

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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A CHRISTMAS WISH

This is a Christmas wish, not a New Year's resolution. A Christmas wish is a hope that something will happen that is consistent with a major theme of Christmas. A New Year's resolution is a goal I intend to complete. This is definitely a Christmas wish because there is nothing I can do about it.

My wish, hope, and prayer this Christmas is that some reasonable, doable form of accountability for bishops and pastors will emerge in the near future within the Catholic Church.

I know. I know. That's not a wish; that's a pipe dream and the pipe is full of stuff that makes you fantasize about things like pink elephants, Rudolf with wings, and an enforceable conduct code for bishops and pastors.

On the other hand, there are some reasons to censure Bishops. Here are two recent examples:

Bishop William Morris was Bishop of the Diocese of Toowoomba in Australia from 1992 to 2011 until Pope Benedict XVI forced him into early retirement because he called for a discussion about ordaining married men and women to the priesthood.

In October of 2013 Pope Francis suspended the German Bishop of Limburg, Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst, popularly known as the Bishop of Bling, because of his lavish, \$42 million dollar renovation of his residence and office.

Compare these two cases and you see the stark difference between Benedict and Francis. And how arbitrary the accountability non-system is now.

The main point here, however, is that any kind of clerical accountability is extremely rare. Ordination to the Episcopacy comes with a gold plated guarantee of immunity and carte blanche permission to run your diocese however you wish, with extremely unique exceptions. To a lesser degree, pastors have a similar open-ended, do or don't do as you please, free to serve or not serve as you see fit, management style.

Fortunately, there are many bishops and priests who minister with selfless dedication, exceptional talent, genuine faith, and a practiced love. Their ministry reflects the gospel and echoes the best impulses of the Catholic tradition. But even if they feel accountable to the gospel, and to the people they serve, they may not be accountable to the institutional Church.

Bishops, in particular, are free to exercise their ministry without a boss. I'm not saying they can spend 10 months out of the year lounging on a beach on the island of St. Thomas drinking frothy concoctions with little umbrellas in them. They are expected to do Churchy things within their diocese. But, frankly, I'm not sure what would happen if they didn't do them.

Bishops are directly accountable only to the Pope. That's how the theology works out practically. It continues the argument that Peter was the Rock, the first among the apostles, and the Pope is his successor as the bishops are the successors of the apostles.

Even if you support that whole line of reasoning, there is one enormous difference between Peter and the apostles, and the Pope and the bishops today. The ratio of Peter to the 11 apostles is 1 to 11. The ratio of the Pope to current bishops is 1 to 5000+.

In other words, the organizational flow chart for the Catholic Church shows over 5000 direct reports to the Pope. That ratio guarantees no accountability. As a result, any bishop who wants to can maneuver the system however he wants.

Where are the checks and balances? An appeals system? Consequences? Nowhere. It is a fertile Petri dish for rampant unaccountability, the e. coli of our hierarchical system.

I can hear the Holy Spirit now: "Listen, folks, I can and will cover for you occasionally but don't expect me to fill in for your stupidity. Put in place a sensible system of accountability, with appropriate consequences for those who can't or won't comply, and I will fix things when necessary. But for God's sake (and I mean that literally), your current status is all messed up. Straighten it out – that's why We gave you intelligence! 5000+ to 1, that's ridiculous! That's not even remotely what We meant about Peter as Rock and leader of the other 11."

See why I have my Christmas wish?

Pope Francis is obviously and quickly moving the Church in the direction of collegiality and subsidiarity, two cornerstones of Vatican II. But without a system of enforceable, clerical accountability the renewed Church will be built on sand.

What do you think? A pipe full of fantasy? Or a Christmas wish worth wishing?

