

DALLAS, 2002: REVISITED — IT'S ALL ABOUT THE BISHOPS

The Pennsylvania Grand Jury report is, clearly, “Dallas, 2002” all over again. In spades. Thomas Reese, S.J. called it “Awful, disgusting, horrifying, sickening.” The Vatican report said the acts documented were “criminal and morally reprehensible.” Kathleen Sprows Cummings, a church history Professor at Notre Dame, said “Its time to re-set the table: we need to rip off the tablecloth, hurl the china against the wall, and replace the crystal with something less ostentatious, more resilient — and, for the love of God, safer for children.”

Over 1,000 victims; more than 300 priests; 70 years of cover-up. The figures are staggering — and they only include data from six dioceses. (The one tiny piece of hopeful data in the entire report is that only 2 of the 300 priests listed were charged within the last 10 years. All others occurred in the previous 60 years.)

NO ONE TOUCHES THE BISHOPS

That said, the first-last-foremost question that seems to be missing in almost every critique of clerical abuse is “Why haven’t the 100+ bishops who passed on pedophile priests to other parishes been charged by police — and removed from office?” The Dallas 2002 decree is touted for its policy of “Zero Tolerance.” But it quietly endorsed a policy of “No Penalties Whatsoever” for the nation’s 300+ bishops, many of whom were both complicit in awareness of pedophile priests and active in enabling them to move other parishes —where they could continue in their vile depravations.

Pope Francis asked for — and received — the resignations of all 30 of the bishops in Chile. But, to date, he has only removed five of them from office. He has also stated, in a number of speeches, that bishops also need to be accountable. However, only a handful have actually been removed from office. The sickening evidence from Chile, and, unfortunately, a number of other venues, including Pennsylvania, Rome, and Philadelphia, is that there were secret groups of pedophiles who worked together to identify and share victims — and to protect one another against criminal charges by Church authorities and local law officials. This may well explain why Pope Francis was so slow to move against the bishops in Chile: many of them conspired to give him false information about the charges when he first began to investigate them.

WARNINGS TO CHURCH LEADERS—SINCE 1985 —LARGELY IGNORED

Fr. Tom Doyle, O.P. has worked indefatigably on this issue since he first sent a 92 page report to the bishops in 1985. He and his colleagues Michael Peterson and Roy Mouton warned the bishops that if they didn’t deal decisively with the problem it could end up costing the Church \$1 billion in lawsuits. The cost to date is now up to \$4 Billion. At a talk Doyle gave to the SNAP convention in Chicago in August, 2014 he said:

I’d like to summarize by asserting that in spite of all that has happened since 1984, I do not believe there has been any fundamental change in the hierarchy. It may be true that individual bishops have been either changed or have been compassionately supportive all along, but in general the hierarchy is behaving today just as in 1985.

Doyle's full story is described in Robert Kaiser's 2015 book "Whistle: Fr. Tom Doyle's Steadfast Witness for Victims of Clerical Sexual Abuse." (Full disclosure: I helped fund Kaiser's writing and publishing the book). In May, 2015 Pope Francis appointed Doyle as a Consultant to his Pontifical Commission investigating clerical sexual abuse of victims. And in September, 2015 Janet Hauter of the American Catholic Council sent a copy of Whistle to every bishop in the U.S.

THE MEETING IN DALLAS: JUNE, 2002

Back to the Bishops. At the pivotal Dallas June 14, 2002 meeting at the Fairmont Hotel the Dallas Morning News had a surprise for the bishops: complimentary copies of that day's edition lying next to their coffee cups. A front-page headline screamed out 'TWO-THIRDS OF BISHOPS LET ACCUSED PRIESTS WORK.' The report said the paper's researchers had spent three months working on a survey that revealed "a broader pattern than has emerged this year in Boston."

Yes. They found that a majority of American bishops had been covering up for their wayward priests. The story said, "Church spokesmen did not dispute the results of their survey" and it cited a number of recent polls saying that the majority of American Catholics believed that "Church leaders involved in cover-ups should resign." Kaiser adds "By the time the bishops stumbled into the hotel's main conference room for their first meeting the bishops looked fairly abashed ('That many of us? Two-thirds?')"

That morning Wilton Gregory, the head of the Bishops Conference, made a frank confession that he and his fellow bishops had failed:

We are the ones, whether through ignorance or lack of vigilance or, God forbid, with knowledge, who allowed priest abusers to remain in ministry and reassigned them to communities where they continued to abuse. We are the ones who chose not to report the criminal activities of priests to the authorities because the law did not require this. We are the ones who worried more about the possibility of scandal than bringing about them the of openness that helps prevent abuse.

It's all right there. In black and white print. From Dallas, in June, 2002. Sixteen years ago. And how many further coverups and atrocious revelations have occurred since then? Fr. Marial Maciel and the Legionnaires of Christ; Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Kansas City, Cardinal Pell and Archbishop Philip Wilson in Australia; Ireland; Minneapolis/St. Paul, Great Falls, Montana, etc.

Dallas enacted its highly publicized "zero tolerance" for diocesan priests, but none of this was made applicable to bishops — or to religious order priests, who comprise 40% of the 36,000 priests in the U.S. Dr. Eugene Kennedy, a clinical psychologist (and former priest) wrote an incisive critique of the Dallas meeting:

They arrived in Dallas not so much to come to terms with the sex abuse scandal as to rehabilitate themselves and to breathe some fresh life back into their gasping moral authority. Afterwards, the bishops spoke of their meeting and their vote in terms of men who had survived an airplane crash. It was, they said gravely, 'a graced moment' and a 'new beginning,' and they had agreed on a Zero Tolerance policy for priest sex offenders, watch us now...'

Terry McKiernan heads the Bishopaccountability.org website that has been tracking clergy abuse world-wide since 2003. His summary on bishops, states that, “As of 2010, of 109 bishops who have enabled abuse, only 33 were still managing the same diocese, 12 had resigned, 45 had retired, 15 were promoted, 3 had died in office.” Eight years later would alter this data, leaving smaller numbers of bishops facing criminal charges who are still alive and in office.

CRITICAL FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

Nonetheless, there are two actions that need to take place as soon as possible: 1. Remove the statues of limitations on prosecuting sexual abuse claims (as recommended by the PA Grand Jury); 2. Investigate all bishops who passed on pedophile priests. If found guilty, they need to be stripped of their titles and, possibly, be removed from the clerical state. Honorary degrees, statues, portraits on cathedral walls, names on buildings — some or all of these could be considered as appropriate punishments for their involvement in the pattern of abuse.

140 Catholic theologians and educators have signed a petition asking all of the U.S. bishops to resign (NCR, August 18, 2018). Dr. Sprows Cummings concluded her article in the New York Times “For Catholics, Gradual Reform Is No Longer An Option,” (August 17, 2018) by suggesting that church leaders should voluntarily relinquish their place at the table, with Sunday homilies and statements from diocesan offices that might include the following:

We were granted privileges because we were meant to represent Jesus Christ on earth. But Jesus said that we should humble ourselves like little children if we want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and, also, that anyone who harms a little one ‘would be better drowned in the depths of the sea with a great millstone around his neck.’ We are no longer worthy of your trust.

We are ready to listen humbly, first of all to victims and their advocates, who might tell us how to begin to ease suffering and to make recompense. We welcome prosecutors and lawyers and historians into our archives, so that the full truth, however damning, might be known. . . We submit to new layers of oversight, because the ones we ourselves imposed failed so miserably. We are listening. We are learning. We ask for God’s mercy, and yours.