

POPE PRAISES CARDINAL WUERL

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Pope Francis has accepted the resignation of Cardinal Donald Wuerl, the Archbishop of Washington. Ever since a Pennsylvania grand jury report was released in August, Wuerl has been under considerable pressure to resign.

In his letter accepting Wuerl's resignation, Pope Francis commented favorably on his service to the Church. "You have sufficient elements to 'justify' your actions and distinguish between what it means to cover up crimes or not to deal with problems, and to commit some mistakes. However, your nobility has led you not to choose this way of defense. Of this, I am proud and thank you."

Every word of the pope's statement is true.

When Cardinal Wuerl was Bishop of Pittsburgh, he was among the first bishops in the nation to institute a Diocesan Review Board to assess charges of clergy sexual abuse. In his 18 year tenure there, 19 new cases of alleged abuse were brought to his attention, and in 18 of them he quickly dismissed the priest from ministry.

Soon after being named Bishop of Pittsburgh, Wuerl removed Father Anthony Cippola from ministry. Cippola appealed to the Congregation for Clergy, but it sided with Wuerl. The accused priest then appealed to the Vatican Signatura, the Vatican's high court. He won. But then Wuerl stunned Rome by refusing to accept him back in ministry. On a second review, the Signatura agreed with Wuerl's assessment and Cippola was laicized.

What Wuerl did took courage, but he gets little credit for it. Instead, his critics focus on some aspects of the Pennsylvania grand jury report.

Like all newly appointed bishops, Wuerl inherited some cases that had not been fully adjudicated. Taking the advice of therapists who said they had successfully treated the offending priests, Wuerl gave them a second chance. In a few cases, it is obvious that the treatment failed, thus marring Wuerl's record. As always, no one blamed the "experts" for overselling their expertise.

This explains why the Holy Father said there were "sufficient elements to 'justify'" Wuerl's decisions. The pope is also right to note that Wuerl did not "cover up crimes" or refuse to "deal with problems." That view is supported by Nicholas Cafardi, who sat on the bishops' first National Review Board in 2002.

Cafardi, who is a Pittsburgh civil and canon lawyer, said that during Wuerl's time in Pittsburgh, he "never failed to react to a complaint of child sexual abuse." The same is true of Cardinal Wuerl's 12 year tenure as Archbishop of Washington.

Wuerl's spokesman, Edward McFadden, says that "not a single priest of the Archdiocese of Washington has faced a credible claim, and there is not today a single priest in ministry in Washington who has faced a credible claim."

Some argue that Cardinal Wuerl should be held accountable for the behavior of Theodore McCarrick, his predecessor in Washington. But Wuerl had no authority over McCarrick when he was abusing seminarians in New Jersey. Moreover, to blame Wuerl for McCarrick's refusal to abide by restrictions placed on him by Rome is similarly misplaced: No one at the Vatican ever asked Wuerl to be McCarrick's policeman.

The pressure on Wuerl to resign came partly from the left, but mostly from the right. Right-wing activist groups, along with normally level-headed conservative Catholic writers and pundits—this includes some priests—have led the way. The former are vindictive and lie with abandon. The latter

approach this issue the way some in the “#MeToo” movement have acted.

We just went through an ugly chapter in American history where totally unsubstantiated charges were made against Brett Kavanaugh. Yet the allegations are believed by millions of Americans, all of whom are angry about women being abused. So is every normal American. But when anger becomes a substitute for reason, it is easy to lump allegations together, tying them into a knot of supposed truths. This is a gross injustice. Indeed, it is pernicious.

This is what Wuerl has had to endure as well. He has become the scapegoat for Catholic conservative purists who are angry about the abuse scandal. Others are angry as well, but they do not approach this subject with childlike innocence. To be explicit, those who are familiar with the complex issues that the bishops have faced, and who do not insist that today's standards be used to judge decades-old cases, have a more mature understanding of the problem.

This is not an excuse for bishops who have acted irresponsibly from beginning to end. But most of the really bad apples, whether they be enabling bishops or molesting priests, are either dead or out of ministry. It's about time everyone acknowledged this verity and stopped looking for any bishop to scalp.

These carping conservatives love to take wide swipes at the hierarchy, patting themselves on the back for being so right. But purists are a problem in all institutions, and it matters not a whit what side they are on. Mr. Clean exists only in their heads.

Kudos to Pope Francis for being so kind to Cardinal Donald Wuerl.