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Editorial: Kansas City's Bishop Finn must resign or be removed

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial

If Bishop Robert W. Finn wanted today to volunteer at a parish in the Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., diocese to teach a religious education class or chaperone a parish youth group to World Youth Day, he couldn't do it. Convicted of a misdemeanor charge of failure to report suspected child abuse, Finn wouldn't pass the background check necessary to work with young people in the Catholic church.

That is, he could not serve in those positions if he were just a layman, deacon or priest. But he is a bishop, and that makes all the difference. And he can, apparently, do anything he wants under church law.

There are two issues at play here: the governance of the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese and the integrity of the U.S. bishops as a national conference.

Finn cannot govern the diocese. It is clear to local Catholics he has been largely absent from the day-to-day life of the diocese for almost a year. The chancery offices are in disarray, diocesan personnel feel abandoned, and the clergy are either angry or dumbfounded. From the very first day of his tenure in this diocese, Finn has been a source of division and divisiveness. He does have supporters, but he has never won even a grudging respect from majority of active Catholics.

His timid apology on the day of his trial is telling.

"I truly regret and am sorry for the hurt that these events have caused," he said. He should have said: "I'm sorry for the repeated failures that my decisions and my actions have caused" -- full stop. Finn's premeditated written statement continues his denial of the wrong he has caused. It reflects a kind of deflection and part of Finn's attempt to keep his see.

The topic of discussion in coffee klatches after Mass this weekend in the diocese was the cost of "these events" to the diocese: \$1.39 million for defending Finn and the diocese in the criminal cases; about \$286,000 in fees for civil suits stemming from this case; \$450,000 for a report to study what happened in this case; and almost \$200,000 to establish a new diocesan ombudsman for abuse and office of child protection. And insurance premiums will rise 11 percent this year.

We cannot imagine how those expenses will be explained in the annual bishop's appeal that would typically be rolled out in the next couple of weeks.

We do not believe Finn can heal the wounds inflicted on the local church. For endangering children and for losing the confidence of the diocese, we believe that Finn should resign or be removed.

Some have said the criminal convictions of high chancery officials for covering up for clergy sex abusers -- Finn last week and Msgr. William Lynn in Philadelphia earlier this year -- signals a new chapter in the already-too-long tragedy of sex abuse of minors in the Catholic church. These cases, we've been told, send a new signal to the hierarchy that cover-ups and non-cooperation with civil authorities will no longer be tolerated. If that is true, and we sincerely hope that it is true, we applaud these cases and the public prosecutors who had the courage to pursue them.

But if it is true that the force of civil law has been brought to bear from the outside, inside the church, the local bishop still reigns as an unchecked potentate. Robert Finn would not be allowed to teach Sunday morning bible study, but Bishop Finn remains spiritual leader of the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese with exclusive and sole authority over all diocesan matters.

It is now 10 years since the Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children was adopted by the bishops. For 10 years, the bishops have told their flocks that whatever happened in the past, they learned their lesson and would be vigilant both in the protection of children and the prosecution of those who failed to protect them. For 10 years, the bishops have said no place was safer for children than the ministries and parishes of the Catholic church. Yet we now know, and a court has found, that when faced not only with the requirement of meeting the church's own standards, but with the standards of civil law, Finn failed to fulfill the obligations the bishops made and the procedures demanded by civil law.

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In June, the bishops heard from the chairman of their own review board on child protection, Al J. Notzon III. He commended the bishops for the steps they had taken but warned them their credibility remained an issue for many Catholics. He specifically noted the fear many Catholics have that bishops still had the means and the power to cover up instances of child sex abuse.

"This suggests a trust problem and must be met with scrupulous adherence to the charter," Notzon told the bishops.

The report Notzon filed with the bishops warned against "complacency or Charter drift."

"Now is not the time to drift away from the moral requirements of the Charter and the legal requirements of reporting," he wrote. "Children must be protected. Bishops must continue to work toward restoring the trust of the faithful. Only when bishops are seen as following through on their promise to protect and pledge to heal will the faithful begin to trust them to take care of their most precious gift -- their children."

"... [T]he question of the consequences for those who do not follow the Charter is still unanswered. The National Review Board asks each bishop to continue to take seriously the harm done to the Church and the faithful when these requirements are not met."

Last month, Bishop R. Daniel Conlon, head of the bishops' committee on child protection, talked about why people remain skeptical of the bishops' efforts in the area of child protection.

"Our credibility on the subject of child abuse is shredded," Conlon told a conference of lay staffers who oversee child safety programs in American dioceses. "You may have a better chance. People -- in the church, outside the church and hanging on the edge -- need to know that real progress is being made."

Everywhere, the insight is apparent. Until there is some reason to believe bishops can and will be held accountable for their failings, the church's credibility remains in tatters. We urge Finn to take seriously the harm done to the church and the faithful -- especially the most vulnerable young children -- because he did not meet the moral requirements of the charter.

Finn, under any other circumstances, would not be permitted to publicly minister to children. The inescapable conclusion is that for the good of the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese and of the larger church, he must either resign or be removed.

Bishop Robert Finn in the courts on Dipity.

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