

12-27-07 - Toward the Future: The Lessons of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Report, and the Ways in Which We Can Protect All Children From Sex Abuse
By MARCI HAMILTON, FindLaw

Recently, the National Review Board for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released the results of its five-year study evaluating how the hierarchy has handled clergy abuse since the public first learned of its scope and prevalence from the Boston Globe in 2002. The report is just what one would expect from any corporation undergoing a scandal; It details new programs, promises to do better in the future, and admits the problem is complex (which, translated, means that the Bishops have not put the problem behind them, not by a long shot).

As I read the report and reflected upon the last five years, I had very mixed feelings. On the one hand, every American (and even world citizen) should be grateful to Providence (as well as the Globe) for revealing the scope of child abuse and cover-up within the ranks of the Roman Catholic Church. We really did not know, let alone understand, the gravity and extent of the scourge of child sex abuse society-wide until we saw it entrenched in the one institution everyone had trusted - Catholic or not. This was the religious institution whose clergy every lawyer hoped would testify on their side, after all! The point could not have been made more clearly than by the scandal in the Church: Children are being sexually abused everywhere, and the ones not to trust are often the ones we trust the most.

There is another quite different lesson to be learned from the 2007 Bishops' Report, too, however: The bishops are not a terribly important element in the solution to society-wide child sex abuse. Yes, they have instituted programs to protect children, but it was well-known long ago in the public sphere that such programs are crucial. And they have created their Victims Assistance Programs and appointed Directors. Though victims and their families have not found these programs terribly helpful or supportive, at least they exist. Yet, it simply does not matter what program the hierarchy creates for the victims it has generated. Why? Because its victims count for such a small number of child sex abuse victims overall. Even perfect care for all of its victims puts barely a dent in the larger problem.

The Bishops might have been leaders in the national movement to right the laws that affect child sex abuse survivors, but they have chosen to take the opposite path. If public records are accurate, the New York Catholic Conference is paying well over \$100,000 per year to lobbyists and public relations firms to defeat legislation that would make it easier for victims (both within and outside the Church) to get to court, by reducing the barriers created by the statute of limitations. That is just another signal that they are part of history on this problem, not the future..

The Bishops do not stand alone in proposing solutions that do not touch the vast majority of the problem. We have Megan's Law public reporting statutes, pedophile-free zones, and increased sentencing for molesters, but we still have not made the changes necessary

to identify the many predators currently living among us. As I have discussed in previous columns such as this one, the statutes of limitation on child sex abuse must go. At the same time, there needs to be a concerted effort to turn the insights gleaned from the Church's clergy abuse problems into aggressive plans to stop the problem in the future.

Ultimately, It Will Take Private and Public Institutions and Legislatures, to Win the War Against Child Sex Abuse

We are at a promising turning point for our children. It will take the actions of private and public institutions as well as legislators to turn the tide on child sex abuse. The National Child Protection Training Center at Winona State University is one organization that holds out hope for the future. President Bush just signed legislation granting \$1.22 million to the Center, which is engaged in groundbreaking work. Director Victor Vieth explained part of the Center's mission, which is centered around education and more education: "[W]e will provide training to over 10,000 child protection professionals, will assist dozens of universities in implementing model undergraduate or graduate child protection curricula, and will grow our forensic interview training program--a program that will positively impact a million children by the end of this decade." Vieth's vision includes a call to eliminate child sex abuse altogether in several generations, through programs and multi-tiered education. That is the clarion call needed to right the wrongs now so deeply embedded in the psyche of this society.

The Training Center is part of NAPSAC (the National Association to Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Children), of which I am a Board Member. NAPSAC also houses the National District Attorneys Association, a point that highlights another crucial element in making this world a safer place for children: We need prosecutors who are sensitized to these issues and inclined to protect the children, not the adults who ask them to keep their "dirty laundry" hidden.

With these private and public projects and legislators with the guts to roll back the statutes of limitations on child sex abuse so we can identify the perpetrators among us, we can become a country that is truly proud of its commitment to children. Words, reports, and individual institutions will never be enough; it will take passionate action on the part of many.

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