CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE: THE FIRST DECADE

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

July, 1993

Introduction

I wrote this article in 1993 to commemorate the first ten years of the present wave of clergy sexual abuse reports. At the time I was on active duty in the Air Force and had just been assigned to Hurlburt Field, Florida. I submitted it to several Catholic publications including Jurist, Studia Canonica, The Priest and two or three others whose names I have forgotten.

All rejected it and some responded with reasons for doing so. One editor told me it was too "passionate" and "explosive." Another informed me that it was too sensationalistic and that it exaggerated the problem and still another advised me to cease trying for publication and discard it because it was overly critical of bishops and presented a highly distorted and subjective view of a problem that was no longer urgent.

Not long after I completed this draft, and subsequently filed it away with other documents and letters relative to the clergy abuse problem, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, Press Secretary to Pope John Paul II, issued a statement that said, in effect, that the clergy sexual abuse scandal was limited to North America and especially the United States. He attributed this phenomenon to American secularism and materialism and lamented the fact that so many people had departed from the Catholic Church's traditional sexual morality.

Within a year after uttering these words, the Irish government under Prime Minister Albert Reynolds had fallen because Reynolds had been implicated in stalling extradition procedures for the late Fr. Brendan Smyth, a notorious Irish pedophile. To make matters worse, not long after that event, Hans Hermann Cardinal Groer, the Archbishop of Vienna, was forced to resign upon credible accusations that he had sexually abused young boys while serving as head of a Benedictine boys school in Austria.

1993 was am important year in the clergy sexual abuse saga. In June 1993 Pope John Paul II issued his first public statement on the issue, a letter to the U.S. Bishops. The U.S. Bishops voted to establish an Ad Hoc Committee on Clergy Sexual Abuse at their June meeting. The committee published a manual in several parts, held perfunctory meetings with a few survivors and generally had little effect other than to try to create the appearance that the U.S. Bishops Conference was competently handling the issue.

As I re-read the article and reflected on my experience in 1993 and what I have learned since then I am struck by how little the hierarchy has changed since then. One aspect of the article and my thought then, that had definitely evolved is the issue of re-assignment in ministry. In the early years I held the opinion that some…actually a very few… clerics who had been validly accused, could return to limited ministry. I recall that I believed that this could happen only after extensive therapy, intense after-care and constant monitoring by medical professionals. My thinking has obviously evolved since then. At that time my awareness of the psychological dynamics of sexual dysfunction were limited compared to the present. But more important, I believe that I failed to give adequate importance to the need for the official Church to be especially sensitive to the community and to the image of arrogant disregard that is put forth by assuming the clergy sexual abusers are any different than lay abusers.

CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE: THE FIRST DECADE

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

July, 1993

I. The Issue Goes Public: 1984

The problem of the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests, though not new by any means, first became the object of widespread public attention in late 1984. Nearly a decade has passed since then and the issue is still a serious concern for Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Back in 1984, few, especially the bishops, had any idea of the dimensions that this unfortunate saga would take. As one who has been involved in the controversy from its public inception, I have watched the ramifications this problem has had for the Church with intense interest and ever-increasing sadness. In this short article I hope to present an overview of the impact that sexual abuse by the clergy has had during this period.

The first major case to go public, (though certainly not the first instance of sexual abuse by a priest), was that of Gilbert Gauthe of the Diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana. Gauthe had been reported to diocesan officials several times and accused of molesting children. Each time he was reprimanded and sent to another parish. Finally the diocese attempted to settle out of court with several families. In spite of the monetary settlements, one family obtained the services of an attorney and then entered a civil suit against the diocese, alleging that it had acted in a negligent manner in its response to their complaints. In turn, criminal charges were brought against the priest. The local and national press got hold of the story and it quickly became front page news and remained that way for months. The general public had grown highly sensitive to the question of sexual abuse of children by persons in positions of care or authority over them, fueled in no small way by the explosive scandal and ensuing trial that surrounded the McMartin day School in California. This no doubt had a lot to do with why Gauthe's situation could no longer be handled "quietly" by Church leaders.

In the course of the Gauthe investigation, it turned out that there were several other priests in the diocese suspected of the same kind of behavior. The entire situation seemed to go from bad to worse and was generally handled in an inept and self-destructive manner by diocesan officials.

In the end, Gauthe was convicted and sentenced to a long prison term and the diocese was found liable with an award of over one million dollars for the family. By trying to cover the matter up, the diocesan officials only made it worse. A coadjutor bishop was appointed and the ordinary quietly faded into retirement.

This was but the beginning. Reports of similar cases of alleged sexual abuse of children (and some of adults as well) by priests quickly began to surface around the country. The complaints, no matter where they came from, bore a remarkable similarity: a priest would be accused of the sexual abuse of a child or children with the Church authorities accused of ignoring, denying, stonewalling or otherwise mishandling the report. Frustrated in their efforts to receive adequate attention and justice from Church authorities, families of victims, in ever increasing numbers, sought redress from the civil courts.

The American bishops quickly realized that they had a serious problem on their hands and no readily available solution. Privately many bishops voiced great alarm and concern yet as a group, the American bishops made no significant moves. One bishop referred to it as the "pedophilia nuisance," another challenge the institution would face and in time survive. However the crisis did not peak within a few months. It continued to get worse.

II. Secular Media Attention

The secular press devoted widespread coverage, first to the Lafayette, Louisiana situation and then to other scandals that were erupting around the country. Not only was there local coverage but national attention as well. Many questioned why such attention was given to Catholic problems, accusing the secular media of being anti-Catholic. In reality, the Church, with its apparently restrictive moral code in sexual matters, its continued condemnation of birth control and strong defense of clerical celibacy was a natural object of media attention. Whether accurate or not, the perception was that the Church preached and taught a strict moral code while it condoned totally unacceptable sexual behavior by its own priests. To make matters worse, investigative reporters uncovered widespread evidence of cover-up and mishandling by the Church authorities. Bishops thrashed about in vain for a solution that would neither embarrass them nor rock the power base while diocesan spokespersons made matters worse when they either denied or responded with a "no comment" when asked about specific cases. Perhaps many

in the Church thought that it was above public scrutiny, that it's exalted and powerful position exempted it from such intense demands for accountability. The continuing accusations of sexual misconduct combined with the stand-offish attitude of Church officials only made the institution more vulnerable.

The secular press, in spite of accusations to the contrary, did not sensationalize the issue nor did it conduct a campaign of "yellow" journalism fueled by anti-Catholic bias. Although there have been published stories about various forms of sexual misconduct by ministers of other denominations, the fact remains that the Catholic Church is the largest single denomination in the country. Unofficial research also points to the fact that there are many more cases of reported sexual abuse by Catholic priests than by clergy of any other group. By and large, the media reports over the years have been fair and accurate. If anything, the secular media attention has been a blessing in disguise because it has proven to be a major source of pressure on church authorities, forcing them to acknowledge the problem and in turn, to take some constructive steps to deal with it.

The intensity of media attention has been varied. At first there were local newspaper stories and occasional TV reports of individual cases. Then there were syndicated series written not only about particular cases, but of the manner with which they were handled by Church leaders. All of the major TV talk shows have featured clergy sexual abuse in one form or another. The networks have also produced "specials," documentaries, and even a dramatized version of the Gilbert Gauthe story, all of which received widespread attention.

Articles have appeared in popular magazines and professional journals and at least three books have been published. The first of these, Fr. Stephen Rossetti's Slayer of the Soul covered various clinical and sociological aspects of clergy sexual abuse. The other two told specific stories. Broken Covenant is about Fr. Bruce Ritter of Covenant House fame, and Lead Us Not Into Temptation begins with a detailed account of the Lafayette, Louisiana case and then goes on to recount details of the problem in several other American dioceses, including San Diego and Chicago. Lead Us Not Into Temptation, authored by award winning journalist Jason Berry, has had the greatest impact. It is well written and factually correct and has been favorably reviewed in various places including the New York Times. Most recently Fr. Andrew Greeley's novel Fall From Grace dealt with the themes of wife abuse and child sexual abuse by a priest in the

Archdiocese of Chicago. In spite of the author's disclaimer that the book is not about the pedophile crisis which exploded in Chicago just prior to its publication, the fictionalized case in the book and the real-life civil lawsuit struck some raw nerves and several Catholic newspapers, including the Chicago archdiocesan newspaper, refused to carry advertisements for it.

We must accept the fact that Churches are held to higher standards of moral and ethical conduct than secular organizations. Sexual abuse by ministers of religion is bad enough but the appearance of denial and cover-up by the religious leaders is worse. The pedophilia crisis for the Catholic Church has brought much of both. The hypocrisy involved in this whole issue is so great that we cannot expect anything less than widespread media coverage and public interest.

III. The Courts and Civil Lawyers

Prior to 1984 the prosecution of a priest-abuser was a very rare occurrence. With the Gauthe case things changed. There was too much social and political pressure on public officials for them to look the other way, allowing the Church to take care of its own problems. The traditional "quiet" and behind the scenes manner of dealing with sex abusers had never really worked anyway. Now, its failure was coming back to haunt the Church. Civil law statutes which mandated the reporting of allegations of child abuse were enforced and the prosecution of accused priests became commonplace. Throughout the country, priests who had sexually abused minor children were tried, convicted and in most instances, sentenced to prison terms. At the same time aggrieved families of victims and victims themselves pursued civil actions for monetary damages against dioceses, religious communities and church officials. The story is nearly always the same: church officials, though aware of complaints about a given priest's abuse of children, allowed him to remain in ministry. Attorneys in several States have developed an expertise in bringing suit against Roman Catholic entities. The various defenses used by the Church, through its own attorneys, were gradually broken down thus increasing its vulnerability as well as its accountability not only to its own faithful but to the public in general.

It is difficult to say just how many criminal and civil suits there have been since 1984. There is no uniform case following by any Church body either here or in the Vatican. The only way to "get a handle" on the numbers is to compare or combine information from lawyers, reporters etc. One attorney admits to representing families in about 150 different cases of child

abuse by priests. Others who successfully handle cases quickly find out that their clientele rapidly increases. It is safe to say that the number is in the hundreds nationwide.

The amount of money spent by the Church on legal fees, professional counseling, damage awards etc. is obviously a matter of great interest. Again, lacking any accurate case following, it is impossible to arrive at an "official" figure, but reliable estimates place it at 400 million dollars. When asked about money spent, Church officials, including the NCCB-USCC general counsel, minimize this figure. The same officials have no way of providing an accurate figure. The amount of 400 million plus is most probably right on target. It has been arrived at from input from attorneys, secular reporters and plaintiffs themselves. This amount includes legal fees, court costs, jury awards and monetary settlements. The only official figure yet released has been that of the Archdiocese of Chicago which admitted that in 1992 an excess of two million dollars was spent on the “pedophilia problem.” The Catholic Church, as an institution, has always been elusive about money matters. Obviously Church leaders will never publish a true accounting of how much has been expended because of the sex-abuse scandals because it would be profoundly embarrassing, yet the faithful have a right to know because it is their money that is being spent.

Some have accused the civil lawyers of pursuing this matter primarily for their own gain. This is really a "knee-jerk" reaction as well as a symptom of the psychological denial of the gravity of the issue. There are plenty of fictitious stories about lawyers running around the country like ambulance chasers, but it is not the lawyers who have aggravated the problem. The victims and their families have sought out civil lawyers often in sheer desperation because no-one from the "official" Church would give them satisfaction. Their lives have been violated and in many cases irretrievably shattered not only by what individual priests have done to children but by what the institution has done to the families.

The lawsuits have produced a variety of consequences. In the legal arena the central question is the responsibility of church leaders, i.e., the bishops, for the misconduct of their priests. The legal understanding of this responsibility is not something that has been written in the law but an issue that has been developing, case by case, over the years. One of the constant questions is whether the church leadership "knew or should have known" about the problems of priests suffering from sexual disorders. In searching for the answer to the limits of

responsibility, lawyers examine the seminary and personnel records of accused priests. They also look to see how bishops or other church leaders have acted in similar though not necessarily identical cases. The search for documentary evidence has produced another legal issue, namely the confidentiality or inviolability of official church files. Initially many defendant dioceses claimed that such files could not be turned over to the courts or to attorneys because they were highly confidential. Some even claimed that such files were the equivalent of confessional matter. Nevertheless the courts, in a number of cases, have decided that even files from the diocesan secret archives are "discoverable" that is, can be used as evidence if requested by attorneys.

The relationship of a priest to his bishop and diocese is another important area. Related to this is the responsibility of a bishop to and for his priests not only in the direct exercise of their ministry but in the activities of their private lives. Civil lawyers look to Canon Law to assist in developing the answers to many of these questions. To sum up the legal question one can say that the lawyers for the victims say that the bishop and the diocese are responsible for what a priest does while the lawyers for the Church try to find ways to prove that a sexually abusive priest acted on his own.

Plaintiff lawyers have repeatedly complained that dioceses, their spokesmen and their lawyers have been dishonest and have employed underhanded and often dishonest tactics that indicate that their only concern is the institution and not the welfare of the victims of sexual abuse.

Outside of the courtroom certain other tactics have been used by the institution, tactics which are shameful and only widen the credibility gap. Plaintiffs, that is victims and/or their families, have been harassed, made the object of smear campaigns, subjected to slanderous rumors about their character, threatened with excommunication or offered money in return for silence. In short, the victims of clergy sexual abuse have themselves been treated as if they were the wrong-doers and the enemy of the Church.

Many of the civil suits have never reached the stage of public trial because they were settled out of court with sizeable monetary damage awards being made to victims and their families. In almost every case the amount of money paid out is sealed. Yet several cases have reached the trial stage with jury awards in excess of a million dollars to plaintiffs.

IV. Meeting the Crisis

The sexual abuse or molestation of a child is a crime in every State in the union and has been for years. Many have rightfully asked why then, has it taken the Catholic Church so long to acknowledge the critical dimensions to which it exists in its own midst. In response some church leaders have said that the number of priest-abusers constitutes but a minuscule minority of the total number of priests. This is totally beside the point. The havoc wrecked by this minuscule minority over the past several years has been enormous. It seems that only recently have individual bishops and the NCCB acknowledged the problem. Some have expressed alarm at the scope of the problem, stating that they have only now learned how bad it really is.

The secular press has regularly referred to a "manual" on dealing with sexual abuse by the clergy, allegedly made available to bishops at the beginning of this period of crisis. Such a manual does exist and in fact, it was made available to the bishops in 1985. Consequently there is no excuse for having waited nearly ten years to take public notice of the sex-abuse problem.

The manual in question is a detailed compendium of information on the medical/psychological, legal, canonical and pastoral aspects of the problem. It contains suggested procedures for dealing with reports of misconduct and information on the medical evaluation and possible treatment of priests suffering from related sexual disorders. This manual was composed as a private venture by two priests, one a canonist and the other a psychiatrist, and a civil attorney. The three had been directly involved in the Lafayette, Louisiana case and initiated the project with the sole intention of providing the bishops of the country with a means of assistance for what they, the three authors, believed would be an ever increasing problem. Along with the manual they drew up a proposal for a "crisis intervention team" of experts who would be available to assist bishops who requested their aid. The initial vision included an NCCB (National Conference of Catholic Bishops) sponsored committee that would gather medical, legal and other experts to thoroughly research all aspects of the sexual abuse issue thus providing the Church's leadership with a solid base of information upon which to act. Although the venture had the private backing of several bishops and archbishops and appeared to be off to a decent start in 1985, it suddenly became a dead issue. Several copies of the manual and the proposal were circulated among the bishops at their June, 1985 meeting in Collegeville,

Minnesota. No official acknowledgment was ever made nor action taken. In December of 1985 copies of the manual were sent to all of the residential bishops in the United States. When questioned about the manual and the attached proposals, NCCB spokesmen, usually through the general counsel's office, stated that the information contained in it had already been known to the bishops. The same sources also claimed that the authors had envisioned selling themselves to the various dioceses as a kind of "swat team." The claim was also made that the NCCB had no authority to mandate or suggest policies or procedures for dealing with sexual abuse in the individual dioceses since each diocese was independent. Although these official sources questioned certain aspects of the manual, its proposals, and even the motivation of the authors, at no time then or since were any of the authors approached to discuss or clarify any aspect of the total venture.

There was however, an initial reaction not only to this written work but to the crisis in general. Beginning in the spring of 1985 a number of seminars and conferences were held throughout the country to discuss the issue. The first was a heavily attended seminar sponsored by the Eastern Regional Canon Law Society at its annual convention in May of 1985. Another such seminar, open to bishops, religious superiors and other church officials, was held at River Forest, Illinois in June of 1985. In other parts of the country bishops and religious superiors held similar gatherings or workshops for their clergy. In many of these, policies and procedures were drawn up and promulgated and in most instances, faithfully followed. In many local churches something was being done as early as 1985, yet nothing of note was happening on the national level.

The bishops continued to privately agonize over the problem. After the media flurry surrounding the Gauthe case died down, the press continued to follow and report cases that cropped up here and there around the country, yet the intense interest of 1985 seemed to subside a bit. The general counsel of the NCCB/USCC circulated several informational memos to the bishops and the issue was no doubt discussed at bishops' meetings on the national and regional level. The written documents included a summary of State child abuse reporting statutes (1986), a letter outlining possible procedures for handling accusations against priests (1988), a policy statement (1990). The issue was discussed at least five times in general NCCB meetings: June 1985 in Collegeville, when a panel of three (a psychologist, the NCCB general counsel and an

auxiliary bishop) gave presentations on various aspects of child abuse; an executive session in Nov. 1988 when the focus was on the disposition of priests guilty of child abuse; June of 1992 at Notre Dame University, November of 1992 in Washington and most recently, at the June meeting in New Orleans. At the last two meetings (Washington and New Orleans) a group of survivors insisted on meeting with the bishops and succeeded in doing so. The issue was brought up on the floor in November, 1992 and a resolution was passed by the assembled bishops. This resolution naturally decried the entire phenomenon and included policy recommendations for the various dioceses. Finally, in February 1993 a special meeting was held in St. Louis to discuss the problem. Present was a bishop and about 40 other interested individuals, including survivors, psychologists, family members of survivors. The impression given in the press was that this was an NCCB sponsored venture, yet in fact it was privately funded. The meeting produced a rather direct and hard-hitting document containing several specific recommendations. The final version, published in Origins, an official publication of the Bishops' Conference, significantly watered down the original text.

V. What Happens to the Priests?

Prior to the eighties child abuse by the clergy was generally considered to be more a moral problem than a medical/psychological disorder, one that could be controlled by rightly directed will power. In retrospect it is clear that the common way to deal with accused priests was to transfer them although some were sent away for professional care. After the Gauthe case, Church officials became much more aware of the recent advances in medical science concerning the causes, treatment and care of child abusers. Several health care facilities created programs for the evaluation and treatment of priests with sexual disorders. Many (but not all) accused priests were sent for evaluation and extensive in-patient treatment followed by long-term after care. The bishops were still faced with the question of what to do with priest-pedophiles (or those who had been involved sexually for other causes). Some who were involved in criminal litigation were convicted and sentenced to prison. Others either chose or were persuaded to seek laicization and still others completed treatment and hoped to re-enter some form of ministry.

For the bishops, the issue of continuing liability loomed. Legal and medical advice was often at a stand-off with legal advice. Lawyers advised the bishops that priests who had

completed treatment remained a serious threat while the medical experts advised that in some cases priests could be returned to some form of supervised ministry that excluded any contact with young children. Therein is a serious problem. The only way to laicize a priest against his will is by direct intervention of the Holy Father. In 1988 the bishops sought Rome's permission to utilize proposed administrative procedures for involuntary laicization. These were turned down, leaving the bishops with no choice but to try to persuade some priests to petition for laicization. Barring that, the priests remained the responsibility of the bishops or religious superiors. Throughout the country a few bishops have allowed priests to return to limited, supervised ministry after treatment and with the proviso that after-care be continued. Yet the majority who have not elected to seek laicization remain in a kind of limbo. It is possible that many more could be returned to limited ministry, yet the influence of lawyers and the fear of recidivism and future lawsuits continue to hold sway over the prognoses of the medical and psychological experts.

The treatment of many priest-perpetrators by their ecclesiastical superiors is another area of concern. Many priests confronted with accusations have admitted that their bishops treated them with compassion and charity, even if the accusations were proven true and criminal and civil prosecution followed. On the other hand there have been too many reports of priests having been subjected to penal sanctions without any canonical due process. While there can be no question of the negative impact of child abuse by the clergy on all aspects of church life as well as the responsibility such priests must accept for their actions, this does not excuse any ad hoc suspensions of their canonical rights.

How many priests are pedophiles or sexual abusers? The problem with answering this constantly recurring question is again rooted in the fact that there has been no uniform case following, by a single official agency to which all instances of sexual abuse must be reported. The only reliable sources are news reports of specific cases and these would probably reveal between three and four hundred since 1984. Some sources give the figure of three thousand pedophiles among the U.S. population of about fifty-three thousand priests. This figure is based on the closest professional estimate available on the number of pedophiles among the general male population. Nevertheless while the actual numbers may be a small percentage, the multi-

faceted damage done is colossal. To quote the oft-repeated phrase from Church leaders, "even one case is too many."

VI. The Reaction of the Victims and Their Families

The first group of people who complained about clergy sexual abuse were parents of young children who had been abused. By the late eighties at least another group had come forward. Adults who had been abused in their youth found that the atmosphere had changed to such a degree that they felt not only "comfortable" but justified in speaking out against priests who had abused them years ago. In almost every case these victims, or survivors as they are more correctly and commonly called, believed that they were constrained from complaining when the events took place. There was a general tendency at the time not to believe such reports, based on a general presumption by faithful Catholics that priests would never do such a thing. Many of these people have suffered incredibly throughout their lives because of what happened to them at the hands of a priest during their youth. They are coming forward only now to seek redress. The controversy surrounding the former Fr. James Porter is one such example.

Little is publicly known about how church officials dealt with victims and their families. One would expect that the first reaction of such officials would be to treat them with compassion and understanding while extending offers to help in any way needed. This certainly has been the case in many instances, yet the testimony of many, perhaps a majority, of these people points to the opposite.

It was not until 1991 when the survivors of clergy abuse organized amongst themselves. Jeanne Miller, herself the mother of a survivor, has maintained a persistent crusade from the time her son was abused in 1982 until the present. Together with a handful of other survivors, she started a support group initially called VOCAL, which stood for Victims of Clergy Abuse Linkup. Due to the existence of another organization with the same name, this group is now known as LINKUP. Its existence became known very quickly and before long Jeanne Miller found herself inundated with letters and phone calls from victims of clergy abuse not only throughout the United States but in Canada and European countries as well.

VOCAL/LINKUP held its first conference in Arlington Heights IL on the weekend of October 16, 17, 18, 1992. There were hundreds of survivors and their families present along

with scores of other interested parties including police officers, attorneys and psychologists. Ironically only a handful of priests showed up, most of whom had been victims themselves. Although the event was widely publicized no member of the hierarchy was present. (The archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Bernardin, had been scheduled to give an opening talk but backed out the day before.) Likewise, no member of a diocesan administration attended. The event received widespread press coverage from throughout the United States. The speakers included law enforcement officials, psychologists, survivors and two priests. This was the first gathering ever of survivors and others touched by the phenomenon of clergy sexual abuse. Countless people told their stories privately and publicly, forming both formal and informal support groups. While it was to be expected that there would be a great deal of anger at the priest-abusers themselves, this anger was often tempered with sentiments of pity. Far more powerful and widespread was the sentiment of anger with the institutional Church and its officials over the way individuals have been treated. In general, survivors and their families felt that they had been perceived as an enemy of the Church. Anger was also focused on the hierarchy as a group for having done little if anything to alleviate the problem. Catholics, both practicing and formerly practicing, voiced bitter disappointment that the Church to which they had been faithful had not only let them down but proceeded to try and punish them.

Another influential and rapidly growing group is SNAP, a survivor's network founded by Barbara Blaine, herself a victim. Both VOCAL/LINKUP and SNAP have provided a much needed source of support for victims. Their effectiveness has also been proven in that they have forced the bishops to listen to victims and their families and to acknowledge the magnitude of the problem. Both organizations have local chapters throughout the country. Are these groups detrimental to the welfare of the Church? Are they a cause of scandal? Should they be ignored, discouraged or avoided? No! They ARE just as much the Church as any officially approved body or organization including the NCCB. Their existence is a powerful voice calling the Church to accountability...demanding that the institution be what it claims it is...the People of God.

VII. The Present and the Future

After what seemed like a cooling off period, with occasional reports of clergy abuse being relegated to back pages of the secular newspapers, the issue received front page attention once again with the revelations about the alleged extensive abuse by former priest James Porter. Forced no doubt by another blanket of negative publicity as well as looming lawsuits, a number of dioceses began to publicly acknowledge the problem while at the same time publishing detailed policies and procedures for handling allegations. Bishops began making public promises to deal effectively and responsibly with accusations. While this trend has been lauded by the Catholic press, the vast number of survivors and their families remain hurt and frustrated, many convinced that the newfound concern is the result of media pressure and the threat of lawsuits rather than genuine pastoral concern. The basic questions remain: why did it take the bishops as individuals and as a group so long to move when in fact they were made aware of the problems and potential solutions nearly a decade ago? Why hasn't as much genuine attention been given to victims as has been given to the security and financial stability of dioceses and their leaders? Why has no one from among the body of bishops emerged as a true leader in an offensive rather than defensive attack on the problem? Why has the Holy See done nothing, at least publicly?

The Reaction in Rome

One wonders, and justifiably so, why there has been such a muted response from the Holy See. This crisis is far worse than other problems that sparked a Roman reaction. In October a reporter working on a book about clergy abuse phoned the Secretariat for Communications in Rome to ask what the Holy See had done. The response from one of the officials was that this is a local or American problem. This is a strange response given the recent history of justifiable Roman intervention in the United States....the 1984 pro-abortion advertisement in the New York Times, signed by a number of American priests and religious; the case of former Sister Agnes Mansour in Michigan; the seminary investigation and the Apostolic visitation of the Archdiocese of Seattle to name a few. It is only within the past few months that the Holy Father has publicly mentioned the problem.

There is no question that the Holy See has been aware of the issue and its various dimensions since 1984, both from communications sent through the Apostolic Nuncio's office,

communications from bishops and press reports. It has been discussed by bishops with curial personnel and the Pope himself during Ad Limina visits. Numerous private individuals have sent letters to the Holy Father about the problem.

To date the Holy See has not directed that the U.S. bishops take any specific actions. It is known that at least once the bishops asked Rome to give them the power to laicize priests by an administrative process and that this request was tacitly refused. Most recently the Pope said that the Church and its bishops should show serious concern for the victims. Victim reaction indicates that this serious concern has yet to be translated into widespread action.

It is now too late for explanations or excuses. Massive damage has been done and continues to be done. The time for honesty and aggressive action was several years ago.

VIII. Summary

The devastating effect that the pedophilia issue has had on the church cannot be overstated. The Church's overall credibility has been dealt a blow that will take decades to heal. Its role as a strong moral leader and teacher is doubted by many and ridiculed by many more. Trust and confidence in priests and bishops continues to erode. There is an ever-widening credibility gap between the laity and the clergy and an even wider gap between the laity, many of the clergy, and the bishops.

Morale among priests is understandably low and why not? Many feel that the vocation they once took great pride in is now viewed by many as a haven for misfits and deviates. The institutionalized clericalism that once provided built-in deference for priests and bishops and a shield against the consequences of their wrong-doing, is dying. The reaction to this death is mixed: some are relieved that a major barrier to the continued emergence of the Church as "People of God" is falling yet others evince a strong defensiveness and even anger. There is a great deal of denial among priests and bishops that the sex abuse problem is a great as it is portrayed. Blame is placed on the press, on lawyers, on disloyal Catholics and even on the victims themselves. The defensive clichés all miss the mark. There is no way on earth that this problem can be minimized nor its negative effects avoided for the future.

The victims and their families see themselves as an alienated and marginalized minority. Their anger and frustration stems not only from the fact that sexual violation took place and was

betrayed. This is a group of people who had been very close to their Church. Their anger is also grounded in the feeling that their Church was taken away from them. In spite of the incredible pain many have suffered at the hands of the institutional church, they still yearn for some tie with it. At the same time a fresh ecclesiology is emerging. Groups like VOCAL/LINKUP and SNAP, made up of both laity and clergy, men and women, are acting because they see themselves no longer as a rejected group but as the CHURCH. The phrase "the good of the Church," used all too often as an excuse in trying to convince offended people...victims....from taking action, is now referred to in terms of the hurt and hurting and not the institution or the hierarchy.

What will the future bring? Priest-abusers continue to be exposed, bishops continue to be embarrassed and lawsuits continue to be filed. Some may rely on the cliche "the Church will survive" but perhaps they fail to accept the prospect that the future may see a church that is not identifiable with the mythologized and established institution of the past. One can only hope that the good that will result from this excruciating period will be found in a Church which, from the top down, readily admits its humanity and its weaknesses and embraces the rejected and hurting as its most important members.