

CLERGY ABUSE SURVIVORS MEET IN POLAND

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Survivors of Catholic clergy sexual abuse from thirteen countries met in Poznan, Poland on November 13, 14 and 15, 2015. The event was sponsored by SNAP, and the Don't Be Afraid Foundation. The Foundation was founded in 2013 in Poland as a support organization for Polish sexual abuse survivors. Although SNAP has held annual conferences in the US for the last 15 years, this was the second international conference. The first was held in Dublin in April 2013.

The speakers and attending survivors brought the international state of sexual abuse by clergy into sharp and very disturbing focus. Victims are coming forward in rapidly increasing numbers, especially in Latin American and African countries. With little variation their stories are the same. The universal theme running through all is the lack of an effective response of both individual bishops and Episcopal conferences. In most instances the bishops' response is not simply to ignore reports but to attack the victims. Many victims told stories of first approaching bishops after they had been abused, fully expecting a caring response. Instead they were met with coldness, denial and open hostility. In some countries the Church leaders not only deny the existence of the problem but openly persecute victims who come forward. Just as in the early years in the U.S., widespread sexual abuse by clerics has been denied and minimized by Church officials and when the reality can no longer be ignored, the blame is shifted and the victims and their supporters are devalued and demonized.

Although most of the abuse survivors in attendance were from Poland, the speakers were from North America, Latin America, Australia, Africa, Ireland, Western Europe and Eastern Europe. The speakers included the Deputy Commissioner for Human Rights in Poland and a member of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. The presentations included a wide variety of topics, all directly related in some way to sexual abuse. Some of the speakers described the plight of victims and survivors in their own countries and others discussed more specific topics such as the developments in neuroscience on the effects of childhood sexual trauma on the brain, the problem of statutes of limitations in various countries, the emotional and spiritual damage inflicted by sexual abuse, child pornography and sexual abuse via the internet. The Australian representative, SNAP leader Nicky Davis, gave a detailed status report on the Australian Royal Commission's progress.

Civil attorneys from the U.S., Canada, Poland and the U.K. all spoke of similar responses from the Church through their attorneys. Survivors are often treated like criminals. The damage done to them is either vigorously denied or minimized. The impression is that the Church, while speaking of support for victims will actually go to scandalous lengths to discredit and emotionally devastate victims in court. There is no incentive for the bishops to change their behavior because in far too many countries there is no accountability for their actions. The very few examples of papal action are dwarfed by what is really happening. The most moving presentation was given by a three young women from a small village several hours distant from Poznan. Two of the women were mothers who described in

very disturbing detail the struggle they went through to get the Church and civil authorities to respond to their pastor who had repeatedly sexually violated their young daughters. They described their own painful and frustrating efforts and how they were finally supported by a local journalist who accompanied them and who published front-page stories in the local newspaper. The priest was finally dealt with by the civil authorities. He was given a two year suspended sentence, fined the equivalent of \$150.00 for each victim and transferred to another locale. The most shocking part of their story was the reaction of the local villagers. The women were verbally attacked, accused of trying to destroy the church and shunned by the community. Although there was no question of the priest's guilt, no one from the Catholic Church reached out to either mother with any expression of regret or compassion. This horrific response from the "devout" Catholics is apparently not an exception in Poland.

The speakers from the various countries and the informal discussions with the survivors revealed a uniformity in the bishops' responses in every country. In spite of promises from the Holy See all the survivors spoke of responses from the bishops that ranged from hostile denial to outright attacks. The Polish victims have the worst situation of those in any European country. Known perpetrators are still openly transferred from parish to parish. Victims not only get no support from bishops but are often attacked and accused of undermining the Church. The institutional Church is still very powerful and as a result otherwise sympathetic people are afraid to antagonize the clergy by openly supporting victims. It was especially disturbing to learn that Hanna Sochoka, a former Polish ambassador to the Holy See and a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors has

refused to meet with Polish survivors.

There was a good deal of discussion about Pope Francis' response to victims since he began his papal ministry. Some admitted an initial surge of hope but the discussion quickly revealed that the survivors are highly skeptical that any of the pope's initiatives will amount to anything. The consensus among participants was that the healing of present victims is being ignored. The participants from Poland, Africa and Latin America provided a discouraging picture in which there appears to be no reflection of the pope's call for healing in the actions of the bishops in their respective countries. There was general agreement that compassionate care as well as justice for victims and effective provisions for the safety of children in the future will be accomplished by survivors from all countries working together with active collaboration with both national and international secular organizations and law enforcement agencies. No one held out any hope that the Holy See would actually do anything truly effective. At least two of the European speakers stressed the fact that clergy victims are not only Catholics but citizens of their respective countries and as such have a right to the protection of the civil law.

It became clear that it is necessary for abuse victims in Europe need to involve the European Union because several countries are not protective of victims because of the undue influence of the bishops on government leaders and agencies.

There was input and discussion about the need for competent therapy for victims, a problem encountered in every country represented. Several speakers and survivors stressed that Church authorities should have no part in

selecting therapists, monitoring a survivor's progress or receiving reports from psychologists yet in spite of the unethical and even illegal nature of such practices, they still go on in many dioceses in the U.S. and other countries as well. The input at this discussion made it very clear that bishops from the countries represented either do not understand the real nature and complete picture of the impact of sexual violation by clerics, or they reject the findings of medical and psychological experts in favor of their own erroneous and biased opinions.

All of the participants had come from very devout Catholic backgrounds and all agreed that the deep spiritual damage incurred from sexual abuse is an area that has been consistently ignored by Church authorities. No one could provide an example of a Church-sponsored resource for victims to deal with spiritual healing. The most outrageous input was from some Polish survivors who said that some Polish bishops had actually sent abuse victims to exorcists who inflicted far more damage to them.