

Deeds, not Words

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Some called the February meeting in Rome on abuse crisis a bust. The evidence tells a different story, one less black and white than most reporting. Pope Francis called for an “all-out battle” against sexual abuse and has taken action against those who abuse and those who cover it up.. Forthcoming are the Vatican’s high-level standards for the global Church. The Vatican cannot, however, provide the specifics for particular cultures, legal systems, and political contexts of a global Church. But bishops’ conferences and leaders of religious communities can, and the Vatican has given them the green light to do so in their areas of responsibility. Some have begun to do just that.

In the U.S., bishops and leaders of religious communities face two, interrelated crises: the abuse crisis and the crisis of a leadership culture that permitted, then covered up, the abuse for far too long. These crises demand two, interrelated solutions: recovery from the abuse crisis and reform of the leadership culture. In the U.S., leaders have not waited, recovery has begun.

More U.S. bishops and leaders of religious communities—some in response to law enforcement, others 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 jurisdictions. They are moving toward extending the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People to cover behavior of bishops. They have also begun describing what the Church owes survivors: recognition, justice, and meaningful support. More bishops and religious leaders are establishing third-party reporting, investigatory and adjudicating procedures that include the laity and will increase transparency and trust. Further, U.S. bishops and leaders of religious communities are discussing procedures that go beyond individual dioceses and provinces to increase the trustworthiness of the actions they take.

These actions put the Church on the road to recovery. Cardinal Blase J. Cupich’s proposed twelve procedural steps advances recovery from the abuse crisis by applying the three criteria announced in Rome: transparency, accountability, and co-responsibility (lay, ordained, and religious). More work is ahead, but this represents positive momentum—too slow for some; too fast for others. Still unclear is whether the U.S. bishops and religious leaders will all commit to these policies so that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops can act as a body and recognize that the abuse crisis requires coordinated national solutions.

So some evidence is encouraging, but the jury is still out concerning full recovery. The jury is also still out concerning reform of the culture of leadership that permitted, then covered up, the abuses. This culture emerged from and is sustained by the habits formed in the daily workings of the Church. The abuse crisis is a symptom; the disease lies in the culture of privilege and secrecy, or “clericalism” as Pope Francis called

it. This culture must change. Changing a culture is always hard, but hard does not mean impossible, and hard doesn't mitigate the fact that it is necessary. The Catholic Church in the U.S. is on the road to recovery; it must also get on the road to reform.

That means asking and answering some tough questions: What are the right methods of checks, balances, and oversight in the Church's daily governance processes: within parishes and dioceses, between parishes and dioceses, and within religious communities? A strong hierarchy without equally strong checks and balances is a petri dish for excess and abuse. How should the Church make its leader selection processes, seminary formation, and continued development for ordained leaders more rigorous? The way priests are educated into the clerical culture of privilege and secrecy matters. And the way too many of the laity are expected to be deferential and passive recipients of religion also contributes to the clerical culture. How can parish, diocesan, and religious communities adapt their human resources, financial management, and investment processes to be made more consistent and transparent? Inconsistent and opaque leadership and managerial practices are an anathema to healthy organizations of integrity of any type.

The meeting in Rome was far from a bust, for it set the conditions for both recovery and reform. These are significant steps, steps that may prompt other religions and civil institutions to follow suite. The only way the Rome conference could be a bust is if Catholic Church leaders do not follow through with action. What are victims/survivors and the laity now watching and hoping for? Deeds, not words.