

The Philadelphia Indictments

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 11, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Will it never end? The announcement that a Philadelphia grand jury has returned indictments against three priests and a lay man for raping two juveniles, as well as against Monsignor William Lynn, who served as the archdiocese's Secretary for Clergy, makes one think that we are a long way away from seeing the story of clergy sex abuse in the rear view mirror. How much longer will bishops look like so many tobacco company executives: The men from RJ Reynolds et al., denied that there was any link between their product and cancer. The U.S. bishops assert that ever since the 2002 Dallas norms were established, no one has any cause for concern. Alas, this Philadelphia story points to the need for increased accountability and transparency on the part of bishops.

True, the alleged rapes happened in the late 1990s, before the Dallas norms took hold, and those named as perpetrators of the rapes have all been laicized or removed from ministry. Improvements in securing child safety have been made and new cases of clergy sex abuse have dropped precipitously. But, what the Church leaders have not done is come to a simple recognition: Unless they ferret out all previous wrong-doing, as well as permit some kind of oversight of their on-going efforts, civil authorities will do it for them. It is clear from the grand jury indictment, that the principal reason Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua was not also named in the indictment was due to his age and infirmity and the fact that it was not clear he knew all that Msgr. Lynn knew about the incidents. But, why did he not know all that his Secretary knew? How much did he know? This is beginning to resemble Watergate and the questions for prelates are the same: What did he know and when did he know it? If the bishops themselves do not furnish the answers to these questions, they will be asked about them in further grand jury proceedings in other cities.

The Watergate analogy works for a different reason as well. Watergate, you will recall, started as a burglary. The clergy sex abuse crisis started with incidents of child rape and molestation like those detailed in the indictment. (And the report makes for horrific reading in this regard.) But, the crisis is no longer about the actual rapes. It is now about the cover-up. It is now about the culture of clericalism that excused these acts, and has continued to excuse those in authority who looked the other way.

The crisis is also about something else. It is about the fact that these horrific tales show what happens when the entire Church connives to avoid the fact that the Church's teachings on sexuality no longer persuade. Parishioners and many priests do not believe that their eternal souls are threatened by the responsible use of contraception. Parishioners and many priests do not believe that same-sex civil marriages are a threat to the Christian sacrament of marriage. But, giving voice to such misgivings is not the way to advance up the hierarchic ladder so these misgivings are never raised. The culture is not only a culture of clericalism but a culture of lies and evasions. That is a culture in which horrific acts are met not with horror but with obfuscation and avoidance. That is the scandal.

In selecting candidates for the episcopate, Rome looked for evidence of the candidate's adherence to the Church's teachings on sexuality. They should be looking for someone who raises thoughtful questions about those teachings. They should be looking for candidates who will admit that we have a problem with more than

ninety percent of the flock does not agree with some of those teachings. Even those who agree with every line of *Humanae Vitae* must acknowledge that we have a problem of credibility that must be faced, head on, and that the failure to do so invites the kinds of winks and nods that corrupt an organization from within. There is a difference between winking and nodding and demonstrating sympathy with the sinfulness of our human condition. Our Church has been winking and nodding for four decades. Should we be surprised that a chancery official like Msgr. Lynn allegedly winked and nodded too?

When the scandal broke in 2002, [I wrote these words](#) [1]: "The Church's lack of credibility on questions of sexual ethics is especially disheartening because the Church has a lot to say to a culture in which sexuality is dehumanized, commodified, and generally seen as less than the beautiful thing the Catholic Church's best theology insists it is. It is more than a little ironic that a culture awash in images of underage sexuality--the same culture that gave Oscars to *American Beauty* and where Britney Spears albums go multi-platinum--is now struck with horror at the revelation of priestly molestation. The irony, however, is grim. When the Church is most needed to remind our culture that sexuality can and should be humanizing, a giving of self in freedom and love, a participation in God's ongoing creative work, the Church instead finds itself in court." I would not change a word.

The lesson from Philadelphia is as clear as day: Every bishop in America must do what the grand jury did, investigate the facts and remove those who not only perpetrated the crimes of sexual abuse, which I suspect has been largely done, but also remove those who perpetrated the crime of endangering children by covering that abuse up. They must invite outside scrutiny of the record. If they themselves were a party to any cover-ups, they must resign. The time for prevarications and obfuscations is over. And, at their forthcoming *ad limina* visits in Rome, the bishops must have the courage to raise the crisis of belief over the Church's sexual teachings with the Vatican. This crisis will not go away.

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[1] <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Catholic/2002/05/The-Betrayal-How-To-Save-The-Church.aspx?p=1>