

The time has come for bishops to face the abuse crisis

When the U.S. bishops gather for their plenary assembly in Baltimore in June, their immediate task will be putting in place a new system of episcopal accountability in dealing with sex abuse. Its elements will likely include a code of conduct for themselves, a hotline for receiving complaints and a framework for judging bishops who commit abuse or cover it up when committed by others.

The bishops were preparing to vote on just such a system at their general meeting last November when Pope Francis told them to put off acting until after his summit on sex abuse in February. Now the bishops should find it relatively easy to adopt a plan for accountability at their June 11-13 gathering, and the Vatican, one assumes, should find it easy to say yes.

And then the bishops will have put the crisis in the Church arising from the abuse scandal behind them, and everything will get back to normal.

Except, of course, that it won't. And arguably shouldn't.

As time has passed it has become increasingly clear that the crisis – although obviously involving the abuse scandal and the bishops' response – is a far larger matter that raises profound issues of authority, accountability and participatory decision-making. In Baltimore the bishops would do well to take preliminary steps toward addressing these matters by authorizing a feasibility study of a plenary council or regional synod for the United States.

Here we can learn from the Church in Australia.

Australian Catholics have suffered their own dark night lately. Morale has taken a beating from clergy sex abuse and

the conviction of Cardinal George Pell on charges of abusing two boys years ago. (The cardinal is appealing the decision.) But, nothing daunted, the Australian Church is pressing ahead with plans for a two-session plenary council in October 2020 and May 2021. Over 20,000 suggestions have come from 75,000 Catholics in listening and dialogue sessions hoping for a turnaround.

The idea of doing something similar here is by no means new.

Following the famous Dallas assembly in 2002, at which the bishops adopted a “zero tolerance” policy on abuse, eight bishops circulated a proposal for a plenary council to address the underlying issues brought to light by the scandal. They included Bishop Daniel DiNardo of Sioux City, Iowa – now Cardinal DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops – and Auxiliary Bishop Allen Vigneron of Detroit, originator of the idea. The proposal generated discussion but ultimately was not acted upon.

The time has come to revive it – not as a panacea, but as a realistic way of addressing urgent needs. A plenary council with voting participation by bishops, priests, deacons, religious and laity is the highest form of legislative assembly for the Church in a particular country. If approved by the Holy See, its decisions are law. There were three such gatherings in the United States in the 19th century, but there has been none since. And if a plenary council is not the best approach now, a regional synod, perhaps more appealing in the present pontificate, is a workable alternative.

The Church is an unusual entity whose fundamental structure is simultaneously hierarchical and communitarian. The tension this creates can be fruitful or destructive, depending on what Catholics make of it. The hierarchical dimension long has been dominant, but the time has come to give far more attention to the communitarian dimension than it now receives. The crisis is real, the need is obvious. The next move is up to the

bishops.

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