

What kind of organization does the church want to be?

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Church and state are separate but the lesson in the firing of a priest at St. Bernard Catholic Church in Vernon by the bishop of Norwich may be that their administration can be very similar. For no matter where it is, power corrupts, and amid secrecy and unaccountability it can be hard to tell a bishop from a school superintendent, except that the bishop may have God as his shield.

The central question in the Vernon case is simple: Why was the priest fired with what appears to be an unprecedented peremptoriness in a church that has extended exquisite due process to child molesters?

The question is compounded by the shifting explanations provided by the bishop -- first it seemed to be deficient sermons, now it seems to be something involving a charity the priest founded to help his native village in Africa -- the weakness of each explanation, the bishop's refusal to submit to an interview to clarify and document his reasons despite the priest's appeal that he do so, and the vicious insinuations circulated against the priest, anonymously or confidentially, by the bishop's supporters, apparently at the bishop's urging.

Rather than answer the questions and advocate due process, the bishop's supporters lately have tried to change the subject, denouncing the local newspaper, the Journal Inquirer, for its reporting on the controversy and the newspaper's editorial page editor for his several columns about the mistreatment of the priest.

Why, the bishop's supporters clamor, didn't the editor attend a meeting of the parish council with the bishop a couple of weeks ago, at which complaints about the priest's charity supposedly were aired?

But of course as much as he might have liked to attend, the editor wasn't invited to the meeting. Indeed, the meeting was effectively secret and was held out of town. If anyone really attended to complain about the priest's charity, the more compelling question would be why neither the priest himself nor someone representing the charity's board was invited to the meeting to respond.

The parish council is said to be planning a public meeting in two weeks to provide information about the priest's case. Will the priest and the board of his charity be invited to attend and allowed to respond? That does not seem likely.

Besides, while the bishop seems to be trying to wash his hands of the controversy by turning it over to the parish council, what the council thinks isn't relevant; it would be at best more hearsay. For only the bishop himself knows why he dismissed the priest peremptorily, and he's not saying, only insinuating lately that the priest is somehow a crook.

Maybe the priest HAS done something reprehensible -- who can prove that he HASN'T? -- but even so, he has been denied fair procedure by people who should know better.

Yes, in protesting his treatment by refusing to leave the church rectory, the priest has been disobedient, and maybe he has no right to complain if the church wants to claim to be a private organization with the right to be peremptory and unaccountable. And as much as this peremptoriness and unaccountability may dishearten believers, the sins of its clergy and hierarchy do not necessarily impugn any faith. "Put not your trust in princes," the psalm says, "nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help."

But as a practical matter the sins of the clergy and hierarchy discourage faith and impede a church's good works. While bishops, including the bishop of Norwich, like to call themselves shepherds, religious doctrine is one thing and church administration something else, and lately Catholics have had every right to resent what can happen to their church when they behave like sheep.

Chris Powell is managing editor of the Journal Inquirer. His views are not necessarily the newspaper's.