

Restoring Trust: The Response to Sexual Abuse

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The Catholic Bishops of the United States are deeply sorry for what has happened to innocent children due to the abuse perpetrated by some priests. The Church's commitment to the sanctity of the family and to the care, nurture, and education of children comes too near the heart of what we are all about to feel anything but regret that a single child should be harmed by someone serving in her name.

The steps taken by the bishops to respond to abuse cases have been these: self-education in the problem; development of effective diocesan guidelines and procedures; support sought and received from Pope John Paul II about the problem; and the work of the ad hoc committee of the bishops' conference set up to deal with this matter.

Since the mid-1980s, when public attention became intensely focused on pedophilia, we bishops began to educate ourselves about the problem of sexual abuse with the help of experts. We found ourselves learning, along with the rest of society and, sometimes, along with the experts, that child sexual abuse is more widespread than most people realized. One important lesson has been that abusers are sick people driven by compulsions which can be treated but not eradicated. Another was that abusers are not an identifiable class of people, easily distinguished by suspicious behavior. Nor are they limited to one group of people or one profession. They can be parents, relatives, teachers, counselors, and, sadly, sometimes priests.

We learned that even those priests who seem to their congregations, their fellow priests, and their superiors among the most dedicated and pastorally sensitive can be abusers. Their pathology enables them to develop highly effective strategies to conceal their desires and behaviors.

In many ways, 1992 was a watershed year in this learning process. It was then that the case of James Porter received a great deal of public attention. He had abused numerous children and continued to abuse after he had received treatment, left the priesthood, and married. By then, he faced charges in three states.

It was also in 1992 that the president of the bishops' conference announced the actions which we considered basic to shaping our independent diocesan policies: to suspend a priest from his duties immediately and investigate, when there is a well-founded allegation of abuse; to extend pastoral care to the victim and the victim's family; to cooperate with any investigations by civil authorities that might arise; and to deal with the matter as openly as possible, given the circumstances.

Early in 1993, a "think tank" was held, under the auspices of the bishops' Committee for Priestly Life and Ministry, to gather as much information as possible from experts and victims about how to deal with the problem in all its dimensions. Then, in March of that year, the bishops' conference president decided to establish an Ad Hoc Committee to draw together information on how the dioceses were dealing with the abuse problem and to offer recommendations on enhancing the Church's response. In June, Pope John Paul II, responding to the concerns brought to him by the U.S. Bishops, wrote a letter expressing his

support of the bishops' efforts and establishing a commission to consider temporary relief from some provisions in the Church's canon law as a help in dealing with the problem.

Meanwhile, the Ad Hoc Committee gathered and studied diocesan policies and offered additional recommendations in a 1994 report, "Restoring Trust." The Committee found that some dioceses were already on their second generation of policies, refining those established several years before. Many had also developed a variety of mechanisms both for handling allegations and for offering support to victims. This report made clear 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.

As time passed, the nature of the challenge changed significantly. At first, dioceses were dealing with relatively clear-cut, current cases of abuse. Often the priest admitted his behavior, or an investigation by the civil authorities established the facts. Then a shift took place in which most cases began to involve allegations of a wide variety of behaviors going back quite a few years, even decades. It was no longer as easy to establish the facts. Even with these cases, where there is often no criminal or civil liability remaining, we bishops feel the moral obligation to deal with them.

Some wonder when this difficult chapter in the Church's life will be closed. In one sense it never will be, because we have experienced a sinful and predatory aspect of human nature against which we have to be permanently on guard. However, in the sense that the Church is fully alert to the problem and committed to preventing, as far as humanly possible, the future admission to her ministry of potential abusers, a page has been turned and a new chapter begun.