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USCCB should disinvite bishops in sex abuse cases from conference

by David Clohessy

Examining the Crisis
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This week, all of America's Catholic prelates are invited to the annual meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Almost all of them will certainly show up.

But because of their recent recklessness with children's safety, some don't deserve to be there. They should have the decency to stay home. More importantly, leaders of the conference should have the courage to disinvite them.

Let's start with the first and most obvious bishop who should be forbidden to attend: Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City, Mo., who was found guilty of criminally endangering kids in September. For at least five months, Finn kept hidden from police hundreds of pornographic, suggestive and inappropriate photos of young girls taken by Fr. Shawn Ratigan. Besides breaking Missouri's mandated reporter law, Finn clearly violated both the letter and the spirit of USCCB's Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.

Yet so far, not one of Finn's roughly 200 peers has even seen fit to criticize him. Our secular justice system has punished his wrongdoing. The full Catholic church hierarchy has ignored his wrongdoing.

But Finn is not the only member of the bishops' conference who should be disinvited.

Consider Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski, who just last month suspended Fr. Rolando Garcia from active parish ministry after the fourth -- yes, fourth -- civil lawsuit was filed charging Garcia with child sex crimes. (Whatever became of the bishops' allegedly binding "one strike and you're out" abuse policy?)

Adding insult to injury, two of those suits, dating back to 2007, had been settled by Miami church officials.

Then there's Bishop R. Daniel Conlon of Joliet, Ill. In 2010, his predecessor suspended Fr. Lee Ryan because of credible child sex abuse allegations. But in September, Conlon abruptly and inexplicably announced he was putting Ryan back on the job. Thankfully, public pressure forced a reversal of that callous and irresponsible decision.

Adding insult to injury, Conlon heads the USCCB's Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People.

Conlon's ill-fated move should merit some discipline from his brother bishops, starting with his banning from this meeting.

Next, consider West Virginia Bishop Michael Bransfield, also accused of molestation. He should be disinvented from this week's meeting.

In April, Bransfield was accused of abuse by a man who testified about another child-molesting cleric. During that same trial, another man, also under oath, said Bransfield had a lewd conversation with him. And the prosecutor in the case disclosed that Bransfield had been accused, in a separate instance, of fondling a child years earlier.

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Despite a pending criminal investigation into these allegations, Bransfield refuses to step aside during the probe.

In light of this, Bransfield should be told to stay home this week.

There are two reasons why being ousted from the bishops' meeting is the appropriate response to these four wrongdoers.

First, banning these bishops is the clearest and easiest penalty the USCCB can levy. Only prosecutors can file criminal charges. Only the Vatican can demote, discipline or defrock a corrupt prelate.

But the USCCB is essentially a trade organization. Like any organization, it can set its own rules for membership. And it needs no approval from Vatican bureaucrats -- or anyone -- to say, "This man has put kids in harm's way. He can't come to our meeting."

Second, banning these bishops is precisely the kind of action the USCCB pledged a decade ago. Ten years ago this month, all US bishops made a formal "fraternal correction" policy, committing themselves to "apply the requirements of the Charter to ourselves." In other words, prelates promised they would deal effectively with not only clerics accused of child molestation, but also with complicit colleagues who act improperly in child sex abuse and cover-up cases.

Sadly, however, since making that pledge, bishops have completely ignored it.

Now, however, with these clear, egregious and recent misdeeds by Finn, Wenski, Conlon and others, it's time for bishops to stand up to bishops to continue, even now, to protect predators, endanger kids and break the child safety laws of the church or of our society.

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