

Another hurdle for those seeking justice

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JOSEPH F. Vallario Jr. did not return my phone calls, so the only explanation I have is the one that Annapolis lobbyist Mike Gisriel says Vallario gave him - he doesn't like people going after dead priests.

Even if the priests molested children, Vallario doesn't think their victims should have the right to sue the priests' dioceses for damages long after the crimes occurred. This, Gisriel says, is why the 68-year-old chairman of the House Judiciary Committee is deep-sixing a bill that would extend the time for victims to claim damages. Gisriel, hired to represent victims of childhood sexual abuse, doesn't think Vallario will let the committee vote on the matter.

A ridiculous amount of power for one old-school pol, but that's our system.

At present, Maryland law allows such civil suits only before victims reach their 25th birthday. Victims' advocates say that's not enough time; victims of such horrific crimes are too burdened with guilt, shame and fear to come forward until they are deep into adulthood, and many of the Catholic victims have waited until their parents died before going public.

The bill, HB 1376, would give victims until they are 46 years old - that is, 28 years past the age of majority - to bring civil suit against those who molested them. It also would provide a one-year open filing period, so all victims - no matter their age - might sue.

But Joe Vallario doesn't like the bill, so he's single-handedly holding it up.

The Archdiocese Of Baltimore must be grateful.

At a hearing on the bill a couple of weeks ago, the opposition came from officials of the Catholic Church in Maryland and the District of Columbia, who worry about having to pay out millions to settle damage claims.

They should.

Last month, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops reported that more than a thousand new sexual abuse complaints were lodged against U.S. Catholic clergy in 2004. An audit of local dioceses found more than \$157 million paid out last year in connection with the scandal, bringing the nationwide total to at least \$840 million.

In 2002, the Archdiocese Of Baltimore reported \$4.1 million in settlements stemming from clergy sexual abuse, all of it paid by insurance companies, and another \$419,00 in counseling expenses for victims, paid by the church.

Last year, there were 22 new allegations in Baltimore, all of which involved sexual abuse that occurred years ago by priests who are no longer active. Three of the new allegations were not considered credible; in three more, the identity of the priests was unknown.

One of these recent allegations came from a woman named Laura Halford.

Halford, who grew up in the Frederick area, says she had been raped at age 12 by a relative.

A year later, while on a retreat with her confirmation class, she went to confession and told a priest about the rape.

The year was 1980, and the retreat house was somewhere in Western Maryland.

In an interview recently at her home in Howard County, Halford said the priest, whom she could not identify but who she believes was in his 30s and spoke with an Irish accent, asked if she had engaged in sex. When she told him of the rape, Halford recounted, the priest said she was to blame for it, that she was "put on earth to tempt men." She alleges that in the next moment, as they sat in a private area of the retreat house where the priest had been hearing confessions, he molested her.

Halford says she kept the incident secret until last fall, when she took part in a training program for teachers and volunteers at her daughters' Catholic school. A discussion about the identification of abusers was too much to bear, and Halford broke down sobbing.

Later, after her therapist arranged to have Halford tell officials of the abuse, it was Alison D'Alessandro, the diocesan director of child and youth protection, who took the report.

"This is not a case of repressed memory," Halford says. "It was a secret shame I had no desire to expose to anyone."

The next time Halford saw D'Alessandro, they were both in Annapolis, at the hearing on HB 1376 before Vallario's committee.

Halford testified in favor of it, D'Alessandro against.

Halford was appalled. The woman to whom she had confided her story had publicly opposed a victims' bill. Halford felt betrayed because she had come to see D'Alessandro as "the face of the Catholic Church for survivors."

Yesterday, D'Alessandro said she regretted that some victims were angry that she had appeared at the hearing. She had been careful in choosing her words, she says, going to Annapolis only to make the point that the archdiocese needed money to fund counseling services, education about abuse and the screening of volunteers, clergy and teachers.

Halford, for her part, is not interested in money from a lawsuit. Successful in developing her own computer maintenance business, Halford says she has no plans to sue the church to which she remains faithful.

But she sees the need for extending the time for others to do so. "The only currency the church understands is cash," she says. "If they know they will have big payoffs to make, they'll act to prevent this from happening to other children. That's the only way."