

May 13, 2007 - Lessons Have Been Learned

The Day (CT), editorial

A front-page article that appears in today's edition documents that the Diocese of Norwich was not exempt from the priest sex-abuse scandal that rocked the Roman Catholic Church in this country, nor from the poor decisions that made it possible.

The revelations, culled from lawsuits and firsthand accounts, are painfully familiar. Church authorities, confronted with reports that priests had sexually abused children or teens, did not treat them as potential crimes, but as problems to be kept out of view of the public and law enforcement.

After allegations were raised, and sometimes documented, priests were moved from one parish to another. Church communities had no warning of the predators that had arrived in their midst. Too often there were new victims.

Overseeing the diocese at the time many of the documented cases took place was Bishop Daniel P. Reilly, who served as the spiritual leader from 1975 to 1994. It was Bishop Reilly, now retired and living in Worcester, Mass., who ultimately decided how abuse allegations were handled and where priests were transferred.

It is difficult to reconcile the affable, charitable Bishop Reilly, the man who founded the Annual Bishops Appeal that has improved the lives of thousands, with the Bishop Reilly who made such seemingly callous decisions in reassigning abusive priests. But they are one and the same.

And what of the victims? The church, until confronted with lawsuits years later, ignored their needs and pain. The diocese, which includes much of the eastern half of Connecticut, reports spending nearly \$4.4 million to settle priest sex-abuse lawsuits filed by victims.

Part of the problem was the hierarchical nature of the church. Bishop Reilly held a prominent role in the Diocese of Providence before moving on to this region. Displaying great leadership qualities, he was seen as an up-and-comer. But his involvement in the handling of abuse cases in Providence has been questioned as well.

As in many organizations, priests did not move up the organizational ladder by rooting out embarrassing problems and making them public. Advancement came with keeping things quiet and avoiding scandal. It was an approach that backfired badly on the Roman Catholic Church in the United States.

The scandal also has to be viewed in the context of the times. Bishop Reilly and his contemporaries grew up in the 1940s and 1950s, when society's perspective on child sexual abuse was far different. Such things were simply not talked about. When abuse was hinted at, the reaction was often to look the other way. Children were discouraged from speaking up because of the perception they, and their families, would be tainted as well.

While the church has become the symbol of how not to handle allegations of child sexual abuse, it was not alone. Abuse has happened, and probably will always happen, in many organizations that deal with children.

The good news is how far we have come.

Society now knows that a molester is far more likely to be someone known to the child—an instructor, relative, camp counselor, coach, clergyman—rather than the stereotypical man in the trench coat hanging out at the playground.

Averting stranger danger

Most organizations dealing with children now do background checks on employees and volunteers. They provide training programs that help adults recognize inappropriate behavior. They assure that children are never alone, unsupervised, with a single adult. And they empower children to say no and to speak up if anyone does something that makes them feel uncomfortable.

The Diocese of Norwich has its own Safe Environments Program for children, parents, clergy and educators. It does background checks. The official policy of the diocese is to contact the police if it receives allegations of child sexual abuse.

No policy is perfect. And child sexual abuse will never be fully eradicated. But certainly things have moved in the right direction.

Another step toward recognition would be for the diocese to welcome Voices of the Faithful, a group that organized in the wake of the priest sex-abuse scandals. Currently Voices of the Faithful chapters are not allowed to use parish meeting halls. This is the wrong approach.

It would be better to open a dialogue, consider the criticisms, and seek common ground in a shared faith.