

8-18-08 - Confession and consequences
Opinion, Chicago Tribune

"There are certainly consequences even after sin is forgiven. So we have to deal with those consequences . . . and they can be severe, as they must be."

—Cardinal Francis George, June 9, 2002

On the day he spoke those words at Chicago's St. Juliana Parish, Cardinal George was talking about clerics who had sexually abused children. This wasn't his only invocation of "consequences" in that dramatic week. As U.S. bishops of the Roman Catholic Church gathered in Dallas, the cardinal also proposed unspecified "consequences" for bishops who mishandled abuse cases.

Unfortunately, George's brethren in the U.S. and in Rome didn't follow his lead and enact any such policy. A 2004 report from a National Review Board of lay Catholics chosen by the bishops defined the roles of some bishops in tolerating felonious behavior:

"Although the fact that approximately 4 percent of clergy have sexually abused minors outrages and saddens the laity, the overwhelming majority of the clergy have led honorable lives of dedication to the church and her people. More distressing to the laity is the inadequate response by bishops and other church leaders to this problem over the last 25 years. . . . Their responses were characterized by moral laxity, excessive leniency, insensitivity, secrecy, and neglect."

The report concluded that numerous church leaders focused primarily on protecting their earthly realms and their accused subordinates. In response, this page concurred that mismanagement by numerous bishops not only had hurt victims of criminal molestation, but had left model priests tarred by the most unfair and diabolical of suspicions: Could he be the one in 25?

Today, George is president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Might this be the time for consequences? Might this be the cardinal's moment?

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Last week George announced a \$12.7 million settlement with 16 abuse victims, bringing the total of payments by Chicago's archdiocese to \$77 million. We were struck by these sentences from Wednesday's Tribune:

"By releasing the details and unveiling his own sworn deposition, the archbishop revealed a flawed and secretive system where priests and bishops employed by the archdiocese to this day protected their own. . . . Standing before television cameras Tuesday, the cardinal once again said he was sorry for not acting sooner and promised more

transparency. 'In the sense I'm responsible for this archdiocese, I have to accept the blame,' George said."

The Catholic Church is a private institution, entitled to choose its leaders as it sees fit—just as all citizens are entitled to judge the church by the standards to which it holds those leaders: Pedophilia by clerics wasn't merely an internal matter beyond public commentary. Like all acts of sexual abuse, these were serious crimes against society.

The cardinal's acknowledgment of his own mistakes, and the mistakes of subordinates who withheld from him information about abuse allegations, is a step toward restoring the credibility of an institution long admired for its work in health care, education and social justice issues.

The cardinal should insist that his disclosures lead by example. He doesn't wield power over the U.S. bishops, but the job does give him a national bully pulpit. We hope he urges the bishops to disclose their failures of leadership that let this crisis metastasize. Where careers need to end, so be it.