

Activists' claims warrant papal response

March 24, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

A Catholic activist group called Bishop Accountability said this week that newly installed Pope Francis should take swift and public responsibility for mishandling sex abuse crises in his former archdiocese of Buenos Aires while he served as head of the Argentine Bishop's Conference from 2005 – 2011.

The group says the Holy Father, as an influential cardinal - archbishop, helped the church to coddle and protect (my terms) priest-abusers Napoleon Sasso and Julio Cesar Grassi, convicted of pedophilia in 2007 and 2008, respectively. Information about the cases is, of course, widely available on the Internet.

Bishop Accountability says Pope Francis never spoke with the victims of the abuse, offered assistance, or apologized on behalf of the church. The group also charges that church administrative officials under the authority of the then cardinal are guilty of cover-up efforts, and were never disciplined for their actions.

Just what is Bishop Accountability? According to the group's website, lay Catholic activists founded Bishop Accountability in Boston in 2003 after reports of widespread abuse and subsequent obfuscation on the part of American bishops surfaced.

To date, Bishop Accountability has reportedly amassed an online database of nearly 4,000 publicly accused priests around the world. Its online library boasts a collection of more than 100,000 pages of documents related to sexual abuse in the church.

Co-director Anne Doyle published a devastating indictment against Pope Francis's predecessor, Benedict XVI, shortly after he announced his decision to retire. Benedict, she said, was not only guilty of protecting priest-abusers and of cover-up during his earlier church career in Germany, but blew the opportunity he had as pope to aggressively tackle the sex abuse crisis.

Had Archbishop Bergoglio, the present Pope Francis, hidden the truth in the 1960s and 70's, says Boyle, "we would be alarmed. That would be sad and disturbing." Alleged shielding of priests credibly accused within the past five years, however,

"puts him behind some of his American counterparts, that's for sure."

Some Catholics (a few of them priests or bishops) may feel that groups such as Bishop Accountability do more harm to the church than good. Why keep beating the same dead horse about criminal behavior by clerics or church-related officials, and why the continued noise about the transfer and hiding of miscreants that was simply common practice until recent years? Why this constant reminder of scandal and call for transparency on misdeeds and dusty records and such?

The answer is simple. For starters, the damage done to the victims here has no time limit. Sexual misconduct may leave scars that innocent people carry into their dying breath. Thus, while a statute of limitations may exist for some crimes in a legal sense, there can be no such protection in a spiritual or moral sense.

The credibility of the church in the United States and elsewhere has suffered irreparably, absolutely irreparably, because of the scourge of sex abuse in our time. The emperor is wearing no clothes on this one. This is a no-brainer. No hiding of the facts, no protection for personnel guilty of this kind of wrong, and no refusal to turn wrong-doers over to police authorities was ever right in the past. We need to say so, and say so loudly indeed. To claw itself back to even a semblance of moral credibility, the church must show it is sincere and serious about reforming itself in these matters.

Bishop Accountability wants the opening of all files on accused sex-offenders. It wants the highest authorities in the church to order personnel who are credibly accused to be handed over to law enforcement. The group insists on a zero tolerance policy for sex abuse among church workers. I agree with these views, regardless of stains of scandal or shame for my church.

Pope Francis should realize accusations that he was wrong in the past by passivity or silence will not fade away like cigar smoke in the wind. The thing he must do now is face the truth and tell the truth. Delay can only do harm and bring deeper sadness upon all of us who want the best of all possible beginnings to his reign. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1) This column focuses on a Catholic activist group called Bishop Accountability that is 'demanding' that the new Holy Father in Rome apologize for being too easy on 2 shen-fu who were guilty of sex abuse (of minors) in his former city of Buenos Aires. Why is it often difficult for people in high positions to say "I am sorry for my mistakes," or to even admit to making a mistake?

2) Although "bad 'shen-fu'" reports do sometimes arise in the Catholic church, so do reports on 'bad teachers' and 'bad doctors' and so on. SHOULD the media reveal these kinds of news events? Does such news harm society or make the public feel pessimistic?

3) In some ways the question of 'bad 'shen-fu'" raises the issue of trust that young people put in people who hold a position of authority. A child-abuser breaks the trust the child and society put in her or him. Do you think sometimes about whether you can IN GENERAL trust people in positions of authority?

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