

Crisis in the Priesthood—Update—August 2003

We need to keep praying. On the surface things have been relatively quiet concerning the clergy sexual abuse scandal but on a deeper level the struggle for true repentance and reform still hangs in the balance. Terrible things continue to come to light, but due to the media's interest in new stories, they haven't received the coverage that they would have earlier on. Here- are some examples:

A grand jury in Rockville Centre, New York issued a 181 page report detailing how the diocese acted to protect itself—and 58 abusive priests—at the expense of leaving children vulnerable to known priest sex abusers. One of the priest/lawyers assigned to handle "problem priests" was asked what help would be given to an abuse victim and he said: "It's not my responsibility to worry about the boy. My job is to protect the bishop and the church."

When a nun asked the priest/lawyer to meet with another victim, the priest responded that it was a waste of time because the statute of limitations on the abuse had expired. The nun replied: "These people are hurting. Why do you care about the statute of limitations?"

Contributions to this diocese's annual fund are down 34% from the previous year, as more lawsuits are filed against abusive priests and the diocese.

Despite promises of disclosure and cooperation with the legal system, many dioceses have significantly backtracked and have reverted to stone-walling and secrecy.

In the Diocese of Cleveland, for example, the diocese claimed that 28 priests had been accused of sexual misconduct. A grand jury that conducted an investigation discovered that 145 priests have been accused and need to be investigated, in addition to 351 lay people who are affiliated with or employed by the Church, such as principals, teachers and volunteers. More than 1000 people were identified as possible victims of sexual abuse by people affiliated with the Church. People connected with the investigation didn't know whether Cleveland was an anomaly or if the grand jury just looked deeper and similar situations would be uncovered in other dioceses if more in-depth investigations were to be done. The diocese had no comment on the huge discrepancy in numbers.

In Los Angeles, the Cardinal estimated that there were six to eight offending priests in the archdiocese. A lawyer representing 200 victims in southern California provided the archdiocese with a list of more than 118 priests who are being accused by his clients. While there obviously may be false accusations among these, the problem is definitely being greatly minimized by the Church. The archdiocese is refusing to hand over relevant documents and has gone to court to block the disclosure of documents pertaining to priests named as sexual abusers, despite previous promises of openness and cooperation. While nationally about 2% of priests have been clearly implicated in the sexual abuse of minors, in dioceses where more extensive disclosure has been forced or volunteered the percentages are much higher. In Boston it is 5.3 %; in Baltimore, 6.2% and in

Manchester, New Hampshire, 7.7%. Most experts on sex abuse believe that many victims never come forward because of shame and guilt and fear.

Efforts to shift the blame are also happening in an unprecedented way. The Diocese of San Bernardino, California is suing the Archdiocese of Boston for sending them a priest who was a known sexual predator without informing them. A province of the Franciscans is filing suit against the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, claiming they were responsible for supervising an abusive friar who was working for the archdiocese.

In order to avoid criminal indictment for child endangerment and obstruction of justice, the Bishop of Phoenix, Arizona has recently signed an agreement with the prosecutor admitting that he knew of accusations of sexual abuse by priests (fifty have been named so far as involved with the abuse of minors), but transferred them without telling their new superiors or parishioners, allowing them to victimize others. As part of the agreement the bishop is handing over responsibility for dealing with sex abuse issues to someone else not implicated in the criminal negligence. The prosecutor was informed that even if the bishop was indicted, the Vatican would not remove him. According to the prosecutor's office, six priests have already been indicted and two others may soon be. A few days after this the Bishop was arrested and has been charged with leaving the scene of a hit and run accident in which someone was killed. His resignation has finally been accepted by the Vatican.

Could anything be worse than this? In the Diocese of Tucson, Arizona it was worse. This year the bishop resigned with health problems, but also because of the devastation of the diocese as a result of the clergy sex abuse, which has brought it to the verge of bankruptcy. Out of 83 active priests, 19 were suspended last year because of accusations of child sex abuse. Fourteen million dollars has already been paid out as a result of lawsuits by victims of clergy sex abuse. The court records revealed that one monsignor in the diocese was allowed to stay in ministry by the recently resigned bishop—despite being a known abuser—because he had threatened to reveal an affair he had with the former bishop of Phoenix. The two had also allegedly victimized the same teenager. That bishop, who is now dead, had been a leading figure in the National Conference of Catholic Bishops national office for many years before becoming bishop of Phoenix. Fr. Thomas Doyle, who worked in the Vatican office in Washington which is in charge of helping choose bishops for the American church, was called as an expert witness in the case that resulted in the 14 million dollar settlement with the Phoenix diocese. He called this case "the most flagrant, well-documented, exasperating case of cover-up that I've ever seen and I've seen a lot of them." He stated that the Bishop settled and arranged for the documents to remain confidential because if the cases had gone to trial they would have been more damaging to the church than the cases in Boston.

Why bring these unfortunate events up? So we can fervently intercede. Because there needs to be a deep cleansing of this corruption, or the Church will not be able to experience the renewal and the success in evangelization that the Holy Spirit desires for her.

I am concerned that the instinct of many leaders in the Church today is to solve problems through the optic of legal and public relations advice, while neglecting the more fundamental need for true repentance and change. Their approach is to disclose as little as possible, admit as little as possible, deny as much as possible, pay as little as possible, and hope that it all blows over and the press and legal system go on to something else. Of course, this attitude isn't universally true but it is still too common for the dominant note to be heart-felt repentance and change.

Recently the head of the National Review Board set up to monitor the Bishops' compliance with their own decisions resigned. He expressed frustration at bishops who still "resist grand jury subpoenas, suppress the names of offending clerics, deny, obfuscate and explain away." There is also still a resistance to face issues that are serious but may not be crimes in the eyes of the state. For example, it is said that the incidence of pedophilia among Catholic priests may be no higher than among other populations. No one really knows this because no really solid studies have been done. The American bishops are refusing to cooperate with such studies, refusing to provide the data that only they have. But one significant fact is known and is being ignored. The majority of the sexual abuse now revealed among clergy has happened with adolescent males. This is not true pedophilia, but a homosexual disorder. Eighty percent of the sexual abuse that has come to light among Catholic priests has involved male victims. Among those victimized by non-priests a little less than seventy percent are female. There is clearly a big issue concerning homosexuality in the priesthood that needs to be addressed. The issue isn't just pedophilia; it's a wider practice of homosexuality, and it isn't even just among minors, or adolescents, but among adults.

For example, in a diocese in Michigan, the diocese has just paid \$90,000 to a man who was in his early 20's when he was molested by a priest, to help with counseling and education expenses. The priest admitted to the diocese about 10 years ago that he had been involved in such a relationship but was still allowed to minister. Since the young man was legally an adult at the time, the diocese was not required to report it. The diocese pointed out that there is no obligation to report such relationships and would not say if they have paid other settlements involving priests and adults. They stated that only priests who are guilty of sexual abuse of a minor have to be barred from priestly work.

Unless the issue of adult, consensual, homosexual relationships involving priests is also dealt with, we are only addressing a small part of the problem.

Unless the underlying corruption of theology that still occurs in many places is dealt with, rationalizations and justifications for such behavior will continue to be provided by those teaching in the name of the Church. (I'm currently helping a layman in training for the Diaconate in a diocese, address with the diocesan authorities some really awful teaching that is part of the official formation program.)

Until bishops begin to fear God more than the press and the legal system, and take decisive action, even when they're not compelled to, a clear note of the trumpet will never be sounded.

Let's continue to pray for a fresh outpouring of a spirit of repentance and true reform so our Church can be what God is calling it to be; a light for the nations, a hope for all the earth.

We at Renewal Ministries continue to do all we can to respond to this call ourselves and to help people all over the world to do the same.