

Abuse response dominates USCCB plenary

The fall general assembly of the American bishops was meant to polish their tarnished image, showing them as strong, competent leaders bravely addressing the scandal of sex abuse, including policing themselves.

Instead the meeting turned into a public relations embarrassment for the bishops, presenting them as subservient to the Vatican and unable to reach agreement.

The assembly, held in Baltimore, included three days of open sessions, Nov. 12-14, followed by a morning meeting in executive session.

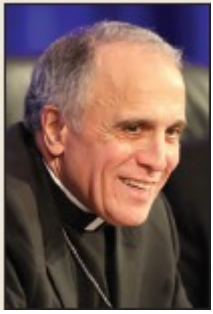
U.S.-Rome dynamics

The gathering began with a surprise announcement by Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, that the Vatican had asked that the USCCB delay voting on two reform measures until after a special meeting of presidents of bishops' conferences that Pope Francis will convene in Rome next February to discuss the abuse crisis.

Cardinal DiNardo said he got word from the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops only the day before the USCCB meeting. He said he was "disappointed" at the delay but described it as only a "bump in the road."

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Presidential Address Excerpt



The morning of Nov. 12, Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, gave his address as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“Brother bishops, to exempt ourselves from these high standards of accountability is unacceptable and cannot stand. In fact, we, as successors to the apostles, must hold ourselves to the highest possible standard. Doing anything less insults those working to protect and heal from the scourge of abuse.

“As, however, the events of this year have so clearly revealed, we must expand our understanding of protection and vigilance. Sexual misconduct must be more intensely dealt with in our dioceses and in our policies. The sense of justice founded on the people’s genuine instinct of faith will hold us accountable.

“The Church founded by Jesus Christ is one of hope and life. My dear brother bishops, we must take every precaution that our example not lead a single person away from the Lord. Whether we will be remembered as guardians of the abused or the abuser will be determined by our actions beginning this week.”

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But another setback, self-inflicted this time, came two days later when the bishops voted to reject a resolution calling on the Vatican to release documentation with a bearing on sexual misconduct charges against Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, who resigned as a cardinal last June. That vote followed a protracted debate over the resolution – decried by one bishop as a statement of mistrust.

Post-summer of shame

The Baltimore assembly was the U.S. bishops' first general meeting since the "summer of shame" that began with disclosures and allegations concerning Archbishop McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, followed by his resignation as a cardinal, the publication of a Pennsylvania grand jury report on abuse of 1,000 victims by 300 priests during the last 70 years, and steps by attorneys general in a dozen or more other states to produce similar reports. Anger mounted among American Catholics, much of it directed at the bishops for supposedly not doing enough to deal with abuse.

In fact, they did deal with it 16 years ago, at a momentous meeting in 2002 in Dallas that followed months of disclosures of cover-up in the Archdiocese of Boston and other sees. In Dallas the bishops adopted a tough new "zero tolerance" policy on the abuse of minors together with a child protection charter and accompanying norms subsequently approved by the Vatican as Church law in the United States.

Since 2002 the new policy and procedures have apparently worked, with the number of new, substantiated cases of sex abuse of minors dropping to only six – four involving the same priest – in the most recent year for which numbers are available.

Deep discussion

In Baltimore, the USCCB adopted a strong new statement opposing racism and took other actions, but abuse easily overshadowed everything else.

The bishops had before them a three-part response to the crisis focused largely on complaints about bishops accused either of engaging in sexual misconduct or covering it up. Its elements are a confidential hotline for receiving complaints; a new, predominantly lay commission to evaluate complaints and

refer them to the nuncio; and new “standards of accountability” for the hierarchy.

Plans are going ahead for the hotline, with the USCCB seeking an outside vendor to operate it. But the other two proposals – the commission and the standards of accountability – are on hold at Vatican request.

Observers asking why the Vatican wanted a delay turned for an answer to the address delivered at the Baltimore assembly by Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the current nuncio, who had met just two days earlier with Pope Francis in Rome.

Archbishop Pierre’s talk was long and surprisingly explicit. A key passage that may shed light on current thinking in Rome reads as follows:

“There may be a temptation on the part of some to relinquish responsibility for reform to others than ourselves [the bishops], as if we were no longer capable of reforming or trusting ourselves, as if the deposit of trust should be transferred to other institutions entirely,” he said.

“To regain trust it is not enough to simply preach words about responsibility, without living the difficulties of that responsibility, even in the face of criticism,” he added. “When it comes to the responsibilities, with which we are charged – with children and the vulnerable at the forefront – we must show that we can solve problems rather than simply delegating them to others.”

Although that can be read in various ways, it’s fair to ask whether things like standards of accountability for bishops, the proposed new lay commission and the existing National Review Board that oversees the USCCB’s response to the abuse scandal are instances of the over-delegating the nuncio had in mind. If so, there are larger issues of ecclesiology and episcopal accountability at stake here than at first meet the eye.

“We need to come out of this meeting with some concrete action so that people can see we can govern ourselves,” Cardinal Sean P. O’Malley of Boston, OFM Cap., who heads the Vatican’s child protection commission, told the bishops at one point.

He was right. And they didn’t.

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