

Editorial: Buffalo, Church teaching and the role of a bishop

Let us start by stating truthfully and unequivocally: The Church is blessed with many good bishops. Such men have given their lives in service to the Church, as shepherds keeping watch over their flocks. Like the people they care for, they are trying to do their best to hold the Church together amid its many challenges by teaching and protecting the one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith. We are grateful for their witness, their service, and their love of Jesus Christ and the Church.

But it would be highly naive to pretend that all of our episcopal leaders are cut from such righteous cloth. Indeed, the Church has struggled mightily in recent decades because of a failure of leadership and, in many cases, because of the impropriety of certain shepherds themselves. No one who has followed the scandalous stories of former cardinal Theodore McCarrick or Bishop Michael Bransfield could deny this.

Another aspect of the sex abuse crisis are bishops who have mishandled reports of clergy abuse, who have concealed the truth and who have left their flock vulnerable, all of which weakens their ability to proclaim the Faith. In his recent *motu proprio*, titled *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, Pope Francis makes it clear that bishops can and should be held accountable for such misconduct. Pope Francis adds that bishops “above all” have the responsibility to help the Church move forward from the crisis, and this “demands from them a commitment to follow closely the path of the Divine Master.” This means, before all else, a commitment to the truth – both following it and telling it, no matter the cost.

Lumen Gentium, the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution on the Church, also makes clear the responsibilities of a bishop, saying, "it is the duty of all bishops to promote and to safeguard the unity of faith and the discipline common to the whole Church, to instruct the faithful to love for the whole mystical body of Christ ... and finally to promote every activity that is of interest to the whole Church, especially that the faith may take increase and the light of full truth appear to all men. And this also is important, that by governing well their own church as a portion of the universal Church, they themselves are effectively contributing to the welfare of the whole Mystical Body, which is also the body of the churches" (No. 23).

That being established, we turn our attention to the Diocese of Buffalo, where embattled Bishop Richard J. Malone, 73, is facing calls for his resignation not only from local media, but from some priests, two of his formerly closest collaborators and, most notably, the board of lay advisers who were tasked with helping him find a way forward after a series of events in 2018 revealed, among other things, that he had mishandled cases of abuse, left clergy in place despite knowledge of multiple accusations of abuse, and failed to disclose a complete list of diocesan clergy accused of abuse.

These revelations, in part, led to the formation and collaboration of a nine-member board of local, committed Catholics in Buffalo known as the Movement to Restore Trust. In April, the group announced the implementation of several recommended proposals to address the ongoing crisis that, as one of the leaders commented at the time, led to "a very hopeful beginning." That was then.

In a Sept. 5 news release, the Movement to Restore Trust called for Bishop Malone's resignation, saying that his presence was impeding the movement's mission for reform and restoration of trust within the diocese.

“Our decision to ask Bishop Malone to resign was not made lightly and as we have pointed out in the past, the sex abuse scandal in the diocese dates back several decades, long before Bishop Malone arrived here. But it is also true that he has not handled current cases properly and as a result, there is a substantial risk of harm to the diocese and the good works that the Church does in this region,” they wrote.

“In order for our Church to move forward, and for the good of the diocese, the time has come for new leadership.”

Bishop Malone, though, has opted not to resign. In November 2018, he said, “I know that there may not be a high level of trust right now, but I do believe that working with others who continue to believe in me, we can steer through this storm into a calm sea.”

The storm, however, is ongoing. In a 2019 recording, released to the press by his priest-secretary whistleblower, Bishop Malone is heard saying that, as a result of yet another scandal, “everyone in the office is convinced this could be the end for me as bishop.” He added, “It could force me to resign if in fact they make a story.”

If the primary responsibilities of a bishop are to be Christlike, to teach and protect the Faith, to provide good local governance, all of which is predicated upon a commitment to the truth, then is it not unfair for the laity to ask: Given all that has occurred, is Bishop Malone able to fulfill the obligations of his office?

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