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The crisis of episcopal governance in Philadelphia

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Distinctly Catholic

It has been almost ten years since the clergy sex abuse scandal blew up in Boston in 2002. *NCR* readers, of course, had earlier been made aware of the issue but no one in the national media or in the country's chanceries paid much attention before 2002.

That was when the revelations in Boston were so gruesome, with clear evidence that priests who had raped dozens of children were passed from parish to parish, always with the intent of keeping their horrific activities under wraps, that there was no possibility of containing the scandal.

The press and the people of God both demanded an accounting.

Cardinal Law was forced to resign, giving those clamoring for change a pound of hierarchic flesh, but the truth be told, Law did not do anything that other bishops and cardinals had not also done.

The centerpiece of the bishops' response to the scandal was the adoption of the Dallas norms for the protection of children. The bishops of the United States essentially said to the Catholics of America: We recognize that we have a real problem.

Horrific attacks on children were called to our attention and we did not react with horror, we reacted with a defensive, self-protecting, overly legalistic response. Instead of caring for the child-victims, we cared more about the priest-predators, and more than either, we cared most about the Church's and our own reputation. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*

But the Dallas norms also did something else. They promised a change. Like the prodigal son, the bishops turned around from their former ways at Dallas. They adopted standards of reporting, guidelines for

investigating, and independent review boards to look at the ways every diocese in America handled allegations of clergy sex abuse.

It was not only that they had repented, but they promised that the new measures would make any further cover-ups impossible. They got it, and even if they didn't get it, the norms were in place to force them to confront this horrific sin and stain upon the life of the Church.

After Dallas, we had the most solemn pledge from our bishops that no priest against whom charges had been made would be in active ministry unless an investigation proved those charges to be groundless.

The announcement yesterday that 21 priests in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia were being placed on administrative leave demonstrates conclusively that the Dallas norms have failed. (Another five were either already retired or had left the archdiocese.)

Last Sunday, those 21 priests presided at Mass in their parishes. Last Sunday, those 21 priests were in active ministry. The charges against them had been examined before and...what? They were either wrongly exonerated or diocesan officials decided to look the other way.

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And this is no ordinary diocese. It is led by a cardinal, indeed, by one of the most powerful cardinals in America given his active responsibilities as a member of the Congregation for Bishops. Over the past few years, the fastest way to become a bishop was to be a successful monsignor in Philadelphia.

But we now know the man at the helm was not only derelict in his duties, he completely misunderstood the nature and import of the promises made to the faithful at Dallas.

To be clear, the entire reputation of the entire American hierarchy, and that of the officials in the Vatican, is being weighed in the balance. There is nothing that has been done or said by SNAP, or by victims' attorney Jeff Anderson, or by any of the Church's critics that comes even close to the damage to the Church's reputation inflicted by Cardinal Justin Rigali.

All of the warnings from SNAP about the lack of independence by the independent review boards have been confirmed. The Vatican must remove Cardinal Rigali and remove him now.

On a New Orleans radio show the other day, Archbishop Gregory Aymond said, "What has happened in Philadelphia, quite frankly, is embarrassing to us."

That is putting it mildly, although Aymond gets credit for breaking the unwritten rule that no bishop criticizes a situation in another diocese. What has happened in Philadelphia eats at the very heart of the credibility of the American bishops as a whole.

If they can't get the clergy sex abuse mess right, after all their protestations that they had taken steps to deal with the problem, and all their claims that the Catholic Church was now ahead of the curve on the issue, that our policies were such that the Catholic Church was the safest place for a child to be, nothing else matters.

The New Evangelization? Forget about it. Pro-life activities? Not a chance. Advocacy for the poor? It rings hollow. If the leaders of the Church cannot be trusted to keep their most solemn pledge to protect children, they cannot be trusted at all. If they fail to see this, their moral sensibility is not merely skewed,

it is dead. It is not only that they cannot be trusted, it is that they should not be trusted.

I do not believe that Cardinal Rigali's mishandling of this situation is the norm. I believe many bishops, even most bishops, have been faithful to the Dallas norms. But if those norms shifted the responsibility for the safety of children from the clergy to the bishops, and those norms have now been spectacularly breached, either the man who breached them must go or the norms will be seen to have no force.

The bishops and the Holy See can no longer place this scandal on the backs of the clergy. The issue is no longer pedophilia among the priests. The issue is episcopal governance.

St. Augustine taught us many centuries ago that evil is an absence. In Philadelphia, there has been a great evil, the absence of effective, Christian leadership. The culture of bowing and scraping, of "Yes, your Eminence" and "As you wish, your Eminence" has brought into question the credibility of the entire American hierarchy.

Cardinal Rigali has proved himself eminent in his arrogance, in his willingness to flout the standards of conduct to which he had pledged himself. For the good of the Church, no, for the survival of the Church, he must go and he must go in disgrace. No continued membership of the Congregation for Bishops. No sinecure. Let him go someplace quiet and repent of his sins.

Rigali's brother bishops are said to be livid, as well they might be. But livid is an emotion, not an action, and the situation demands action.

Only the Holy See can remove a bishop from his diocese. The ball is now in the Vatican's court. If they fail to move swiftly in Philadelphia, the people of God in Ireland and Germany and around the world will take note and the church will be seen to be unserious in its promises.

The day of reckoning in civil court will come, and the payouts to the victims of these priests in Philadelphia will be enormous. But, now, immediately, the Holy See must act to restore whatever credibility can still be salvaged.

The situation in Philadelphia is not, as one person put it, "Boston Reborn." This is worse than Boston. After Dallas, there is no excuse.

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