

CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE CHURCH  
TODAY:  
TURNING TALK INTO ACTION

*Voice of the Faithful* Annual Gathering

April 5, 2014, Hartford CT

Thomas P. Doyle, J.C.D., C.A.D.C.

# CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE CHURCH TODAY: TURNING TALK INTO ACTION

## Where the Institutional Church is Today

*Sources of information:* media reports, official church statements, court records, official and private reports, information from victims, bishops statements, bishops' actions

1. The so-called sex abuse “crisis” or “scandal” is thirty years old this year. My authority for any conclusions or opinions I offer rests partially on the fact that I have been directly involved for all of those thirty years. I will admit today that in the summer of 1985 and the winter of 1985 I would not have been able to imagine what would unfold in the following decades. I certainly had no idea of the impact my own experience would have on my relationship to the institutional Church, to my belief system and to my concept of the Higher Power.
2. Before considering the transition from discussion to action, it is essential to consider the foundation for action and the reasons why it is essential to the life and growth of the Church. By “Church” I do not mean the very limited institutional dimension but the far more dynamic reality, the *People of God*.
3. The past three decades have revealed much about clergy sexual abuse but even more important, they have revealed much about the institutional Catholic Church and the tension between *it* and the Body of Christ.
  - a. Sex abuse of minors by clerics of all ranks is an historical constant. There is sexual abuse of minors by clerics in every geographic area where the church exists.
  - b. The extent of revelations of sex abuse has been commensurate with the willingness of victims to seek relief in the civil courts and in the capacity and willingness of the courts to respond to the victims with objectivity.
  - c. Sex abuse has been actively denied and covered up by bishops, religious superiors and popes since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The bishops' negative and inadequate response to reports of abuse and to suspected abusers has been uniform and consistent throughout the international scope of the Church.
  - d. The institutional Church as a whole and bishops in general, including the bishops of Rome, have never given any credible indication that they understood the nature and gravity of the spiritual damage done to victims.
  - e. Likewise the Church and bishops in general have given no credible evidence to date of an ability and willingness to make the pastoral welfare, i.e., compassionate care and support, the priority in their response.
  - f. Bishops remain on the defensive. Their responses have been administrative and bureaucratic. The bishops in the U.S. have expended significant monetary and human resources on programs and policies to protect children in the future.

- g. No effort by any diocese has been proactive or initiated independent of pressure from the media, the courts and angry laypersons. In other words, all of the programs and other “advances” referenced by bishops and by Pope Francis have been forced on the institutional Church since the public revelations and nearly all have been instituted since 2002.
  - h. Attorneys for the institutional Church continue to exert great influence over bishops. Victims are treated with disdain if they decide to resort to the civil courts for justice and recognition. Some examples: *Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Kansas City, Philadelphia, St. Paul, and Denver*.
  - i. The archetype of revictimization and institutional abuse is George Pell formerly of Sydney.
  - j. There are few known examples of bishops who have exhibited sincere pastoral concern for victims. Perfunctory visits at the bishop’s office and penitential liturgies are not examples of pastoral concern.
  - k. The overall costs for the U.S. Church between 1986 and 2014 are slightly over 3 billion dollars. This figure includes known settlements, jury awards and attorneys’ costs for the Church. The actual amount expended on attorneys is unknown but reaches into the hundreds of millions of dollars. For example the diocese of Kansas City took 200 depositions in one case (Teman) and ended up settling for \$2.25 million. In Sydney the archdiocese spent \$1 million fighting John Ellis who asked for \$100,000.
  - l. The Church in general continues to favor the clerics over the victims. This is a by-product of the clericalism mentality and magical definition of the priesthood. The recent decision by the Italian Bishops’ Conference is an example of the attitude.
4. The U.S. bishops continue to treat victims with disdain at the very least. This is evidenced by
- encouraging attorneys to go to extreme lengths to defeat victims who challenge the diocese in court. This holds true for religious communities as well, e.g., California Franciscans, Jesuits, Salesians and Christian Brothers.
  - refusing to recognize or communicate with SNAP or any other victims group
  - Expending vast monetary resources and engaging in dishonest campaigns to defeat any legislative advances for victims of child abuse in general
  - Refusing to publicly disclose the names of known predators and putting known predators back in some form of ministry
  - Threatening victims with lawsuits if they break confidentiality clauses in settlement agreements

- Counter suing victims
  - Failing to muzzle Bill Donohue
5. There are no clear signs of hope that the institutional Church is beginning to comprehend the horrendous nature of sexual abuse by clerics. There has been a great deal of rhetoric and public relations bluster but there is little if anything to show sincerity. To date no bishop has been subjected to any penal process or penal sanctions for sexually abusing minors or adults himself or for their failure to remove known perpetrators.
  6. The recent appointment of eight members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors is not a sign of hope for a variety of reasons. Everything they need to know has already been well researched especially in the U.S.
  7. What Have We Learned About the Church. The past thirty years have revealed much about the institutional Church. Perhaps the most far-reaching conclusion one can draw is that there is a sharp division between the institutional Church and the Body of Christ and that the institutional Church is essentially *atheist* judging by its choice to protect its worldly image, prosperity and power rather than respond to the victims with immediate care and concern.
    - a. **Ecclesiology.** There is either an ignorance on the part of many, including bishops, of the true nature of the Church or there is a conscious rejection of it.
    - b. **Spirituality.** The clerical spirituality is deeply flawed in that it has highly narcissistic strains which actually enable sexual abuse and prevent a compassionate and just response to it.
    - b. **Priesthood.** The common understanding and the standard theology of priesthood in the Church is deeply flawed. The heavy emphasis is on sacramental ritual and sacrifice rather than ministry. The elitist “theology” of priesthood, grounded in the concept of “ontological change” and being joined with Jesus are the basis and constant support for the toxic concept of priesthood commonly held by victims, and others.
    - c. **Pastoral care.** The “crisis” has revealed an inability to conceive of spirituality and spiritual care in other than terms of ritual attendance and obedience to authority. The bishops have shown that they do not know how to give pastoral and spiritual care to victims of the clergy.
    - d. **Episcopacy.** The bishops as a group and as individuals have consistently failed *and* offended the People of God by their treatment of victims of sexual abuse, their insistence on limiting the concept of “Church” to the clergy and hierarchy and their squandering of financial resources, all donated, for their own security and protection. This calls into question the authenticity of their claim to be the essential pillars of the Church. In reality, in light of our experience with a growing scarcity of priests but unfortunately not a comparable scarcity of bishops, and the dependence on the laity, it is probably true that the Church needs bishops as much as a duck hunter needs an accordion.

- e. Concern for **doctrine and dogma** has eclipsed commitment to charity and justice. The recent popes (John Paul II and Benedict XVI) have reacted, often with cruelty and nearly always without process, to anyone who has voiced or written an opinion not in complete compliance with their opinions. At the same time these popes have protected bishops who have violated children themselves or who have enabled priests to violate children.
8. The Church *has* responded to the victims of sexual abuse by the clergy and these victims extend well beyond those actually violated by clergy. It includes parents, siblings, friends and in a real sense, every believing person in the Body of Christ. The Church that has responded has been *us*. It has not been the official institution but laypeople and a small number of clergy and religious. There are a number of things we can continue to do. One of them is *not* talking about it anymore. There have been enough meetings, discussions, symposia etc.
- a. Actively support **legislative reform** in your own state and in other states. If you don't understand the issues contact SNAP for help. There are numerous sources of factual information. (Please note the work of Voice of the Faithful in collaboration with Sr. Maureen Turlish in this area with the publication of "[Statute of Limitation Reform: An Advocacy Guide.](#)")
  - b. **Challenge priests, bishops or lay people** who continue to speak out against victims and who continue to propagate the erroneous propaganda from the institution.
  - c. **Invite survivors or their active supporters to speak** publicly. There are still countless people who live under serious misconceptions about this issue.
  - d. Ask your pastors and your bishops if they support victims support groups, i.e., SNAP and ROAD TO RECOVERY. If they do not, challenge them.
  - e. If survivors plan a demonstration of any sort near you, go and support them.
  - f. If you know of church officials who speak or act in a way that is harmful or derogatory of survivors or who are harboring credibly accused clerics, challenge them. Call, write, email...but challenge them.
  - g. Do NOT donate to any diocesan causes. Do NOT donate to Peters Pence. In the ideal do not donate to any Church affiliated organization especially those that have or continue to harbor criminals.
  - h. Give/donate to survivor support organizations, i.e., SNAP and Road to Recovery.
  - i. Actively insist that all church officials but especially bishops, act and speak with complete openness, transparency and honesty.

9. The thirty-year chapter of Catholic Church history, dominated by an epidemic of sexual abuse of minors by clerics and ineptitude and malfeasance by bishops, has exposed flaws in several essential elements of the Church that are so destructive to the People of God that they are fatal to the present paradigm of the institutional Church. Try as they might the ordained office-holders have been unable to change or camouflage these flaws. The chasm that separated the clergy and hierarchy from the mass of lay people has shrunk to the point where the old methods of control no longer work. The playing field has been leveled to the point where ever growing numbers of Catholics are encountering and confronting bishops as adults and not as compliant and docile children. This has irrevocably altered the definition of the Church promulgated by Pius X in his 1906 encyclical Vehementer Nos:

*It follows that the Church is essentially an unequal society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors.*

In spite of the insistence of Pius' successors that this is the only authentic understanding of the socio-political structuring of the people of God, the realities of life in the Catholic Church over the past fifty years have shown that rather than comply in lock-step to such stratification, the voices and actions of a significant number of lay persons, religious and clerics have shown that *agere sequitur esse*, "action follows being," is not so much changing the meaning of the Church, but revealing what it really is.

Thomas P. Doyle, J.C.D., C.A.D.C.  
Vienna VA