

## Vatican document on the reorganization of U.S. Dioceses



### The tsunami of child abuse cases has devastated the life of the American Church

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The huge wave of child abuse scandals has dramatically altered the life of the American church. Not only from a moral point of view - as is obvious and right - with an examination of conscience that has been going on since the 90s when US bishops met in Rome **in front of John Paul II and, at the time, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Ratzinger. But also, and above all, from an economic point of view.**

The lawsuits brought forward demanding tens of billions of dollars in damages, which have enriched the victims of abuse from decades ago and the team of specialised lawyers in the field have forced several dioceses to seek judicial protection for bankruptcy. The first was a diocese of great importance, Portland, followed by others, including Spokane, Delaware and Wilmington.

**There is great concern in the Vatican. Not just because the United States, historically, has always made large contributions to the Holy See's budget, a budget which receives very little revenue and so is normally in the red** without the contributions of the dioceses of the various donating countries throughout the world, among which the most important are the U.S., Germany and Italy. The Holy See, however, also fears that economic problems could lead to repercussions on religious life and even on maintaining the basic living conditions for priests, especially pensioners.

**For this reason, the Congregation for the Clergy in agreement with other departments has prepared a specific document, which will be released after the summer,** possibly in October, that is specifically dedicated to the reorganization of American dioceses. The document is currently being examined by the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, chaired by Archbishop Francis Coccopalmerio. Obviously the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is also interested in the matter. It will provide guidelines on how the U.S. Bishops' Conference, and each individual diocese must act to rebuild its presence in their area.

A "classic" negative example of the reorganisation linked to the economic problems is that of Cleveland, where the Holy See has decided to send an apostolic visit, or rather, an investigation to look into whether the decisions taken by the Bishop Ordinary Gerard Lennon were adequate. He announced that 29 parishes will close and another 41 will be merged. The restructuring plan which will cut 52 parishes out of 224 is already in effect. Other cities in which word about closure has been heard are Camden, New Jersey, Allentown, Pennsylvania and New York City. The reasons that prompted the decision to close parishes in Cleveland have been the flow of population to outlying areas, the financial difficulties that have seen 42% of parish budgets finish in the red and the shortage of priests. Now this last point is questioned by the Vatican and the apostolic visit will serve to ascertain the facts. The Vatican has asked Lennon to stop his policy of savage cuts. In Boston, amongst many other controversies, he closed 60 parishes. So far the Vatican has not had any luck.

**The protests of the faithful against these cuts have been numerous and loud and have even reached the Vatican. This uprising inspired the creation of a document which is based precisely on the nature of participation at the grass roots level that the Church in the United States has, therefore giving an important role to the laity.** The philosophy is that of making a distinction between parish and the church. A diocese in difficulty does well to reduce the number of parishes, but must maintain churches and chapels where they exist, perhaps entrusting the care to families of the faithful who are willing to look after them and keep them open. Then on Sundays it is easy to send a priest to celebrate Mass. This solution would take into account various factors, the first being the singular issue of distances, **which in the United States are so large. Outright closure of places of worship often oblige the private faithful of the parish to take long journeys to participate in the holy Sunday service.**

A second problem that the document will take into account is the sale of and management changes at Catholic hospitals. The first recommendation is to preserve an ethical perspective in the case of a change in management. If this is not possible, then one can sell, but must anyway favour organizations and institutions that are ethically sound. Finally - and this will not be in the document, and will probably be part of recommendations provided to the individual bishops, there is great concern about the consequences of the payment of damages for the abuses. Some dioceses, such as Boston, led by the Franciscan Cardinal O'Malley that have been particularly affected by the abuse phenomenon, are extremely generous. **But they may run the risk of not being able to pay for pensions and healthcare assistance to elderly priests. The document will advise the creation of a guaranteed safety net for people such as these who are particularly vulnerable.**