the names of anyone ever accused. But we have been suggesting for years that bishops, in a process overseen by professionals from the community who can be trusted to be discreet, oversee a narrative project that would give Catholics in their dioceses, an unvarnished look at what happened. In each case an independent commission, perhaps consisting of legal and church experts from that diocese, could comb the personnel files and financials to put together a narrative of what happened. How many priests were involved? How many victims? What kind of correspondence went on about those cases? Which bishops took money from diocesan sources to deal with legal fees and victim payouts without notifying the church? How much? When? For what purpose?

At that point, the bishop could ask forgiveness for what was done in the name of the church. And my bet is, finally having the truth, Catholics would forgive quickly and in great measure.

The John Jay College studies have value, certainly, but I am continually skeptical of them because they are

based on what bishops in place are willing to divulge. And in those cases where documents have been obtained in legal proceedings and made available publicly, invariably the numbers of priests, victims, amount of the payoff and dimensions of the scandal have been far greater than the data previously volunteered. It's understandable. Bishops are human and if they can get away with preserving their legacies by hiding what's been done, they will.

It is important to keep in mind that in the United States, while much is known and has been divulged, we really don't know the entire story.

And certainly Archbishop Lucas knows that in his metropolitan area there's a bishop who provides a great example of how unenforceable the charter can be. Fabian Bruskewitz has made a mockery of the process by refusing to comply with any elements of the charter.

I suspect Archbishop Lucas will avoid joining any dispute with the Lincoln bishop. There are far more important issues at hand and Bruskewitz, who turns 74, is quickly heading toward mandatory retirement age of 75. But he puts us all on notice that if a single bishop can entirely ignore the charter without consequence, the whole process is open to suspicion.

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