

The Clergy Abuse Scandal

Part Two

Clergy Abuse: Cases Few, Response Significant

by John Burger

Although the damage done by sexual abuse has been "immeasurable," the number of priests involved in such activity have been few, Bishop Wilton Gregory of Belleville, Ill., president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, said in February. At least 232 priests have been removed over the past 20 years because of sexual misconduct with minors, according to a survey of 178 dioceses conducted by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Compared to the more than 40,000 priests in the United States, the number is small though tragic.

The statistics from individual dioceses also put the problem in perspective. In Boston, Cardinal Bernard Law is said to have turned over to Massachusetts authorities the names of 60 to 70 priests who had been accused of abusing minors (nearly all of them abused teen-agers), but that figure covers the past 40 years. The Archdiocese of Philadelphia recently found "credible evidence" that 35 of the 2,154 diocesan priests who have been in service since 1950 sexually abused minors. That's about 1.6%. Although the Church has been accused of doing too little too late to respond to sexual abuse. Bishop John Kinney of St. Cloud, Minn., said the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on sexual abuse, which he headed from 1993 to 2000, found that "Catholic dioceses have been as quick as most other religious and professional groups in developing guidelines and taking action to deal with sexual abuse."

The Church in the United States was one of the earliest organizations to recognize that pedophilia existed and to send people for help, said Fred Berlin, a psychiatrist who serves on the U.S. bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse. Church concerns set up centers for priests with addictive problems, including alcoholism and sexual abuse. At least 80% of the dioceses responding to the Post-Dispatch survey said they rely on lay committees, not just the hierarchy, to assess allegations of sex abuse. Following is a summary of actions taken and statements issued over the years by the Holy See and the United States bishops:

The case of Gilbert Gauthier, a Louisiana priest suspended in 1983 for molesting small boys and sentenced to 20 years in prison, marked the start of a national effort by the U.S. bishops to prevent and respond to sexual abuse of children, especially within the Church. The bishops held discussion sessions with experts at national meetings. In the late 1980s, discussions began with the Vatican about streamlining the canonical process for laicization of abusers among the clergy.

Many dioceses in the 1980s produced the first written policies on the issue. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1992 adopted five core principles as the framework for all such policies, after which many dioceses revised their policies and procedures to make them more effective.

The five principles are:

- Respond promptly to all allegations of abuse where there is reasonable belief that abuse has occurred.
- If such an allegation is supported by sufficient evidence, relieve the alleged offender promptly of his ministerial duties and refer him for appropriate medical evaluation and intervention.
- Comply with the obligations of civil law as regards the reporting of the incident and cooperate with the investigation.
- Reach out to the victims and their families and communicate sincere commitment to their spiritual and emotional well-being.
- Within the confines of respect for privacy of the individuals involved, deal as openly as possible with the members of the community.

Unfortunately, some diocese failed to remove even acknowledged offenders from ministerial duties, and have done so only recently, under legal pressure and in the glare of media attention. Also, some dioceses failed to comply with the obligations of civil law even when the abuser acknowledged his crimes. In 1993, the bishops formed an Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse. Over the next four years the committee developed and discussed with the bishops' extensive resources for all dioceses. They cover everything from assisting victims and families therapeutically and

pastorally, to abuse prevention programs, from initial handling and investigation of allegations to removal, evaluation and treatment of priests found to have engaged in misconduct.

The committee covered issues of insurance and civil and Church law, psychological testing and screening of priesthood candidates, screening and training of Church employees and volunteers. It recommended model outlines for comprehensive diocesan policies and procedures, with guidance on issues to address in adapting them to local circumstances, such as different levels of expertise and personnel between a small, rural diocese and a large, urban archdiocese. Also that year, Pope John Paul II addressed the issue with U.S. bishops at the Vatican. In 1994, when the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse asked dioceses to submit their existing policies, 178 of the 188 dioceses responded. Of those, 157 submitted policies, 13 said they did not have a written policy and eight said they were working on one. Many of the policies submitted were revisions of policies originally developed in the 1980s.

Mark Chopko, general counsel for the bishops conference, said he is not aware of a single diocese that does not now have a written policy in place. Today, a person who presents an allegation to Church authorities "will be listened to, appreciated and responded to by skilled people," Chopko said. "The complaint will be evaluated; if something needs to be reported it will be reported; the proper authorities will be contacted, and the whole pastoral outreach to that person, to the parish, to the community will be undertaken by the diocese."

In 1995, the U.S. bishops published "*Walk in the Light: A Pastoral Response to Child Sexual Abuse*." In 2001, Pope John Paul made sexual activity with a minor an ecclesiastical crime that falls under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Pope, in his Holy Thursday letter to priests this year, said perpetrators of sexual abuse have betrayed the priesthood and cast a "shadow of suspicion" over the many good priests in the world. He also said this year that a seminarian who has continuing difficulties with chastity should not be considered an appropriate candidate for priestly ordination. Cardinal Law announced this year that from now on no priest of the Archdiocese of Boston who was ever found guilty of abusing a minor will be allowed to remain in active ministry. Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua of Philadelphia said that any priest involved in the sexual abuse of a minor, whether or not he is clinically diagnosed as a pedophile, will not receive an assignment in the archdiocese.

Bishop Wilton Gregory of Belville, Ill., president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, expressed "profound sorrow that some of our priests were responsible" for abuse "under our watch." He said that bishops have developed procedures whereby priests moving from one diocese to another must have certification of their good standing. They have also revised seminary screening and mandated in-service programs for priests, teachers, parish ministers and volunteers "to emphasize their responsibility to protect the innocent and vulnerable" from abuse, he said. The bishops conference's administrative committee instructed the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse to make recommendations for further action and determine whether additional principles other than those from 1992 should be formulated. A comprehensive response at the national level is on the agenda for the semi-annual meeting of the U.S. bishops in June.

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(CNS contributed to this report)

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