

Bishops seduce and abandon review board
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Don't pay as much attention to what we say, Richard Nixon said famously in introducing his cabinet to the country 35 years ago, but pay attention to what we do.

The bishops' administrative board recently voted to defer until November any authorization of the continued work on the clergy sex abuse scandal by the National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Young People that they themselves appointed in 2002.

What they are saying, according to their president, Wilton Gregory, is that they discussed "how to build on what has already been done" and "strongly reaffirmed" the conference's commitment to the charter they adopted in Dallas two years ago.

What they are doing, however, is smothering, with a pillow they think as silken as their choir cassocks, the work of the review board by short-circuiting the next round of the independent audit of the 195 dioceses to see if they are in compliance with their own mandate.

What they are doing is aborting the further study of the causes of the sex abuse scandal proposed by the National Review Board in its Feb. 27 report.

What they are doing is trying to put an end to the review board, to make its work history as Gregory claimed, in reacting to the board's report, that the abuse sex scandal itself is now history. As my late Aunt Margaret once wrote to the sponsors of a soap opera about unlikely motivations in its characters, "What do you take us for, damn fools?"

What they are doing is best illustrated in the letters to the administrative board from such bishops as New York's Cardinal Edward Egan and Nebraska's Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz, urging its members to postpone action on this vital and relevant report until after the leaves fall.

What they are doing is obvious in the letters from other bishops, each written, as they say of the synoptic Gospels, from a common source or shared "talking points" designed not just to defer but to delay and ultimately to defeat the work of the National Review Board.

What they are doing is obvious, for example, in the letter of Archbishop Henry Mansell of Hartford, Conn., who, acting as shocked, shocked as Claude Rains in "Casablanca," complains that the review board acts as if it were independent of the bishops. The bishops, in short, want to get the distressing phenomenon of mature Catholic men and women thinking that they are the church as a people back under their control.

What they are doing is trying to regain their power without realizing that by these actions they are further eroding their own authority.

What they are doing is exhibiting the parallel between their manipulative style of relating to their people and the seductive approach of bedeviled clerics to their victims. They are doing this because they are themselves victims of the corrupted hierarchical system they think that they are called to support. They have unwittingly become the agents of the core problem of which the sex abuse scandal is but a symptom.

The dynamics are as near to identical as we are likely to find. The first step in the pas de deux between the priest and the innocent victim is the use of a position of power to establish a relationship with someone who lacks that power. Geniality, compliments, condescension, yes, we can be friends together, you can trust me. These are the sounds of the not so distant drummer. Manipulation of the other for one's own uses is the energy at the heart of every seduction, come closer, this is God's work we do together.

The preliminaries lead quickly to the accomplishment of the manipulator's true intention, exercising power over the other in using him for a brief period that turns out to be humiliating and demeaning for the other who is then sworn to silence and abandoned.

That is the organizational dynamic of a system that is dying, and it even demeans the bishops who feel that they have no choice but to be loyal at a high personal price to a structure that is falling apart, instead of being free to serve a people who are filled with life and goodness.

The transaction is transparently clear in what the bishops are doing to the National Review Board whose members they first drew close to themselves when they desperately needed a commission of highly qualified lay Catholics to look into the sex abuse scandal. Now they have used them, taking such gratification as they could from the board members' work while demeaning and humiliating them as too "independent," and as misunderstanding what was expected of them, and then swearing them to silence by silencing their voices, abandoning them and getting back to the protection of their own clerical universe.

We have heard what the bishops say and we have seen what they do. They seem unaware that in their use of power to put an end to the work of the National Review Board, they have settled, as institutional seducers do, for a short-term gratification that manifests the corrupted structural problems of the institutional church. The latter bred the abuse of demeaning power over people that is the sex abuse crisis. It also generates this new use of demeaning power over people, not to end the crisis but to end the search for a true understanding of its causes.

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