

A CHURCH'S CHANCE AT REDEMPTION

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Sister Maureen Paul Turlish, SNDdeN

Why isn't the Catholic hierarchy actively supporting legislation to protect Pennsylvania children?

Avoiding liability for sexual abuse on the grounds that the statute of limitations has expired is hardly a moral victory, but it's exactly what the church has done in Philadelphia and throughout Pennsylvania in recent years. Legislation to lift civil and criminal statutes of limitations would give victims of childhood sexual abuse the opportunity at long last to have their cases heard in court.

Most of the individuals mentioned in a 2005 grand-jury report on sexual abuse in the church, released under former District Attorney Lynne Abraham, could not be criminally or civilly prosecuted for their alleged crimes. Why? Because their enablers did not have the integrity to call the police, and the statute of limitations covering their alleged crimes ran out. In fact, the archdiocese issued a lengthy response to the report that was geared toward damage control and protecting the church at the expense of children.

This does not appear to be the case with the latest grand-jury report. So far, the church has made no orchestrated public attempt to discredit this investigation or the current district attorney, Seth Williams.

This grand jury indicted three priests and a lay teacher on charges of sexual abuse of boys, and one church official - Msgr. William Lynn, who was formerly responsible for priest assignments - was charged with reckless endangerment of those youngsters. Not only has this never happened in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia; it appears not to have happened anywhere in the United States, and it has sent shock waves through the country's largest religious denomination.

As a community of believers, we say we are concerned about the rights of the downtrodden. But many of us have ignored the victims of child sexual abuse who are right in front of us. Instead, we talk about those who must be in it for the money and make inflammatory statements about anti-Catholic bias - none of which does much to address the problem.

Real accountability requires that all arbitrary statutes of limitations on sexual abuse of children, criminal and civil, be repealed, and that a window of at least two years be provided to allow previously barred cases to be brought forward.

Justice, like charity, should begin at home, and our church should be leading the push for legislative reforms. Jesus said, "The truth shall set you free," but when will the truth of these allegations be known? If the leadership of the archdiocese means what it's been saying since 2005, it will take the lead in abolishing the statute of limitations.

State Rep. Michael P. McGeehan (D., Phila.) has said he intends to introduce legislation in Harrisburg this week (HB 878) "that will once and for all afford all victims of childhood sexual abuse the ability to seek justice." I encourage other legislators to join him, and I expect the archdiocese to actively support his bill and Rep. Louise Bishop's bill (HB 832). The church leadership failed its most vulnerable charges, but now it has an opportunity for redemption.

State Representatives Louise Williams Bishop and Michael McGeehan have introduced House Bills 832 and 878 on March 1st and on March 9th, 2011, called for a public hearing and vote on these bills which would abolish the statute of limitations in child sexual abuse cases and suspend the civil statute of limitations for adult victims of childhood sexual abuse, by anyone.

Sister Maureen Paul Turlish is a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur. She is on the Steering Committee of the Greater Philadelphia Voice of the Faithful and a founding member of the National Survivor Advocates Coalition. She also supports Justice4PaKids.com and Catholics4Change.com

She may be reached at: maturlishmidsnd@yahoo.com