

Reflections on the Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests

Dr. Aaron Milavec

Some people have gained the impression that sexual abuse by priests is a very recent phenomenon. Those who are in the know, however, realize that sexual improprieties have been going on quietly for a long time and that, only in recent times, have they come into the public limelight. The statistics for the United States are staggering:

The **United States Conference of Catholic Bishops** (USCCB) reports having received allegations from 14,000 victims against 5,600 priests between 1950-2008. The official numbers are found in the 2004 **John Jay Report** commissioned by the USCCB and the subsequent **implementation report** from 2008.¹

My reflections on this worldwide ecclesiastical crisis are divided into two parts: (a) Cultural factors shaping the current crisis and (b) Ecclesiastical factors aiding and inhibiting the bishops' response.

¹David Manes, "Vatican releases Church response procedure for sex abuse cases," *Jurist: Legal News and Research*, 12 April 2010, <http://jurist.org/paperpurchase/2010/04/vatican-releases-church-response.php>

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Cultural Factors Shaping the Current Crisis

Cultural factors play a large role in accounting for why the pedophilia crisis has emerged into the public limelight at this period of history.

To begin with, one has to reflect on how tolerance for sexual abuse within families has markedly decreased in our own lifetime. A man used to be able to beat his wife with impunity and to terrorize and sexually abuse his children as well without any outside interference of any kind. The victims were ashamed to tell even members of their wider family. They were oftentimes persuaded that they brought these things upon themselves and somehow deserved their mistreatment. Fear clouded their minds and they were cowered into silent submission.²

Why do children permit themselves to be sexually abused? The truth is that generally they are not even aware that they are being “sexually abused.” This only comes many, many years later.

Case One: Susan, a cute neighborhood girl of ten, came over to plant flowers with me. As we worked together, she tells me, with a sense of pride, that she has “a very special relationship” with her dad. I respond, “Oh, that’s nice, tell me about it.” “Oh, I wish I could, but I can’t. My dad made me to promise never to tell anyone. I can’t even tell my sister or my mother.” “Why can’t you tell me.” “My dad said it would get him in trouble, and a policeman would come and put him in jail.”

As I heard these things, red flags went up. “Special relationship” could be the kind of talk her father (a lawyer estranged from his wife) might use by way of sugar-coating his inappropriate touches. The emphasis on secrecy and the threat of disclosure were also suspect. Overall, however, I noted that Susan felt very special to be included in her father’s night-time rituals!

Case Two³: Albert Green vividly remembers the first time he saw the home of the Rev. Ed Olszewski, the priest who cared for him [as an orphan] when he was 11. “The first day, I was so excited. I went

² Examine an exemplary website wherein Muslims talk freely of these matters: “Child Molestation in Muslim World—Myth or Reality?” *MuslimMatters.org*, 2009, <http://muslimmatters.org/2009/02/16/sex-the-ummah-child-molestation-in-the-muslim-world-myth-or-reality-part-i/>

³ This account comes directly from Michelle Nicolosi, “Man says sex with priest began at 11,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 20 Aug 2004, http://www.seattlepi.com/local/187183_albert20.html

running through the church. Everything was so pretty — it was like a mansion. It had twelve bedrooms and six bathrooms. It was humongous,” said Green [recalling these early events for the jury]. Green remembers the mysterious chute that dropped dirty clothes right down to the laundry room, the giant bowl filled with silver dollars and the cool stuff in the priest’s bedroom: a little fridge with soft drinks in it, a popcorn machine, the soft rug in front of his bed.

He also remembers that Olszewski didn’t wait long to establish that their relationship would be sexual. . . . While the priest had sex with him, Green said, he was looking over at the bowl full of shiny coins, thinking “all this money. He’s going to give it to me,” Green said.

Green said he also liked the power and stature that came with being the priest’s surrogate son: “I knew what he was doing. I just felt like he was my father, he was the president, whatever he says, goes. I never really had nothing, now I’m rich and famous. . . . I felt special,” he said.

The parallels between Green and Susan are striking. Both children were hungry to be nurtured, protected, and made to feel “very special.” Both cases also confirm clinical findings: “Less than 10 percent of the participants [children] reported experiencing their abuse as traumatic, terrifying, overwhelming, life-threatening, or shocking at the time it happened.”⁴

Other cultural factors also come into play. As the tolerance for sexual abuse of minors has declined, the tolerance for “sex tourism” has massively increased in various Asiatic countries, and the American military offers combat troops R&R [“rest and relaxation”] in areas where sex trafficking has been flourishing.⁵ In such a world where utilitarian values hold sway, one should not be surprised that reputable scholars publish books⁶ and Christian “experts” sponsor websites that openly advocate the advantages of pedophilia:

⁴ Susan B. Clancy, *The Trauma Myth*, Basic Books, 2009.

⁵ Debra McNutt, “Is the Iraq Occupation Enabling Prostitution?” *CommonDreams.org*, 11 July 2007, <http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2007/07/11/2453> & Amanda Kloer, “Sex Trafficking High Around U.S. Military Bases Abroad,” *Care2 News Network*, 09 Feb 2010, <http://www.care2.com/news/member/941239049/1386125>

⁶ James Hitchcock, “Hypocrisy on Pedophilia,” *The Hitchcock Column*, 10 May 2003, <http://www.wf-f.org/JFH-Hypocrisy-ChildSex.html> & “Child-sex book canceled,” <http://www.wnd.com/?pageId=32461>

Pedophiles who decide to act out are usually someone who [sic] the child loves and respects. The experience (before society dumps its guilt and other garbage) is usually positive. The sex is mutual and pleasurable in many cases to both parties, especially when the relationship is a good, loving one. . . . Allow children freedom [sic] of choice! Promote RELATIONSHIPS between youngsters and adults!⁷

What these sites fail to recognize is that “consent” on the part of children is often overwhelmed by the “initiative” on the part of male adults who cleverly exploit their “innocence” and “trust” and “longing for human contact.”

Furthermore, patriarchy offers men a sense of entitlement. Their sexual satisfaction is legitimated even when achieved at the expense of vulnerable women and children. The claim that “the sex is mutual and pleasurable” never takes into account the imbalance of power that exists in pedophilia (as well as in sex tourism and R&R). Furthermore, in the case of children, there is a glaring imbalance of sexual development. Thus, male exploitation is inevitable even in those instances where the child finds the encounter satisfying. Recall Green saying, “I never really had nothing, now I’m rich and famous.” Young women offering sex tourism and R&R might even be able to say much the same thing. When examined more closely, this is all a seductive fiction brewed in the fragile imaginations of patriarchal men feeding on their sense of “male entitlement.” Priests, truth to say, have no inbred immunity from this cultural factor.⁸

Ecclesiastical Factors Aiding and Inhibiting the Bishops’ Response

Prior to 2002, the response of the U.S. Catholic bishops was overwhelmingly in favor of silencing victims and preventing public scandal. After 2002, these same bishops turned things around and drew up a “Charter” with the Catholic people to put into place protections at all levels and, above all things, to stand by the victims who had been abused.

In the early period, from Vatican II to 1980, most bishops listened to the complaints of parents and guardians and then followed through by confronting accused priests in private. Some boldly refused to allow that there was any substance to the rumors that had been

⁷ *The Pedophilia/Pedophile Education Web Site Mirror*, 1997, <http://lege.cz/archiv/pedo1.htm>

⁸ Kathryn A. Flynn, *The Sexual Abuse of Women by Members of the Clergy*, Jefferson: Mcfarland & Co., 2003, 150ff.

brought against them. Others confessed their misconduct and poured out tears of repentance that sufficed to convince their bishops that they had turned from sin to grace. After a time of prayer and reflection, these priests were generally assigned to new pastoral locations⁹ where they could make a clean start.

When psychological testing was first introduced in the 1980s as the preferred way to weed out unfit candidates applying to the seminary, stress was placed upon psychological assessments by way of assuring bishops that those entering the seminary had a adult psychological profile and were capable of undertaking a life of committed celibacy. During this period, bishops also asked the advice of trusted psychologists regarding wayward priests addicted to drink or to sex or to drugs. On the basis of the best advice of professional psychologists, they began to realize that mere contrition and the firm resolve not to sin again was largely ineffective when it came to addictive behaviors. They thus began to send troubled priests to isolated psychological centers wherein they could recover their spiritual and psychological health. When deemed "cured," such priests could be reassigned to a parish in a new geographical center where they could have a "fresh start" free of the lingering rumors and the human mess that they had created in their former pastoral settings.

Meanwhile, in the 1980s, an avalanche of fresh accusations surfaced. No one knows how many cases were reported since the bishops routinely followed the policy of protecting the reputations of the perpetrators and of doing damage control within the community. Reported cases of child sexual abuse across the United States reached epidemic proportions from 1980 to 1990, with a reported 322 percent increase from 1980 to 1990.¹⁰ Given the logic shared earlier, one can suspect that the bishops received an epidemic rise in reported incidents of sexual abuse by priests also during this period.

At this point, no bishop within the United States was handing over evidence to the local police regarding the confirmed sexual improprieties of their priests. Their logic was that this was an internal affair and that their responsibility ended when a priest had taken up residence in an addiction center and his case file, complete with

⁹ Alessandra Rizzo, Bradley Brooks, "Predator priests shuffled around globe," *World News*, 14 April 2010, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/36523444>

¹⁰ "Sexual Abuse Statistics," *Pandora's Box*, <http://www.prevent-abuse-now.com/stats.htm>

the sworn testimony of witnesses pledged to secrecy, was transferred to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome, which was under the direction of Cardinal Ratzinger from 1981 to 2005. The revised 1983 Code of Canon Law removed the right of diocesan bishops to involuntarily laicize misbehaving priests. This had been the procedure in the 1917 code that was normally used. With the revised Code, however, a formal Vatican tribunal had to be convoked.

The old adage is that “Rome moves slowly” and, in the affair of wayward priests, this applied in full rigor. The notion that a tribunal of complete strangers in the Vatican could competently decide the degree of guilt and the entire future of the accused on the basis of sworn testimony (wherein the accused never had to face his accusers; and, in many instances, was never even permitted to know the identity of his accusers and wherein no cross-examination of live witnesses was possible) may seem ludicrous to us today, but this was the required formal procedure for canonical laicization. In the Vatican tribunals, even the judges were sworn to secrecy and could never discuss the cases they decided with either the victims or the perpetrators. Such a system was thoroughly unsatisfactory since neither the victims nor the perpetrators had any way of knowing whether their case received a “fair hearing.”¹¹

Wayward Clergy in the Patristic Church

In the patristic churches of the second to the fifth century, local bishops within a Roman province met twice yearly for the purpose of devising a uniform pastoral plan for the faithful. At these assemblies, any person of any rank could bring forward accusations against any of the assembled bishops. Testimony under oath was received with the accused present and cross examinations were permitted to get at the truth of the affair. Any bishop judged to have acted improperly was disciplined immediately: Some were suspended from their office for a limited time. Others were permanently removed from their clerical office. In severe cases,

¹¹ Nicholas P. Cafardi, *Before Dallas: The U.S. Bishops' Response to Clergy Sexual Abuse of Children*, New York: Paulist Press, 2008. This book expertly details how and why the procedures used by the bishops prior to 2002 largely failed. Among other things, Cafardi notes “avoiding scandal is simply not a valid excuse for secrecy” (p. 154). Current Vatican procedures can be found at http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_guide-CDF-procedures_en.html

bishops were excommunicated entirely¹² and expected to become penitents living on bread and water, and kneeling at the doors of the church every Sunday beseeching the faithful to pray for them since God was deaf to their prayers and they were unable to join in the Eucharist.¹³

In this Patristic setting, the Sacrament of Penance¹⁴ was functioning as the public rite whereby unworthy ministers were publicly judged and penitential practices were invoked by way of restoring a person to health and forgiveness *within the community*. No one ever imagined that disciplining misbehaving bishops and presbyters was an affair that had to be handled in Rome or that the office of bishop was somehow unaccountable to the local church.

In parallel fashion, in every urban church, the bishop met with his council of presbyters early in the week and routinely heard cases of Christians who were vexed or injured by the conduct of their brothers or sisters in Christ.¹⁵ Christians were asked not to bring their brothers or sisters before the judgment of secular magistrates.¹⁶ After 318, Constantine even allowed that Christians could settle their legal complaints in these effective church courts.

In this era, bishops and presbyters ordinarily resided in their local communities for the whole of their lives.¹⁷ They were well known to everyone in the community. A bishop was chosen on the basis of open deliberation and voting within the council of presbyters. Such

¹² For example: "If any bishop, or presbyter, or deacon . . . abstains from marriage, flesh, and wine . . . because he abominates these things, forgetting that 'all things were made good' and that 'God made male and female,' either let him reform, or let him be deprived [of his office], and be cast out of the church" (*Ecclesiastical Canons of the Holy Apostles* 51).

¹³ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1989, 429-524.

¹⁴ The private confession of sins to a priest did not emerge prior to the Middle Ages and, even then, it first emerged as a monastic tradition brought to Europe by Celtic monks. For details, see Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to the Sacraments in the Catholic Church*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1981, 307-363.

¹⁵ "Let your judgments be held on the second day of the week. . . . Let the presbyters and deacons be ever present in all judgments with the bishops. Judge without respect to persons" (*Didascalia Apostolorum* 11.2.47).

¹⁶ "Let him not go to the tribunals of the heathen" (*Didascalia Apostolorum* 11.2.45).

¹⁷ "A bishop ought not to leave his own parish and leap to another . . . unless there be some good reason. . . . If any presbyter or deacon . . . leaves his own parish and goes to another . . . , let him communicate there as a layman" (*Ecclesiastical Canons of the Holy Apostles* 14-15).

appointments were then brought before the entire community and the consent of the entire assembly was required before anyone took office.¹⁸ Any presbyter accused of misbehaving was judged by the bishop with his council of presbyters. Witnesses were sworn in and the accused was invited to speak in his own defense and to call witnesses from within the community.¹⁹ Here, again, no one ever imagined that disciplining misbehaving presbyters (priests) was an affair that had to be handled in Rome²⁰ or that the office of presbyter was somehow not accountable immediately and directly within the local church.²¹

This diversion into church history is offered here by way of indicating how dysfunctional the Church of the 1980s had become. Some say that the sexual abuse crisis was precipitated by the policy of secrecy and damage control perpetuated by bishops and clergy alike operating in a patriarchal system.²² From my perspective, the problem goes much deeper. Centralization of the Church in Rome (which began as the

¹⁸ Patrick Granfield, *Ecclesial Cybernetics: A Study of Democracy in the Church*, New York: Macmillan, 1973, 148-163. Pope Leo I (440-461) aptly summarizes the tradition of his day when he wrote: "No consideration allows making bishops of those who have not been chosen by the clerics, sought for by the people, and consecrated by the provincial bishops with the consent of the metropolitan" (*Ep.* 167).

¹⁹ These familiar forms of juridical trials were slowly imitated by secular tribunals and thus, even in entirely secular courts today, jurors are chosen from within the community, witnesses swear an oath upon the bible, and the accused (or lawyers acting in their name) are permitted to cross-examine witnesses.

²⁰ "Cyprian [d. 258] believed that the Spirit worked through the concord and unanimity of bishops consulting together in council. No single bishop could dictate to his colleagues." [W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964, 352.] With time, however, Rome gradually emerged as the primal see in the West and it was only natural that episcopal elections required the confirmation of the Bishop of Rome and that deposed clergy sometimes sought to overturn local judgments against them by appealing their cases in Rome. See Frend, 352-411. For a systematic study, see Kenan B. Osborne, OFM, *Priesthood: A History of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church*, New York: Paulist Press, 1988 & Edward Schillebeeckx, OP, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry*, New York: Crossroad, 1985.

²¹ "Let a bishop, or presbyter, or deacon who is taken in fornication . . . be deprived [of his office]. . ." (*Ecclesiastical Canons of the Holy Apostles* 25).

²² In a patriarchal family, a mother sometimes minimizes and excuses the sexual abuse of her own children by their father (as indicated earlier). Likewise, in a patriarchal ecclesial 'family,' bishops shielded abusive priests from detection and punishment. They were often rewarded for this by their fellow bishops. See, for example, David Gibson, "Top Vatican Official Praised Bishop Who Covered for Child Molester," *Politics Daily*, April 2010, <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/04/15/top-vatican-official-praised-bishop-who-covered-for-child-molester/>

much needed Gregorian reform of the 11th century) left Catholics with an inadequate system of justice that provided scant relief for either the accused or the abused. Parents often just wanted to receive a fair hearing, an admission of guilt from the perpetrator, and some guarantee that the perpetrator would never again be in a position to create yet more victims. Prior to 2002, these things were in short supply.

Shortcomings of the Penitential System

Even the recent practice of sacramental confession left the victims out in the cold. A priest who molested children could screw up his courage and confess his sins to another priest (maybe even his bishop). As a result, the penitent's tears were blessed with the assurance that God had forgiven all his terrible sins and that he could begin with a fresh slate. It never occurred to most confessors to imagine that the "innocence" of a child had been stolen and, as in cases of theft, restitution (according to the means of the person involved) was required before absolution could be given. Nor did most confessors imagine that 'a firm purpose of amendment' might entail requiring the penitent to never be alone with a child since, for him, this constituted a 'near occasion of sin.'

The theology of the confessional also reduced any prospect that angry parents would ever hear any admission of guilt from the perpetrator.²³ The confessor and God had heard the confession of guilt, but those who were hurt and angry were greeted with only a stony silence. In brief, sacramental confession failed to address the fact that sexual abuse by a priest no longer constituted just a private sin; it was, by its very nature, a crime that broke down and destroyed community trust. No amount of private tears in the confessional could restore this lost trust. Bishop Geoffrey Robinson clearly recognized this in his soul-searching book when he wrote the following: "There was never going to be an adequate response to abuse as long as many people thought in terms of sexual offense against God rather than harm caused to victims."²⁴

²³ The Jewish survivors of the Shoah are on target when it comes to the issue of forgiveness: (a) No one can forgive on behalf of another; (b) No one ought to forgive unless their is **teshuvah** ("turning around" and repudiation of past crimes); (c) Finally, even when forgiveness comes, there is an obligation never to forget the past lest such crimes be repeated. See "The Genius of Solidarity with Victims" in Aaron Milavec, *The Didache*, New York: Newman Press, 2003, 882-888.

²⁴ Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008, 204. See also Charlene Spretnak, "Church renewal can be a spiritual practice," *National Catholic Reporter*, 28 May 2010, 18 & 22.

It was at this point that parents of victims got very angry and took charge of their right to protect their daughters and sons from priests who were wolves in sheep's clothing. One such mother explained how her son had been abused as an altar boy and how the priest responsible continued to have monthly sleepovers at the rectory. When she met with the bishop and explained in great detail the havoc being wrecked by this priest, the bishop suddenly stood up, put on his stole, and gave her absolution. Then he explained that everything she told him was under the seal of confession and that she had the sacred Catholic duty not to reveal to anyone what she had just confessed to him. She was now doubly angry by her bishop's "pious trickery." She stormed out and immediately found a lawyer to bring criminal charges against the priest for "improper sexual conduct with a minor."²⁵

Once frustrated parents caught on that bishops were reassigning offending priests to new parishes and that most priests so assigned became repeat offenders²⁶, more and more parents began to use the legal system as *the only route left to them* to bring forward the remedy that the Vatican tribunals and the confessional were unable to deliver. "Since 2007, in the US alone, the Church has settled more than 500 cases of abuse for over \$900 million."²⁷ This has severely depleted the coffers of just about every diocese in the United States. Properties have been sold. Loans have been taken out. In some cases, entire dioceses have declared bankruptcy.

In March of 2002, a *USA Today/Gallup poll* revealed the massive dissatisfaction of U.S. Catholics with the conduct of their own church leadership:

- 72% of Roman Catholics said that the church leadership has done a bad job dealing with sexual abuse by priests,

²⁵ This narrative came to me as a confidential disclosure; hence, names have been omitted.

²⁶ Some parents, frustrated with the stalling or cover-up procedures of individual bishops, began organizations (a) to support survivors of clergy sexual abuse, (b) to support priests of integrity, and (c) to shape structural change within the Catholic Church. See, more especially, Voice of the Faithful (<http://www.votf.org>), BishopAccountability.org (<http://www.bishop-accountability.org/>), the worldwide SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (<http://www.snapnetwork.org/>), and <http://www.archpdxpriestfiles.com/resources/>

²⁷ Sarah Miley, "Vermont Catholic Diocese Reaches Settlement in Clergy Abuse Cases," *Jurist*, 14 May 2010, <http://jurist.org/paperchase/2010/05/vermont-catholic-diocese-reaches-settlement-in-clergy-abuse-cases.php>

- 74% said that the church is more concerned with protecting its own image than with solving the problem.²⁸

The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People

It is to the credit of the U.S. Bishops that, in 2002, they did a deep and soul-searching reassessment of their delinquency in handling sex-abuse cases. The wake-up call was undoubtedly due to parents and survivors coming forward to tell their stories and to mount legal action against those responsible. The bishops did an about face by turning their full attention to the victims where it should have been all along. For the first time, as a group, bishops moved completely away from coddling perpetrators and extended their primary concern for the victims and their families.

The bishops' website provides the following summary of this Charter:

The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People is a comprehensive set of procedures established by the USCCB in June 2002 for addressing allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy. The *Charter* also includes guidelines for reconciliation, healing, accountability, and prevention of future acts of abuse.

The *Charter* directs action in all the following matters:

- Creating a safe environment for children and young people;
- Healing and reconciliation of victims and survivors;
- Making prompt and effective response to allegations;
- Cooperating with civil authorities;
- Disciplining offenders;
- Providing for means of accountability for the future to ensure the problem continues to be effectively dealt with through a national Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection and a National Review Board.²⁹

The 2004 Annual Report which details the degree of implementation undertaken by each diocese was published with this forward by Bishop William S. Skylstad, President, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:

The last three years have been a humbling experience for the Church. We bishops have had to face the sinful betrayal of trust by those who should

²⁸ Cited from http://www.religioustolerance.org/clergy_sex5.htm.

²⁹ U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops, "Victim Assistance," http://www.usccb.org/ocyp/victim_assistance.shtml

have been most trustworthy. We have had to deal with the continuing consequences of these betrayals. We have pledged to hold ourselves accountable, as far as is humanly possible, to see to it that this betrayal never happens again.³⁰

This public accountability was insured by hiring twelve lay auditors who produced the report. For those who had been following individual cases, it came as no surprise that the conduct of bishops was sharply criticized for enabling the multitude of preventable acts of abuse. The auditors concluded: "These leadership failings have been shameful to the church, both as a central institution in the lives of the faithful and a moral force in the secular world, and have aggravated the harm suffered by victims and their families."³¹

Needless to say, the creation and implementation of the Charter in 2002 did not mean that all bishops were attuned to abandoning their former dysfunctional ways. Some bishops continue to badmouth Catholics bringing lawsuits against them. Still others continued to drag their feet and to invent ways to circumvent court orders to turn over documentation relative to particular cases. Overall, however, most bishops turned around their entire approach to the issue.

Conclusions

Sometimes deep pain and failure are a stimulus to reflection, to conversion, and to renewed forms of action. The 2002 Charter, the Victim Assistance Coordinators, and the independent National Review Board are a testament to this.

Sad to say, however, some of the practices that enabled this worldwide crisis to mushroom have not significantly changed and this bodes badly for the future. The Vatican's system of tribunals perpetuates an antiquated system of justice that provides scant relief for either the accused or the abused. No credible, mandatory diocesan guidelines/practices are in place that require a fraternal accountability of a bishop to the clergy and the faithful of his diocese. Acts of injustice (other than sexual abuse) often have no local remedy; hence, most grievances remain unheard and unhealed. Meanwhile, sacramental confession continues to be so privatized and sanitized that it provides little or no remedy for the social effects of sin.

³⁰ William S. Skylstad, "Preface," *Report on the Implementation of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, Washington: USCCB, 2005, v.

³¹ Michael Paulson, "Church Hierarchy Faulted by Lay Panel on Abuse," *The Boston Globe*, 28 Feb 2004, http://www.boston.com/globe/spotlight/abuse/stories5/022804_report.htm

Yet, when all is said and done, this is the church we love and pray for and strive to improve. . . .

A Reflective Footnote

The turn-around of the bishops in 2002 has provided the Church with a remarkable safety net. One bishop was even so bold to say that "today the church is the safest institution in our country for children and young people."³² Even so, however, the bishops have been very reticent to speak openly of their own failures. In so doing, my fear is that they have been cautioned by their lawyers not to reveal anything that might assist their 'adversaries' in any present or future court cases. This adversarial climate is very unfortunate. Victims and their families never have the opportunity to hear an open admission of guilt coming from either the priests who abused them nor from the bishops who collaborated through their misguided silences and cover-ups. This is an impediment to the healing of victims and healing of the Church.

The Gospels describe in bold relief the failures of Peter and the other apostles.³³ One must reflect here that these Gospels demonstrate that the Pharisees challenged Jesus "as outsiders," but that the male disciples of Jesus resisted his message "as insiders." Needless to say, this embarrassing recital of the personal failures of the male disciples would not have made it into the permanent record (the written Gospels) unless the apostles themselves had freely included these sad recitals of personal failures as an integral part of the oral gospel that they proclaimed about Jesus. Understood in this light, these Gospels offer us a miniature "Truth and Justice Commission" undertaken by the first apostles (as well as 'their successors') by way of showing that they could govern with confidence only to the degree that they had acknowledged their own personal shortcomings.

Unfortunately, this transparency is in short supply today, and I fear that Bishop Geoffrey Robinson's personal observation is sadly true: "Few are convinced that problems such as sex abuse have yet been faced with total honesty and genuine courage by the whole world-wide church."³⁴

³² Bishop John C. Wester, "Celibacy not cause of sexual abuse by priests," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 19 April 2010, http://www.sltrib.com/opinion/ci_14913988

³³ Mark 4:35-41, 6:45-52, 8:14-21, 8:27-14:63 (esp. 14:50), 14:66-72, and par. For an extended study of the progressive failure of the disciples in Mark, see Theodore J. Weeden, Sr., *Mark – Traditions in Conflict*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971.

³⁴ Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, *Confronting Power and Sex*, 299. For video, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEOyD4gHJdU>