

10-22-07 - Carolyn B. Disco: Diocese's new Web site hides some uncomfortable truths

By CAROLYN B. DISCO, The Union Leader (NH)

The colorful new Web site launched this month by the Diocese of Manchester (www.catholicchurchnh.org) is full of information about issues and activities in the Catholic church across the state. Unfortunately, the child safety section contains misinformation that seriously undermines Bishop John McCormack's commitment to transparency and truth.

A notation below the entry for the attorney general's audit released last January notes, "The report confirms that the Diocese of Manchester has complied with the letter and spirit of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, all articles of the Agreement with the State of New Hampshire, and the diocesan sexual misconduct policy."

Would that it were so.

That is a terrible misrepresentation of the findings that noted the Diocese did nothing to verify through documentary means who should actually be on the parish lists of teachers and volunteers working with children; that there was no printout of sex offender registry checks to verify their completion; that there were numerous discrepancies between dates on spreadsheets and databases, and the actual documentation in the files; that there was no formal mechanism to record and track the resolution of issues or non-compliance matters -- to name a few outstanding items. (See pdf pages 30-34 -- audit pages 29-33 -- of the attorney general's audit, available online at www.doj.nh.gov.)

The most serious charges involved Rev. Edward Arsenault's "word games," and a lack of candor and cooperation with the state's auditors.

When parsing McCormack's and Arsenault's statements, it is best to recall the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the noted Lutheran theologian executed by the Nazis: "There is a way of speaking which is . . . entirely correct and unexceptionable, but which is, nevertheless, a lie When an apparently correct statement contains some deliberate ambiguity, or deliberately omits the essential part of the truth . . . it does not express the real as it exists in God."

The reality betrayed by diocesan spin is evident in additional information about the interview state auditors had with Arsenault, the one that ended tensely after 15 instead of 90 minutes. The truth is that Arsenault engaged in a charade in which he forced the lead auditor to repeat a question from a second auditor that everyone had just heard clearly because only the lead auditor was allowed to speak to Arsenault directly.

It played out like this: In questioning Arsenault, the lead auditor asked a colleague who had actually done the field work visiting parishes and examining documentation if he had a follow-up question. He did and Arsenault answered. Then the colleague had a logical follow-up himself, but Arsenault refused to answer, indicating the colleague had to ask anything through the lead auditor.

So, the colleague repeated the question to the lead auditor, who in turn repeated the question to Arsenault. It happened again, and finally, Arsenault was asked if that would be the case for every question. Yes, he said, whereupon the auditors replied, forget it, this is over, we're done.

Assistant Attorney General Will Delker noted that the auditors and his office had reservations about changing an open forum where anyone could speak, but decided to be accommodating to the diocese by selecting one questioner. Delker said he could understand where someone would not want 10 people questioning him at once, but the process was not meant to stymie the free flow of information. Arsenault's attitude in the interview was a substantial concern to the auditors, who said the uncooperative "tone at the top" was a serious problem with the diocese's responses.

One also would not know from the Web site the diocese and the state differ over when an accused priest should be removed from ministry. The agreement with the state says, "Upon receipt of an allegation"; diocesan policy says, "During the course of an investigation," if there is a semblance of truth. The auditors believe there is additional risk without immediate removal.

Arsenault disputes that, and told the auditors, "I don't think the risk exists." He says accusations can be from disturbed individuals, and removal is unnecessary until after an initial investigation. One reasonably asks, how long might that take?

Arsenault said at his press conference that he refuses to speak about hypotheticals with the auditors -- therefore, no such discussion is possible. The diocesan attorney confirmed in writing that indeed Arsenault will not speculate, retrospectively or prospectively, about any hypothetical situation. End of conversation, apparently.

So, the rest of the story is much more than compliance by the diocese with everything related to sexual abuse investigations, screening and training.

Truthful communication is still beyond its competence.

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