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Back to square one as bishops duck audits

It is too early to jump to conclusions about whether the American bishops will follow up in any substantial way on the reports and audits released earlier. It is not too early, however, to raise the caution flags over the first rumblings that the bishops will attempt to simply scuttle the process ([see story](#)).

Apparently some bishops are balking at the recommendation that the audits of dioceses continue annually. Members of the National Review Board say some of the bishops just don't like the idea of outsiders scrutinizing church governance.

Sounds like we're back to square one, where bishops hold themselves above accountability to the church they supposedly serve.

No doubt the tug between developing new means of accountability and reverting to the kind of clerical privilege and secrecy that was so much a part of the sex abuse scandal will continue to be an ongoing tension. And the only leverage the board has -- as it has stated from the beginning -- is public opinion.

Continuing the audits is a minimal act in the aftermath of the scandal. It is the least church leaders can do to assure that they have attacked the narrow but deeply damaging problem of clergy sex abuse. Conventional wisdom holds that the church has now successfully dealt with the problem of sexual abuse of children by clergy. To which we say, maybe. Do we really want to have to revisit this issue 20 years from now because, in fact, things were not as they appeared?

The scandal, however, is merely a symptom of deeper problems in the church -- problems of authority and leadership, of broken trust and damaged relationships among bishops, priests and people.

Some bishops apparently think that having gone through the embarrassment of the audits, the John Jay College study and the Review Board's assessment of the causes of the crisis, the scandal is now neatly behind them.

What's missing, as we have said before, is any significant sign of contrition and taking responsibility on the part of the bishops. They have apologized profusely for the suffering others experienced, for the conduct of the priests and they have bemoaned everything from societal forces to greedy lawyers to sensationalist media.

We're still waiting for the bishop who will open the books, unseal the documents and give a full accounting of what church leaders did in the course of the 20-year scandal.

Allowing a self-reported audit to proceed each year is a tiny step in the right direction.

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