

REFLECTIONS ON WORKING WITH PROBLEMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Before assuming the role of Vicar for Priests in the Archdiocese of Chicago in October of 1991, I had spent most of the previous 34 years of my priestly service as a parish priest. Coming from that world, I was ill prepared emotionally and spiritually to deal with cases in which my fellow priests were alleged to have sexually abused minors. In a vague way, I knew the issue existed. But I had kept the problem at a distance, hoping vainly that it was not true and, if true, that it was under control and would quickly go away.

From experience, of course, I was aware that all priests have to struggle to integrate celibacy into their lives. I recognized that, in the process, priests make mistakes and may even harm others in they're all too human efforts to come to terms with their own sexuality. I presumed naively that the search for sexual wholeness took place within adult relationships. Shortly after I took over as Vicar of Priests, the scandal of clergy sexual abuse of minors became public here in Chicago. Initially I had difficulty dealing with the fact that some of my brother priests could have engaged in sexually harmful acts with minors. How could these decent men, many of whom I knew well, do such tragic things?

As I met and listened to the victims of the sexual misbehavior, I was touched by their terrible pain, pain which I was to discover would not go away. I was angry and my anger grew as I saw the rippling effects of the abuse on the victims and their world, on parishioners, on the Church and priesthood itself, and on my own consciousness.

Early on, it was difficult to be very understanding with the priest perpetrators. When I encountered minimization and denial on their part, I was dismayed. And yet the Cardinal had named me to serve as Vicar for Priests, the "pastor for the priests" themselves. I was supposed to walk with priests in a non-judgmental way through the difficulties they were facing.

The task was formidable. At one and the same time, I found myself working with victims and their families, with the perpetrators and their friends, families and parishioners, with insurance people, attorneys, therapists, public relations people, with the supervisory and monitoring people for the priests - and trying to be sensitive and understanding through it all. My loyalties were torn and it showed.

Support Blossomed

Fortunately I had a lot of personal support. From the parish where I had pastored for then years, there came promises of prayers. At the parish in which I had taken up residence, I found encouragement and positive support, especially from the priests with whom I lived. They must have made me and my morale their special project. In typical priestly fashion, they were not slow to point out my foibles and make fun of my sometime pessimistic outlook. My personal friends, priests and laity alike, and my family rallied around. They didn't always understand the nature of my work, but they understood me.

The other officials of the archdiocese, including the Cardinal himself, were most cooperative and reinforcing. The Archdiocese and its personnel were sincerely trying to face up to the evil and the terrible scandal that had descended on us all.

I must put in a special word of commendation to the archdiocesan attorneys and legal consultants. In our efforts to deal with the crisis, they consistently reminded us of the need to be pastoral and not to allow the legal and insurance ramifications, as importantly as they were, to drive our response. Unfortunately when our efforts to face the problems of sexual abuse drew criticism, the attorneys unjustly came in for the brunt of the attacks.

Growing Distrust

One additional negative aspect of the Vicar for Priests' involvement in the sexual abuse cases was that the Vicar, originally appointed to help priests, was more and more being seen as the "judge, jury, and jailer" in these highly publicized situations. I sensed a noticeable decline of trust among priests for the Vicar's office itself, and, in a way, for me personally. It was understandable. The abuse was claiming another victim.

Creative Solutions

Two events helped to turn that deteriorating situation around. The Cardinal appointed a co-Vicar in June of 1992. The newly named Vicar was a man of great sensitivity and was deeply trusted by his fellow clergy. We agreed that he would concentrate more on pro-active work with priests and I would hang in with the misconduct issues. Having another priest in the office was a blessing. I could talk to someone, face the bad news, critiques my judgments, and share my sadness. Nevertheless, I must say that it still didn't take long before the new man was also drawn into dealing with the misconduct.

Then in September of 1992, the Cardinal published policies and procedures for a new approach to the problem of child sexual abuse by clergy. A Victim Assistance Ministry office was established. The Cardinal also named an independent Professional Fitness Review Board which proceeded to hire an administrator. All this was in place by February of 1993. The presence of those policies and procedures as well as the establishment of the new structures changed my role considerably.

The most disheartening aspects of my work were shifted. The Fitness Review Administrator received and processed the allegations, and the Victim Assistance Minister worked directly with the victims of the abuse. I was still involved with the priests, but my more defined role was to accompany them through the whole process.

As I walked with my brother priests in facing their difficulties, I found myself being more sympathetic, not to the misconduct itself, but to the human beings behind those actions. As a result I think I understand the nature of their misbehavior and the men a bit better now.

Lingering Fears

Sometimes it disturbs me to think that, with all the publicity that has accompanied clergy sexual abuse of minors, similar actions may possibly be going on at this very moment. We may not know about them for years to come. Nevertheless I do believe that one of the positive aspects of the public airing of the scandal in the media has been an increased awareness among priests about observing professional boundaries in their own contacts with youth.

Over and over again, priests tell me they are really more conscious about their relationships with young people than they ever were before - even, they sadly admit, to the point of mild paranoia. The prudent caution is good. The paranoia is not. I hope we will soon strike a good balance again, for the sake of the people, for the sake of the young people themselves.

Recently I returned to my former parish for a funeral. After the funeral Mass, there was a reception for everyone in the gym and I had the opportunity to renew many old friendships. At one point, the mother of a second grader came up to re-introduce her son to me. We had a delightful few moments together. She came back a short time later - without the lad - to tell me in a most sincere manner that I had no idea what an impression I had made on her son. She described how he wanted to come to the funeral service just to see me. And this after almost four years of my absence from the parish. I tell the story as a slight indication of how important we priests may be for the young, even when we are unaware of that influence.

Looking Back

Over the past four years, I have come to a better understanding of the extent of the evil of clergy sexual abuse. I recognize also the almost irreparable hurt and pain inflicted on victims. At times, I hear good people unwittingly downplaying the effects of clerical sexual abuse on victims, wanting victims to "forgive and forget" and get on with their lives. They point to the good things the priest has done as mitigating the evil of the abuse. But it doesn't work that way.

I have also learned humility in the face of the vulnerable, human, sinful side of all of us priests. I see a reflection of my own weakness and humanity in them. Though I deplore what they have done, my heart goes out to them in their now almost shattered dream of priesthood. A few men have been able to return to limited types of ministry where there is no danger to children. As I look into the future, I know that some kind of monitoring will have to be in place perhaps for the rest of their lives. That saddens me, yet I recognize its necessity.

An Encouraging Word

Over the past three years, many of the men and women who do my type of work in dioceses throughout the country have kept in contact. We have formed an unofficial network that has been very beneficial. We have even met informally at Mundelein, Illinois for three summers now. These annual August overnights are stimulating, and provide opportunities for the exchange of information,

insight and wisdom. We share the downside of our work, but also laugh a lot; we ultimately reassure ourselves that we're not alone in all this.

The Whole Church Benefits

Our work is good for the Church, I think. Priests have been the cause of much pain and suffering. By our labored patience and non-judgmental understanding and our willingness to keep at it, we can atone in some small way for that evil

In my experience, most victims do not want their situations aired in front of the world. They routinely want the problem to be handled by the Church in a pastoral, confidential, yet honest way. They seek healing and the chance to go on with their private lives. Having shown great courage in coming forward in the first place, they have every right to expect that courage to be respected and acknowledged.

I believe that victims of sexual abuse have been helped, far more often than most people know. I am proud of the way the Church is continuing to assist the victims and the priests who have been the victimizers. We Vicars, personnel people, and administrators have had some small part in the Church's response. That has made it all worthwhile.

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