

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 2, 2011 at 11:35am

A bottom-up approach to Bishop Finn's indictment

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

The recent charges against Kansas City's bishop and his diocese for failing to report suspected child abuse have been analyzed six ways from Sunday, including by me on my "Faith Matters" blog.

And they have deserved all the commentary, given the shocking nature of the failure alleged in the indictments.

But I want to look at this distressing case from the perspective of a Protestant whose form of church governance is not hierarchical but, rather, republican, in the lower-case-r sense. And I want to suggest that the two approaches to polity yield different results, though each has its strengths and weaknesses.

It may be too simplistic to put it this way, but the system of governance used by the Presbyterian Church (USA), to which my congregation belongs, is essentially bottom-up. The congregation elects its ruling elders. In turn, some elders, based on the size of the congregation, become voting commissioners at meetings of the presbytery, which is our regional governing body. Clergy also are voting commissioners of the presbytery.

Ultimately, some elders and clergy also become voting delegates to our national governing body, the General Assembly, which has the power, among other things, to adopt changes to our constitution, though such changes then must be ratified by a majority of the presbyteries.

The Catholic system, by contrast, is much more top-down. Although it hasn't always been this way, the only way someone can become a bishop now is to get appointed by the pope. In turn, bishops can assign priests to parishes, even against the desire of a majority of members of a congregation.

As I say, top-down has its merits. For instance, congregations don't wait an average of two years after one

pastor leaves for another to be on the job -- as often happens in my denomination.

But top-down also has its inherent problems. And one of them was starkly visible when Bishop Robert W. Finn and the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph were charged with Class A misdemeanor crimes.

There was simply no way for people in the diocese to remove Finn from office. He had to take that step himself or the Vatican would have had to replace him. (Neither has happened.)

By contrast, the Presbyterian Book of Order provides a whole section on what to do in disciplinary cases when church officials are alleged to have done something seriously wrong. Why, the Book of Order even provides copies of 51 (count 'em, 51) separate documents that can and should be used in such cases.

I'm not suggesting that we have a perfect system for handling alleged wrongdoing, but at least it doesn't leave people in the pews, their elders and others without tools to use to remove, if only temporarily, someone from office.

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My guess is that the hierarchical system tends to make church authorities, especially bishops, feel more secure and perhaps even inherently less accountable to people below them in the organizational chart. That, in turn, can lead to both laxity and arrogance.

Laxity clearly was part of the problem in Kansas City. Even an independent investigation authorized by the diocese said as much.

Once it was clear that the bishop and some of his staff had fouled up in major ways, Finn offered apology after apology, and I believe he was sincere. But there still was no way to force him to step aside while the criminal case proceeds. And, as I say, he has not offered to do so.

So will any system of governance guarantee that church leaders won't commit crimes? No. Not the Presbyterian system. Not the Catholic system. But once something bad happens, the bottom-up system offers more tools to respond.

Which ultimately raises the question of whether the hierarchical system is so sacrosanct that it cannot be changed. That's one Catholics will have to answer. I wish they could do so bottom-up.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for *The Star's* website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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