

Documents brought to light in the latest sex abuse lawsuit against the Roman Catholic diocese of Burlington reveal a disturbing and familiar failure by church leaders.

The suit was brought by James Turner, who alleged that the Rev. Alfred Willis sexually abused him as a boy. The suit charges that church leaders moved Willis from church to church though they knew he had been the subject of allegations since his days in the seminary.

Ultimately, the church defrocked Willis after hearing allegations that he was a "diagnosed sociopath" and a "pedophile."

Willis's behavior provoked numerous allegations of abuse during his short tenure as a priest. He was ordained in 1976 and was assigned to St. Augustine Church in Montpelier. Two years later church leaders heard the first allegations from parents that Willis had been molesting boys.

Willis underwent a psychiatric examination, and he met with some of the accusing parents, one of whom referred to Willis as a "degenerate liar." Church officials apparently took refuge in the fact that they could not prove the lying.

Bishop John Marshall transferred Willis to St. Ann Church in Milton but informed no one of the accusations against him. Accusations continued to mount, and eventually some parents went to the state's attorney. In one of the most disturbing episodes Bishop Marshall, according to one of the lawyers present, tried to intimidate the state's attorney into refraining from prosecution by saying that to prosecute would be to commit the sin of scandal.

It is a story familiar from similar episodes elsewhere in the country. Church leaders believed they could handle things in their own way, through counseling and church discipline, while avoiding adverse publicity. Instead of treating sexual abuse as a crime against the state, they treated it as a failing of one of their brethren, who required compassion and patience. The trouble was that an alleged sociopath could do significant damage to people's lives as church leaders covered up for him.

The Catholic Church is the largest religious denomination in Vermont, and its welfare and reputation matter to tens of thousands of Vermonters. That's why it is painful for Catholics to see the transgressions of priests and church leaders made visible to all.

The relationship between the church and the larger society has always been a complex one, shaped by anti-Catholic bias among non-Catholics and also by a siege mentality within the church that sometimes perceives secular society as alien and threatening.

The church plays a vital role in education, health care, and charity work and in the spiritual well-being of its members, making it an important constituent part of the larger world. Catholics themselves may be tempted to view the world of the church as the whole world and the demands of the larger world as threats. That view yields actions like those that protected Willis from the consequences of his alleged crimes.

The magnifying glass that these scandals have placed on the behavior of the clergy is not part of some anti-Catholic plot; it is a necessary corrective. The church failed to address these problems adequately, leaving civil society the task of doing so. We can all hope that the church will become stronger by facing up to its failings, becoming better able to carry out its important work.