

August 16, 2007 - Banished priests, roaming freely

Ronnie Polaneczky, Philadelphia Inquirer

This week, the Orlando Sentinel wrote how a former Philadelphia Catholic priest named Nicholas Cudemo had made his home in Central Florida. Another former Philly priest, Stanley Gana, had resided in Orlando as recently as last year, the Sentinel also revealed.

What made the story such a big deal is that the two men figured prominently in the Philadelphia D.A.'s 2005 grand-jury report about sex abuse by clergy in the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

In the report, Cudemo was described by a clergy superior as "one of the sickest people I ever knew." Cudemo was accused of raping and impregnating an 11-year-old girl, for whom he then arranged an abortion, and of abusing 15 other victims.

Gana was accused of raping a 14-year-old boy who'd come to him for help after an incident of sex abuse by a family friend. Sometimes, Gana would have sex with the child and another boy at the same time.

The Church found the claims so credible, it booted the men out of the priesthood. Their names and photos now appear on the Philadelphia Archdiocese' "Child and Youth Protection" Web site page of accused priests and on the Web site of nonprofit BishopAccountability.org, which documents the abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church.

Where you won't find their names is on any Megan's Law Web site of registered sex offenders, because the statute of limitations on the crimes they're accused of lapsed before they could face justice in a court of law.

Such is the case with many pedophile priests who, though known to have abused kids, have never been held accountable for their depravity. These men (who knows how many?) are living unmonitored in a way that convicted sex offenders will never be.

So the only way the public can take precautions is if people happen to learn - whether through a story like the Sentinel's or word of mouth - that a predator is in their midst.

If ever there was a problem in dire need of a solution better than this alarming work-around, it's this one, says Terry McKiernan, founder of Massachusetts-based BishopAccountability.org.

"Every D.A. in the country is aware of the seriousness of this situation," McKiernan says.

"Some of these men are dangerous criminals with multiple, credible allegations of abuse, but there's no way for the community to know where they are. We list them on our Web site, but we don't have the ability to track them, or the legal right to disclose where they're living. We have no authority to require them to tell us when they move. It's very scary."

It doesn't appear that the Catholic Church is tracking them, either - at least not in a way the public can access as readily as a Megan's Law registry. The Philadelphia Archdiocese Web site, for example, notes only if a priest has been laicized - i.e., defrocked - or has agreed to live a "supervised life of prayer and penance."

That's unacceptably sketchy information, given the archdiocese' lack of integrity in handling its sex-abuse scandal.

For all we know, these "supervised" priests are living in a group home across the street from Sesame Place.

Some will argue, of course, that a priest who has never been convicted of a sex-abuse crime is as entitled to his privacy as any of us. And surely some priests have been wrongly accused.

But those are not the priests whom the Philadelphia Archdiocese has taken great pains to identify on its Web site. Nor are they the men whose acts are so sickeningly documented in the D.A.'s grand-jury report.

If Philadelphia's Cardinal Justin Rigali really wanted to ensure "a safe environment for all our children," as he vows on the archdiocese Web site, he would lead the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, whose board he chairs, to do something more proactive to protect our kids.

Like monitor the whereabouts of the priests whose crimes the Church abetted by looking the other way for decades. And then share that information with us.

He could also support bills, now working their way through Harrisburg, designed to protect kids from sex abuse and offer the chance of justice to those who were too young to demand it when they were victimized.

But a Megan's Law-type registry would be a start. I'm sure the archdiocese could find a legal way to implement it.

After all, it has excellent lawyers. They kept the Church out of court for years.