

BISHOPS BEWARE OF LAY CLERICALISM

Anne Burke, interim chairman of the National Review Board (the group empanelled by the bishops to conduct diocesan audits), got into a public dispute in May with some bishops over the authority and longevity of the panel. Burke, who said she will resign from the panel at the end of June, maintains that the bishops have “manipulated” the group by seeking to block further implementation of another round of diocesan audits. But some bishops have alleged that the panel is inappropriately expanding its autonomy; others object to imputations of ill motive.

We released the following remarks to the media on this issue:

“The National Review Board’s audit of the dioceses, and the John Jay Report that was issued on priestly sexual abuse, were done in compliance with the ‘Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People’ that was authorized by the bishops in 2002. Most fair-minded Catholics agree that both entities did a commendable job. The question now, however, is whether there is an end line to this process, or whether the National Review Board will be instituted in perpetuity.

“It has been firmly established that the majority of cases involved in the scandal took place more than two decades ago. A consensus also exists regarding the condition of the seminaries: beginning over a decade ago, serious steps were taken in most dioceses to improve the seminaries. In other words, while no one maintains that progress can’t be made, it is a mistake to suggest that the problems that came to light in recent times are still with us to the same extent.

“Therefore, the bishops are right to be wary of any attempt on the part of laypersons to institutionalize their authority.

The sociological literature on organizational behavior is replete with case examples of committees that seek to drop anchor once the assigned task has been completed. More to the point, there is nothing in the 'Charter' that gives the National Review Board any degree of permanence. In short, the clericalism that helped to create the scandal will not be corrected by adopting a lay clerical bureaucracy."