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An open letter to Pope Francis about Bishop Robert Finn

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Dear Holy Father:

I write as a brother in Christ to say -- in words echoing what John Dean, former counsel to President Richard Nixon, once told Nixon in the midst of the Watergate scandal -- that there's a cancer growing on your remarkably hopeful papacy.

Radically unlike Nixon's mess, this one is not of your making, but only you can fix it.

You must remove Robert W. Finn as bishop of the Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., diocese. His continued presence there mocks the good-faith efforts the church is making to respond to the crisis of priests sexually abusing children.

As you're aware, Finn was convicted in court of failure to report to government authorities a priest suspected of child sex abuse. It was classified as a misdemeanor, but that label belittles the magnitude of Finn's failure.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI should have told Finn to resign immediately upon conviction, if not before. His failure to do so means the ball is in your court. And the longer it stays there without your response, the more it damages the church both Finn and you love.

Some people will disagree with me that Finn loves the church. If he did, they say, he'd have resigned long before now. That's hard to argue with, but I truly believe Finn erred in the way he handled the case of former priest Shawn Ratigan precisely because of Finn's love for the church. He sought to protect it so no one would know about Ratigan's indecent behavior and thus think worse of the church.

It was, of course, exactly the wrong thing for Finn to do. It was an egregious error that caused widespread grief. But I believe he made that error to keep the church from additional harm.

I've met Finn several times and I interviewed him in some depth when he first came to Kansas City. I see him now and then at various events and he's always been friendly toward me in public and seems an affable man.

But none of this is about me, and it really isn't about Finn, either. It's about the church you have been chosen to lead, Holy Father. And it's about how to make it clear to members of your global community that church leaders understand what happened in the abuse scandal and are committed to do all you can to respond in compassion, love and justice.

Compassion, love and justice require Finn's removal from office.

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What will you do with Finn once he leaves office? I have no idea, but it would be good if it didn't look as if you were "kicking him upstairs," as we Americans say about such people as Cardinal Bernard Law, who left the troubled Boston archdiocese and was brought to Rome.

Rather, you might require Finn to take a year off for study and meditation. Then you could assign him to write his confessions and make them available to a church that is seeking to understand why so many bishops responded so badly to this abuse crisis.

After that, you might just make him a doorkeeper in the Sistine Chapel. For even the psalmist said he would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God "than live comfortably in the tents of the wicked," as Psalm 84:10 puts it in the Common English Bible version.

But Finn's future is not the issue, either. Rather, the issue is both responding properly to the abuse crisis and, secondarily, making sure that this scandal doesn't kneecap your pontificate, which it surely can do if Finn stays. His continued presence will be a message to the whole world that you don't care about fixing the scandal. And none of us wants to believe that of you.

You have brought hope and joy to the church. And you can keep up that momentum, but not if you let Finn stay in office. Please act now.

[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@gmail.com.]

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