



Pastoral Reflection
by
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Episcopal Support as Pope Carries Out Reform

The initial shock, confusion, anger and frustration when the allegations against Archbishop Theodore McCarrick came to light were the focus of our immediate response. In our pain, we also turned to all survivors of abuse, whose burdens are greater than our own. We must confirm our commitment to them with actions even more than words, that we are resolved to respond effectively in every way to these offenses. I addressed this initial period of the past few weeks in my interview in the *Catholic Standard* and *El Pregonero* archdiocesan newspapers entitled: “Cardinal Wuerl Reflects on Next Steps in Wake of Allegations against Former Archbishop.”

Dear brothers and sisters, I bring these pastoral reflections to you as Shepherd of this portion of God’s flock, knowing that much of what we are discussing necessarily engages the bishops since it is our responsibility to provide oversight to the Church. As Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) noted in his August 1 statement on the McCarrick matter, he intends to invite all of the bishops of our country in discussions, “oriented toward discerning the right course of action for the USCCB.” That being said, I feel it is also important to share these reflections with you.

What is particularly disheartening, certainly for me, is the sense that we had already gone through this traumatic scandal in 2002 with not only the pain of priests abusing young people but the realization that bishops were not properly attentive to the dimensions of the problem. In response to this situation, the Bishops’ Conference gathered in Dallas, Texas and promulgated the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.

What we are now facing, in the media and from many of our people, is the question: “Has anything changed?”

The answer, I believe, is, “Yes.” We are encouraged by our Holy Father’s determination to hold accountable those who violate the obligations of their ordination, who go so far as to abuse the young and vulnerable among us, or to use their power and influence in a harmful way.

In his strong and decisive response to the allegations against Archbishop McCarrick, Pope Francis is leading the way in calling bishops to greater accountability. The Pope has demonstrated a keen awareness of the feelings of betrayal, the disappointment, the not-unreasonable anger felt by so many of our faithful people as these accusations come to light.

Just as our Holy Father has provided us with an example of how to begin to heal these deep wounds, we, the bishops of our country, are presented with an opportunity to reflect on what has come to light, to minister to the pain and to respond as best we can to questions that have been raised by this scandal, while moving forward to address in practical ways the very real and legitimate concerns for accountability.

I think everyone recognizes that words, good intentions, and new policies, while important, are not enough. We must not only denounce abuse and take steps to stop the abusers. We must remove even the appearance of cover-ups as we investigate and address allegations.

It seems that one practical and direct way in which we bishops can move into a more active posture is to work with our Holy Father, Pope Francis, and his representatives to ensure greater accountability at the level of the local episcopacy in addressing and reporting issues of concern. This can also be a time, as Cardinal DiNardo urges, that, “We, bishops, recognize that a spiritual conversion is needed as we seek to restore the right relationship among us and with the Lord.” It is an occasion to renew our own personal commitment to holiness, to constant conversion of heart, to generosity and fidelity, and to the highest standards of ministry – and exhort our brother priests to do the same. This obviously calls for that fortitude that has always been essential to fraternal correction.

On April 23, 2002, in the midst of those difficult days, Pope Saint John Paul II spoke to the Cardinals of the United States and emphasized the duties of bishops. “It must be absolutely clear to the Catholic faithful,” he said, “and to the wider community, that bishops and superiors are concerned, above all else, with the spiritual good of souls. People need to know that there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young.” He then continued with a strong sense of hope. “We must be confident,” he insisted, “that this time of trial will bring a purification of the entire Catholic community, a purification that is

urgently needed if the Church is to preach more effectively the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all its liberating force.”

As we, bishops, unite ourselves to the reforming efforts of Pope Francis, it is essential that we be able to address any allegations of abuse by a bishop, even if the allegation is later proved to be unsubstantiated. And here we have already a document to provide the essential components to this approach.

When the *Charter* was issued in 2002, the bishops also issued a “Statement of Episcopal Commitment.” In that statement we said, “If a bishop is accused of the sexual abuse of a minor, the accused bishop is obliged to inform the Apostolic Nuncio. If another bishop becomes aware of the sexual abuse of a minor by another bishop or of an allegation of the sexual abuse of a minor by a bishop, he too is obliged to inform the Apostolic Nuncio and comply with applicable civil law.”

This commitment may serve as the nucleus of a more effective mechanism to ensure greater accountability among ourselves. We can draw confidence from the recent corrective actions taken by Pope Francis. Our bishops’ conference could redraft the “Statement of Episcopal Commitment” including clear, precise, practical steps and an outline of who is to be informed when there is an allegation – or even when rumors become so consistent and persistent that they rise to the level of an unconfirmed allegation. Such a document, approved by the next plenary session of bishops, could effectively contribute to that accountability so earnestly sought by Pope Francis and by our people.

We have just completed a review of the *Charter*. It is time to review our “Statement” as well, and to propose a renewed and expanded commitment to its realization with practical and clearly articulated measures.

This review, however, must not be from a canonical perspective alone but also include an expansive theological and moral perspective. Our new statement must address not only our spiritual and moral obligations as bishops to the people entrusted to our pastoral care, but also the need for the fraternal correction that is as much a part of the life of the Church as her laws and procedures.

We must have always before our eyes the Lord Jesus, who became a child to sanctify children, and a youth to sanctify young people, and a man to sanctify adults, and to be an example to the elderly. He loved children, laid his hands on them in blessing, and promised woe to those who would harm them. The children loved the Lord as well. In one of Saint Ephrem’s hymns on the Nativity of Christ, we read of the Lord’s entry into Jerusalem: “The children cried out, ‘Blessed is he that has become a brother to us, and our companion in the streets. Blessed be the day which

by the branches gives glory to the tree of life, that made his majesty to be brought low, to our child's age!" (Saint Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity*, no. 6)

Let us pray that our children and all our people will see in us, their bishops, through our actions as well as our words, their brothers and companions.

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