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The Irish bishops: more of the same double standard

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NCR Today

At the risk of sounding ungrateful for the effort the Vatican and certain Irish bishops have already expended to deal with the clergy sex abuse crisis in the most forthright manner we've yet seen, the report of the meeting between the pope and the bishops was profoundly disappointing.

Some might consider that unjustifiably harsh, since the meeting was held behind closed doors and so it is impossible to know all of the details from a distance. However, church leaders were the ones who decided to hold the meeting in secret, so we are left to decipher the content from press dispatches and characterizations of the meeting, and we can only presume that all the public statements were hammered out and agreed upon by all parties present.

What results are statements that seem, given the magnitude of the offense, more self-serving than illuminating.

One, in particular, jumped out at me from the final statement about the meeting released via Vatican radio: "While there is no doubt that errors of judgement and omissions stand at the heart of the crisis, significant measures have now been taken to ensure the safety of children and young people."

"Errors of judgment?" "Omissions?"

That is a form of episcopal speak, honed to perfection by the U.S. hierarchy, that accomplishes a sort of daily minimal requirement. It acknowledges a general problem in the community but adds no specificity to how it was caused, who was culpable for the coverup (the element that really angers Catholics) and how those persons should be held accountable.

If the hierarchy were so wildly understated and measured when it comes to what they perceive as the

transgressions of the non-ordained, it would be a far more pleasant and gracious community.

Whether the overwhelmingly Catholic population of Ireland will allow that kind of assessment to stand as a summary remains to be seen. I doubt it.

It is almost impossible to imagine, now witnessing this scandal over a period of a quarter of a century in a variety of countries and cultures, how the hierarchy can continue to evade the central question that is on the minds of almost everyone else outside the hierarchical culture: How did it happen? Not the abuse of children, that occurs everywhere, but how did it come to pass that bishops hid the problem, lied about it, callously passed on priests to other locations, failed to inform legal authorities about serious crimes and now reduce it all to "errors of judgment" and "omissions."

No bishop I know would stand in a pulpit and instruct a congregation to handle their misdeeds in that manner. The only conclusion one can arrive at is that bishops simply expect us to accept a stunning double standard.

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