

## **CHURCH CHAT**

**BY**

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### **THE DIOCESE OF PENN STATE**

The firings of Joe Paterno, head football coach at Penn State, and Graham Spanier, President of the University, demonstrates, once again, an essential flaw in the Catholic Church. I assume you already know the broad outline, if not many of the details, of the story. But if you don't, here is one link that will bring you somewhat up to date: <http://news.yahoo.com/paterno-gone-questions-penn-state-remain-011614817.html>

My comparison with the Catholic Church is this: if Penn State were a diocese and Paterno a Monsignor with Spanier as his Bishop, no one would be fired. If the Penn State diocese were like some dioceses (Kansas City- St. Joseph, for example), Sandusky, as a priest, would be removed from active ministry (if the sexual abuse were public) or transferred to another parish (if the abuse were not public).

The difference between Penn State and a diocese is that Penn State has a governing board of trustees with the power to fire. The Pope is the only authority with the power to hire and fire a bishop in the current Catholic system.

In 2009 there were 5,065 Bishops in the world, each one directly reporting to the Pope. Other people also report to the Pope but let's just count the bishops for now. The only other organizations that have similar power concentrated in one person are brutal dictatorships. Even benign dictatorships split up the hiring and firing authority among more people.

No management company in the world would support a ratio of 5,065 to 1 as direct reports. It is patently and obviously ridiculous. And don't tell me that Vatican congregations and national Episcopal conferences monitor and control errant bishops. Isn't so. The Pope alone has the power to hire and fire Bishops. And, of course, he can't monitor 5,065 bishops.

The system itself is not only outmoded; it is inherently and inevitably defective, with predictable destructive outcomes.

Here's the real irony: there is no evidence that Jesus was that stupid. His management style was personal, creating relationships, not structures modeled on the Roman Empire. When his core message was misunderstood by the

crowds, he formed a small faith group of apostles who would get to know him personally and ultimately absorb his radical principles regarding life and death. He and his followers did not have 5,065 direct reports; he clearly was not that dumb of a manager.

The current state of affairs with the governance model of the Catholic Church is so flawed that it resembles the famous quote of Lord Acton in 1887: “Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” It is nowhere near the initial, Gospel mandate: “You know how among the Gentiles those who seem to exercise authority lord it over them... It cannot be like that among you...serve the needs of all.” (Mk 10:43 -44)

I do not advocate for the abolition of the hierarchical governance of the Catholic Church. But history plainly demonstrates that church hierarchy can be expressed in various ways. The first three centuries were light years away from our system of the last three centuries.

Vatican Council II introduced collegial styles of governance – synods of Bishops, national Episcopal conferences, subsidiarity, all with the potential of evolving into genuine decision making authority, including some possibilities for reorganizing those 5,065 bishops. Those Spirit-filled, promising impulses of Vatican II were deliberately smothered by a minority of some powerful, inside-traders who protected their personal authority.

The Pope could delegate the power to hire and fire Bishops to local leaders (some early bishops were chosen by a mixture of local clergy and lay people) and still remain Supreme Pontiff. It isn't God-ordained that the Pope must select all bishops. It is a chosen system, not a divine imperative. And, once again, Jesus was not a naïve and power hungry cult leader who would have insisted on the governance system we currently have. That approach is precisely what he fought against – to his death.

Our current hierarchical system is a choice, not a mandate. Other hierarchical models are possible and it is high time we pick up the impulses of Vatican II and find a new structure. Maybe even the Penn State system can teach us something.