

(Image: Painting by Georges Croegaert, 1848-1923)

According to a [June 2017 Gallup survey](#), nearly half of US Catholics (i.e., 49 percent) had a “high” or “very high” opinion of the honesty and ethical standards of the clergy. By early December 2018, the number had fallen to 31 percent.

Most of the difference is probably attributable to the new reports of earlier cases of sex abuse (most, though not all, involving adults) that began to surface in the summer of 2018. Since new scandals are being revealed on a weekly basis, it’s probable that confidence in Church leaders will continue to drop. One can assume, moreover, that the credibility of Catholic leaders has dropped even further among non-Catholics.

In short, the Church’s public witness has been badly damaged and is likely to suffer further damage. The scandals will certainly affect the credibility of Catholic teachers and clergy when they teach about sexual ethics. But because the scandals also involve lying, cover-ups, cowardice, financial fraud, cronyism, abuse of power, and possible blackmail, they will result in a general loss of confidence in the Church’s authority to speak on any moral matter.

The damage is compounded by the fact that the abuse revelations come at a time when the Church is under fierce attack from the secular left. As the Church becomes more vulnerable, the attacks are likely to increase. The slandering of Covington Catholic pro-life students by the media, and the smearing of the Knights of Columbus by two US senators is just a taste of what is to come.

The abuse scandals are likely to result in more attempts by the left to push the Church out of the public square and to diminish its influence in other ways. At the same time, federal and state authorities will be tempted to exert more control over the affairs of a weakened Church. Meanwhile, more Catholics will leave the Church, more churches and schools will close, and more young men will be dissuaded from entering the priesthood.

According to Professor [Scott Hahn](#), the current crisis in the Church is worse than the crisis precipitated by the Reformation. Others have described it in even more apocalyptic terms. [Cardinal Raymond Burke](#) has characterized it as “possibly the worst crisis that it’s [the Church] ever experienced.” “Our Lady warned us at Fatima about an apostasy from the faith,” said Burke. “I believe there’s been a practical apostasy from the faith with regard to all questions involving human sexuality...”

Expanding on Cardinal Burke’s remarks, [Fr. Ladis Cizik](#) likened the crisis to the “final trial” spoken of in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (675):

Before Christ's second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the "mystery of iniquity" in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth.

Whether this is the "final trial" of the Church or only the worst crisis since the Reformation, it is difficult to see it as anything other than an extremely serious crisis—one that should evoke an equally serious response. But Pope Francis and the men he has surrounded himself with don't seem to see it that way. Although they may use words such as "serious" and "grave," their actions indicate that they don't plan to do anything serious about it.

Take the long-awaited summit on clerical sex abuse to be held at the Vatican from February 21-24. The fact that the meeting will only last four days suggests that it is only meant to reassure the public that something is being done. It's highly unlikely that the kind of reforms that are now needed in the Church can be discussed and formulated in a few days.

There are other reasons to be suspicious. For one thing, the summit is being billed as "The Protection of Minors in the Church." Yet the present crisis is not mainly about the abuse of minors. It's about the abuse of seminarians by priest and bishops, consensual sex among priests, and the cover-up of such sexual misconduct by bishops and cardinals. The February meeting has been engineered to avoid the root problems—one of which is the existence of a homosexual subculture within the Church. As one "well-informed" source told *LifeSite News*, the meeting is a "[masterpiece of hypocrisy](#)" in the making.

Another reason to doubt that the summit is meant to seriously address any of the above problems is that the man Pope Francis has appointed to organize it has a major conflict of interest. Cardinal Blase Cupich, let's recall, is one of the prelates [named in Archbishop Viganò's indictment](#) of corruption in the hierarchy. Cupich is mentioned in the Viganò statement as being "blinded by his pro-gay ideology," which suggests that Cupich is not the man you would call on if you were at all serious about uncovering a homosexual subculture in the Church. Moreover, Viganò suggests that Cupich was elevated to the position of Archbishop of Chicago precisely because of his ideology:

The appointments of Blase Cupich to Chicago and Joseph W. Tobin to Newark were orchestrated by McCarrick, Maradiaga and Wuerl, united by a wicked pact of abuses by the first, and at least a cover-up of abuses by the other two.

In light of these charges against Cupich, one would think that Pope Francis would want to keep him a good distance away from any supervisory position regarding the summit. Yet, in what can only be described as an in-your-face act of brazenness, Francis appointed Cupich to organize and shape the summit. In short, Francis is more interested in preserving a certain ideology than in preserving any semblance of impartiality. And so, the man who dismissed Viganò's allegations as a "[rabbit hole](#)" to be avoided is now in charge of guarding the rabbit hole lest anyone be tempted to explore its labyrinth of warrens.

As I observed in a [previous article](#), the gravity of the scandals needs to be met with an equally grave response. What might that be? Archbishop Viganò who wrote of the "grave, disconcerting and sinful conduct of Pope Francis" called on the pope to resign. [Phil Lawler](#) has asked the guilty bishops to make a public confession of sin and public acts of repentance. [Scott Hahn](#) believes that Archbishop McCarrick and others like him should be excommunicated. A [petition](#) co-sponsored by *Pro Ecclesia* (Switzerland) and *LifeSiteNews* has asked, among other things, for:

A declaration from the Holy Father stating that any bishop who has covered up for abuser priests will be removed from his office pursuant to the norm of canon 1389 CIC.

But this last request would put Francis in a rather awkward position. There is a good deal of evidence that Francis himself has covered up for or promoted abusers on several occasions both as pope and as archbishop of Buenos Aires.

- Although Archbishop McCarrick was a well-known abuser, Pope Francis lifted the sanctions against him and made him a trusted advisor and official envoy.
- Despite what the *Telegraph* described as a "string of homosexual affairs," Francis appointed [Battista Ricca](#) as prelate of the Vatican Bank.
- After the Vatican received evidence of sexual harassment of seminarians by Argentine [bishop Gustavo Oscar Zanchetta](#), Francis promoted him to the position of assessor of the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See (APSA) which oversees the Vatican's investments and its considerable real-estate holdings. And this, despite the fact that Zanchetta had also been accused of mishandling diocesan finances.

- An Italian priest, [Mauro Inzoli](#), known as “Don Mercedes” for his lavish lifestyle, was found guilty of abusing boys by an ecclesiastical court and was suspended from the priesthood by Pope Benedict XVI. Francis reinstated Inzoli to the priesthood in 2014. Subsequently, an Italian civil court sentenced Inzoli to four years imprisonment for sexual crimes.
- When he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio went to bat for [Father Julio César Grassi](#), who was accused of sexual abuse of minors and seminarians. To prevent the conviction of Grassi, Bergoglio commissioned a series of books that cast doubt on the victims’ testimonies. Although Grassi was eventually sentenced to 15 years in prison, the pope reportedly declined to meet with his victims or to remove him from the priesthood.
- A recent article by journalist [Marco Tosatti](#) provides a list of prelates who have been favored, protected, promoted or rehabilitated by Pope Francis despite their record of covering up for abusers. The list includes: Cardinal Godfried Danneels, Cardinal Roger Mahony, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor, Cardinal Errazuriz Ossa, Bishop Juan Barros, Bishop Juan Jose Pineda, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, and Archbishop Kevin Farrell.

Why does Pope Francis show so much favor to people who are morally compromised? [According to Tosatti](#), Francis’s behavior “leads us to think that the pontiff chooses or prefers people who have a past, and at least one skeleton in their closet.” Tosatti speculates that such people are more easily manipulated. But it may simply be that the pope prefers the company of people who have flamboyant lifestyles. Judging by his frequent condemnation of rigid, puritanical, and fundamentalist Catholics, Francis may simply feel more comfortable in the presence of “liberated” Catholics—those who lead daring double lives, flout convention, and wink at middle-class morality.

A clue that this might be the case can be found in a [book-length interview with Francis](#) by Dominique Wolton, the founder of *Hermes* magazine. In the interview, the pontiff makes a point of emphasizing that sexual sins are the “lightest sins.” Priests, he says, should not focus on what he calls “below the belt” morality, because the more serious sins are elsewhere. As a model of a good confessor, he mentions a cardinal who told him “that as soon as somebody goes to him to talk about those sins below the belt, he immediately says: ‘I understand, let’s move on.’” [The author of the piece](#) on Wolton’s book suggests that Francis’s “minimization of sins of sex—and of homosexual practices widespread among the

clergy—may explain his silences and his tolerance toward concrete cases of abuse, even by high-level churchmen he has esteemed and favored.”

Other recent popes may have had a more sophisticated view of sexuality than the average Catholic, but when it came to basics, their beliefs were not that different from, say, faithful Catholic parents living on a farm in Kansas. But with Francis “we’re not in Kansas anymore.” That line, of course, is from *The Wizard of Oz*. And appropriately so. With Francis at the helm, the Church is sailing dangerously close to over-the-rainbow territory.

All of which suggests that nothing much will come of the sex-abuse summit. We can expect some tightening of the rules that are already in place for the protection of minors. And we can expect much talk about the Church’s commitment to protect children, but very little about widespread immorality among priests and bishops. There will quite likely be some acknowledgement of those pesky below-the-belt sins, but the general tenor will be “let’s move on”—meaning, now that we’ve held this perfunctory discussion of the sex-abuse crisis, let’s talk about the really important issues such as world peace, global warming, the plight of immigrants, and the needs of LGBTQ families.

One can safely assume that there will be no calls for compromised bishops or the pope to resign, no public confession of sins, no defrocking, and no excommunications. In other words, there will be no real acknowledgement of the disastrous and dangerous state into which the Church has fallen, no firm purpose of amendment, and no real attempt at reform.

Instead, we will be encouraged to move on and to ignore the fact that the same compromised people remain at the helm and continue to set the course. In the meantime, the faith of countless Catholics will continue to erode, the Church will be seen as increasingly irrelevant, and the enemies of the Church will continue to grow in power and ferocity.

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