

Letter From Rome

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Has the abuse crisis torpedoed Francis' reform plan?

That is clearly the aim of those who oppose the pope. The question is whether they will succeed.

Robert Mickens, Rome, Vatican City, September 14, 2018

For nearly five years he never made it one of his major priorities, despite the fact that many of his admirers and unofficial spokespersons tried to claim the opposite. But now Pope Francis, who was slow to even pronounce the phrase "clergy sex abuse of minors," has been forced to face head-on this worldwide phenomenon and its institutional cover-up. It is arguably the worst crisis to hit the Catholic Church since the Protestant Reformation some 500 years ago. And everyone seems to know it.

Some people are quietly (and not so quietly) delighting in the hope that, by being pressured to devote all his energies towards resolving it, the 81-year-old pope will now have to abandon his broader and more ambitious program of radically reforming the Church and its institutions.

In fact, these people — part of a strange alliance made up of various Catholic traditionalist groups and political conservatives — see the sexual abuse crisis as the silver bullet that will help them achieve the one goal they've been working at the past several years — to discredit and neutralize Pope Francis.

Up until just eight or ten months ago, the pope, who will be 82 in December, had focused with a single-minded persistence on laying down the foundations for a bold Church reform. His blueprint came in the early months of the pontificate with the publication of *Evangelii gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel).

The document, an apostolic exhortation, was released in September 2013. It proposes a renewed vision of the Church, which is more radically wedded to the message of the Gospel and less obsessed with (mostly) human-made rules, customs and sectarian customs sometimes meant to clearly distinguish Catholics as superior to all other Christians.

Evangelii gaudium, and its pathway towards liberating Catholicism from any number of historical developments that are now outdated and anachronistic, has alarmed the traditionalists. They are horrified by the document's call to demythologize the papacy, decentralize decision-making and welcome people who live in "irregular" marriage-like relationships or fall short of the "moral" (read: sexual) norms established by the Vatican.

The real issues behind opposition to the pope

Francis' adversaries (and this is exactly what they are) ridicule the pope for professing that he does not have all the answers and should not be expected to single-handedly resolve all the problems and thorny issues facing the Church. They call him naive for opposing unbridled capitalism and insisting on a more equitable distribution of the world's material wealth and resources. And they accuse him of caving-in to political correctness and abdicating his duty of preaching Jesus Christ because he has made care for God's creation (and the fight against human-induced climate change) one of his major priorities.

More seriously, they mock the pope for his focus on God's mercy. And now their sudden and disingenuous crusade to combat clergy sexual abuse and its institutional cover-up has become a sort of nuclear weapon to attack him for not getting tough on bishops who failed to deal properly with erring priests.

They were piping a very different tune when the perpetrators and their protectors were the traditionalist priests and bishops that shared their churchy ideologies, such as disgraced Legion of Christ founder Marcel Macial and a good many others.

Please spare us the feigned disgust and moralizing outrage! Those currently trying to bring down Pope Francis make no serious or righteous plea for justice. Rather, theirs is a bloodthirsty cry for vengeance. And the first head they want on their sanctimonious platter is the pope's.

Most of the ringleaders of this effort to get the pope, and by any means possible, are also some of the most holier-than-thou supporters of the "pro-life" movement.

They claim to be in favor of life, yet do not see their contradiction in attacking Francis for formally pronouncing that capital punishment, which is also killing a human life, is morally unacceptable in all circumstances. But the rest of us can see what underlies their position. It is the vengeful demand that people must pay for their mistakes.

A concerted effort to turn people against Francis

Will they be able to take advantage of this crisis moment in the Church and derail Pope Francis' pontificate? It is a serious question and it depends on how much they are able to successfully convince people that the pope is part of the problem and cannot be trusted. Their aim is to persuade Catholics that only a new and clean pair of hands at the helm of the Vatican, that consolidates even more power at the center, is the only hope in resolving the crisis. But, in fact, it is just the opposite. The current pope believes that local problems demand local solutions. And this is true even for the clergy sex abuse crisis.

For even as we slowly and begrudgingly have come to the realization that this is a global phenomenon, we need to see that it has components and contexts that vary from one region to another. The right and best solution will necessarily demand regional responses that, in some cases, will sometimes be different.

For example, in traditionally Catholic countries such as Italy where the hierarchy still wields great influence and institutional and even political power, the response will necessarily be different from countries where the Catholic Church is a persecuted minority.

In the former, civic leaders and secular entities have been complicit in (and continue to perpetuate) the cover-up of abuse. In the latter, clergy abuse has been used as a further weapon to attack the Church.

It is hard to see how a one-size-fits-all policy dictated by the Vatican could be effective in every place throughout the world. In fact, that has been the approach up until now. And it has failed. But in order to reverse that, it will be imperative to further decentralize and restore the rightful authority that, over the centuries, the Vatican and the papacy have gradually stripped from local Churches, patriarchates and synods (more recently in the form of episcopal conferences).

The time is right for de-centralization of Church authority

Pope Francis has called all the presidents of the world's national bishops' conferences to Rome next February for a three-day meeting to discuss "the protection of minors." That's a very broad and vague topic. But the fact that he's having such a gathering is an indication that he understands that the sex abuse crisis is a worldwide problem (even if it has yet to be played out in public in many places). It is also an indication that he believes the entire hierarchy, and not just he and a few people in Rome, must decide together on the steps that need to be taken to get to the root of the problem and its prevention.

Will Francis use the February meeting to obtain a clear mandate for his desire to grant more juridical (and doctrinal) authority to the local churches and their episcopal conferences? That seems like a real possibility. But the pope is absolutely convinced that the deeper issues at the heart of abuse perpetrated by the Catholic clergy — whether that be an abuse of authority, conscience or sex — are clericalism and elitism in the Church.

How to effectively eradicate them will be much, much more difficult than punishing abusers and their protectors. It will require, as Francis has often said about all reform/renewal in the Church, a change of mentality. And that is a very painful thing that not only the pope, the bishops and priests will have to suffer through. It will be a purifying path for the entire People of God.