

# The Church in Delaware

*Sister Maureen Paul Turlish - September 13, 2010*

Clericalism has often been described as the pursuit of ecclesiastical power at the expense of the laity. It is viewed as an elite caste unaccountable to the People of God.

It is this mindset peculiar to bishops and priests that renders otherwise ordinary good men so insensitive to the moral depravity present in some of their fellows that they will go to any lengths to enable, protect and cover up for them even years after the fact and in the case of ordinary priests renders them incapable of challenging Church leadership in the face of such evil.

Failing to protect the innocent from childhood sexual abuse all those decades ago and enabling further abuse by becoming complicit in covering up for perpetrators makes one wonder whether or not church leaders believe the words of Jesus in the Gospel.

Or is it rather that some do not consider Jesus' words binding if following the words of the Lord embarrass one, causing him to lose stature and authority in the church? Is it a choice between arresting one's advancement in this highly clericalized system and speaking truth to power? Is it for all of these reasons and more?

Apparently it was not enough for the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington to have failed to protect its children decades ago nor was it enough to have avoided accountability and transparency in its vicious opposition to the 2007 Child Victims Law with its accompanying two year civil window, something the 2005 Philadelphia Grand Jury investigation on the Archdiocese of Philadelphia was unable to move the Pennsylvania legislature into accomplishing.

After records, documents and depositions were produced by way of discovery and the civil trial of four named and four John Doe plaintiffs was about to begin, the Wilmington Diocese decided it was necessary to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in federal court causing unimaginable and irreparable harm to the already shattered hearts, fragile minds and tortured souls of these now adult victims of childhood sexual abuse.

This end run around the 2007 law on the very eve of the trial's opening was not the harbinger of the Catholic Bishops' long promised accountability and transparency that many expected.

Rather the diocese's action was seen as a transparent attempt to demean and intimidate victim-survivors and their families while preventing their cases from going forward in civil court.

Almost a year after the diocese filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy Judge Christopher S. Sontchi did something that was unprecedented in any of the previous Chapter 11 filings by Catholic dioceses in the United States. He permitted seven acknowledged victims of childhood sexual abuse by priests to speak in his courtroom.

Sontchi made the decision to let the seven speak in open court before ruling on a petition made by the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington which would have further delayed pending civil trials against individual parishes while the diocese continued its pursuit of a global resolution of claims against it.

A day and a half later after hearing from the seven, Judge Sontchi denied the diocese's request to extend the stay to non-debtor parishes and basically ruled in favor of the victims' cases going forward with few exceptions.

Can the diocese be blind to the fact that its actions in continuing on its present course are speeding up an already unprecedented erosion of credibility among the ordinary faithful who want to cling to the belief that church leadership is capable of telling the truth and being accountable for its failures in protecting children?

Negotiations with individual religious orders continue as they, like individual parishes, are not included in the diocesan chapter 11 filing. Formal mediation talks involving the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales continue in Wilmington in an attempt to avoid up to thirty-nine civil lawsuits going to court.

Is it not this hubris of leadership, this horrific abuse of power that has created the rough seas, that perfect storm in which the Barque of Peter now finds itself floundering?

The Diocese of Wilmington is a microcosm of the larger Church. Is there not the possibility that in acting justly and loving tenderly this diocese could still prove to be a model for justice and compassion for the entire Church?

Or did Jesus' words mandating the protection of children, the most vulnerable among us, include the caveat that his words were binding only if in protecting the children the cost was not too high?

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