

7-8-08 - Catholic leaders knew

By Sister Maureen Paul Turlish, Guest Commentary, The Denver Post (CO)

The Archdiocese of Denver recently agreed to a \$5.5 million sexual abuse settlement covering 18 claims, and it took more than two years. In some ways, it is a bit of a surprise when one remembers that the spiritual leader of the archdiocese often voiced his opinion that he thought victims were only in it for the money.

The reality is that the leadership of the Archdiocese of Denver knew that there were priests who were sexually abusing children in the 1950s, '60s, '70s and '80s, just as church officials were aware of that in the Philadelphia Archdiocese, in Boston, in Los Angeles and in much of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States.

This is fact, not opinion, supported by official investigations of numerous dioceses, and in Philadelphia's case, by the Grand Jury Report of 2005. Records in Denver show, for example, that the archdiocese knew of complaints against Harold Robert White as early as 1960 but still moved him from parish to parish, so statements made by Archbishop Charles J. Chaput that many of the decisions archdiocesan officials made regarding White would be different today are disingenuous at best.

It is cold comfort for victims that there is no evidence in church files that White, a known serial offender, abused after 1981. Ecclesiastical authorities knew. They knew it was wrong then as they know it is wrong today, but they are still either unable or unwilling to acknowledge and take accountability for that even at this late date.

Church officials made a conscious and informed decision not to protect the children, choosing instead to hide, transfer and protect pedophiles while additional children were put in harm's way and victims and their families suffered further intimidation and abusive treatment when they approached officials with their concerns.

Statements made by Archbishop Chaput stand in stark contrast to the Roman Catholic Church's own history, which tells us that the incidents of sexual abuse were seriously condemned in the earliest days of the church.

Church councils and canon law were very specific in their condemnations of sexual aberrations and just as specific as to punishments, sometimes even including death.

Who did not know in 1960 or in 1985 that the sexual abuse, rape or sodomizing of a child was wrong as well as being a mortal sin and should have been reported to the police? It is not that difficult to understand. It is not an article of faith; it is the rape of a child's body and soul. Archbishop Chuput continues to make excuses rather than take responsibility for the crimes and sins of the past, just as he makes excuses for not supporting the complete removal of criminal and civil statutes of limitation in Colorado regarding the sexual abuse of children. The Archdiocese of Colorado and the Colorado Catholic Conference have been the most vicious opponents of child abuse legislation.

Pope Benedict XVI mandated that bishops do "all that is possible" in addressing the scourge that is childhood sexual abuse, and the People of God get only "sounding brass and tinkling cymbals" (1 Corinthians 13:1-2), because words without action remain hollow.

Sister Maureen Paul Turlish is a Delaware educator and a victims advocate who testified before the Senate and House Judiciary Committees in support of Delaware's recently passed Child Victims Law removing all statutes of limitation as well as opening a two-year civil window for previously barred cases of child abuse.