

# Winning the All-Out Battle

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Pope Francis called for an “all-out battle against sexual abuse” during the Vatican convening on abuse in February 2019. The Holy Father called the abuse an “abominable crime” that needs to be “erased from the face of the earth.” Just two days before, Cardinal Blase J. Cupich of Chicago said “the commission, cover-up, and tolerations of sexual abuse” is “gravely incompatible to the very meaning and essence of the Church.” At the same time, a British abuse survivor said that he “didn’t think we can rely on the institution to clean itself up.” Therein lies the leadership challenge: acting so as to demonstrate the Church can clean itself up. That is, restoring trust in Church leadership.

The Holy Father’s call for an all-out battle is, of course, metaphorical, a perspective that is far afield from the expected. The metaphor has merit, however, and reflects something that Pope Francis said in *Open to God Open to the World*: “Being at the periphery helps us to see and understand more clearly, to have a more correct analysis of reality, rejecting centralism and ideological approaches.” Using this peripheral perspective of a battle reveals some of what should lie ahead as the Church tackles the challenges it faces.

After over 37 years of leadership in the U.S. Army, commanding soldiers in peace and in war, from the smallest unit to the largest, I can attest to the difference between declaring a battle and winning it. Winning a battle requires developing a plan that has a relatively high probability of success and inspires confidence, putting someone in charge of the battle with an organization designed to carry out the plans over time, as well as adapt to the inevitable dynamics and unfolding realities that all battles contain. Neither survivors, the laity at large, or the vast majority of ordained and religious leaders are likely to consider the declaration of battle sufficient. To demonstrate the kind of trustworthiness the British abuse survivor calls for requires more. Battles are won in the doing, not the declaring.

One thing I learned early on in my career is that just as shoes must fit an individual’s foot, battle plans must fit the nature of the problems they are designed to solve. So first things first, what is the nature of the problem? The Holy Father, Cardinal Cupich, and others are addressing twin, interrelated crises: the crisis of abuse and the crisis of a culture of leadership that permitted and then covered up the abuse for decades. Further, this dual problem is not a local problem. It is global, and the Vatican will have to deal with that. But even in a particular region, like the Catholic Church in the U.S., it crosses diocesan and religious community boundaries.

So, with respect to the Catholic Church in the U.S., the initial analytical conclusions from the Holy Father’s call for battle are these: First, the battle must have two, related objectives: recover from the abuse crisis and reform the root causes of the leadership culture that permitted and then covered up the abuse. Second, while whatever actions taken in the U.S must be consistent with the Vatican’s global approach,

leaders in the U.S need not wait. They have sufficient “marching orders” to move forward; they can act within the intent of the Holy Father as well as within the intent of the Spirit, even as further guidance is being developed in Rome. Third, since the dual problem in the U.S. crosses diocesan and religious community boundaries, so must the solutions.

In the U.S., we are fortunate that recovery from the abuse crisis has already begun. More bishops and leaders of religious communities, of their own accord and in coordination with one another, are rendering a full account of both the abuse and the cover-up within their dioceses and provinces. They are moving toward extending the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People to cover episcopal behavior. They have also begun describing what the Church owes survivors: recognition, justice, and meaningful support. More offenders and enablers are being held accountable. Dioceses and religious communities are establishing reporting, investigatory and adjudicating procedures that will increase trust as they become more widely understood and enacted. Further, U.S. bishops are discussing procedures that go beyond individual dioceses and provinces for holding themselves accountable and to increase the trustworthiness of the actions they take.

The number of bishops and religious leaders who have begun this work is increasing; their actions have put the Catholic Church in the U.S. on the road to recovery. Cardinal Cupich’s twelve procedural steps is an excellent application of the criteria designed to advance recovery from the sexual abuse crisis: transparency, accountability, and co-responsibility (lay, ordained, and religious). Much more work is ahead, but a good bit of positive momentum has formed. Maintaining this momentum, however, requires more than the actions of individual bishops and religious leaders. The abuse crisis is a cross-diocesan problem requiring a coordinated, national solution. The same is true of the culture of leadership that permitted and then covered up the abuses.

This culture emerged and was then sustained from the habits formed in the daily workings of the Church: how parishes and dioceses are governed, how human resources and financial decisions are made and carried out, how seminarians are formed and priests developed, how the laity is treated, and how information flows and is communicated (or not). The abuse crisis is a symptom; the disease lies in the root causes of the culture of leadership. The Church must apply transparency, accountability, and co-responsibility to both the symptom and the disease if it is to win the all-out battle the Holy Father describes.

Moreover, both the abuse crisis and the crisis in the culture of leadership that permitted and covered it up persisted for decades. We should expect, therefore, that the recovery and reform will be a long-term activity. Recovery and reform require sustained action at the national level, even if implementing resides with individual bishops and leaders of religious communities.

What is the Catholic Church in the U.S. to do now in preparation for the June General Assembly of U.S. Catholic Bishops? The answer to this question is relatively simple.

- First, accept the fact that winning the battle against the twin crises is a leadership challenge. Do not deny it. Do not sugar coat it. Do not hide from it. Further, understand that the leadership challenge is actually a co-leadership challenge, meaning that without losing any sovereignty, bishops and leaders of religious communities must incorporate the expertise of the laity into identifying what must be done to recover and reform. No bishop, no leader of a religious

community, no lay executive has all the answers, but we, as the corporate Body of Christ, with a humble and prayerful attitude of service to Our Lord's Church, together have a high probability of success that will generate a sufficiently high level of confidence.

- Second, figure out what organizational construct best facilitates developing an adequate plan and guiding sustained progress toward the goals of recovery and reform. Plans don't identify themselves, nor do they execute themselves. Winning the battle that the Holy Father mentions will require coordinated action over time. In such cases, leaders must act through an organization or set of organizations they create for this purpose.
- Third, use that organization to guide actions over the time necessary to embed transparency, accountability, and co-responsibility as operant values throughout Church governance, thus setting the conditions for full recovery and reform. Whatever plans are developed initially will change over time. Situations like these are dynamic: actions that seemed to be promising at the start will not produce as intended; new dimensions of either the twin crises or their corresponding solutions, recovery and reform, will emerge; and adaptation will be the only constant.
- Lastly, and most certainly first, all action must be firmly planted in prayer and attentive listening to the Spirit. Our battle plans and their execution must be guided by prayer and a discerning attitude. Thomas Merton, in *Contemplation in a World of Action* seems to speak to us right now: "If our prayer is the expression of a deep and grace-inspired desire for newness of life...God will act in us and through us to renew the Church by preparing, in prayer, what we cannot yet imagine or understand." Our prayers and actions, taken together and sustained over the necessary time, should be a grateful response that flows from our awareness of God's presence among us. "Prayer without action," Fr. Henri Nouwen reminds us in *Compassion*, "grows into powerless pietism, and action without prayer degenerates into questionable manipulation."

Moving forward will not be easy. It will be traumatic. All battles are. But to pretend recovery and reform is not necessary because we fear the tasks ahead of us would be folly. Already these crises have eroded the moral authority of the Church in the public square, affected the ability of the Church to evangelize, destroyed the credibility of Church leadership in the eyes of many, driven Catholics from our faith, and placed the Church's financial well-being at risk. We must not be afraid, because not fully recovering and reforming puts the Catholic Church in the U.S. at even greater risk.

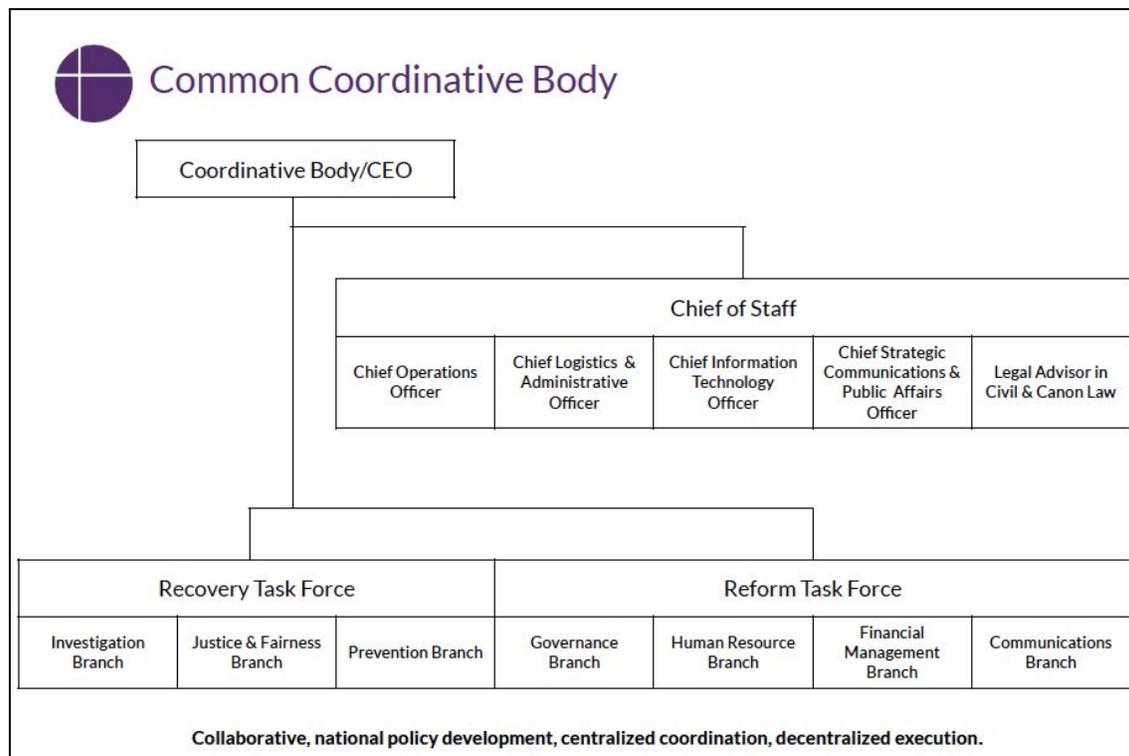
We—lay, ordained, and religious leaders who now have responsibility for shepherding the Body of Christ in the U.S. together—are not merely creating a better world, not just trying to win a secular battle. Rather, our efforts reflect much more. They reflect what the Spirit is calling us to do in order to restore the light of Christ to its proper place. Besides, we should be confident that Christ will not abandon His Church in an hour of need. The same Spirit that descended on the heads of the first apostles is present with us now, if we listen and act with a prayerful and humble heart. The first apostles did not know how their journey would end, but they knew they had to begin. So it is with us now.

Fr. Henri Nouwen speaks to this journey in *Making All Things New* when he says, "Where does God lead me as an individual person who tries to do his will?" More basic and significant is the question, "Where does God lead us as a people?" This question requires that we pay careful attention to God's guidance in our life together and that together we search for a creative response.... Thus the discipline of community frees us to go wherever the

Spirit guides us, even to places we would rather not go.”

The first steps in the Holy Father’s all-out battle have already been taken. Now the U.S. Bishops and leaders of religious communities should create a common coordinative body, a board of governors with a Chief Executive: someone put in charge of developing and executing the necessary battle plans associated with both recovery and reform. If no one is in charge, nothing gets done—especially if the tasks require execution over time and across jurisdictional boundaries.

This body, consisting of the right mix of bishops, leaders of men and women religious communities, as well as men and women senior lay executives—must have a formal charter that provides sufficient independent authority to conduct investigations and make recommendations. Additionally, this body and its selected Chief Executive, as its charter should mandate, would be responsible for identifying goals and metrics associated with both recovery and reform tasks, as well as for maintaining unity of effort while taking simultaneous and sequential actions toward both objectives. This body would also create the proper discernment, decision, action, reporting, and communication cycles as well as update information technologies and communications strategies throughout the Catholic Church in the U.S. The body should also ensure that all actions taken to recover from the abuse crisis and to reform the root causes of the culture of leadership that permitted and covered up the abuse stay consistent with the Vatican directions and reflect best practices properly adapted to match Church ecclesiology and canon law. Figure one, below, depicts this common coordinative body, its relationship to a governing board, and the activities associated with both recovery and reform.



Once the common coordinative body is established and has made its initial decisions, it can form two subordinate task forces to oversee the execution of the objectives set for recovery and reform. Figure two, below, depicts the two task forces.

Recovery Task Force	Reform Task Force
<p><b>Purpose:</b> to replace a culture of abuse and cover-up with a culture of safety and transparency and allow the light of Christ to shine</p>	<p><b>Purpose:</b> to replace a culture of clericalism with one of servant leadership and management practices that reinvigorate the body of Christ</p>
<p><b>Expertise:</b> investigatory, legal, judicial, and victim services</p>	<p><b>Expertise:</b> institutional, systemic, and organizational</p>
<p><b>Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Render full account of the credibly accused</li> <li>• Extend the Charter on the Protection of Children and Young People to cover episcopal behavior</li> <li>• Provide justice and meaningful support to the survivors and fairness to healthy clergy</li> <li>• Prevent future abuse</li> <li>• Replace the spirit of clericalism with servant leadership and advance unity</li> </ul>	<p><b>Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a standards-based, transparent, and accountable servant leadership culture across the Catholic Church in the United States, in the governance, human resources, financial, and communications areas</li> <li>• Replace the spirit of clericalism with servant leadership and management practices, and advance unity</li> </ul>
<p><b>Implementing each set of tasks requires an organization composed of lay, religious, and ordained leaders, women and men</b></p>	

Many of the above tasks are among those actions bishops and leaders of religious communities have already taken, and many are captured by Cardinal Cupich's twelve procedural steps. The recovery task force would be responsible for expanding these actions across dioceses and religious communities. Further, the prevention branch of the task force would help ensure that actual performance meets agreed upon standards. Figure three, below, depicts a possible organization of the recovery task force, its potential objectives, and a list of likely tasks associated with achieving those objectives.



## Sample Tasks (from Summit): Recovery Task Force

	Investigation Branch	Justice & Fairness Branch	Prevention Branch
Towards a New Culture	Publicly acknowledge the sexual abuse failure, accept responsibility, engage with survivors, and begin to restore trust	Form proactive agreements to cooperate with external, civil authorities on investigations, reports, and statutes of limitations	Define clericalism, its root causes, and the various forms it takes
Transparency	Set national standards and protocols for: role and responsibility of diocesan review boards, standard definitions for the accused and other major terms, retention and record keeping, release of names of all credibly accused, what a comprehensive audit process entails, and periodic, independent review of files for allegations or red flags	Involve abuse victims at each decision-making level	Involve women in initial and ongoing clergy formation
Accountability	Convene a national working group of clergy and lay experts to help write a Code of Conduct for bishops and ensure the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People includes bishops	Ensure seminary curriculum addresses abuse prevention, improved human formation, personal integrity, and the experience of survivors	Provide vocation directors with better training and develop national standards relating to clergy selection and abuse prevention
Co-responsibility	Establish a national or metropolitan independent, lay-led entity that will address misconduct of bishops and bishop accountability and will include transparency during and after an investigation	Consider a regional review board model that would allow multiple dioceses that lack certain experts to come together to ensure a wide cross-section of expertise and consistency of practice	Create a governance structure that is transparent with layered checks, balances, and oversight, and includes the expertise of the laity at the parish, diocesan, and national level

The common coordinative body would also establish a reform task force, with objectives and tasks for which they would be responsible. Figure four, below, depicts a possible organization of the reform task force, its potential objectives, and a list of likely tasks associated with achieving those objectives.



## Sample Tasks (from Summit): Reform Task Force

	Governance Branch	Human Resources Branch	Financial Management Branch	Communications Branch
Towards a New Culture	Put in place mechanisms for greater synodality among bishops, among bishops and priests, among clergy and laity	Require best practices in human resources: effective selection, training, assignment, evaluation, compensation, and continuing education	Identify the twin crises as the main priority for Church funding and resourcing for the immediate future	Provide consistent, transparent, and coordinated communications at all levels
Transparency	Commit to and invest in creating a new culture of leadership and management that is transparent, accountable, and proactive in including lay leadership and co-responsibility	Develop and invest in ongoing formation programs in management and leadership to train clergy, religious, and laity, including bishops	Provide full financial transparency regarding all aspects of the crisis, include how donations are used	Establish a crisis communications plan and develop a proactive plan for restoring trust
Accountability	Seek authority for the bishops conference to modify canon law to address local realities and update canon law to include a detailed list of punishments for clearly defined crimes of abuse or cover-up by clergy, religious, or laity	Explore different models of training for new bishops	Build a broad, deep, and transparent financial management and accounting system	Identify best practices for bishops to listen to and engage parishioners that makes bishops accessible and responsive to needs
Co-responsibility	Commit to a diocesan governance structure that is transparent with layered checks, balances, and oversight, including a strong presbyteral council, corporate board, and diocesan pastoral and finance councils	Implement ongoing professional and personal formation and 360-degree assessments for bishops and all Catholic leaders that begins in seminaries and ministerial programs; assessments should be linked to appointments	Implement ongoing best practices training for all Catholic leaders, covering, financial management, decision-making, pastoral management, etc.	Use data to show the visible, measurable change since the implementation of the Charter to help restore trust, especially with the young and disaffiliated

As is the case with recovery from the abuse crisis, selected bishops and leaders of religious communities have begun some of the reform actions listed above. Unlike the actions necessary to recover from the abuse crisis, however, the discussion concerning which actions are necessary to address and reform the root causes of the culture of leadership that permitted and covered up the abuses is much less developed. The sustained conversation about reform is vital to a healthy future of restored trust in Church leadership. The battle against abuse will not be won without success relative to both the recovery and reform objectives.

Declaring a battle and winning it are two different things. As I mentioned in the opening of this article, winning means developing a plan that has a relatively high probability of success and in which all have high confidence, putting someone in charge of the battle, then using an organization to carry out the plans over time and adapting to the inevitable dynamics and unfolding realities that all battles contain. Certainly all this is a tall order. But figuring out how to do them consistent with Catholic ecclesiology and canon law is what the nature of the dual problem demands.

Prayer, repentance, humility, and spiritual conversion, as our Holy Father has often spoken about, remain the important foundations, for the Church is more than a human institution. It is the embodiment of the Body of Christ. But the Church is also a human institution, run by people that remain human beings regardless of the fact that they serve the Church. As such, they are subject to every human shortcoming resident in each of our hearts. So are the systems and institutions that human beings create. Saint John Paul II echoes this understanding of ourselves in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, that “we should not fear the truth about ourselves,” that the systems human beings create are always imperfect.

The actions described above may not be exactly right. But they do reflect what we, the Catholic Church in the U.S., are called to do together in order to win the battle that Pope Francis has declared: fully recover from the abuse crisis and reform the culture of leadership that permitted and covered up that abuse. The dual problem against which the Holy Father wants all of us to battle has already put the moral authority, ethical credibility, and spiritual position of the Catholic Church at risk. We—lay, ordained, and religious Catholics alike—are not fighting this battle for ourselves. We are fighting it for Christ’s Church. The battle called for by the Holy Father and the recovery and reform associated with that battle are not ends in themselves. They are means toward reclaiming the Body of Christ’s moral and spiritual authority necessary for its mission on earth. Winning this battle matters.