

5-5-08 - Forum: Church, laity, have more to do to heal after abuse crisis

Dan Yetter, The Eagle Tribune (MA)

As a cradle Catholic and someone who has been involved in my parish for 40 years, I was encouraged by Pope Benedict's acknowledgment that the sexual abuse crisis was "very badly handled." He also told the bishops "to bind up the wounds caused by every breach of trust, to foster healing, to promote reconciliation and to reach out to those so seriously wronged." By meeting with representatives of the abused, the pope displayed a Christlike behavior which made me feel proud to be Catholic, since Jesus was more about love and compassion than anything else.

I pray that this is not the end of the healing for the abused. They deserve much more of our compassion, respect, and support.

To the Church's credit, in its third and latest annual audit, the New Hampshire attorney general did report "significant progress" by the Diocese of New Hampshire toward compliance with the terms of an agreement which kept the diocese out of criminal court. Also reported were "positive changes with respect to the tone at the top and oversight of the compliance program."

However, diocese policy language is still not in place which would remove someone accused of abuse when an allegation is reported, and, in previous audits, the diocese had challenged the agreement.

Furthermore, both here and nationally, those who knowingly and secretly have transferred sex abusers from parish to parish are still in positions of authority.

In addition, in Maryland, Colorado, and Wisconsin, the Church has opposed bills that would have temporarily lifted the statute of limitations for suits brought on behalf of victims of child sexual abuse. This was done through "Catholic Conferences," which are agencies created by the bishops of a state to advocate positions in legislative processes.

Lastly, during his visit, the pope had also asked, "What does it mean to speak of child protection when pornography and violence can be viewed in so many homes through media widely available today?" He then charged the bishops with the task of confronting sexual immorality in the wider culture.

It is with disappointment that I reflect on the Church's response. I see attempts (1) to be less than cooperative with the state's judicial process, (2) to place the cost of settlements above the victim's welfare, and (3) to minimize the need for change in the Church. Change is not fostered by keeping those currently in authority in place, and by shifting the focus of the scandal from the Church's responsibility to that of pornography and violence in the media.

We, Catholics, can do better than that. Last Sunday, at Mary Queen of Peace in Salem, we sang the hymn "Here I Am, Lord." Let us take the words to heart: "I who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright. Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send? Here I am, Lord. Is it I?"

Yes, it is us. We, the laity, need to reread our Vatican II documents, and to rediscover that "we are the Church" by baptism. Let us put aside our concern over the shortage of priests and the loss of youth from Church attendance, and first make this crisis right by healing the abused, and using this beautiful Catholic faith to transform our Church. Perhaps then, other concerns will take care of themselves.

We must address the underlying causes of this crisis — (1) clergy who are not accountable to the people they serve, and (2) the culture of clerical secrecy. Reversing these would produce an open, transparent, and accountable Church.

Additionally, lay people, including women, must participate in a meaningful way in Church decision making and governance. This would embrace all talents within the Church for the good of the Church.

Finally, with compassion, but firmness, we must insist that those who transferred sex abusers from parish to parish must remove themselves from positions of authority. Justice and progress would demand no less.

To join with others for the healing of the abused, you can support the organization "Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests," [snapnetwork.org](http://snapnetwork.org). For the transformation of the Church, support "Voice of the Faithful," [votf.org](http://votf.org).

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