

# Learning From Clergy Abuse of Minors Scandal Can Help Others

By Joseph Young



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Robert Bennett  
Charter Member  
National Review Board



The clergy sexual abuse scandal that rocked the U.S. Catholic Church five years ago was a painful period but a teachable moment. Healing and preventive measures have gained momentum since the U.S. bishops adopted the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People in June of 2002, and formed an independent National Review Board.

Subsequently across the nation, in accordance with the Charter, diocesan review boards have been formed, safe environment programs put into place, annual audits on abuse implemented and procedures for more careful screening of priesthood candidates adopted at seminaries.

The Catholic Church has learned much, but what lessons can others learn from the church’s experience of multiple acts of sexual abuse committed by some of its clergy?

There is also much that others can learn, said Bishop Gregory Aymond, chair of the USCCB’s Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People and bishop of the Diocese of Austin, Texas. Bishop Aymond noted that two other Christian denominations and one school system already have consulted with his committee about how to deal with sexual abuse by those in authority.

Ann Riggs, Ph.D., a member of the Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers) and associate general secretary for Faith and Order for the Washington-based National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., said that from the Catholic Church’s experience with clergy sexual abuse, other churches have learned that ignorance is no excuse.

“You have to educate yourself so you are not naïve,” she said. Another lesson learned, Riggs said, is that supervisors cannot give candidates for positions in church leadership the benefit of the doubt and dismiss questions about their background “because it is so unlikely to be true.”

“You can’t just assume their mental health and spiritual honor,” she said. Finally, Riggs said, churches have learned from the Catholic experience that abuse compromises an institution’s capacity to carry out its mission. Some funding for ministries is diverted to legal fees and settlements that often include provisions for victim/survivor counseling. Also, in a church wracked by scandal, those in the pew, if they remain in the pew, are less likely to contribute monetarily.

But it is not only institutions that can learn from the Catholic Church's experience, Bishop Aymond said.

"At every level of society, consciousness has been raised about sexual abuse. More and more, even families sitting around the table are discussing it openly," he said.

One topic is the importance of being vigilant, which Bishop Aymond said is perhaps the primary lesson others can learn.

"You need to be very, very vigilant about picking up any signals that sexual abuse may be occurring," he said.

Robert Bennett, Washington attorney and charter member of the National Review Board, said, "people need to realize that child abuse occurs in all sorts of places; you can't be self-righteous and say, 'It can't happen here.'"

Closely related to vigilance is prevention. One preventive measure to be learned, Bennett said, "is not to allow dysfunctional men into the clergy."

"Sin exists, even in hallowed circles, and we have to be aware of this and take the necessary steps to prevent it," said Teresa Kettelkamp, executive director of the Office of Child and Youth Protection. "We need to lead holy lives of prayer and avoid situations which can lead to sin."

Kathleen McChesney, retired executive assistant director of the FBI, served as executive director of the USCCB's Office of Child and Youth Protection from 2002 to 2005.

"Faith communities need to recognize that it is impossible to eliminate all causes for sexual abuse," she said, but "it is necessary to remain vigilant in prevention and detection activities."

Vigilance in prevention, she added, includes "determining the causes of the problem and instituting measures to prevent future abuse, insofar as possible."

Bennett warned against using the "geographic cure," which is no cure at all, of moving abusive pastors to other churches, or "burying the abuse for fear of scandal, only to have a bigger scandal emerge" when the abuse is eventually revealed.

But, when even the best-laid preventive plans fall short, victims of abuse ought to be offered as many pounds of compassionate cure as necessary, Bishop Aymond, Kettelkamp and McChesney all agreed.

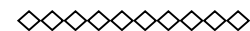
"Reaching out to victims/survivors of clergy sexual abuse to help with their healing and reconciliation, and putting barriers in place to protect children, must be who we are as followers of Christ," Kettelkamp said.

"The response to allegations of sexual abuse must be grounded in compassion and focused on the victims, their families and the faith communities impacted by the incident," McChesney said.



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Another lesson to be learned is the importance of transparency and truth.

When allegations of abuse are made, Bishop Aymond said, the first order of business is to “find the truth of the matter” by prayerfully listening to all sides without bias.

All allegations must be investigated, Bennett said, adding that bishops, or whoever is in authority, must meet with victims and, in the process, not assume that they are not telling the truth.

“You don’t want to act like you’re some risk assessment manager for an insurance company,” he said.

After the truth is determined, “quick, decisive action by church leaders is imperative to reduce further victimization,” Kettelkamp said. “Truth and transparency are critical to achieving and maintaining trust.”

If an allegation is found to be credible, “appropriate law enforcement and/or child protection agencies ... are duly authorized and experienced in investigating allegations of abuse,” McChesney said.

“Institutions should be as open and transparent as possible with the faith community about what has occurred, keeping in mind the privacy of the victim and the accused,” McChesney added.