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Opinion

Lynn's trial may expose church's darkest secrets

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For the first time in this country a high ranking clergymen - Msgr. William Lynn, the former Vicar of Clergy for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia - will now be tried on criminal charges for putting children in danger because of his alleged mishandling of priests known or credibly accused of the sexual exploitation of children.

Up until now, while no bishop in the United States has been held criminally responsible for facilitating or enabling the sexual exploitation of a child, deals have been made to avoid prosecution in a number of jurisdictions.

This will soon change with the March opening of Lynn's criminal trial in Philadelphia.

What church officials in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia have done and what they have failed to do over decades has enabled and facilitated the sexual exploitation -including vaginal and anal rape - of untold numbers of children and that is only the beginning of the harm inflicted on the innocent. One has only to read through the hundreds of pages that comprise the 2005 and 2011 Grand Jury reports on the archdiocese to realize the truth of such a statement.

Ordinary Philadelphians have no idea of the depths of depravity that will be plumbed if Common Pleas Court Judge M. Teresa Sarmina allows testimony about prior bad acts at Lynn's criminal trial. In the meantime the Archdiocese of Philadelphia is doing everything possible to keep this from happening.

Remember, this is an archdiocese that has vehemently denied that it even had a problem with priests sexually exploiting children within its ranks when the magnitude of the sexual abuse and cover up in the Archdiocese of Boston, Mass., was exposed by The Boston Globe.

Nor has the Archdiocese of Philadelphia been able to get out in front of its sexual abuse cover-up scandal; not between 2002 and 2005, when it denied it had any problems at all, not in 2005 when the first Philadelphia Grand Jury report came out and it took 76 pages for Stradley, Ronon, Stevens & Young, L.L.P., to help the archdiocese put its foot in its mouth while confirming what many had suspected for years; and not in 2011 when the second Grand Jury report documented how little had been done in response to the recommendations made in 2005.

On Thursday, Jan. 26, Sarmina told the Archdiocese of Philadelphia "to be ready March 26, the first day of Lynn's conspiracy and child-endangerment trial, to turn over what could be hundreds or thousands of private records detailing Lynn's communications with church lawyers about sex-abuse claims between 1992 and 2004, when he was secretary for clergy."

The possible exposure of the depth and breadth of the hierarchy's cover-up of the sexual abuse of children in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia may very well eclipse that of Boston in 2002. Sarmina, on making her decision, should have immediately sent officers of the court armed with search warrants and security personnel to the offices of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to secure all the aforementioned records.

It is not too late to be done. The destruction of such documents cannot and should not be ruled out of the realm of possibility. Should those who have failed so miserably and learned so little since 2002 now be trusted to do the right thing and follow Sarmina's orders?

Remember, altruism was never the basis for the 2002 decisions made by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Holding those who commit the heinous crime of sexually exploiting children, enable others to do so and then are complicit in covering up such "prior bad acts," responsible is matter for the criminal justice system because it is society's responsibility to protect those who could not protect themselves.

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