

# Path for reform goes through Rome

It is not often when a meeting of all U.S. Catholic bishops is described as having a “consensus of anger.” But that is how one bishop described their recent fall assembly in Baltimore. Judging from comments, there was a lot to be angry about.

The bishops were angry at their own. After all, this was to be the meeting when the bishops were going to set standards for dealing with errant peers following the latest wave of sex abuse stories — Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick, the Pennsylvania grand jury report about alleged cover-ups and the subsequent flood of subpoenas and investigations.

They were angry at the media, which they felt were pummeling them unfairly for the sins of their predecessors, while ignoring or dismissing all the reforms that had been put in place since 2002 — the priests removed, the millions who received safe environment training, the improved seminary screening.

They were angry at factions in the Catholic Church who often seemed less concerned about the victims than about exploiting the crisis to attack bishops they didn't like, or attack Pope Francis himself.

And finally, only minutes into the fall meeting, many of them became angry at the Vatican. Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo, president of the bishops' conference, began the meeting with the surprise announcement that the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops had asked them not to vote on key proposals: One concerned standards for the conduct of bishops. Another was for a special commission to review complaints against bishops.

The Vatican request, received only hours before the meeting started, generated widespread disappointment among many of the bishops, who had hoped that the meeting would result in concrete actions that would show they grasped the gravity of the situation and wanted to hold themselves accountable.

Although much anger in social media has been directed at the Vatican because of this decision, it was not as boneheaded a move as some suggest. The action items were drafted in a hurry, and the Vatican had little time to study them. The Vatican's

defenders said the proposals had widespread implications concerning church law as it relates to bishops. While others took issue with this understanding of canon law, a number of U.S. bishops raised serious questions about the proposals in their open sessions.

For Catholic laity frustrated by yet more scandals, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the meeting was an extraordinary outpouring of pain and remorse.

The bishops told personal stories of meeting with victims and holding listening sessions with parishioners. Many were plainly furious at what they saw as Archbishop McCarrick's betrayal of his episcopal responsibilities. Particularly eloquent were some of the younger and newer bishops, and almost all committed themselves to finding ways to hold themselves and their peers more accountable.

Bishop Christopher J. Coyne of Burlington, Vermont, outgoing chair of the bishops' communications committee, was particularly blunt. "We are just as broken as you are," he told Catholics during a Facebook Live session, "but I believe we are moving in the right direction."

In January, the bishops will go on a weeklong retreat at the request of the pope. In February, Cardinal DiNardo will join the presidents of other bishops' conferences in Rome to discuss further action. Cardinal DiNardo will take to that meeting not only the proposals the U.S. bishops have drafted and refined, but the clear sense of the bishops that more needs to be done if they are to win back the trust of their people.

Rome does indeed move slowly, but the U.S. bishops, who are clearly feeling the pressure from their people, are committed to applying pressure of their own.

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