

**FIFTY YEARS OF SHAME:
SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT**

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Last September the Diocese of Bridgeport celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. All Catholics, bishops, priests, nuns, laywomen, and men, can rightly take pride in our many good works intended to foster the spiritual life, such as the building of churches, schools, hospitals, and convents, and the establishment of a university. These achievements testify to the working together of all the members of Christ's Body, the Church, as each one contributed his or her special gift to the well-being of the whole.

Sadly, a dirty secret concealed during those fifty years received only oblique reference in the anniversary celebrations. The secret is now out. On February 15 the diocese announced that 32 priests were accused of sexually abusing 107 boys and girls from 1953-2003. In settlements reached in 2001 and 2003 the Diocese paid \$37,700,000. In comparison to the national average of about 4% the percentage of accused priests is small, i.e., 2.5% of the 1,279 who served in the diocese since its inception. Until the release of this document only 23 priests had been identified. The names of the other 9 have not been released; 7 are now dead, and 2 were visitors. Who are these men? Where are those who have been removed because of allegations of sexual abuse?

The diocesan report anticipated the publication on February 27 of a national survey of priestly sexual abuse compiled by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice from information submitted by each of the 195 dioceses. More than 4,000 priests nationally were charged with sexual abusing more than 10,000 boys and girls in the past fifty years. Settlement costs are estimated at \$540,000,000, but are likely much higher. In its assessment of the crisis the National Review Board singled out Cardinal Edward M. Egan, former bishop of Bridgeport, for his mishandling of the case of an abusive diocesan priest.

A comparison of Bridgeport with other dioceses is instructive. Washington, D.C., for example, has a comparable number of priests accused (27) and allegations (119), but incurred only \$4,351,500 in costs. The figures for the archdiocese of Hartford are 24 priests accused, 79 allegations, and \$2,000,000, and for the Diocese of Norwich, 19 priests, 19 allegations, and \$568,000. Bridgeport has the unenviable distinction of ranking in the top five or ten of all 195 dioceses in terms of settlement costs. Why is that?

Bishop William E. Lori has assured us that none of the \$37,700,000 expended comes from “the Annual Bishop’s Appeal, Faith in the Future, individual or group contributions to the Diocese, or parish collections,” but rather from insurance (about 41%), investment income, and the sale of unneeded property (about 59%). Where did the money for insurance premiums, investments, and the purchase of disposable property come from, if not out of the pockets of the people in the pews? It is disingenuous to imply that the Catholic community in the Diocese is not hurt by this colossal outlay, the consequence of extraordinary mismanagement. The faithful have a right to be outraged and to demand a detailed financial statement explaining exactly how that \$37,700,000 is being spent.

Numbers alone cannot convey the intangible consequences of priestly sexual abuse and episcopal cover-up. It is likely that some survivors and their families never reported abuse, but may now come forward. If our community is indeed “one family in faith,” we need to reach out in loving embrace to our boys and girls, now grown to adulthood, whose innocence was taken away. Many of them have suffered grievous psychological and spiritual damage; many have turned away from the Church that allowed them to be raped and sodomized and refused to hear their complaints. Catholics in every parish need to acknowledge this sin in the general intercessions at every mass and to offer atonement every year, especially during Lent.

The majority of our priests have been faithful to their vow of celibacy and faithful in their service to the people, but because of the betrayal of some, a cloud of suspicion

hangs over all. The implicit trust vested in our priests no longer exists. Parents worry about allowing their children to be alone with priests and are reluctant to encourage their sons to contemplate priesthood as a worthy vocation, burdened as it is by charges of pedophilia and homosexuality.

While Catholics everywhere are dismayed by the harm inflicted on our children by some priests, they are even more horrified by the realization that our bishops knowingly allowed predatory priests to run free in the flock. Here let us not forget the auxiliary bishops, vicars, and other clerical diocesan officials who collaborated with the bishops in failing to safeguard our children, our most precious resource. Jesus admonished his disciples to “let the little children come to me, and do not prevent them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (MT 19:14). How many children have turned away from Jesus because of the actions of some bishops and priests? Jesus also declared “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (MT 18:6).

In their desire to defend the walls of the clerical culture and to protect abusive priests, the bishops destroyed the trust and credibility they enjoyed as leaders of the Catholic community. Though they have made much of their new-found intention to be transparent and accountable, they have yet to acknowledge the enormity of their own sin of complicity in the crime of sexual abuse. They cast about to blame society, to suggest that everyone does it, and that abuse by a priest is no worse than abuse by anyone else. Their opposition to the publication of court documents concerning sexual abuse gives the lie to their claim to openness.

Is it any wonder that the bishops are no longer believable and that their every pronouncement is greeted with skepticism? Their massive failure of leadership affects their credibility when they speak on issues of social and economic justice, sexual morality, war and peace, and the like. The damage done to the leadership of the Church

by the leaders themselves is incalculable. Their leadership is bankrupt, yet bishops who betrayed the trust of innocent children are unwilling to step down. Have they no shame?

Only a new generation of bishops will be able to recapture the trust and credibility so foolishly thrown away. In order to do so they must abandon the old ways of secrecy and intimidation and adopt a new management style that is honest and open and above board and allows all the faithful, laymen and women alike, to bring their gifts to the table. The bishops must recognize that all the parts of Christ's Body, the Church, are essential to its harmonious life and that no one can say to another "I do not need you." Just as all share in the joy of the achievements of fifty years in the Diocese of Bridgeport so all suffer from the shame hidden for so long.