



## Holding Bishops Accountable

A year ago this month the McCarrick scandal rocked the Church in America. The aftershocks continued all summer long with sickening disclosures of priestly sexual abuse in the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report followed by publication of Archbishop Vignano's letters charging cover-up all the way to the Vatican. On into the fall and winter the same degraded clerical corruption came to light in one country after another. Throughout the world Christ's flock watched in dismay, disgust, and deepening distrust of their shepherds.

But the shepherds were shaken too--at least this one was. After all, Christ our Lord built His Church on the foundation of the Apostles' faith, and ordination as bishop passes that same Apostolic mission on to us. Never before had we realized how vulnerable it is to human weakness, ambition, and diabolic distortion.

As that realization comes home to us, so too does recognition of our responsibility as bishops to make whole and strengthen what betrayal has divided and weakened. At our Conference meeting last November we proposed practical measures to make bishops accountable for their own personal failings and for those of their brother bishops. These proposals, revised and clarified in the

intervening months, will be taken up again this month at our meeting in Baltimore.

Pope Francis lightened our burden in early May when he issued new rules for the conduct of bishops throughout the world. These norms mandate that bishops "establish within a year . . . public, stable and easily accessible systems" of reporting specified violations of chastity and/or authority by bishops, priests, or deacons. A report is to be "protected and treated in such a way as to guarantee its safety, integrity and confidentiality." The bishop who receives it "shall transmit it without delay" to the bishop of the diocese where the events occurred, as well as to the bishop of the cleric named in the report.

An allegation against a bishop is forwarded both to the Vatican and to the Metropolitan of the Province of the accused bishop. This point needs explaining.

A Province is a geographical grouping of diocesan bishops coordinated by a Metropolitan--that is, an archbishop. The dioceses of Baker, Boise, Helena, and Great Falls belong to the Province of Portland; Archbishop Sample is our Metropolitan. (The other metropolitans in our region are the archbishops of Seattle and Anchorage.)

Upon receipt of an allegation against a bishop in his province, the Metropolitan requests permission from Rome to commence the investigation. Once authorized, he may utilize experienced investigators to gather and assess relevant information from files, persons, and institutions as necessary. At the conclusion of the investigation the

Metropolitan transmits the documented facts of the case as well as his assessment of them to the appropriate office in the Vatican, which then issues a judgement. (This is the process which brought Theodore McCarrick to justice last year under the direction of Cardinal Dolan of New York.) If the Metropolitan is accused, the new norms specify that the case be entrusted to the senior bishop in the region.

It has been widely acknowledged that Pope Francis' norms lay down a good foundation for what we need: a viable structure of deterrence that will make it more difficult for Theodore McCarrick's successors to carry on and cover up the atrocious behavior that shocked our consciences a year ago. But deterrence depends on vigilance, and that is an ongoing task for us all.