

WHAT BISHOPS CAN DO TO HELP

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The Archdiocese of Philadelphia put on an event a month ago that was billed as an opportunity for the bishops and priests to hear first hand the stories of clergy abuse victims. One mother of two sons who had been abused spoke as did two adult victims. The cardinal and his auxiliary bishops were present along with several hundred priests. The archdiocese called the evening “Witness to Sorrow”. Cardinal Rigali is quoted as saying that *“It is extremely important for us to hear their stories firsthand so we may see the human face and hear the human voice.”*

The Delaware Times ran a story about the event. The headline read *“Let the victims be heard in court.”* Ronnie Polaneczky started her story for the Philadelphia Daily News with the line *“Whatever this gesture is supposed to deliver, its way too little, way too late.”* Edd Conboy wrote his column under the heading *“When doing nothing may be better than doing something.”*

Is their cynicism justified or is it a knee jerk reaction to *anything* the official Church tries to do in response to the never-ending clergy abuse nightmare?

Looking at this event in context, I’d say their response is both cynical and realistic. The event was planned by the archdiocese, no doubt with major input from their public relations experts, to create an appearance that would serve as a distraction from the fact that the archdiocese is still stone-walling victims in court and working to defeat any meaningful changes in State legislation that is favorable to victims of sex abuse. The benevolent image projected by the Cardinal is a far cry from the vicious attack by the archdiocese and its lawyers on the grand jury report which was called, among other things, “anti-Catholic bias.”

The priests who had sexually assaulted the two victims and the children of the mother who spoke were members of religious orders, not archdiocesan priests. This was an all-too-obvious attempt to minimize the far-reaching abuse perpetrated by the archdiocesan priests. The grand jury report named only 63 but in reality they looked at cases involving over twice that number.

I spoke to the husband of the mother who spoke about the abuse of their two sons by a Norbertine priest. He was not impressed and told me that the cardinal did not interact with his wife or the victims after the event.

“Witness to Sorrow, like many similar events sponsored by dioceses across the country, comes nowhere close to responding to the need for the clergy to interact with the victims. The archdiocesan press release said *“one of the most significant things [Rigali] has learned in the past year is the importance of listening to victims who are able to convey the hurt, pain and suffering which is still part of daily life for many of them.”* That statement is remarkable. Why

would any clergyman of any rank *not* know that listening to the victims was an all-important aspect of the necessary response to them? The clergy caused their pain. Bishops made this pain worse by denying or minimizing it and now they think that one evening of listening to two victims and a suffering parent is going to justify the years of cold silence and active denial?

The true measure of any churchman's commitment to listening, understanding and healing is not to be found in orchestrated public relations events but in day to day action. This action should be seen by all as a solid commitment to helping and healing the direct victims of clergy sexual abuse as well as all those who suffer from collateral damage. This means feeling the sting of their anger and trying to sense the depth of their pain and anguish.

The official church and its clergy are masters at show. We regularly put on elaborate liturgies to commemorate everything from papal coronations to earthquakes. Such events may provide an emotional jolt but they don't change anything and they surely don't constitute a substitute for authentic pastoral action. The many healing liturgies and other events similar to "Witness to Sorrow" are viewed by many as too little, too late or even an insult to those grievously harmed by the Church through sexual abuse. These men and women are individuals and not simply members of a group or nameless faces in a congregation. It's easy for a bishop, archbishop, cardinal or pope to make a public statement of apology or expression of sorrow at the nightmare the clergy have caused. It's not quite so easy to meet one on one with the victims and certainly not so easy to support legislative change or civil court action that will either reduce the likelihood of future abuse or provide access to the civil justice system for victims, or both. Yet that is what it takes to be truly committed to righting the unspeakable wrong done, not only to the countless victims but to the whole Body of Christ.

Pope John Paul II spoke about the sex abuse crisis several times and mentioned his concern for victims. Yet this concern was, in the final analysis, disingenuous because he made no attempt at structural change and consistently refused to even greet groups of clergy abuse victims much less actually meet with them. So too with the bishops. A tiny minority of truly pastoral bishops have crossed the line in the sand and attempted to get to know and minister to the victims. Only in this way will they ever really come to appreciate the horror inflicted on their lives.

Being "pastoral" does not mean putting on a show, liturgical or otherwise, and then retreating to the safety of the rectory or the episcopal palace to await the next meeting with the church's lawyers or her lobbyists to refine strategies for keeping the victims at bay or defeating any meaningful legislation that would guarantee them the justice not provided by the Church.

The bishops can and should do what we have all learned from the Gospels....be present to the suffering. Countless victims have said over and over "*If only someone had come to me, listened, believed and even apologized.*" Yet this is precisely what the bishops *have not done*. It's not too late to start and in so doing, the official Church and its bishops might begin to rehabilitate the trust that has been shattered by the obsession with the institutional image rather than the suffering members.