

Web Site Seeks To Out Records Of Norwich Diocese

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So far, the casualties of the Catholic Church's sex-abuse scandal have been: the grievously scarred victims of pedophilia; the communities where defrocked pedophile priests take up new addresses and careers, unannounced and unrecognized; the good men now carrying out their priesthoods under a cloud; uncounted Catholics disgusted with the church; and the dioceses hemorrhaging money for lawsuit awards.

That leaves one category of American Catholics that either could have prevented this before or repented for it since: the bishops, whose reactionary response to public outrage was a zero-tolerance policy that can snatch away in an afternoon the career of even an unfairly accused priest.

Very little has ever come out about clergy sexual abuse because a bishop voluntarily released records. But a new Web site, BishopAccountability.org, is set to publish all the records it can get relating to abuse complaints, reassignment of accused priests and other details most dioceses have refused to release. Its founders are going after the Norwich diocese.

At a meeting Sunday in Niantic the local chapter of Voice of the Faithful, lay Catholics who have been meeting since the sex-abuse scandal in the Boston archdiocese, introduced the founders of the new Web site, which is seeking to post online records kept by the Diocese of Norwich.

BishopAccountability.org has already posted formerly secret archives of the dioceses of Boston, Manchester, N.H., and Davenport, Iowa. Priests' assignment histories in Iowa are helping identify "networks" of abusers who studied, worked or lived together in places where complaints of abuse have cropped up, the Web site founders said.

Anne Barrett Doyle, a frequent critic of church leaders and a founder of the site, said the group will seek Norwich records in particular because each of the three most recent bishops, Daniel Reilly, Daniel Hart and Michael Cote, have "come here with a history of protecting abusers elsewhere." All three have been named in connection with instances in which priests were not disciplined or were reassigned despite complaints about their conduct, said Doyle.

Bishops are executives of their dioceses, like governors of states, but they are also legislators. The National Council of Catholic Bishops formulated the policies now in effect for dealing with clergy abuse, including zero tolerance for abusers.

Recently they have been showing zero tolerance for dissent, as well. Conservative bishops cost the Rev. Thomas Reese, S.J., his job as editor of America, the weekly magazine published by the Jesuit order, by complaining to the Vatican that he printed articles that disagreed with official church teaching.

Reese, an oft-quoted authority on church hierarchy, has run the magazine as a forum for differing Catholic viewpoints on many issues. Its readership is largely educated American Catholics — many of them graduates of Catholic universities and colleges — who look to it as a way to help live their faith without surrendering their understanding and free will.

And that was the tenor of the group in Niantic Sunday: women and men in about equal numbers, teachers, retirees and at least one priest.

Most of those present believe the abuse still goes on and marveled that it could have been happening "under our noses" for decades. All but a few said they disagree with the zero-tolerance policy because it hurts the innocent and washes its hands of the guilty.

Most urgent, they said, is the protection of children, followed by finding a process to protect the unjustly accused. And if the bishops won't do it, they guess they will have to.