

Philadelphia's crisis of faith

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 14, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

It is a commonplace to say that the sex abuse crisis has become a crisis of credibility for the hierarchy, especially the most recent revelations in Philadelphia which seem to show that the norms adopted by the bishops of America at Dallas either failed or were not followed. True enough.

But, several friends who live in the Keystone State have also expressed a deeper worry in the past week or so, the concern that at its heart, there is a crisis of faith at work in the higher counsels of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

As Pope Benedict XVI has made it a central theme of his pontificate that the Church must stand against the forces of secularism. But, what is secularism? It is what happens when people act as if God did not exist. Does that not describe precisely how the Archdiocese has behaved?

Of course, in one sense, all sin entails acting as if God did not exist. But, the whole point of the Dallas norms was that the bishops recognized the habits of chanceries in the face of sex abuse allegations were not habits conducive to grace. The point of the norms, like the point of a stop light, was to prescribe procedures that limited discretion, so as to avoid a catastrophe. The problem in many chanceries before Dallas was that officials charged with protecting and promoting the Church inflicted grave harm on the Church in their failure to reach out in concern to the victims, concerning themselves solely with the institution's reputation. The point of the Dallas norms was to demonstrate that the bishops understood this, and had bound themselves by the most solemn pledge to change their ways. It is now apparent that those ways did not change in Philadelphia, that the culture of clericalism survived the culture of accountability the Dallas norms sought to establish. Nearly ten years after Dallas, the fact that the culture of clericalism survived so strongly, and so perniciously, is a cause of grave concern.

I had these thoughts in mind this past weekend when [a document emerged](#) [1] that is evidently a form once used to enjoin those who had been sexually abused by clergy not to report any information to the civil authorities or others regarding the abuse. Unlike the supposed "smoking gun" the New York Times claimed to have in the case of Father Keisle in Oakland, this document really does provide a window into the culture of clericalism in Philadelphia, a culture that has resisted dealing with the sex abuse scandal in a Christian manner.

[The document is strange](#) [2]. For example, it states that the person signing the document prohibits the staff at the archdiocese from releasing information to the civil authorities, "unless I disclose information which is mandated to be reported." Mandated by whom? The document also states that the person signing acknowledges, "I understand that this is contrary to the policy of the Archdiocese." The whole form seems somewhat bizarre.

But, this form also made me realize something that I had not quite perceived about the sex abuse scandal. Imagine the circumstance in which this form would be presented to a victim. However confusing its text, its intent is clear: We are going to hush this up, okay? I imagined a family, already torn apart emotionally by the sexual abuse itself, turning to the authorities of the archdiocese, meeting with some smooth-talking monsignori, or several of them, and being advised to sign this. They are vulnerable. The chancery officials are polished. All

they have to do is sign on the dotted line and none of this ugliness needs to see the light of day. In short, the chancery officials who wrote this document did the same thing a sexual predator does: Take advantage of someone who is vulnerable. The particular use of this form is not clear but one thing is certain. This is the kind of form used to intimidate victims.

I have long understood that the cover-up of the sex abuse had become as bad as the sexual abuse itself. I have long understood that such cover-ups revealed an inhuman disregard for the suffering of the victims. I understood, too, that these cover-ups have the potential to cause renewed pain for the victims of clergy sex abuse when the cover-ups finally see the light of day. But, until I saw this document, and considered the circumstances in which it might be employed, it had never occurred to me really how much the chancery officials trying to cover-up sex abuse were, albeit without the sexual prurience, doing exactly what a pedophile-predator does: Confront someone vulnerable, make them do something they don't want to do and that is not good for them, and then tell them they can't tell anyone. Intimidation. Shame. Secrecy. These are not the tools one needs for healing and conversion.

I am told that last Friday, at the service of repentance and reparation at the Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul in Philadelphia, only fifty people showed up. If any more evidence were needed that Cardinal Rigali is not in a position to heal the harms his lax oversight have permitted, there it is. The Archdiocese of Philadelphia needs a fresh start. A crisis of faith can lead to a sense of despair and hopelessness which is, strictly speaking, the antithesis of the Gospel. Sometimes people can clean up their own messes. This is not one of those times.

Source URL (retrieved on 07/20/2017 - 23:55): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/philadelphias-crisis-faith>

Links:

- [1] http://www.myfoxphilly.com/dpp/news/local_news/031111-mystery-document-appears-in-priest-probe
- [2] http://ncrnews.org/documents/philly_document_msw.pdf