

Thoughts on Recent Clergy Abuse Events

Two weeks ago, the Vatican concluded a four-day meeting on the “Protection of Minors in the Church”. Last Friday our diocese released a list of priests with credible allegations of abuse. I would like to offer a point of view and some observations on these two events as thought for you in shaping your own perspective on this crisis of our church.

First, let me be very clear: The sexual victimization of children by priests (or by anyone for that matter) is inexcusable. Church officials protecting offenders rather than victims is also inexcusable. There is much to be livid over.

The data released from our diocese indicate that 35 priests have been found with credible allegations. Of those, 26 were diocesan priests... the others were either priests from other dioceses or religious orders working in the diocese.

These numbers represent the entirety of accused priests since the inception of the diocese in 1868 – 150 years ago. The numbers represent less than 2% of 2,000 priests who have been trained and/or served in Columbus.

Data from the Department of Health and Human Services indicate that 20% of women and 15% of men suffered sexual abuse as children over the past 50 years. Data further confirms that 4% of priests in the USA have been accused of committing these atrocities. This is no less than any other religious denomination, is less than teachers, and considerably lower than what is committed in the US population at large.

Although these statistics are horrific, they are almost never about incidents that have occurred since the late 1980s. Incidents of abuse in the past 25 to 30 years are quite rare compared to incidents during the 60s and 70s. This is also true for other groups, such as teachers. Some argue that more recent victims (i.e., since the mid-1980s) just haven't come forward yet. This may be true, but so far, no published data supports this. The latest incident of a priest in our diocese occurred in 1992 (27 years ago).

The “Dallas Charter for the Protection of Minors” of 2002 imposed strict rules and reporting responsibilities on the Diocese of the United States for any priest accused of abuse. Unfortunately, these actions taken by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) did not go far enough. They did not address bishops and other religious leaders.

The *real* issue here is the outrage with our church leaders (especially bishops), whom many believe have been defensive and arrogant. People demand responsibility and accountability, and they don't see it happening. Clearly, some church leaders treated victims and their families very poorly. For many rank-and-file Catholics, who had put priests on pedestals, it is shocking to hear that some of these men have sexually violated anyone, let alone children. Add to that the Church's unpopular positions

on sexual ethics (e.g., masturbation, contraception, homosexuality, divorce) and it makes these crimes committed by priests even more scandalous.

During the recent meeting on the “Protection of Minors in the Church,” Cardinal Cupich, archbishop of Chicago, had a privileged position as an organizer of the summit. Cupich told the 190 bishops and religious superiors that new legal procedures were needed to both report and investigate bishops and superiors when they are accused of misconduct or negligence in handling abuse cases.

He said lay experts must be involved at every step of the process, since rank-and-file Catholics know far better than the clergy what trauma abuse and cover-up has caused. Cupich called for new transparent structures of reporting allegations against bishops and superiors, investigating them, and establishing clear procedures to remove them from office if they are guilty of a grave negligence in handling cases.

He proposed that metropolitan bishops, who are responsible for other bishops in their geographic area, be tasked with conducting the investigations, with the assistance of lay experts, and then forwarding the results to the Vatican for action.

As the meeting on the “Protection of Minors in the Church,” concluded, three initiatives were announced and have commenced:

- A pending document to be issued by the pope, which provides rules/regulations to safeguard minors and vulnerable adults within Vatican City State.
- The creation/distribution of a rulebook for Bishops world-wide, explaining their legal, administrative, and pastoral duties and responsibilities with regard to protecting children.
- The creation of “task forces” comprised of competent experts, to assist those Bishops’ Conferences that lack resources or expertise to confront the issue of safeguarding minors and dealing with abuse.

So, all that said, “What’s the point” in sharing these thoughts? The point is that the vast majority of our priests are faithful Servants of Christ, true to their vows, and living out the faith they preach. They are as horrified at the actions of some of their own as we are; but from a different perspective. Should we be vigilant? Yes! Should we be suspicious of every priest and/or cynical of our church? No!

Day in and day out, our priests are answering calls in the middle of the night to come to the hospital, offering daily mass and faithfully guiding us in our desire to know Christ ever more deeply. Our world-wide Church leadership now has an acute awareness of the problem, the need for action, and is deliberately moving to put concrete policies in place.

May we continue to move forward in faith, hope and love, as the Body of Christ, recalling Jesus’ words, “Behold, I’m with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Yours in Christ,

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