

www.charlotte.com/mld/observer/news/8132595.htm?template=contentModules/printstory.jsp

'Terrible history' likely to haunt Church's future

Observers say the bishops refuse to accept responsibility for their role in scandal

TOM FEENEY, Newhouse News Service

Posted on Mon, Mar. 08, 2004

Can a grim accounting of 52 years' worth of child sex abuse by Roman Catholic priests bring to an end the darkest period in the history of the Catholic Church in America? The U.S. Conference of Bishops says it can. When it released two reports putting at 4,392 the number of priests accused of sexually abusing minors between 1950 and 2002, the conference president, Illinois Bishop Wilton Gregory, proclaimed, "The terrible history recorded here today is history."

But Church observers are not so sure. Many of them agree there are likely to be fewer incidents of sexual abuse by priests in the future, because of both broad cultural changes and specific preventive measures adopted by the bishops in recent years. But others caution that not even eradicating abuse will be enough to keep the "terrible history" from coloring the Church's future.

The accounting of past abuse compiled by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice from data reported by the Church indicates that more abusive priests were ordained in the 1960s than any other decade and that the largest number of abuse cases occurred in the 1970s. "Men ordained around 1970 were at higher risk for abuse since they were ordained during the tumultuous years of Vatican II and were coping like everyone else with the wackiness of the 1970s," said Thomas Plante, a professor of psychology at Santa Clara University in California.

Reported incidents have fallen sharply since the mid-1980s -- a fact the bishops seized on to make the case that the Church's steps toward preventing abuse have been successful. "Along with the pain and anguish we feel in reviewing the past, we can also discern signs that the actions we have taken over the last 15 years have had a significant effect," Gregory said.

The decline might not be as dramatic as the report suggests, experts say. Survivors typically don't come forward when they're in their teens and late 20s, said Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, co-director of the Trauma Treatment Center at the Manhattan Institute for Psychoanalysis.

Other factors that help account for the lower numbers over the past 15 years, she said. Children now are more likely to be taught to say no to a priest who makes an inappropriate advance and more likely to tell their parents if they are abused, she said. Adults are more likely to take children's reports of abuse seriously.

"I also think that within the Church, kids these days spend far less time with priests," she said. "They're not going on overnights. There's a lot less intense relationship between contemporary Catholics and their Church."

Even if the Church is successful at preventing abuse in the future, the accounting it released will not close the book on the scandal because the bishops, by and large, have refused to accept responsibility for their role in it, observers say. "The abuse problem is something that poor leadership certainly exacerbated, yet in many respects the bishops have not turned the spotlight on themselves," said Paul Lakeland, professor of religious studies at Fairfield University. "There is zero tolerance for priests, but not for bishops."

The abuse scandal buffeted the Church for more than a decade, but during that time no bishop was forced out of office for failing to deal with abusive priests, Lakeland said. Boston Cardinal Bernard Law resigned amid revelations about his role in covering for abusive priests, but he did so under pressure from the laity, not the Vatican. The only other bishops who stepped down did so in response to allegations of abusive behavior in their own pasts.

"This is not something the Church is going to be able to put behind them until certain steps are taken, and the most important one is for bishops to take responsibility for their actions," said Suzanne Morse of Voice of the Faithful, a national group formed in response to the sex abuse scandal to work for reform within the Church.

The organization believes that the Church should identify and hold accountable any bishop who knowingly transferred an abusive priest from one parish to another.

Morse said she will not be able to trust that the Church has a handle on sexually abusive priests until it takes that step.

"Unless there's a mechanism for holding bishops accountable, the bad behavior could continue," she said. "That's something we believe is absolutely necessary for Catholics to feel that the Church is functioning."