

The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors

Thursday, the 4th of May, 2017

Meeting with Monsignor Robert (Bob) Oliver in his offices in the former Santa Marta overlooking the new building constructed during the time of Pope Saint John Paul II, was one of the most thorough and comprehensive we have had in this biennial visit.

Right off the top, Monsignor expressed his gratitude for the 2016 *Responses to the Questions from The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors* prepared by the Society Task Force under the joint leadership of Patricia Dugan and Victoria Vondenberger, with contributors Barbara Anne Cusack, Paul Golden, Michael Joyce and Ricardo Bass. He found the intervention thorough, expertly prepared, and very useful.

But, he wondered, what will come of it? The Commission is not a dicastery of the Holy See but rather an advisory committee to the Holy Father. Pope Francis will renew the Commission at the end of this year, with the expiration of the first three-year term of the members. It is very likely that the Commission will continue with the same mission, that of being a resource for all local churches, helping them fulfill their responsibility for the protection and safeguarding of children.

It can often seem that the work is moving very slowly, labouring under the weight of increasing expectations from victims, from victims' advocates and advisory groups, from bishops and major superiors, and the constant scrutiny of the media. And Monsignor Oliver spoke of the "avalanche" of new cases that is rumbling around the globe. The government of India estimates that 52% of their children will suffer sexual abuse before the age of 18: an estimated 200,000,000 children. The Royal Commission stated that 40% of all reported incidents in Australia took place in a Roman Catholic institution. The Commission is only starting to learn of cases coming from Argentina and Columbia.

"This is an entire generation's worth of work!" And, he lamented, what of the issue of human trafficking? Of abuse that is not just sexual but physical and/or psychological? How does the Church confront and encourage those places where the secular law has not been articulated? Or where there is little regard for children or the vulnerable? What of the perceived slow pace of ecclesiastical courts? Of a dearth of canonists trained not only in advocacy, but in the actual application of our law?

"Our work as a Commission is just beginning," he said, "and it's really about keeping not just our own children safe, it's about keeping *all* children safe." As a resource for all the local churches, the Commission needs to interface with the local secular law. It needs to focus upon prevention and not just prosecution. It needs to help in developing local guidelines, even as it continues to research and gather resources that are already in place – resources not yet known to the Commission.

What, we asked, can the Society do? He asks that we engage the work of thinking through issues in a scholarly way, just we have done in our *Responses*. Could we explore the current practice of the preliminary inquiry with new eyes? It oftentimes seems that the inquiry has the look and feel of a trial which can have disastrous results. What of the Pontifical Secret? When does it actually start? How is it actually used? How does it play out in the name of transparency? With the presumption of innocence? What are the implications of the principle of the "protection of one's good name" after a priest is found guilty?

He pointed out the need for permanent structures, including first instance courts, to handle our own affairs. Perhaps, he wondered, could the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith assign those courts to handle the majority of cases, leaving the more serious matters and second instance to the CDF? He pointed to the dire need for advocates and judges. Finally, he noted that we must never forget to hear, to *really* hear, the voices of victims. How are they to be heard in ways that move them not just toward justice, but to healing itself? How can they be an essential, integral, part of developing new strategies and policies?

Monsignor Stephen Rossetti stopped by for a moment encouraging us not to forget the enormous task the Commission is facing, and thanking us once again for the contributions we as a Society have made, and continuing to make with all of this.

We came away from that meeting feeling the enormity of the work at hand. Yet, rather than being overwhelmed by it, we have a sense of profound gratitude for those in the Commission singularly devoted to their work, being as they are, not just remarkable leaders for the Church, but a model for the entire world.



Father Bruce Miller, Monsignor Robert Oliver, Monsignor John Foster