

Impact of Difficult Behavior on the Province, on the Local Communities and on the Missionaries

Reflections of the Visitor of the Midwest Province USA

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Introduction

Thank you for allowing me to share a few reflections on how dealing with difficult confreres impacts others, especially the confreres of the province and the Visitor himself.

There are so many considerations when dealing with difficult confreres, including civil and canonical considerations. Sometimes we forget that the rest of the province — especially the local house — is also affected, and, of course, it is most easy to forget the impact such cases have on the Visitor of the province.

I hope that these reflections, which arise solely from my own experiences as Visitor, will be of help and support to you.

My reflections are divided into two parts: Part one: how dealing with difficult confreres impacts the rest of the province, especially the local house; and Part Two: how dealing with difficult confreres impacts the Visitor.

Part One:

The impact of such cases on the province as a whole and on the local house in particular

In just the last four and a half years, the confreres of the Midwest Province have become aware of the following misconduct cases: a case in which a confrere embezzled money from a parish and was publicly reprimanded and assigned to make restitution; a case in which a lay advisor to the province misappropriated province funds leading to his prosecution in civil court; a case in which a confrere posted contact information on a public homosexual internet site; a case in which a confrere forged ecclesiastical documents; about a dozen cases of various confreres, either deceased or gone

from the Congregation, being accused of sexual abuse of minors; five cases of sexual abuse of minors in which the confreres are still living with us and have been removed from public ministry and placed on strict supervision plans within certain houses of the province; and, finally, a confrere found guilty in federal court of possession of internet child pornography and now serving a seven-year sentence in federal prison.

Let me mention three challenges — and there are many more — which these public cases have had on the rest of the province.

(1) First is the challenge of learning to be public and appropriately transparent about these cases

This has been a dramatic shift from an approach where secrecy and confidentiality were the hallmarks of these cases known only to the Visitor and his council to an approach where the province is appropriately informed of the cases. In many instances, because of litigation, the names of confreres have become public through agencies outside the province. In some cases where the offense is public and restitution needs also to be public, I have revealed the names in order to avoid the idle gossip, which would result from a confrere suddenly leaving an apostolate or house. Of course, doing so involves a delicate balance in canon law always respecting the right of the confrere to his good name.

This dramatic shift challenged the province to answer the questions: “Can we as a ‘family’ learn to talk openly and appropriately about ‘family’ problems? Can we do so, keeping the conversation within just the Community and not sharing it also with externs, friends or those to whom we minister? Can we learn to speak the truth but always in charity?”

Since confreres cannot always do this without help and since this was a new experience for many in Community, I found it helpful to visit all the regions and houses in person, to spend time explaining why we had to learn a new way — a more public and transparent way — of dealing with these cases. In my words and actions, I tried to mirror how to speak respectfully, yet openly, about these cases, and I worked with the local superiors to help them learn to do the same.

Over the years, the results have been positive and humbling. I especially am struck by the lack of idle gossip among the confreres and how sharing this new information has not demoralized the confreres of the province. There have been difficult moments in learning this new way of communicating, but overall the province seems to appreciate this approach of appropriate and charitable disclosure and transparency.

(2) Second is the challenge of living with and even supervising confreres removed from ministry

It is one thing to know that a confrere is accused or guilty of serious misconduct, especially sexual abuse of a minor. It is another thing to live in the same house with this confrere.

As I already mentioned, in most cases of sexual abuse of minors, the offending confrere is dead or has left the ministry and Community. But there were five such confreres still among us who had to be removed from ministry and placed under a strict supervision plan (called a “safety plan”). A house of the province had to be identified as the place where these men would be assigned to live. A special superior capable of supervising had to be appointed. A team of supervisors to assist him had to be assigned and trained. The restrictions on these guilty confreres were not just removal from ministry but also restrictions on their comings and goings, their needing to sign in and sign out and get permission to leave the property, their not being allowed to have access to the internet without supervision, in some cases restriction of telephone access, no family visits or vacations without a supervising confrere present, and more. Finding confreres willing to do and capable of doing this kind of supervision is not easy.

Meanwhile, there was the issue of how to live common life, day-in and day-out, with these confreres when the rest of the house knew why they had been removed from ministry and were being asked to assist the supervisors by keeping an eye on them. The challenge facing our house of supervision was whether it is possible to live in any kind of ordinary fashion with such confreres under such circumstances.

Again, I am happy to report that over time the confreres under supervision and the rest of the house confreres have been able to find some “normalcy” in common life, especially through prayers together, including daily Mass, through common recreation, and through shared meals.

In particular, I want to mention the most helpful role of the senior members of the house. The senior confreres have led the way in reaching out to the confreres under supervision and keeping them integrated in the common life of the house.

(3) Third is the challenge of using these sad occasions to review our own lives

Each misconduct case also challenges all the members of the province to examine our own lives and our fidelity to our Vincentian vocation and our vows. When a confrere embezzles money, each of us needs to reflect on our use of temporal goods and our simplicity of

lifestyle. When a confrere is guilty of sexual misconduct, each of us needs to reflect on our integrity in living chastity. When a confrere forges documents in order to obtain some special favors, each of us needs to reflect on the role of obedience in our lives.

One of the most difficult cases in the Midwest Province has been that of the confrere who has been sent to prison for possessing child pornography on the internet. I have encouraged each of us in the province to look at our own use of the internet which is both a blessing and a potential curse. For all the good it can do and the helpful services it can provide, it also can become a means for illicit, sinful, and even illegal activity. It can become addictive and a substitute for living in the real world.

Unfortunately, pornography is readily available through the internet. Using such for our sexual arousal and gratification — regardless of our orientation — is gravely sinful, a violation of our promise of celibate chastity. Using such in any way and for any purpose contributes to the growing pornography industry in the USA, an industry which, in no small measure, is at the heart of the continuing destruction of our moral fibre as a country.

We cannot let misconduct cases be just about “the confreres in trouble.” Each case made public calls us to examine our own lives as men of the Gospel.

Part Two:

The impact of such cases on the Visitor

Thankfully, many misconduct cases should not and do not become public. They remain cases which the Visitor with his council must address privately. Doing so can have a significant impact on the Visitor. Again, let me highlight three challenges.

(1) First is the challenge of accepting that this really is part of the ministry of being Visitor

In the early months and even years of addressing misconduct cases, I tended to think of the time and energy spent on these cases as a distraction from what I considered to be my “real work” as Visitor. Eventually and with the assistance of other provincial superiors in the same situation, I came to understand and accept that dealing with these cases is very much part of my job as Visitor.

In fact, it is a central part of my ministry as Visitor. By dealing with these cases directly and investing so much time and energy in them, I allow the rest of the confreres of the province to stay focused on the mission. Hopefully I can help bring some measure of healing

to those whom we have injured and restore justice where it has been violated. And perhaps I can assist the confreres who are guilty to re-examine their lives and make amends.

The temptation to downplay and underestimate these cases and not to give them the time and energy they demand is a powerful temptation. Accepting that dealing with these cases is part of my ministry has helped me persist in addressing these cases.

(2) Second is the challenge of how to deal with confreres who are accused or guilty

For me personally, this is the most difficult challenge, that is, relating to the confrere himself. It is difficult since so much of my understanding of the role of Visitor is connected to animating and supporting confreres, and doing this is very challenging when dealing with confreres guilty or accused of serious misconduct.

When the misconduct is internal to the Community and does not involve civil law, I find it easier — I say easier, not easy — to admonish and reprimand a confrere. I do so not in order to be punishing, but in order to call the confrere to repentance and change.

When the misconduct involves civil legal processes or canonical investigations, as in cases of alleged sexual misconduct of minors, my role as Visitor is very, very difficult. How can I balance my desire to be pastoral and caring for the confrere with my obligation to make sure justice is served? How can I listen to the confrere's story and remain neutral, realizing that he may or may not be telling me the truth, that he may not be guilty as he claims or that he may be very guilty?

During the time of investigating the allegation, the Visitor can appear or seem to be uncaring or emotionless as he strives to remain neutral. And if, thankfully, the allegation proves false, it can be very difficult to reconnect with the confrere who may harbor bad feelings towards the Visitor for pursuing the investigation and not just believing the confrere when he claimed innocence.

It is no easier when the confrere is found guilty. Then the Visitor must impose sanctions, perhaps seek dismissal from the Community or ministry, and probably place the confrere on a safety plan of strict supervision. Again, the relationship between the Visitor and his confrere is likely to be strained and may even be hostile.

I have found no easy formulas for dealing with accused or guilty confreres. One action I always take is to appoint another confrere — perhaps the superior of the confrere in trouble or a confrere friend of his — to represent me pastorally. At least this way, the confrere in trouble can still feel connected to the province and even to me as

Visitor. Asking someone else to do what I feel is the proper role of the Visitor is not easy and certainly not ideal, but often it is the only answer and the only way to care for the confrere in trouble.

(3) Third is the personal challenge to the Visitor

Dealing with difficult confreres is draining on the Visitor, and the more serious the misconduct by the confrere the more draining it can be for the Visitor. When cases are multiplied in number and intensity, the Visitor can experience serious challenges to his own spiritual, mental and physical health and to his ability to fulfill the other obligations of his office.

Spiritually, I have found myself losing perspective and becoming disillusioned with the priesthood and with our Vincentian vocation. I have found myself asking, "Is everything up for grabs? Do the vows mean nothing?" In working through canonical processes, I sometimes have become very frustrated with Church bureaucracy and asked myself, "Is this really the way Christ wants his Church to function?" Mentally I have had to fight off depression, while physically I often have found myself too tired to exercise or eat wisely.

My ability to lead the province has suffered. I sometimes forget how much good is being done by the majority of confreres. I forget that I am called to address misconduct so that the rest of the province can be free to do this good. Caught up in the endless details of civil and canon law, I forget that the rest of the province needs me to call them to the mission and to inspire and animate them.

After four and half years of all this, I do not claim to have found the formula for how best to deal with this challenge. But I have learned the hard way a number of important lessons. Most important among them is to let others support me, and I am richly blessed with and surrounded by wonderful people who can and do support me. My Assistant Provincial has walked this journey with me; like Simon of Cyrene, he has not hesitated to help carry this cross. Certain superiors of the province, especially the superior charged with supervising confreres removed from ministry, have been great helps. My spiritual director and a therapist with whom I share what is happening and how I am feeling have kept me going. Last, but not least, I have found my fellow Visitors in the National Conference of Visitors to be the only ones who really understand what is happening and how I am feeling. We have formed an informal but very important support group. Talking over the phone with them and gathering together a few times a year, when we each share from the heart, have been a source of strength and hope.

Conclusion

I have mentioned six challenges: the challenge of learning to be public and appropriately transparent about these cases, the challenge of living with and even supervising confreres removed from ministry, the challenge of using these sad occasions to review our own lives, the challenge of accepting that this really is part of the ministry of being Visitor, the challenge of how to deal with confreres who are accused or guilty, and the personal challenge to the Visitor. Sadly, many more challenges could be named.

Fortunately, there are many graces for helping us address these challenges. The helps include professional insights and skills such as we are addressing at this workshop. The helps also include the many confreres and other people willing to support us professionally and personally. And most grace-filled of all is our faith by which we come to place these difficult situations within the Paschal Mystery trusting in God even in the darkest hours.

I hope that my sharing some of what I have experienced in the Midwest Province and how it impacts the rest of the province and me will be of some assistance and support to you. Thank you.