

SHOULD THE BISHOPS LISTEN TO THE LAITY?

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on the meeting of the U.S. bishops next week:

On November 12, the bishops will convene in Baltimore for what promises to be an important meeting. All eyes will be on a series of reforms that address sexual abuse, especially as it concerns the role of bishops. The 2002 Dallas norms applied to priests, but not the bishops.

Central to the meeting is the role of the laity. There have been many calls by the laity over the past few months seeking to influence the discussion, and some have organized. In fact, some will be present when the bishops assemble, hoping to have their voice heard. They cover a wide range of views. Some are responsible and some are an utter disgrace.

Should the bishops listen to the laity? Of course. Should the laity govern? No. They should know their place: Their role is advisory. If the bishops want to extend greater authority to them, they can, but it smacks of arrogance for the laity to think that they are better equipped to run the Church than the bishops. Many of them can't even run their own lives without crashing on a daily basis.

Who among the laity should the bishops listen to? The ones who know their place. The first time I sat down with Cardinal John O'Connor was in December 1993. I started working at the Catholic League—our office was in the Catholic Center (the same building where O'Connor worked) on July 1, 1993. I had made some media splashes, motivating O'Connor to write about me. We had met briefly at a public event in the fall, but now he wanted to have a meeting.

Within five minutes, O'Connor asked me, "What do you need?"

"Nothing," I said. A few minutes later, he asked the same question, pressing me to respond. I said, "I want nothing from you. I came to serve you. I came to inherit your problems." He turned to his assistant, an attorney, and said he could count on one hand the number of times this has happened to him over the years.

That's why O'Connor listened to me. So have some other bishops. I don't have a hidden agenda—the Catholic League is here to defend the Church against wrongdoing. I hasten to add that we are not here to defend wrongdoing committed by the clergy.

Any lay person who wants to help the bishops deal with the issue of sexual abuse should be as committed to the rights of the accused as he is to the welfare of victims. Unfortunately, we hear a great deal about the latter these days, but little about the former.

In today's environment it takes courage to insist on the due process rights of priests *and* bishops who are accused of sexual misconduct. However, not to do so is a grave injustice. All of the accused must be considered innocent until proven otherwise, and there should be no exception for anyone who works for the Catholic Church.

There are serious juridical issues that will constrain the bishops from adopting measures to effectively address wrongdoing done by those in their own ranks. It is therefore not helpful to raise expectations of reform too much; canon law can be changed, but existing norms cannot be ignored. Any real changes must be embraced by Rome.

Bishops looking for guidance on which lay groups and individuals they should listen to should keep in mind the content of the proposed reforms and the tone of those making them. They should sniff out lay clericalism whenever it arises.

Beware of those on the right and the left who are proposing a mountain of reforms. Some are so intrusive as to be a menace. As a corollary, beware of those who pledge to “fix” everything. It should never be assumed that everything the bishops have done is in need of repair.

Indeed, the bishops need to be more vocal in touting their successes: the fact that in the last two years for which we have data, only .005 percent of the clergy have had a credible accusation made against them is testimony to the success of the Dallas reforms.

Tone matters. When the laity become lordly, look out. The most recent example is the condescending editorial posted on November 9 by the *National Catholic Reporter*. It does not advise the bishops—it lectures them. That this is coming from the same people who reject the Church’s teachings on sexuality, and who have long promoted a libertine vision—one that was adopted by many seminaries in the late 1960s and the 1970s, *causing* the sexual abuse scandal—makes the editorial all the more despicable.

There are those on the right and the left who are purists, men and women who insist that all the bishops are corrupt and should resign. No, those making such charges should resign. Sweeping generalizations made about any demographic group—indicting all of its leaders—are morally irresponsible.

Most of the bishops, like most of the priests, are good men. They need the support of the laity in times like these. What they don’t need is to be shouted at by self-righteous savants.