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The crisis of credibility in Philadelphia

Clergy sex abuse scandal is likely to deepen

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What happens now in Philadelphia given the archdiocese's disingenuous response to the grand jury on clergy sexual abuse?

Two things will happen.

First, even further alienation of the Catholic community as a result of the archdiocese's position.

Second, significant additional victims of clergy sexual abuse, particularly female and minority, will be empowered to come forward.

Because of entrenched clericalism in the conservative Philadelphia archdiocese, it considered no alternative but to respond as it did in its 76-page report just as, historically, it considered no alternative to protecting an institution at the expense of its children. If there were more reasoned voices around, they certainly were not listened to in Philadelphia before the archdiocese released its response to the grand jury report, any more than they had been listened to for decades.

We all know of sisters and priests who were transferred or fired from their ministries, removed from the "clerical fast track," as some would call it, or disciplined in some manner because they attempted to alert leadership to serious problems.

While it is true that the archdiocese has made strides since 2002 in creating programs in the areas mentioned by Cardinal Justin Rigali in the archdiocese's response, that was a mandate about which the archdiocese had little choice. Evaluating the effectiveness of these programs, though, will take time but that is hardly the point.

I remember Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua being quoted on a CNN "Newsnight" report covering some of the cardinals who returned from Rome and attended the annual Catholic University fundraiser in Philadelphia on April 26, 2002. He answered a reporter's question by saying, "We all are agreed that no priest guilty of even one act of sexual abuse of a minor will function in any ecclesial ministry or any capacity in our diocese."

Various groups picketing outside the Cathedral Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul never saw any of the cardinals because they came on a bus and went in through the back. I know because I was among those picketing out front.

That was 2002.

We who were born, raised and educated in Philadelphia are aware of the recent removal of two priests from ministry, but not, apparently, because of the alleged abuse charges leveled against them for egregious behavior. No, according to Donna Farrell, spokeswoman for the archdiocese, the two “have been the focus of extraordinary attention,” so they were removed.

Formal, documented warnings came to all the bishops in the United States as early as 1985, and in particular to Cardinal Bevilacqua. If the bishops chose not to address the issues up to that time, the Mouton-Doyle-Peterson Report, “The Problem of Sexual Molestation by Roman Catholic Clergy,” that each one received that year spelled out exactly what would happen if they did not act responsibly.

They didn’t. It happened. And here we are.

The archdiocese released its list of credibly accused priests only when the grand jury released its report on Sept. 21. Does the archdiocese still decide what constitutes “credible” before it alerts law enforcement authorities or do they leave that to the lay professionals as required by its own mandates?

Men who should have been removed from ministry and the priesthood have not been laicized and will never be criminally charged as they might have been in other jurisdictions. Would that Pennsylvania had, at the very least, the laws on felony sexual abuse that Maine and Alaska have on their books.

Instead, credibly accused priests were permitted to retire from active ministry while remaining priests to live a “life of prayer and penance” in a retirement home.

Neither the Philadelphia archdiocese nor the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference has clearly stated its support for substantive changes in statutes of limitation for felony sexual abuse. Other dioceses and their state Catholic conferences have campaigned against extensions of time limits on statutes of limitations and fought to the death amendments to the statute of limitations that would permit victims to file civil suits against the institution that caused them so much pain.

In Philadelphia, sexual abuse crimes against children have statutes of limitation but parking tickets do not.

Go figure.

Until church leaders admit to the pervasive hubris, personal and systemic, which allowed sexually abusive priests to continue in their perfidy long after their crimes were known by church authorities, it will be difficult if not impossible to reestablish either the institution’s credibility or their own. Absent that, reconciliation and healing will not happen.

In the Jewish calendar we are now in the season of repentance and forgiveness. But before God can be invoked, sinners must ask forgiveness of those sinned against.

District Attorney Lynne M. Abraham?

She should be beatified, not vilified.

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