

A Cardinal Without Credibility

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Cardinal Edward M. Egan of New York continues to act less like a spiritual and moral leader than like a lawyer tap-dancing his way around sex abuse scandals in his diocese.

Last week, his spokesman said that the names of priests fired for sexually molesting children would not be disclosed. That penchant for secrecy was based on minutes from a meeting the cardinal had with priests on May 1.

The intent to keep things under wraps triggered predictable public outrage. The cardinal's spokesman backpedaled. He said his eminence had planned to name the ousted priests all along but not to say anything about priests cleared of wrongdoing in an internal investigation.

For proof of the cardinal's commitment to openness, the spokesman pointed to a column written by the prelate in the archdiocesan newspaper last month. In it, Cardinal Egan wrote that "the pertinent facts" regarding the ouster of priests would be made public. But who is to decide what the pertinent facts are? And how thorough is the church's in-house and closed-door investigation of priests accused of sexual misconduct?

Cardinal Egan's seeming difficulty with the idea of full disclosure is in contrast to the promise made by American Roman Catholic bishops last year to be aboveboard in dealing with the sex abuse scandals.

Being candid and speaking openly is not his style, unfortunately. When he was archbishop of Bridgeport, Cardinal Egan engaged in a pattern of denial and refused to accept responsibility for the conduct of his priests. Last year, The Courant disclosed in painful detail then-Archbishop Egan's repeated refusal to meet with a devout Catholic mother who wanted to warn him about a priest who had tried to molest her son. That accused priest continued to have access to children.

Archbishop Egan was also aware that another priest had a sexual relationship with a 15-year-old receptionist at a Bridgeport cathedral who became pregnant. Having sex with a minor is statutory rape, but the archbishop did not notify police about the allegations. He allowed the priest to take a job as a teacher in New Jersey.

In response to allegations of outrageous conduct by priests under his jurisdiction, Cardinal Egan issued a letter last year in which he said, "If in hindsight we also discover that mistakes may have been made as regards prompt removal of priests and assistance to victims, I am deeply sorry."

To expect Cardinal Egan to disclose the full story on the tragic and explosive issue of sex abuse may be futile. What is most frustrating, however, is that prosecutors have acted as if the failure to report allegations of crimes is primarily a church matter that should be dealt with by the hierarchy.

The victims of abuse and their families should be excused if they believe that Cardinal Egan has no credibility and is primarily interested in self-preservation.

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