

SIN AGAINST THE INNOCENTS: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THE SEX ABUSE CRISIS IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

This conference, held at Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California, was sponsored by the Bannon Center for Jesuit Education. It represented yet another outstanding day of panelists addressing the issues surrounding clergy sexual abuse, which has rocked the Catholic Church over the past two years. There were four series of panels and one could choose three to attend.

The day began in the beautiful Mission Church on campus with a warm welcome by Tom Plante, the organizer of the day's program. This was followed by a prayer service led, in part, by our Southern California Regional Coordinator, Mary Jane McGraw.

Kathleen McChesney, as Executive Director of the Office of Child and Youth Protection of the USCCB, addressed the packed church about the role of the National Review Board and gave a statistical analysis of the report highlighting the 10,667 reported victims and the over 4,000 accused offenders. In her position as the third highest ranking official in the FBI, each day after 9/11 she asked herself "How could this have happened, and what can be done to prevent it from happening again?" This same question has framed much of the work that she and that of the Review Board have done in dealing with the issues surrounding clergy sexual abuse. Among other findings, there is strong indication of the importance of studying the lifestyle and formation of diocesan and religious priests. The cost to the church nationwide was 472 million dollars, not including the 85 million dollar Boston settlement. The causes and context study will follow, and in that process survivors will be interviewed. One of the many projects she is involved in is setting guidelines for diocesan review boards and for background investigations. As 20 percent of the priests in this country are from foreign lands, her committee is working on thresholds as their backgrounds are unknown.

The first session I attended, titled "**Perspectives from Victims, Media and Laity**", was introduced by Catherine Wolff, a faculty member at Santa Clara University.

Panelist **Mike Rezendes**, of the Boston Globe Spotlight Team, spoke of the battle that they faced obtaining documents in Boston, a battle which continues around the country.

David Clohessy, the national director of SNAP, urged everyone to judge church leaders by their actions, not their words. He very kindly acknowledged my presence and praised Voice of the Faithful for the key role we have played throughout the country in raising the awareness of the laity about the sexual abuse crisis. Voice of the Faithful continued to be mentioned by **Mary Raftery**, producer of the RTE (Irish National Television) documentary "Cardinal Secrets". She feels Voice of the Faithful is much needed in Ireland. A segment of the film was shown and a full presentation of this award-winning documentary series on child sexual abuse in Ireland was made at the end of the day. The last panelist to speak, **Keri McLain**, CEO of the YWCA in Santa Clara Valley, serves on the local diocesan Review Board, and was herself a victim of clergy sexual abuse.

The keynote speaker following lunch was **Leon Panetta**, former Chief of Staff of the Clinton White House and a member of the USCCB committee on child sexual abuse by clergy. Mr. Panetta was very much at home on stage with former classmate and president of Santa Clara

University, Fr. Paul Locatelli, S.J. and there was much joking about their being the founding members of the Italian Club on campus!. Mr. Panetta opened his presentation by saying that campuses have to serve as centers for dialogue. He went on to say that we must do everything possible to restore trust. He detailed the role of the Review Board, and the facts uncovered. In the process of their investigation, it was found that priests were not well prepared for life outside the seminary. He also felt there must be greater accountability in church leadership. One thing he said, that resonated with me, is that we govern either by leadership or by crisis. If we set policy by crisis, then we lose. If we deal with these issues through leadership, however, then the trust can be restored.

That ten percent of the bishops have signed letters opposing proceeding with the audits, is cause for concern and could seriously impair restoring this trust in our hierarchy. His presentation was so compelling that when the question was asked “Will you run for President?”, it was met with overwhelming applause. I sensed that many in the audience were hearing hard, cold facts for the first time from a highly admired person of national stature, and one who is grounded in his faith. Questions were received by both Kathleen McChesney and Leon Panetta following his address.

The next panel I attended was on “**Ethics, Church Governance and Sexuality.**” The panel members were introduced by **Kirk Hanson**, Executive Director of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, and long time friend of Jim Post. **Gerry Coleman, S.S.**, Suplician Priest and President/Rector of St. Patrick’s Seminary in Menlo Park, California said that in preparing seminarians for their life outside the seminary, knowledge alone of the evil of acting out sexually was not enough... there had to be an internal sensitivity that would not allow a priest to go there. **Tom Doyle, O.P.**, canon lawyer and advocate for victims/survivors, feels that the reality of where we are going for solutions is to the courts and grand juries. He feels that dioceses continue to play hardball and that survivors continue to be re-victimized. The institutional church, he feels, has always disciplined the abuser, but never looked at its own role in this crisis. **William Spohn**, Director of Santa Clara University’s Bannon Center for Jesuit Education, feels that the structures of the church do not hold the bishops accountable, that presbyteral councils don’t function well, and that there are a lot of penalties for rocking the boat. **Kathleen McChesney** compared how the United States government responded to 9/11 and how the church responded to the sexual abuse crisis. On the one hand the 9/11 Investigation Commission was allowed to hold public hearings, conduct investigations, and provide immediate compensation. In the case of the church sexual abuse crisis, there have been no public hearings with bishops on panels and it is through litigation that victims are being compensated. **Tom Rausch, S.J.**, is a professor of theology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. In an earlier panel discussion that day, I was told that Tom spoke very highly of Voice of the Faithful and the role it has played. He encouraged people to join and get involved. He indicated that laity realize that there are no structures of accountability at any level, and that there is a need for a renewal and reform of structures. He feels that this problem has to be addressed from Rome, as it is one that is truly universal. **Richard Sipe**, who spent 18 years in a Benedictine monastery and is a lay mental health professional and author, started out by saying how hard it is to see things when you’re in the middle of it. He feels that we have tried to institutionalize celibacy as a charism, and sees religious orders as non-hierarchical, in that they elect their superiors. He reported that the frequency of sexual abuse in Protestant churches is higher and that the abusers are generally volunteers rather than clergy.

Another session I attended was titled: “**What Does a Healthy Church Look Like?**” The moderator was Professor Tom Plante, the organizer of the day and the editor of the new book entitled “Sin Against the Innocents: Sexual Abuse by Priests and the Role of the Catholic Church” (available through www.greenwood.com). **Sonny Manuel, S.J.**, a Vice Provost and Dean of the School of Education at Santa Clara University, stressed that people in ministry need to look at their relationship with God. They need to see that their relationships with others have appropriate boundaries. He said that when you look at a priest’s life, you have to see that appropriate relationships are developed and maintained, and that respecting boundaries can be a profound way of showing love. **Adele Bihn**, County Commissioner on Services to Victims of Sexual Assault in Santa Clara, described a healthy church community in terms of a health family environment. A healthy family is one that listens and is not judgmental, and a healthy adult church calls us to be responsible and to value diversity. **Bernard Nojadera**, Director of the Office for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults in the diocese of Santa Clara, posed the question “So what are we going to do to bring about this healthy church?” He feels that we have an opportunity to bring about change, but that it must come about through collaborative efforts. **Barbara Gelpi**, an emerita Professor of English at Stanford University, quoted from a number of articles addressing the topic of a healthy church. **Patrick LaBelle, O.P.**, is Director of the Catholic Community at Stanford University. His vision of church is one of a gathering of people, a church that is open, with no barriers, and that looks to forgiveness as a primary access. It will have the best music, the best preaching, the best architecture.... It is a church that is educated, a human community with a divine task.

The one session I was unable to attend was **The Psychological and Behavioral Perspectives** and featured a number of experts on the diagnosis and treatment of clergy sex offenders.

The breadth and the quality of the panelists provided one of the richest experiences I’ve had in these past two years. Much of what I heard was the very language that we in Voice of the Faithful have been using from our beginnings –the words that have been our road signs and now I was hearing them from people in much broader circles.

There was an audible yearning in the audience for a direction as to what they could do. I really felt that, had there been a spokesperson from Voice of the Faithful on one of those panels, our message would have been warmly welcomed by the audience, as we do offer “something to do”! It is clear to me that the seeds are still being planted in fertile soil everywhere and we, in Voice of the Faithful, need to continue to be there as often as we can to help lay people bring reap the harvest of our changing church.

Mary Ann Keyes