

# THIRTY YEARS: WHAT WE'VE LEARNED AND WHAT I'VE LEARNED

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This year marks the end of the third decade of the contemporary chapter in the Catholic Church's age-old reality of sexual violation of clerics. In 1983 Jeff Anderson filed the historic case in Minnesota that would launch him on his life-long vocation of bringing not only civil but human rights to the Church countless victims. That summer, the bizarre saga of Gilbert Gauthé was exposed to the light in Lafayette, Louisiana.

This nightmare did not begin in Boston in January 2002 as many erroneously believe. It did not begin in 1983 either. It has been a toxic virus in the Body of Christ since its very beginning. The *Didache*, a handbook for the earliest followers of Christ, written before the end of the first century, explicitly condemns men who sexually abuse boys....and the "men" included the leaders or elders of the infant Church. The Louisiana spectacle generally gets the credit for being the beginning of public awareness of the so-called "crisis." I daresay though that had Jason Berry lived in Minneapolis and not New Orleans, things might have been different. Either way you look at it, Jeff in Minnesota and Ray Mouton in Louisiana opened a new era for the Catholic Church and in doing so, changed the course of its history.

When I first became involved with the Gauthé case in 1984 I still believed in the Church. I thought the institutional Church and the People of God were one and the same. In spite of already having served three years on the inside at the Vatican Embassy I still had some confidence in bishops and shared the hope with my colleagues at the time, Mike Peterson and Ray Mouton, that once the bishops became aware of how terrible sexual abuse of a child could be and also aware of the potential for a very serious problem in the Church, they would quickly step up to the plate and do the right thing, especially by the victims.

I was dead wrong and by the time I left my position at the Vatican embassy I was quite convinced I was wrong. I had no idea however, of the extent of the problem but more important, and worse, I had no idea just how duplicitous and destructive the bishops could be.

Back in 1985 the transformation of the Catholic Church back to a medieval monarchy was underway but not yet in high gear. There were still some good men holding down the office of bishop, most of them remnants from the Vatican II era of hope. John Paul II, soon to be canonized, set about changing the Church by appointing men as bishops who had replaced pastoral compassion with unthinking obsession with orthodoxy that was a thin cover for soaring ambition and lust for power. The unified game-plan for confronting the “nuisance of pedophilia” as one bishop referred to it, was not so obvious in the first years of this era, but it certainly is now.

I don't think any of us who were around thirty years ago had any idea where this odyssey would take us. Above all, we had no idea that the stubbornness, shock, conviction, anger, compassion, desolation, fatigue, disappointment and courage that we have all felt at one time or another, would propel the disparate and sometimes unlikely allies in this hellish

drama to bring about profound changes in the Catholic Church and in our society.

We have discovered things that have shocked and stunned us that thirty years ago were well outside most people's imagination.

1. We have learned that it's not "over" and it won't be over as long as the culture and institution that enabled the systemic sexual violation remains as it is.

2. We have learned that the presenting issue is the sexual violation of children, adolescents and vulnerable adults by clerics of all ranks, from deacons to Cardinals but that the most outrageous aspect of the scandal has been and continues to be the response by the hierarchy.

3. We have learned that both the Church and secular society had to be forced to look at child sexual abuse straight on and reluctantly accept the reality that it is a profound and lasting violation of a person's body, mind and soul and to the additional reality that violated children and adults have regularly been ignored.

4. We have learned that the toxic and even vicious response of the hierarchy and clergy is deeply embedded in the clerical culture and not a geographic phenomenon caused by forces extrinsic to the institutional church such as an anti-Catholic media, a sexualized culture or a materialistic society.

5. We have learned that there is a monstrous chasm between the Christian response expected of the institutional Church and the actual experience of victims and their families.
6. We have learned that the exposure of widespread sexual abuse by clerics has brought irreversible changes to the relationship between the Church and secular society.
7. We have learned that John Paul II cared little or nothing for the victims of his priests and bishops but was instead concerned with protecting bishops and finding a focus for blame anywhere but in the institutional Church.
8. We have learned that the clerical elite that runs the institutional Church is abysmally ignorant of the complex nature of human sexuality and therefore of the devastating effects of sexual violation on all levels of personhood.
9. We have learned that the exposure of widespread sexual abuse at all levels of the institutional Church has triggered the exposure of corruption in other areas and a demand for accountability.
10. We have learned that today's bishops have a severely limited and deficient understanding of pastoral care.
11. We have learned that the last two popes and the hierarchy have a seriously twisted notion of right and wrong whereby they protect or excuse

clerics who violate children but persecute and punish sincere, faith-filled men and women who seek ways to bring Christ and the Church to people in our twenty-first century culture.

12. We have learned that victims who present themselves to Church authorities in a docile, deferential and non-demanding manner will be tolerated but those who stand on an even level with the bishops and demand true justice will be treated as the enemy.

13. We have learned, for certain, if we ever doubted, that the compulsion of an adult cleric to find sexual satisfaction from a child or a vulnerable adult may have moral dimensions but it is fundamentally a highly pathological aberration in one's psychosexual makeup. It is not first and foremost a matter of morality controlled by the will but of a disorder controlled if possible, by various therapy protocols.

14. We have learned that the Church's leaders from the papacy on down have grossly underestimated the impact their action and inaction would have on the community and the mortal blow this would deal their credibility.

15. We have learned that some of the most morally compromised people in our society are lawyers who represent Church entities in sex abuse litigation.

16. We have learned that the Church's response would continue to be shaped by a small number of celibate males, most of them bishops and

above, none of whom have ever had any experience of parenthood and who live in a monarchy significantly isolated from the real world.

17. We have learned that the clerical subculture than runs the institutional Church is fed by a highly malignant, narcissistic spirituality that requires a docile, controlled and compliant laity to survive.

18. We have learned that the passive-dependent relationship of the laity to the clergy, centered around sacramental rituals, has caused a passive, muted response to the sexual abuse plague.

19. We have learned that the strident defense of the institutional Church is grounded in either an ignorance of the authentic meaning of “Church” as the People of God or worse yet, an arrogant rejection of it.

20. We have learned that blind orthodoxy has replaced courageous charity as the main focus of the papacy and hierarchy in our era. Those who profess their staunch but limited orthodoxy and total loyalty to the pope and magisterium are concerned for their emotional security at the expense of charity towards victims.

21. We have learned that the Church has in fact, responded to the victims with charity and support in their demand for justice, but it is not the institutional Church but rather the fundamental Church, the People of God.

The sex abuse phenomenon has affected peoples' lives in a variety of ways. It has had a profound impact on my life on several levels. Most of the impact has been from things I have learned.

1. I have learned that the sage advice I was given in 1972 by a distinguished priest who had been a peritus at Vatican II, that *with bishops yes and no are interchangeable terms*, is true.
2. I have learned that it is dangerous and naïve to place complete, unquestioning trust in every utterance from popes and bishops.
3. I have learned that the *ontological change* that happens at ordination to the priesthood is a myth that is sustained only to try to bolster clerical power.
4. I have learned that constant, obsessive and unchecked anger towards the institutional church, the bishops, is not only debilitating but self-destructive.
5. I have learned that as long as I allowed my anger to dominate my emotions, the toxic and dark side of the Church still controlled me.
6. I have learned that I needed to challenge and question every aspect of the institutional Church that I took for granted or believed without reservation, and that to gain a healthy spirituality I needed the freedom to reject that which made no sense to me.

7. I have learned that the institutional Church, its bishops, priests and unquestioning followers are not the enemy. The enemy is a destructive, heretical and anti-Christian virus called clericalism.

8. I have learned that bottomless pits of money expropriated from the faithful, legions of lawyers, volumes of empty excuses and seemingly endless public relations verbiage are, in the end, no match for truth.