

9/23/07 - Shining the light on church misbehavior

Public disclosure of church sex-abuse scandal is an antidote to years of secrecy and cynicism.

STEVEN GREENHUT, Sr. editorial writer and columnist, The Orange County Register (CA)

If you can't understand why journalists are so cynical, consider how I've spent some of the past week: reading transcripts and viewing videotapes of testimony by Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange officials explaining why they did so little to protect kids who were sexually abused by church leaders. If that won't make you at least skeptical about people in authority and human nature in general, nothing will.

On the bright side, that exercise reminded me of one thing about which I am not cynical, something that does more than most other reforms to keep in check humanity's basest instincts: sunshine. I refer to the sunshine of open records and open court proceedings. I've been heartened to see the way public information about the church-abuse scandal has blown away years of secrecy and covering up.

Over the past week, diocese officials have been reamed by critical news accounts. The impetus was a lawsuit by a woman who was sexually molested over a two-year period, beginning when she was a 15-year-old student, by an assistant coach at Mater Dei High School. The diocese tried to keep the depositions, including one by Bishop Tod Brown, secret. Had it succeeded, the media firestorm would not have ensued, and disturbing truths would not have been revealed. Fortunately, a Superior Court judge rebuked the diocese and allowed the testimony to be unveiled.

The former coach, Jeff Andrade, admits to sexually abusing the girl when he was in his mid-30s, and various interviews make clear that this "affair" was an almost open secret at the school. No official at Mater Dei asked the coach about it, even after teachers intercepted a student note discussing it. The school principal, at the direction of diocese officials, let Andrade stay on after they were convinced of his illegal behavior. Mater Dei's head of security, a friend of Andrade's, allegedly intervened on behalf of Andrade with law enforcement officials. Because charges were not pressed, the diocese let Andrade quietly resign. He went on to work at other schools, and even was allowed back on the Mater Dei campus in following years. Andrade actually sued the diocese and received a \$100,000 payment.

There was a telling scene from Andrade's deposition in the woman's lawsuit, when John Manly, the plaintiff's attorney, asked Andrade whether he ever wondered if his behavior could have long-term psychological effects on the girl. Andrade gave a "what are you kidding?" look and said no. I'm not surprised at that response from a predator, but why didn't diocese officials – they are pastors, after all – seem to care? That's the pattern I've found repeated in my coverage of the many sex-abuse allegations, as officials gave the utmost consideration to the perps and were uncaring, and even cruel, to the victims.

I emphasize this again: Only because of court-ordered open records and the willingness of victims to speak out about what happened has anyone learned the truth. Only the embarrassment of public disclosure and the fear of lawsuit-induced bankruptcy has caused this diocese and others to change their policies.

The public even learned from the recently unsealed deposition that the bishop himself was accused of molesting a boy many years earlier in the Bakersfield area – an allegation the diocese says was not deemed credible by law enforcement, although news reports now suggest that Bakersfield police may never have even investigated the matter. I was shocked by this statement from the bishop, as he justified why he allowed a priest accused of raping a girl to work at a parish with an elementary school: "I think earlier on with regard to molestation cases, that a lot of bishops, including myself, were not fully aware of the seriousness of the problem in terms of putting other people at risk."

They didn't understand the seriousness of child rape? The cynic in me believes instead that these leaders wanted to make the problem go away, being far more concerned about potential embarrassment than about the kids. Just as Mater Dei officials allowed Andrade to quietly resign, they issued orders to staff threatening immediate firing if any of them talked to reporters.

A Los Angeles Times article from 2005 captured the essence of the scandal: "For more than two decades, officials in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange covered up for priests who molested children, shuffling predators from parish to parish and diocese to diocese, protecting them from prosecution and failing to warn parishioners of the danger, according to church documents."

During his deposition earlier this month in the lawsuit involving Andrade, Monsignor John Urell, the St. Norbert's priest who was the point man for the diocese on sex-abuse matters, broke down in tears and the next day fled to Canada for treatment of an undisclosed medical reason. The diocese claimed not to know why he went to the Southdown Institute outside Toronto, a facility where troubled priests are sent by their superiors to deal with a variety of issues.

These circumstances led to speculation, which Monsignor Urell's attorney addressed the day after Urell left the country. The attorney said Urell was sent to Southdown to deal with acute anxiety. Urell's defenders complained about the awfulness of those who might have implied that Urell went to Southdown for sex-related problems. But they missed the main point: Why is one of the key people in the diocese abuse scandal able to evade a court order to give sworn testimony by seeking treatment in another country? Let's hope the courts eventually force him to testify, and the record of it is made public.

Urell was no bit player here. "Documents described how Urell and [then-Auxiliary Bishop Michael P.] Driscoll devised a plan in 1994 to pay [Andrew Christian] Anderson between \$9,000 and \$19,000 to quietly leave the priesthood, according to correspondence between church officials," the Times reported in the above-referenced 2005 article, noting that Anderson eventually was convicted of 26 felony child-molestation counts. In a Times article from last July 21, former religion writer William Lobdell wrote about Monsignor Michael Harris, the former Santa Margarita High School principal accused of molesting students. Although he never admitted guilt, Harris left the priesthood, and the diocese paid victims \$5.2 million.

"While reporting the Harris story, I learned – from court records and interviews – the lengths to which the church went to protect the priest," Lobdell wrote. "When Harris took an abrupt leave of absence as principal at Santa Margarita in January 1994, he issued a statement saying it was because of 'stress.' ... His superiors didn't tell parents or students the real reason for his absence: ... In September 1994, a second former student stepped forward, this time publicly, and filed a lawsuit. In response, parents and students held a rally for Harris at the school, singing, 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow.' ... By this time, church leaders possessed a psychological report in which Catholic psychiatrists diagnosed Harris as having an attraction to adolescents and concluded that he likely had molested multiple boys. ... Some of the diocese's top priests – including the cleric in charge of investigating the accusations – threw a going-away party for Harris."

That cleric, by the way, was John Urell.

This continuing church effort at secrecy is enough to make one cynical, although the fact that this information has been released to the public still gives me some shred of hope.