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Catholics still wait for final accountability

by Michael Sean Winters



Activists Barbara Dorris, left, and Robert M. Hoatson walk near the courthouse before a hearing on the Philadelphia archdiocese's sexual abuse scandal March 14. (Reuters/Tim Shaffer)

COMMENTARY

What to do when bishops do bad? That's a question that has gone unanswered ever since the clergy sex abuse scandal first became public back in the mid-1980s after *NCR* began focusing on it.

From the start it was horrific to discover priests were sexually abusing children. It was more horrific to learn from coast to coast bishops enabled the abuse, more concerned with image and self-preservation than the protection of children.

This was a scandal that had morphed into something larger, revealing unhealthy things about our church, about the culture of clericalism and how far that culture had become immune to normal standards of decency. The abuse story was akin to Watergate, which started as a burglary and ended up as a constitutional crisis.

But unlike Watergate, no one has accepted final accountability.

In 2002, with clergy abuse scandals seemingly appearing daily in newspapers across the nation, the bishops of the United States sat down and adopted what has become known as the Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which includes the "Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons." These norms set up procedures to guarantee the safety of children and offered diocesan compliance with those procedures.

Critics immediately charged that the norms failed to provide procedures for punishing bishops who do not comply. The bishops responded that independent review boards served as safeguards. And they pointed out that under canon law bishops can only be judged by the pope.

The ecclesial landscape seemed to have been changing some 10 years after Dallas, with bishops confident that this ugly and tragic story was behind them. The number of new cases had declined precipitously; many abusers had been laicized; some had even gone to jail. How many times were we hearing that the Catholic church is today the safest place in the world for children?

That story line met its most public demise in Philadelphia some weeks back after a grand jury report found the Dallas-established Essential Norms had not been followed and that priests who faced credible allegations of sex abuse were still functioning in their ministries. Some faced serious charges of sexual abuse while others were facing mere "boundary issues," a nebulous charge that might or might not warrant removing a priest from ministry.

The Philly situation is actually worse today than the situation in Boston was in 2002 -- when Boston Cardinal Bernard Law was forced to resign for grand negligence and sent to exile in Rome -- precisely because it comes well after Dallas. The situation in Philadelphia comes after years of reassurances that abuse tolerance could never happen again. It comes after years of promises that no special considerations would trump the protection of a child. It comes after the most solemn pledge by the bishops to the lay faithful that abuse and cover-up would never happen again.

If Philadelphia's Cardinal Justin Rigali had set out to intentionally make a hash of the Dallas charter, he could hardly have done better.

Sadly, the authorities in Rome still seem not to grasp that this ecclesial catastrophe requires a far more forceful response. The culture of the curia still weighs other considerations above the need to hold bishops accountable.

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In March, Bishop Robert Vasa, for example, was promoted to become coadjutor bishop of the Santa Rosa, Calif., diocese. Previously, Vasa had served as bishop of Baker, Ore., which was one of two dioceses and five Eastern Catholic eparchies in the country that declined to participate in the national audit of compliance procedures mandated by the Essential Norms. How then could the Vatican Congregation for Bishops even think of promoting someone who thumbed his nose at this audit?

This is not a rhetorical question. It is a case study. So how can this happen?

Consider this. Vasa has a patron in Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz of Lincoln, Neb. Vasa was his vicar general and Lincoln is the other diocese that refused to participate in the annual audit of child-protection

procedures. Bruskewitz worked for many years in Rome. He has a powerful patron in Archbishop James Michael Harvey, prefect of the Papal Household. In curial Rome this kind of patronage matters -- and still apparently trumps concern to demonstrate to the faithful that their children are safe.

Patronage is important, though not always enough. Reliable sources say Rigali had aspired to become the grand master of the Knights of Malta, a post recently relinquished by Cardinal John Foley, who is a native of Philadelphia. Rigali evidently had the post lined up until the grand jury report came to light. It is unclear whether or not the appointment was scotched at the behest of the Knights or by curial officials, but it now seems unlikely Rigali will get a Roman post.

One church wag suggested that Santa Maria Maggiore -- the Roman basilica where Law became archpriest after resigning from Boston -- become the ecclesiastical equivalent of Guantánamo Bay, where bishops who behave badly can be confined indefinitely. This is not the Roman way. But if Rigali's failure to secure an appointment in Rome is a sign the Vatican finally gets it, this is a very good sign for our church.

[Michael Sean Winters writes *Distinctly Catholic*, a daily blog on the *NCR* Web site. See it at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic.]

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