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The End of the Sex Abuse Crisis

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The conversation about Catholicism and Pope Francis is about to be dominated by the topics of the environment and climate change, thanks to tomorrow's (official; there have been leaks) release of the pontiff's ecological encyclical, *Laudato Si*. But let me sneak in a belated comment on last week's news that the Vatican is setting up a tribunal to handle accusations of negligence by *bishops* in sex abuse cases, with coincided, probably not coincidentally, with the resignations of the archbishop of Minneapolis-St. Paul and his auxiliary over their handling of a now-defrocked predator priest.

When the Francis era began, I wrote a column and then a blog post arguing that nothing in his pontificate would matter nearly as much as the restoration of moral credibility, the lifting of scandal's shadow, and that Bergoglio/Francis would be judged above all on whether he took concrete steps to bring accountability not only to abusive priests (where the church had taken most of the necessary steps under Benedict) but to those bishops and cardinals who protected them (where it conspicuously had not). I'm not sure if the sweep of my judgment quite holds up given all the other issues that this very active pontiff has stirred up or may stir up soon. But the basic point still holds: The reason the sex abuse issue was a *crisis* for the church rather than

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Now, though, it seems like the church will finally have a mechanism fitted to those sins. Francis had already moved personally to remove a handful of bishops, but those moves probably personalized the process unduly, turning the pontiff into a kind of one-man supreme court, and inspiring talk of enemies' lists among (mostly traditionalist) Catholics skeptical of his choice of targets. Such talk will accompany the operations of the tribunal, too, no doubt, but a formal process will at least minimize it, and hopefully lend some transparency to the path from complaints to resignations.

Of course how the path will work is still uncertain; whether it will be confined (or should be confined) to problems related to sex abuse is also a good and weighty question. As with every Vatican response to the sex abuse scandal, the new tribunal promises to centralize power further within the church, which to some extent an ironic result given this pontiff's (at least rhetorical) bias toward decentralization and the importance of ecclesiastical "peripheries." And such centralization will no doubt have unforeseeable consequences: There may come a time, in this pontificate or another, where this move turns out to have implications for other forms of policing from Rome, other reasons for disciplining and removing bishops, at which point the list of people championing a strong hand in the Vatican may grow somewhat shorter than today.

But whatever consequences await the church in the future, after the long Lent Catholics (especially American Catholics) endured in the last decade this is a necessary, important, and I think morally-essential step. It will not end

sexual scandals in the church (those will never end), but it might write, at last, the last chapter in the story of this particular era of scandal-driven crisis. Depending on how you feel about Benedict XVI you can see it either as Francis finishing his predecessor's impressive (if belated) work on sex abuse or taking the crucial step that Benedict wasn't bold enough to take; both readings contain elements of the truth. But either way this pontiff deserves great credit, and the promise, finally, of *systematic* accountability for bishops will loom large in Francis's legacy whatever else comes next.

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