

June 8, 2007 - A litany of shame, The Oregonian, editorial

It's hard to know which was worse -- the ongoing abuse by Catholic priests or the Portland archdiocese's cover-up

They are saddening and infuriating, these newly released papers that document the way the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Portland dealt -- and failed to deal -- with allegations that its priests preyed on the vulnerable.

Most often the victims were boys and girls who wobbled into the priests' sphere of influence. And, in the shadows behind the errant priests, the archdiocese had a way of soothing problems by shuffling priests around and by stifling public comment.

"For several years, Fr. (Joseph) Baccellieri taught high school. He was an effective and well-liked teacher."

-- The Rev. Charles Lienert, in a July 5, 2001, letter of recommendation for Baccellieri to study at Catholic University. Baccellieri had been placed on leave in 1992 and later acknowledged a "history of . . . sexual misconduct of teenage boys during the 1970s." Then-Archbishop William Levada allowed him to return to active ministry in 1994 after psychological treatment. Baccellieri took medical retirement in 2002.

"Please be advised that my client considers it extremely inappropriate that you have mentioned Father (John) Goodrich by name. . . . Neither the alleged abuser's occupation, nor certainly his name, are relevant to the issues addressed in your letter."

-- G. Kevin Kiely, a lawyer representing the archdiocese, in a Nov. 5, 1992, letter to an unnamed counselor who described the problems his/her client suffered as a result of abuse at the hands of Goodrich, who was accused of molesting a boy in the 1970s.

"When we receive a complaint, we investigate it. We have a policy of the victim's needs first. We place the priest on administrative leave. . . . In some cases where recovery is clear, he may be permitted to engage in some form of ministry with appropriate safeguards."

-- Lienert, in a July 24, 1996, letter to then-Archbishop Francis George, apparently in response to a series of questions to George from a woman who said she was abused by the Rev. Gary Jacobson. Jacobson was confronted about accusations that he pressed himself upon vulnerable girls and women as early as 1980, when a church official promised he would "take immediate action to see that this kind of conduct was brought to an end." Jacobson still celebrated Mass in the archdiocese as late as 2000.

"An individual priest's life has been effectively destroyed. . . . I suggest that we need no more coals to add fuel to the fire, but begin we must to heal and forgive and unite in Christ's love. . . . I suggest that we report to our readers the positive things priests and laity are doing day in and day out."

-- Auxiliary Bishop Kenneth Steiner, in a four-page, single-spaced, Sept. 3, 1983, letter to the publisher of the Oregon Catholic Press, complaining about the continuing coverage of the allegations of sexual abuse against the Rev. Thomas Laughlin, who was convicted of abusing altar boys.

One good thing about the documents: They make it clear why the current officials of the archdiocese felt compelled to seek bankruptcy court protection. On this subject, their archdiocese had been bankrupt.