

Three decades after he was first reported as a child molester, David Sicoli, a Philadelphia Catholic priest, was finally defrocked last week by the Vatican. The move has renewed debate over what should be done with the dozens of sexually abusive priests, ex-priests, nuns and seminarians who have been deemed guilty of child-sex crimes by civil or church authorities. They are walking free - often among unsuspecting neighbors - largely because of Pennsylvania's archaic child-molestation laws.

State laws often require that child victims of sexual abuse take legal action quickly, usually by the time they turn 20 or 21. That restrictive deadline gives predators (and those who employ or shield predators) strong incentives to intimidate victims, deceive parents, threaten witnesses and destroy evidence, to help "run out the clock" and escape detection and prosecution. Such laws also deny victims the necessary time to learn how severely they have been hurt, and to gather the strength and courage it takes to report horrific and embarrassing crimes by powerful adults.

Pennsylvania lawmakers are considering a measure that would temporarily suspend the statute of limitations, giving more child-sex-abuse victims a chance to expose their predators in court. Despite vehement opposition from the state's Catholic bishops, I hope that measure soon passes.

But until this reform becomes law, what should be done with men like Sicoli?

Contrary to common assumptions, most of the proven, admitted and credibly accused pedophile priests are never defrocked. They are merely "suspended," which means they don't report to work every day but remain on diocesan payrolls receiving the full range of benefits - health, dental, housing allowance, car allowance and pensions. (In general, only the most egregious predators, or those whose crimes have been well documented and widely publicized like Sicoli's were, are in church parlance "laicized" or "reduced to the lay state.")

Church officials recruited, educated, hired, trained, supervised, transferred and shielded pedophile priests. One would hope that church officials would feel a duty to warn families about and protect kids from these predators, whether suspended or defrocked. They virtually never do.

Church officials have, on one hand, enormous financial resources and vast property holdings and, on the other hand, dozens of potentially dangerous employees. One would hope that church officials would insist that these men live in secure, remote treatment centers and, as an added precaution, alert neighbors that predators live nearby. They virtually never do.

Church officials have vast and effective communications tools - diocesan Web sites, church newspapers, parish bulletins, and hundreds of employees and thousands of volunteers. Once they deem a priest a likely child molester, one would hope that church officials would make announcements far and wide urging victims and witnesses to call the police, so that child-sex offenders might be prosecuted and jailed. They virtually never do. (The Philadelphia Archdiocese's news release about Sicoli asked victims to call church officials, not police officials, to report the crimes. For decades, the church hierarchy has insisted on handling child molestation cases "in house." It still does.)

Those same communication vehicles could also be used to do what Jesus taught us to do: reach out to the lost and wounded sheep. Psychology, history and common sense tell us that the overwhelming majority of child-sex-abuse victims never come forward. One would hope that church officials would repeatedly and emphatically beg victims to break their silence and begin to heal. They virtually never do.

Instead, bishops oust predators from active parish ministry and stop there.

And because bishops have acted so callously and recklessly, the bar of expectations for them is extraordinarily low. Catholics are grateful that usually, predators are taken out of parishes (which is, of course, little more than a good legal defense and a smart public-relations move). But few push for genuine steps to learn the full extent of the crimes, and discover who else might have helped cover up wrongdoing and who else might be in pain and need help.

So until victims are given the opportunity to expose child molesters in court, lay Catholics must stop blindly going and giving, and start assertively prodding and challenging, and insist that bishops go beyond the bare minimum and start truly protecting the vulnerable and healing the wounded.

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