

Bishops must answer to laity

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It has been two years since the Catholic bishops of the United States met in Dallas and faced up to the issues of the sex-abuse crisis. Millions of people tuned in to coverage of that historic meeting, distressed about what had happened in the church and relieved that measures were being taken to correct what was wrong.

The bishops came across as contrite and resolute. Yes, they appeared embarrassed and shell shocked, but their demeanor also conveyed the fact that they understood the magnitude of the mess they had a large hand in creating.

It was good for people to watch the bishops and listen as they deliberated the pros and cons of zero tolerance for priest-abusers. Lay people learned valuable lessons from television and print media. Their leaders had feet of clay and had engaged in horrible mismanagement. We resolved that going forward we would hold the bishops accountable to much higher standards.

Keeping our resolution is proving difficult. A few months ago a group of influential bishops, mostly from the Northeast, managed to sidetrack this year's audits.

Audits are carried out by independent auditors and are designed to determine diocesan compliance with measures put in place to make Catholic facilities safe for minors. There are almost 200 dioceses and auditors spend time in each, questioning officials about practices and procedures.

By lobbying to "discuss" the audit process at their meeting next November, and, in the meantime, to suspend audits, some bishops have tried to derail the oversight that they themselves established in Dallas and spelled out in the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

An outcry from members of the National Review Board, who were appointed by the bishops themselves, and other informed Catholics has forced the bishops to agree to take up the audit matter when they meet in Denver this week. If the majority of bishops stand up for the policy they adopted two years ago, it will probably be possible to reverse course and conduct audits this year.

Unfortunately, we won't be able to listen as bishops argue for and against funding audits, or to observe the demeanors of bishops who are divided on this critically important aspect of accountability. The Denver meeting has been scheduled as a "retreat," and media will not be present.

Distancing lay people from what is happening is not acceptable. Dallas in 2002 was a turning point for the Catholic Church in the United States. During that bishops' meeting, when victim-

survivors stood at the podium and told their harrowing stories and lay leaders addressed the bishops, lecturing them about their complicity in the scandal and their duplicitous tactics in handling the thousands of cases that had surfaced, it was clear that the dysfunctional culture of the hierarchy had to be reformed. Catholics watched in disgust, realizing, perhaps for the first time, that we could not sit back and let the bishops exercise total control over the church.

The hierarchical culture that existed before the story of sex abuse by Catholic priests was aired needs to be abandoned. Bishops must stop being arrogant and acting as though they do not have to answer to anyone. If bishops find ways to revert to past behaviors, Catholicism in the United States will be in worse shape than it is now.

The position held by the National Review Board -- that outside auditors need to examine records of church practice are an absolute necessity -- represents common sense and a bare minimum. While it has the clout of an ultimatum, it is categorically not a usurpation of bishops' "supervisory authority." Bishops have no authority to administer the church with disregard for the well-being of children and adolescents or to repeat past abuses.

Because the media won't be there in Denver this week, we won't learn who is stonewalling against transparency. Catholics, even though in the dark about positions taken by their bishops, are not powerless. We can check our information sources for the answer to the simple question: "What is the outcome of deliberations by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops concerning funding for audits this year?"

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