

SHOWERS OF MERCY

The pontificate of purges: ten years of defenestrations

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Each individual case is perplexing, but the total number is shocking. We are talking about the defenestrations of bishops by Pope Francis, which have marked his entire pontificate.

The latest egregious case was that of the Bishop of Tyler (see [here](#)), Msgr Joseph Strickland, who, after pressure from the Nuncio for his 'voluntary' resignation, was removed from his diocese, without any explanation being given. There is no record of any financial or sexual scandal against him, still less that he was guilty of heresy (which would probably have advanced his career); more simply, Strickland seems to have committed the crime of lèse-majesté, repeatedly taking positions not pleasing to the ecclesiastical *Politburo*: resistance to vaccines based on foetal cell lines, opposition to the blessing of gay couples, resistance to *Traditionis Custodes*. And then that unforgivable vice of wanting to continue to have numerous seminarians: 21 in training, in a diocese of just over 130,000 baptised and 84 priests.

A vice that Strickland shares with another bishop caught in the crosshairs: Msgr Dominique Rey, bishop of Fréjus-Toulon, in whose diocese priestly ordinations have been frozen for over a year, and an apostolic visitation is in progress. The solution seems to be on the horizon: according to Jean-Marie Guénois (see [here](#)) it would be an "honourable way out (...) both for Msgr Rey - who remains in his post - and for his pastoral work". It would be the appointment as coadjutor of the diocese of Fréjus-Toulon of Msgr François Touvet, Bishop of Châlons en Champagne, who would flank Msgr Rey with right of succession; a sort of diarchy for the four years separating Rey from the fateful 75 years. Or more realistically, if one thinks of what happened to the Bishop of Albenga-Imperia, Msgr Mario Oliveri, a freezing of the ordinary bishop's faculties. It is rather difficult to understand how a bishop's full power of jurisdiction over his diocese and the sharing out of this jurisdiction with a coadjutor can stand together.

But Strickland and Rey are the latest in a long series that, in our recollection, had begun with the removal on 25 September 2014 of the Bishop of Ciudad del Este (Paraguay), Msgr Roger Ricardo Livieres Plano, a member of Opus Dei, who had refused to resign under pressure from the Holy See. Several criticisms weighed on him: having taken in a US priest accused of abuse of a boy over 18, whose case was later dismissed for lack of evidence; mismanagement of diocese funds; and then the great fault of having wanted to erect an independent seminary in his own diocese.

Then came 8 November 2014, with the removal of Cardinal Raymond Leo Burke as Prefect of the Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, the Holy See's highest judicial body, to appoint him patron of the Order of the Knights of Malta. A post from which he was

dismissed on 19 June last, when he was not yet 75 years old, to be replaced by Cardinal Gianfranco Ghirlanda, who is 81 years old.

Next it was the turn of the aforementioned Bishop of Albenga-Imperia; on 1 September 2016 his resignation was accepted by Pope Francis, after Monsignor Oliveri had been flanked for more than a year by a coadjutor, who had effectively replaced him. Also on 1 September, Msgr Josef Clemens, for many years the personal secretary of Cardinal Ratzinger, was left without a post after Francis' decision to abolish the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

On 1 July 2017, the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Gerhard Müller, was dismissed at the end of his five-year term and, at his own request, received no other assignment. On 24 October 2018, record defenestration: the Pope removed the Bishop of Memphis, Msgr Martin David Holley, whom he had appointed two years earlier. The series of removals for 'administrative matters' had begun.

In 2018, the Argentine purges begin. First the Archbishop of La Plata, Msgr Héctor Aguer, was bade farewell not even a week after turning 75, and left homeless. Then it was the turn of Msgr Pedro Daniel Martínez Perea, Bishop of San Luis. In 2017, he took a stand against the openness of *Amoris Lætitia*; in December 2019, the Holy See ordered an apostolic visit to his diocese, and on 13 March the following year he was summoned to Rome to request his resignation. On 9 June 2020, the Pope's acceptance of his resignation was announced. No explanation, no possibility of defence. He too was sent home, unassigned.

Another Argentinean prelate: Msgr Eduardo Maria Taussig, Bishop of San Rafael; the intervention of the Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, Cardinal Beniamino Stella, forced him to close the thriving diocesan seminary in 2020 and in 2022 he was 'encouraged' to leave office, at only 68 years of age. The Pope accepted his resignation.

On 17 January 2019, the Pope decided to abolish the Pontifical Commission

Ecclesia Dei, and its secretary, Msgr Guido Pozzo, was sent, at only 68 years of age, to be the economic superintendent of the Pontifical Sistine Musical Chapel. An honourable post. Then it was the turn of Msgr Francesco Cavina, appointed Bishop of Carpi on 14 November 2011, who, after not even eight years, was forced to hand in his resignation, after having lived through the tragedy of the earthquake and having worked hard for the reconstruction; at 64, he was left without any assignment and to this day lives in his family home 'unemployed'.

No mercy for another 'earthquake victim'. In fact, 2020 was the year of the sacking of Monsignor Giovanni D'Ercole, who was also pressed to tender his resignation. Involved in the tragic L'Aquila earthquake (2009), where he was auxiliary bishop, he then found himself on the front line, as bishop of Ascoli Piceno, following the Amatrice-Norcia-Visso earthquake (2016-2017). Also in his case, no official explanation. It was, however, quite clear that his video, in which he showed that he did not like the continuous restrictions, due to Covid, on the sacramental life of the Church, did not go down well.

November 2021. The Archbishop of Paris, Msgr Michel Aupetit, was accused by a French weekly of being too attentive to a woman nine years earlier. French prosecutors opened a preliminary investigation for sexual assault against a vulnerable person. Aupetit, at the age of 70, submitted his resignation, which was immediately accepted by the Pope. He admitted that he had accepted it under pressure from the media, because, he said, a defamed man is no longer in a position to govern. Closure of the file last September, for non-existence of the crime.

Motus in fine velocior. So, in the last year and a half as many as six prelates have been overwhelmed by mercy. Msgr Giacomo Morandi, after not even five years as Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, took the train on 10 January 2022 to replace Msgr Massimo Camisasca in the diocese of Reggio Emilia-Guastalla. Probable reward for the *Responsum* on the blessing of homosexual couples.

9 March 2022: Pope Francis removed the Bishop of Arecibo (Puerto Rico), Bishop Daniel Fernández Torres, at only 58 years of age, after he refused to resign. The reasons are clear, but not publicly admissible: refusal to sign first a joint declaration by the Puerto Rican bishops, which affirmed the duty of Catholics to get vaccinated against Covid-19; and then a second declaration on the limitation of Masses in the ancient rite. Torres had also refused to send his seminarians to the newly approved interdiocesan

seminary. Not very synodal.

Then the same fate befell the two secretaries of Pope Benedict XVI: Msgr Georg Gänswein, literally kicked out of Rome and sent to Germany, without a posting; and Msgr Alfred Xuereb, sent as nuncio to Korea and Mongolia, with termination of posting just as Francis' Apostolic Journey was being prepared. 64 years old, unemployed.

The torpedoes of Strickland and Rey close (for now) the series. We should also recall the treatment meted out to Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu, the sudden dismissal of Msgr José Rodríguez Carballo, the treatment meted out to Msgr André Léonard with the suppression of the Priestly Fraternity of the Holy Apostles that he founded. The increasingly evident fact is that this Pope does not intend to take prisoners, despite being all about preaching mercy and synodality. Of greater concern are the forced removals of ordinary bishops, without the reasons being known, not only to the public, but to themselves. Another dangerous sign of a poorly understood *plenitudo potestatis*. And of a less than merciful pastoral of 'striking one to educate a hundred'.