

STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

When the *Boston Globe* exposed massive wrongdoing in the Boston Archdiocese in 2002, Catholics were understandably angry. And when more horror stories surfaced elsewhere, we were furious. But now our anger is turning on those who are distorting the truth about priestly sexual abuse. That some are exploiting this issue for ideological and financial profit seems plain.

Every time a new wave of accusations surfaces in one diocese, not coincidentally we see a spike in accusations in other dioceses. What is not often reported is that the vast majority of new accusations extend back decades. For example, for the first quarter of this year, 80 percent of the cases of alleged abuse involve incidences that occurred before 2000.

In March, an 80 year-old man came forward in St. Louis claiming he was abused 70 years ago by a priest who has been dead for a half century. This is not an anomaly: the same phenomenon has happened in other dioceses. Unfortunately, too often bishops have been quick to settle, thus inspiring more claims. When \$225,000 is dished out to a Michigan man who claims he was abused in the 1950s by a priest who died in 1983—and the diocese admits the accusation is unsubstantiated—it encourages fraud.

A common belief, fostered by the media, is that there is a widespread sexual abuse problem in the Catholic Church today. The evidence is to the contrary: In 2004, the John Jay College of Criminal Justice issued its landmark study and found that most of the abuse occurred during the heyday of the sexual revolution, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. What we are hearing about today are almost all *old cases*. To wit: from 2005 to 2009, the average number of new credible accusations made against over 40,000 priests was 8.6. This is a tribute to the reform efforts that have taken place: 5 million children and 2 million adults have gone through a safe environment program. Indeed, there is no religious, or secular, institution that can match this record, either in terms of the low rate of abuse or the extensiveness of a training program.

Penn State professor Philip Jenkins has studied this problem for years. After looking at the John Jay data, which studied priestly sexual abuse from 1950-2002, he found that “of the 4,392 accused priests, almost 56 percent faced only one misconduct allegation, and at least some of these would certainly vanish under detailed scrutiny.” Moreover, Jenkins wrote that “Out of 100,000 priests active in the U.S. in this half-century, a cadre of just 149 individuals—one priest out of every 750—accounted for over a quarter of all allegations of clergy abuse.” In other words, *almost all priests have never had anything to do with sexual molestation*.

The refrain that child rape is a reality in the Church is twice wrong: let’s get it straight—they weren’t children and they weren’t raped. We know from the John Jay study that most of the victims have been adolescents, and that the most common abuse has been inappropriate touching (inexcusable though this is, it is not rape). The *Boston Globe* correctly said of the John Jay report that “more than three-quarters of the victims were post pubescent, meaning the abuse did not meet the clinical definition of pedophilia.” In other words, the issue is homosexuality, not pedophilia.

When the National Review Board, a group of notable Catholics, issued its study in 2004, the team’s chief, attorney Robert S. Bennett, said that “any evaluation of the causes and context of the current crisis must be cognizant of the fact that more than 80 percent of the abuse at issue was of a homosexual nature.” One of the members, Dr. Paul McHugh, former psychiatrist-in-chief at Johns Hopkins, has said that “This behavior was homosexual predation on American Catholic youth, yet it’s not being discussed.” By the way, the figures after 2004 haven’t changed—eight in ten cases involve homosexuality. Worldwide, the Vatican estimates that 60 percent of the cases are same-sex, 30 percent are heterosexual and 10 percent involve pedophilia.

Though the data belie the conventional wisdom, it’s hard to break stereotypes. The assault on priests as child abusers has become a staple in the arsenal of Jay Leno, Bill Maher, Denis Leary, George Lopez, “The View” panelists, and others. So it is hardly surprising to learn that a stranger approached New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan at the Denver airport last month saying, “I can’t look at you or any other priest without thinking of a sexual abuser.” Indeed, most priests I know do not dress in priestly garb when traveling—they’ve had to deal with similar instances.

Why are priests being singled out when the sexual abuse of minors among other segments of the population is on-going today? According to Virginia Commonwealth University professor Charol Shakeshaft, the nation’s leading education expert on this issue, “the physical sexual abuse of students in schools is likely more than 100 times the abuse by priests.” We know from the work of Jenkins, and others, that there is no reason to believe that the rate of abuse is higher among Catholic priests than among the clergy of other religions. Moreover, there has been a slew of stories over the past few years detailing the extent of this problem in the Orthodox Jewish community; some rabbis still insist that sexual abuse cases should be handled internally. No wonder Jenkins maintains, “As a result of the furious investigations of the past decades, and particularly the John Jay study, the U.S. Catholic clergy are now the only major group on the planet that has ever been subjected to such a detailed examination of abuse complaints, using internal evidence that could not have come to light in any other way.”

It would be nice if we could all get on the same page regarding the proper remedies. But just three months ago, Federal District Court Judge Jack B. Weinstein took a “compassionate” view toward a man found guilty of collecting thousands of explicit pictures of children, as young as three, that he downloaded from a child porn website. Weinstein slammed existing legal penalties for the crime, saying, “We’re destroying lives unnecessarily. At the most, they should be receiving treatment and supervision.”

How often has the Church been ripped for following the advice of psychiatrists who thought they could “fix” molesters? To be sure, that was the zeitgeist several decades ago, as virtually every institution and profession can testify. Indeed, the punitive approach so favored today would have been cause for condemnation at that time had it been followed. Interestingly, a report on this situation in Ireland correctly concluded that had more bishops followed canon law, instead of seeking a more “compassionate” strategy, much of the problem could have been avoided.

The real damage done by the therapeutic approach is that it fostered the phenomenon of reassigning priests after they were treated. The exact same thing happened in the teaching profession. Indeed, moving treated teachers to new school districts is so common that it is called “passing the trash.” While moving treated priests to new parishes is no longer tolerated, the *New York Times* found that the practice of moving abusers around who work in New York’s state-run homes is commonplace.

Mandatory reporting of sexual crimes is not uniform in law or practice. In New York State, several attempts to blanket the clergy and other professionals have been met with resistance. Not by the bishops—but by Family Planning Advocates (the lobbying arm of Planned Parenthood) and the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU). Planned Parenthood counselors routinely learn about cases of statutory rape; mandatory reporting would obviously work against their clients’ interests. Even where mandatory reporting is law, such as in the state-run homes, it is seldom followed (more than 95 percent of the time the authorities are not contacted).

Calls for suspending the statute of limitations have regularly been made. But even if one sets aside the fundamental due process reasons why such laws exist, what is most disturbing about this issue is that they almost never apply to public employees. Unless explicitly stated, laws that revise the statute of limitations leave untouched those in education: they are protected by “sovereign immunity,” making transparent what the real goal is—“getting the priests.” And when proposed changes apply to teachers, in every state where this has happened, teachers’ unions and school superintendents have organized to register their objections. Why, then, should bishops who protest these revisions be criticized for doing so?

When the bishops met in Dallas in 2002 to consider reforms, panic gripped the conference. If there was one cleric who saw what the rush to judgment would do to the rights of priests it was the late Cardinal Avery Dulles. Sadly, events have proven him right. Quite frankly, it is more acceptable in our society today to defend the rights of Gitmo detainees than Catholic priests.

Grand juries are launched with the specific directive of investigating “sexual abuse of minors by individuals associated with religious organizations and denominations,” but then quickly evolve into the single-minded pursuit of priests; in Philadelphia, those who initially reviewed the accusations weren’t even called to testify. The unseemly practice of attorneys searching for new “victims” in bars and prisons is a disgrace. Just as sick is the sight of attorneys advertising for alleged victims of priests, but refusing to represent those abused by others. It has gotten so bad that dioceses are now being sued for “wrongful death” in cases where an alleged victim kills himself after his accusation was found wanting. And when AP runs a story on the “scandal” of allowing ex-priests to go unmonitored—as if someone is monitoring non-priest abusers—the bias shines through.

There is a huge difference between an accusation, a credible accusation, a substantiated accusation and a finding of guilt. But not when it applies to priests. I once had a female reporter lambaste me in my office when I expressed my opposition to proposals calling for all dioceses to publish the names of accused priests. I then asked her for her boss’ name and phone number. Startled, she asked why. “Because I want to press charges against you for sexually harassing me,” I intoned, “and then I want to see your name posted on your employer’s website.” She got the point.

BishopAccountabilty.org is accessed by reporters and lawyers for information on priestly sexual abuse, though the standards it uses cannot pass the smell test. It admits that the database “is based solely on allegations reported publicly” and that it “does not confirm the veracity of any actual allegation.” Swell. Furthermore, it says that “If an individual is ‘cleared’ or ‘exonerated’ by an internal church investigation and/or a diocesan review board decision, the individual remains in the database.” Ditto for cases where a priest faces an allegation for an act which occurred after he left the Catholic Church; even lawsuits against the dead are listed. There is no other group in the U.S. which is subjected to such gross unfairness. No wonder wildly exaggerated claims have been made based off of such collected “evidence.”

Perhaps no reform made in Dallas has proven to be more intrinsically dangerous than demands for “zero tolerance.” It all sounds so macho, but priests on the ground know first-hand what it means. Obviously, there should be no wiggle room in the most serious cases, but when priests are sued for “emotional” abuse, or violating “boundary issues,” the door is left wide open for exploitation. Dulles got it right when he said that “A priest who uttered an inappropriate word or made a single imprudent gesture is treated in the same way as a serial rapist.” Even worse, we now have the specter of a priest being suspended because a woman heard a kid in a playground call him a pedophile; she promptly called the cops. Joe Maher, president of Opus Bono Sacerdotii, a group that monitors the incidence of falsely accused priests, says that “at least a thousand priests...have been removed and remain out of public ministry because of unproven accusations.”

Because the Catholic Church is often criticized for not following a “zero tolerance” policy, the Catholic League did some investigation of its own. Here’s what we found. Almost every media outlet, teachers’ union and religious organization we examined does not have a “zero tolerance” policy in place for sexual misconduct (or any other offense). The few that do make no mention of mandatory reporting.

These organizations are not wrong for not having the same kind of policy that the Catholic Church has. The *New York Times* seems to understand this matter when applied to schools. In an editorial titled, “The Trouble With ‘Zero Tolerance,’” it noted that schools which have adopted these policies have created conditions where children are being “arrested for profanity, talking back, shoving matches and other behavior that would once have been resolved with detention or meetings with the students’ parents.” The NYCLU agreed saying, “De facto zero tolerance causes wrongful arrests, searches and suspensions of students in too many of the city’s neediest schools.” Yet as recently as April 2, the *Times* issued another editorial insisting the bishops follow this flawed policy.

No amount of reform will ever satisfy some. Attorneys like Jeffrey Anderson, and his well-greased friends at SNAP, a professional victims’ group, are dogmatic in their convictions; their hatred of the Catholic Church is palpable. Similarly, when others tell the bishops we’re going to “sue the s*** out of you,” and inform them that the goal is to put an “out of business” sign in front of every parish, school and charitable center, it is evident that the Church needs to fight back with greater vigor.

What accounts for the relentless attacks on the Church? Let’s face it: if its teachings were pro-abortion, pro-gay marriage and pro-women clergy, the dogs would have been called off years ago.

The British atheist Richard Dawkins is no fan of Catholicism. But he is honest enough to say that the Catholic Church “has been unfairly demonized over the issue, especially in Ireland and America.” Now if Dawkins gets it, why can’t others?



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