

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

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

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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 30 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 30 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. Today there is still significant apathy among laity and clergy. Many simply do not want to believe the true nature of the problem—i.e., it is not an outbreak of sexual attacks by clerics but a symptom of the very dark side of the institutional Church—because it seriously disturbs their emotional security. Instead they grasp on to the many “excuses” offered by the Church and its defenders: *“it’s a homosexual issue”*; *“it’s all greedy victims and their lawyers”*; *“it’s an attack on the church”*; *“it’s fueled by dissenters.”*
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 the two dimensions of the Church: the institution and the Body of Christ.
 - a. Sex abuse of minors by clerics of all ranks is an historical and geographic 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 and not succumb to deference for the hierarchy.
 - c. Sex abuse has been actively denied and covered up by bishops, religious superiors and popes since the early 19th century. I have cited this approximate date because there was significantly more openness about it by the hierarchical leaders in the early modern period (14th to 18th centuries). The bishops’ negative and inadequate response to reports of abuse and to suspected abusers has been uniform and consistent through-out the international scope of the Church.

- d. The cover-up and secrecy have been conspiratorial in nature and are the product of a number of factors including institutional policy. Bishops have collaborated with one another in transferring clerics accused of sexual abuse. The secrecy was made official by papal decree in 1866 and emphasized again in *Crimen sollicitationis* of 1922 and 1962. It is still officially insisted upon.
- e. 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.
- f. 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.
- g. 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.
- h. 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.
- i. 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*.
- j. The archetype of revictimization and institutional abuse is George Pell, formerly of Sydney. He has been forced to publicly disclose before the Royal Commission the attitude and actions shared by many other bishops.
- k. 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.
- l. 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 had asked for \$100,000.

- m. The Church in general continues to favor the clerics over the victims. This is a byproduct of the clericalist mentality and magical definition of the priesthood. The recent decision by the Italian Bishops' Conference is an example of the attitude.
 - n. 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
 - Countersuing victims, suing their parents, attacking them publicly
 - Failing to muzzle Bill Donohue, and this focuses especially on Timothy Dolan, one of his major supporters.
 - o. The issue is international in scope and it is a contemporary reality and not past or passing history. The U.N. report was deadly accurate.
4. 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. Only one auxiliary bishop (Miranda, Peru) has been subjected to any penal process or penal sanctions for sexually abusing minors. At the present time, Cardinal Keith O'Brien is being investigated. More egregious, however, is the fact that no bishop has even been questioned much less disciplined for failure to remove known perpetrators for lying under oath, for persecuting victims.
 5. 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. The sole American on the committee is a *cardinal*. It is doubtful that any member other than Marie Collins has had serious engagement with victims, if they have ever met one at all. Everything they need to know has already been well researched especially in the U.S.

What We Have Learned About the Church

The past 30 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.

1. **Ecclesiology.** There is either ignorance on the part of many, including bishops, of the true nature of the Church or there is a conscious rejection of it. The “*good of the Church*” does not mean the good of the bishops and clerics, but the good of the People of God, especially those most vulnerable in its midst.
2. **Spirituality.** Clerical spirituality is deeply flawed in that it has highly narcissistic elements, which actually enable sexual abuse and prevent a compassionate and just response to it.
3. **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.
4. **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.
5. **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 becoming evident that bishops are not needed for the welfare and continuance of the People of God as a Christian community.
6. 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 that is not in complete compliance with their opinions. On the other hand these popes protected bishops who have protected child abusers. They have failed to take punitive action against any bishops who themselves have violated minors.

Response of the Entire Church

1. The Church *has* responded to the victims of sexual abuse, 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 as Christ would, 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 any more. 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 or Road to Recovery (Bob Hoatson) for help. There are numerous sources of factual information.
 - 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. 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. 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.
 - j. Write to bishops etc., newspapers, magazines ... to keep the issue on the burner.
 - k. Do not be afraid to address, question and criticize so-called "doctrinal" issues, for many of these are supports for the abuse reality and for the overall erosion of the Church.
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One hundred years from now
It won't matter
What kind of car I drove
What kind of house I lived in
How much money I had in the bank
Nor what my clothes looked like
BUT
The world may be a better place
Because I was important
In the life of a child.

[Attributed to Forest Witcraft]