

OP-ED for the Charleston Gazette

ABUSE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

I write on behalf of many distraught Catholics in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston who recently learned of the seemingly forced resignation of Rev. Mr. George Smoulder, Director of Catholic Community Services for the last 29 years. Deacon Smoulder's abrupt departure has been another huge loss in a string of stellar, committed individuals, dedicated to West Virginia's Churches who have been squeezed out of their jobs since Bishop Michael Bransfield's arrival two and a half years ago.

Cleaning house is common when a new Administrator takes over any office. There is nothing illegal or immoral about taking an institution in a different direction. However, when the institution is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the CEO is also a spiritual leader, Christian ethics beg more forthright clarity and compassion when doing so. Deacon Smoulder's oversight Board of Directors was not informed, much less consulted, and people have been told if they value their own jobs they will not ask questions or talk about it.

This is the same culture of silence and intimidation that allowed the sexual abuse crisis to go on for so long in the Catholic Church. Our Diocese is one of only a few across the nation that has not yet encountered enormous law suits regarding sexual abuse by priests. We have extraordinary clergy, both native and foreign-missionary, who have upheld the sacrament of ordination and their exhausting multi-ministries with outstanding grace, and far beyond their retirement years at the Bishop's request due to the small number of them. Yet, fearful, inane attempts to control have become a trend in Church hierarchy, resulting in devastated innocent victims anyway.

The very real and sickening abuse going on in our Diocese is the abuse of power and it comes from the very top. 1) Intimidating employees into silence knowing they can not afford to quit or be fired for saying something contrary. 2) Replacing competent, experienced, trusted lay ministers and deacons with already-overworked priests. 3) An underlying cool and dismal attitude toward women in high positions that soon has them slumping out the door in search of a work environment that doesn't deny their gifts and talents. 4) Even Jesus had 12 apostles while Bishop Bransfield has tightened his circle, and their lips, significantly. This is to say nothing of the extravagance of his own personal lifestyle or that which he unnecessarily lavishes upon Diocesan building projects with the millions of dollars in his stewardship (so contrary to a Jesus in sandals with no place to lay his head) while many Catholic school teachers make less than a living wage.

My hope is that Bishop Bransfield will not follow the lead of other American bishops by ignoring these types of major issues with "cover-ups" until caught with financial accountability. Since global warming seems to be happening everywhere but in the Catholic Church, my prayer is that the cool climate soon changes in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

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