

A holy higher standard

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The Roman Catholic Church legally can demand the dismissal of lawsuits not filed within two years. But can it morally?

A three-judge panel of the Pennsylvania Superior Court cited the statute of limitations when it dismissed 18 lawsuits alleging sexual abuse by the clergy, filed against the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

If the decision is not overturned, it also effectively prevents plaintiffs in 35 cases against the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh -- and those suing other dioceses in the state -- from having their day in court.

"If that is the standard for others, why would that not be the standard for the church?" asked the Rev. Ron Lengwin, spokesman for the Pittsburgh diocese. "We hope it would not be a double standard."

But is there no hope the Catholic Church will hold itself to a higher standard -- especially when the allegation is perhaps the most obscene violation of trust imaginable?

The church had to ask for dismissal or risk losing its liability insurance coverage. But it could offer the plaintiffs binding arbitration with a predetermined maximum.

To its credit, the Pittsburgh diocese gives pastoral services to any alleged victim. "We do not get into investigating if the allegation is true or not," Father Lengwin said. "We want to respond pastorally if needed."

Unconditionally offering counseling services to all accusers is admirable. Offering binding arbitration would be more than admirable.

An article in the March 11 edition of the diocese's Pittsburgh Catholic newspaper ("Court upholds statute of limitations in abuse lawsuit") said that the church would be left virtually defenseless in addressing old charges. A 75-year-old priest who died in 1967 allegedly molested an 8-year-old boy. The story indicated there was no way the claims could be substantiated or refuted.

But since the plaintiff has the burden of proof, what is the problem? The story also suggested that civil lawsuits would be of little benefit to victims or their families. At least binding arbitration could offer a sense of closure.

Virtually all religions have done more good for mankind than any other institution. And the Catholic Church, more so than many of them. While every faith probably can name an embarrassing incident or issue during its existence, true believers would not trade their worst day in their religion for their best day before they saw the light.

Think of the strongest bond between a loyal customer and the product he swears by, say a NASCAR fan and his favorite driver or a Pittsburgh Steelers fan and the team. Now multiply that by a hundred or a thousand and you have some sense of the relationship between the believer and his faith.

Most of us probably would like to avoid blame whenever possible, especially when life offers what seems like an easy way out of a jam.

Call it an ethical loophole.

Humans being what we are, that free pass can look mighty tempting. But more is asked of man.

Surely every faith says in so many words that while anyone can have the best of intentions, we all must be judged by our actions. So, just because you can do something does not necessarily mean you should -- especially if it might involve the betrayal of a sacred trust.

Since religion asks that of man, is it wrong for man to ask that of religion?