

Cardinal Rigali Must Go

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 17, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

One of the central themes of the Pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI has been the Holy Father's repeated invitation to the secular West, not only that it recall the place of God in human life and in the development of the culture of the West, but that in so doing, our culture turn away from the skepticism about human reason that has infected Western thought, that we, as a culture, rededicate ourselves to the idea that Truth — with a capital T — is accessible and not merely the sum total of subjective whims, but true at all times and in all places.

Except, evidently, in Philadelphia. There, Cardinal Justin Rigali has announced the archdiocese is "re-examining" charges of sexual abuse against as many as 37 of its priests. I am dumb. The Dallas norms, in place for the United States church since 2002, set a low bar for investigations: if there is a "credible" allegation against a cleric, then that cleric will be removed from ministry until the allegations are proven to be true or false. If the charges against these 37 have been investigated and found to be unfounded, and surely there are instances of false allegations, then let us see the results and announce that these priests have been vindicated. If the charges were found to be true, and these priests were not removed, the Dallas norms have been violated.

Here is what cardinal Rigali wrote in a [short, three sentence, letter](#) [1] to the faithful of the archdiocese: "The report states that there remain in ministry archdiocesan priests who have credible allegations of abuse against them. I assure all the faithful that there are no archdiocesan priests in ministry today who have an admitted or established allegation of sexual abuse of a minor against them." Now, I am no lawyer, but I can spot lawlerly distinctions. In the first sentence, the operative word is "credible." In the second, the operative words are "admitted or established." But, if an investigation against someone charged with a crime has proven that the charge is "unadmitted or unestablished" we have a word for that too: exonerated. But, Cardinal Rigali is not saying that these clerics have been exonerated. He is re-opening the investigations.

The entire American episcopate has staked its reputation on adherence to the Dallas norms. They have said, in effect, yes, we messed up horribly. We were confronted with horrific allegations and we did not respond with horror. But, we have learned our lesson. We have learned that clergy sex abuse is a thing so revolting to common standards of decency, to say nothing of the Master's warning not to harm the young, that all credible allegations require immediate examination and investigation and, if true, that priest will never, ever be returned to active ministry. They have said that they "get it," that they understand that this issue is so large, and so repulsive, that the credibility of the Church itself hangs in the balance, that all of the Church's good works, our care for the poor and the vulnerable, our attention to the educational needs of the young and the medical needs of the elderly, indeed the veracity of our claims to act in the name of the Good Shepherd, all of this counts for nothing if we look the other way when one of our priests molests a child. That has been the stance of the bishops since Dallas. That stance has been gravely compromised by the revelations from Philadelphia.

On an issue this important, you do not get two bites at the apple. Who can ever trust anything Cardinal Rigali now says? How can he, in good conscience, mount the pulpit of his cathedral and proclaim the Good News when the newspapers are documenting the Bad News, the devastating news, that all the promises made at Dallas were lies? One case that slipped through the cracks would be one too many, of course, but we all make

mistakes. Thirty-seven cases? That is a systemic problem. And the name of that systemic problem is clericalism.

Just last Sunday, in the Gospel, we heard, "If your right eye offends you, cut it out." Cardinal Rigali should resign. He should resign today. In disgrace. He should resign from all of his Vatican appointments: He sits on the Congregation for Bishops, after all, and who would want someone so morally compromised having anything to do with the selection of future bishops? Nothing he can say now can restore his credibility. Nothing he can do will restore the confidence of the people of God in his governance. And, the Holy See must figure out, perhaps with an apostolic visitation, how it is going to root out of the culture of clericalism that is stronger in Philadelphia than anywhere else in America the rank and stinking sin of covering up clergy sex abuse.

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[1] <http://archphila.org/grandjury2011/CardinalUpdateStatementNS.pdf>