

"Yesterday, before he landed in the U.S., Pope Benedict XVI said he was 'deeply ashamed' of predatory priests, adding that pedophiles would be rooted out of the Church. Today, the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP) is holding a press conference in Washington criticizing the pope for not doing enough."

So begins an April 16 news release from the Catholic League. William Donohue, president of the Catholic League, comments, "Any minor who has been sexually molested deserves our compassion. But what SNAP is doing, aided and abetted by angry Catholics and ex-Catholics, deserves not our understanding, but contempt. This is a group which has a deep ideological and financial investment in painting the Catholic Church as a villain."

Donohue says, "SNAP's ideological basis stems from the fact that it positively refuses to recognize the incredible progress that has been made - exactly five priests out of more than 40,000 had accusations made against them for abusing a minor in 2007 -- yet for SNAP it's never enough. Financially, it derives much of its funding from the steeple-chasing lawyers who have fleeced the 'deep-pocket' Catholic Church. It's time we dismiss these professional victims' advocates for what they are -- activists whose goal is to discredit the Church."

Leon J. Podles, a former federal investigator, senior editor of Touchstone magazine, and a former Catholic seminarian, has written a new book titled *Sacrilege: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church* (2008, Crossland Press, PO Box 26290, Baltimore MD 21210, www.CrosslandFoundation.org). He tells the now-familiar story of how the U.S. bishops stonewalled, threatened, and ignored the victims of clerical sexual abuse and their families, while protecting predatory priests with impunity. But he tells the story in graphic detail. "Bishops," he writes, "knew about the abuse and sometimes took part in it... Most bishops were not interested in protecting children." Podles quotes Frank Keating, one-time head of the U.S. bishops' National Review Board (fired by the bishops), as saying that the bishops "cared more for the...reputation of the Church than for the ravaged and frightened souls of children." This is the mentality on display in Donohue's press release. "Meanwhile," writes Podles, "the children were left with their secrets, without help, in the darkness of their souls."

The parents of one young victim of clerical sexual rape said, "We had been taught all of our lives to respect and trust the Church and that if everyone else fails you, the Catholic Church would not fail you and would help you." Thomas J. O'Brien, bishop of Phoenix, told the parents that going public with their accusations would "do harm" to their son, that it would "hurt the Church and that nobody would believe them." Bishop O'Brien then transferred the predatory pedophile priest to a high school, where he would abuse again. Same old story. (O'Brien was charged in 2003 with felony hit-and-run after striking a jaywalker and leaving him to die in the street. O'Brien's sentence? Forty hours a month of community service.)

Is it any wonder that Catholics, as Donohue puts it so derogatorily, are "angry"?

One bishop, according to Podles, even asked a young male victim if he had "seduced" his priest abuser. The bishop then told the victim "that his own mother had just died and 'wasn't I ashamed to assert these things at his time of sadness... I felt so dirty, so worthless... I felt like I was the one who had done wrong.'"

"Above all," writes Podles, "the victims, having had their trust and bodies so abused, could no longer trust anyone. They couldn't trust the Church, they couldn't trust their employers, they couldn't trust their wives, they couldn't trust themselves."

One young male victim, writes Podles, "had been taught that 'priests are the direct hands of God the Almighty. He was taught that he would go to hell if he did not obey the priest.' [The boy] therefore felt God's hands torturing his genitals." Another victim has accused a priest of "raping him about one hundred times." The priest would wear his clerical garb and say the Our Father while he raped the adolescent, promising him that "sex would make him more holy."

When the boy cried in pain during the rape, the priest "told him to be quiet because his suffering was nothing compared to the pain of Jesus' crucifixion." The priest, writes Podles, "was not only destroying the boy's innocence, he was identifying the abuse with God, trying to place a barrier that would keep the boy from God."

This, Podles proclaims, is "not just abuse of the body, it's abuse of the soul." Is it any wonder that some of the victims of clerical sexual abuse are now "ex-Catholics"? Most troubling is that one abuse victim has even said, "If I hadn't been born into the Catholic religion, how different, how better, and healthy my life would have been." This poor lost soul wasn't referring to the existence of SNAP.

"The victims suffered the immediate horror and degradation of sexual abuse; they and their families endured decades of pain, which sometimes ended only in death by suicide for the victims, and unending grief for the families." What "incredible progress" has been made for them? Do these tortured bodies and souls, and their longsuffering loved ones, not need, not deserve, advocacy, which is what SNAP provides?

As for Donohue's claim that SNAP's "goal is to discredit the Church," that task was accomplished by the Church's own pedophile priests and their enabling bishops. "Bishops lied. The lying was continuous," writes Podles. "When a bishop lies, he destroys the value of his testimony to the Gospel." The mystery, writes Podles, "is why sexual abuse was regarded by the bishops as such a trivial matter. Massachusetts Attorney General Thomas F. Reilly concluded that the bishops 'didn't seem to recognize the wrongfulness of it.'"

"The focus of the hierarchy was and remains on the clergy; they are stuck in a narcissistic mode in which the whole story is about them, about their rights and privileges, about their importance, about how all of this is affecting them." This is the mentality on display in Donohue's press release. Hey, look at the "incredible progress" we've made! Only five credible accusations were made last year. So stop your whining! What Donohue doesn't mention is that many victims are cowed into fear or are too ashamed to report the abuse. Those who do usually don't do so until years later. Studies have shown that only a fraction of victims ever come forward.

As for Donohue charging SNAP with being "professional victims' advocates," Podles describes SNAP, a nonprofit organization, as "a volunteer self-help organization of survivors of clergy sexual abuse and their supporters" (*italics added*). Once the revelations of abuse came pouring forth in 2002, SNAP hired a small, paid staff. As for those "steeple-chasing lawyers who have fleeced the 'deep-pocket' Catholic Church," Charles Molineaux easily dispatches this weak claim in his article, "Why the Church Should Not Oppose Extending Statutes of Limitation," on page 28 of this issue.

Donohue says SNAP is invested in "painting the Catholic Church as a villain." But Donohue is attempting to paint SNAP as the villain. Which is the guilty party? SNAP arose as a reaction to the negligence of the Church. The bishops' history is one of lying and abetting abusive priests. For the most part, they took action against pervert priests in their midst only after being "shamed" into doing so by the secular press and the secular courts. But "this is not evidence of a sincere conversion of heart on the part of the bishops or the Vatican," says Podles. The underlying attitude that fostered the environment of abuse, secrecy, and clerical privilege still remains. Is this "incredible progress"?

The "refusal to admit the possibility of mistakes is arrogant," writes Podles, "and continues to be the dominant attitude among bishops." His reading of the post-Dallas Charter Church is borne out by William Cardinal Levada's recent comment, as reported by the San Francisco Chronicle (April 19), that he "did not foresee sanctioning bishops who failed to remove priests suspected of molesting young people." Although Cardinal Levada admitted that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, of which he is prefect, is still dealing with a "backlog" of abuse cases from the U.S., he said, "I personally do not accept that there is a broad base of bishops who are guilty of aiding and abetting pedophiles..."

The culture of insular clericalism that fostered the abusive environment is alive and well. That is the attitude on display in Donohue's news release. Everything's fine now, so please go away quickly, SNAP.

Podles writes that the bishops "still do not, as a body, see the serious wrong that they have perpetrated and, having satisfied the press, which is now turning its attention elsewhere, want to ignore the situation." Perhaps Donohue was worried about the possibility of SNAP "embarrassing" the Pope and the U.S. Church, during the Pope's highly publicized visit to the U.S. this April. He shouldn't have been. The clerical sex-abuse scandal was a recurring theme of Pope Benedict's visit. He spent time praying with a few hand-selected abuse victims on April 17, his third day in the U.S.

The Pope had told the U.S. bishops the previous day that the problem of predator priests had been "very badly handled," and at the April 17 stadium Mass in Washington, D.C., he called on the Church "to do what you can to foster healing and reconciliation, and to assist those who have been hurt" by abusive priests.

Donohue's impertinent news release works against the Pope's call to foster reconciliation and assist those who've been hurt.

SNAP, for its part, called the meeting of the Pope with abuse victims "a positive first step on a very long road." It should be mentioned, as Podles repeatedly points out, that Pope John Paul II "to his death refused to meet with any victims" of clerical sex abuse, "despite repeated requests through official channels."

John Paul II did issue a general public apology for the scandal, but not for "his own errors...in governing the Church that allowed the abuse to go on."

Pope Benedict is right to feel "deeply ashamed." But it remains to be seen whether his words and gestures translate into policies and action.

Visceral antipathy toward SNAP is nothing new. Podles mentions that when Barbara Blaine, founder of SNAP and herself a victim of clerical sexual abuse, was scheduled to speak in September 2002, Fr. Thomas Quinn, director of communications for the Diocese of Toledo, said, "Where do we place the bombs? And you can quote me on that."

David Clohessy, national director of SNAP and also a victim of clerical sexual abuse, gave a statement in response to Donohue's news release to Matt C. Abbott (www.RenewAmerica.com, April 18): "Whether [Mr. Donohue] realizes it or not, he's perpetuating the unhealthy, age-old 'blame the victim' mentality that ultimately hurts both the institutional church and its most vulnerable members. Fear of being attacked like this is one of the many reasons sex crime victims stay trapped in shame, confusion and self-blame, instead of speaking up, exposing predators and protecting kids." Victims and their advocates shouldn't be silenced or swept under the rug, as they have been in the very recent past.

Podles's book *Sacrilege* (which will be given a full review in our July-August issue) contains a litany of horror stories too gruesome and stomach-churning to repeat (we've only mentioned a few of the milder cases). But it's a necessary read for comprehending the depth of evil that festered in the Catholic Church under the averted yet knowing gaze of the U.S. bishops. We know at least one gentleman who would have been well served by reading it before popping off at advocates for victims of clerical sexual abuse.

"It's just a matter of time," Donohue wishfully concludes his news release, before SNAP "becomes obsolete altogether." Would that that day would come.

But as long as there are any abusive clerics (one, five, one hundred, five thousand), SNAP will serve a purpose. And as long as there are victims of clerical sex abuse -- whether the revelations of their abuse are recent or old -- someone needs to speak for them, even in a loud, forceful manner. Clearly, William Donohue and the Catholic League won't.
