



*Pope Francis greets Bishop Gustavo Zanchetta.*

El Tribuno

OPINION | CATHOLIC CHURCH, HOMOSEXUALITY

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# Pope Francis's commitment to sex abuse reform is nonexistent. Here's proof

January 14, 2019 (CatholicCulture.org) – Early this month, the Vatican acknowledged that an Argentine bishop working at the Vatican faces sex-abuse charges. The story drew little attention from American media outlets, and understandably so: just one more in a long line of complaints against clerics, in this case involving a bishop whose name (Gustavo Oscar Zanchetta) was unfamiliar to readers in the US. But reporters who look at the story just a bit more carefully recognize it as a blockbuster: a potentially fatal blow to the reputation of Pope Francis as a reformer.

The facts, in brief: Zanchetta was appointed Bishop of Oran by Pope Francis in July 2013. He had served under the future Pontiff on the staff of the Argentine bishops' conference, and was one of the new Pope's first episcopal appointments. He abruptly resigned, however, just four years later, leaving the city without warning, at the age of just 53. At the time Bishop Zanchetta cited health

reasons for his departure. Today Vatican officials say that he stepped down because of administrative problems; he had developed a rocky relationship with the priests of his diocese. After a few months without assignment (during which he showed no signs of ill health), Pope Francis gave him an important post at the Vatican, at the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See (APSA), the agency that handles the Vatican's investments and its enormous real-estate holdings.

Late in December – in fact, on Christmas Day – the Argentine newspaper *El Tribuno* revealed that Bishop Zanchetta had been accused by seminarians of sexual abuse. The Vatican insists that these charges were lodged only recently, and had nothing to do with his resignation from the Oran diocese. *El Tribuno* disagrees, saying that the charges date back to 2015 and were the reason for his removal. Readers can decide for themselves which claim seems more credible.



Now why is this bishop's story so important?

John Allen of *Cruce* took the first step in explaining the significance of the Zanchetta case, noting that it is embarrassing to Pope Francis for two reasons. First, just as the Vatican is preparing for a February meeting on sexual abuse, here is another case in which the Pontiff himself has apparently protected – indeed promoted – a prelate with a questionable background. Second, the particular job that Zanchetta was given in Rome, with APSA, put the Argentine bishop into an office that is at the very center of debates about financial accountability. How serious could the Pope be about financial reforms, if he arranged a soft landing for a troubled bishop as the second-ranking official at an agency that has been criticized for making sweetheart deals, arranging no-bid contracts, undervaluing assets, and resisting independent audits?

Sandro Magister, the veteran Vatican-watcher for *L'Espresso*, took the analysis a few steps further. If Zanchetta had been persuaded to resign because of his administrative deficiencies, he asked, why was he given an administrative job at APSA? And why was he placed in an agency handling financial affairs, when the accounts of the Oran diocese were reportedly in a shambles? What *was* he doing at APSA, in a post ("assessor") that had not existed before his appointment?

Magister also probed into the seminarians' abuse charges, questioning whether Pope Francis had been aware of those complaints in 2017 when the bishop resigned, and had chosen to ignore them – just as, a few years earlier, he had dismissed charges against the Chilean Bishop Juan Barros; just as, according to Archbishop Vigano, he ignored complaints about then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick.

Even without the Vigano testimony, however, and even without the precedent of Bishop Barros, it is undeniably true that in this case, Pope Francis appointed a bishop with a problematical past to a very sensitive position. That fact would be shocking enough, if it were an unprecedented move by the Pope. But it is not.

Along with APSA, the Vatican institution most central to any bid for financial reform is the Institute for Religious Works (IOR), commonly known as the Vatican bank. In 2013, Pope Francis appointed Msgr. Battista Ricca as prelate of the IOR. Years earlier, Msgr. Ricca had reportedly brought a boyfriend along with him to a posting as a Vatican diplomat. Questioned about the prelate's past, Pope Francis offered his famous rhetorical question: "Who am I to judge?" Msgr. Ricca remains at his post at the IOR.

Both Bishop Zanchetta and Msgr. Ricca have been charged with abusing their offices and with sexual misconduct. Yet Pope Francis has found jobs for them at the Vatican – and not just any jobs, but jobs in which they are responsible for detecting misconduct by other Church officials.

Let me put it plainly: Both were obvious potential targets for blackmail. And they were put in positions where they might have ample opportunity to blackmail others.

The Zanchetta case demonstrates that Pope Francis continues to protect his friends and allies, regardless of his professed commitment to accountability. This one case illustrates how, since Francis was elected, the Vatican has actually moved *backward* on two crucial fronts: the fight against sexual abuse and the quest for financial transparency. In this pontificate, the cause of reform is dead, unless the reform begins with the Pontiff himself.

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