

How to stop child abuse by clergy? Make 'em pay

By Marci A. Hamilton
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The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, meets this weekend in Chicago. The legal failures that contributed to the secrecy and extent of abuse by clergy are on the agenda. The greatest void has been Congress' failure to take any action.

Childhood sexual abuse by clergy is one of the most insidious forms of child abuse, perpetrated by the people whom children are taught to trust most. The result is physical, emotional and spiritual devastation.

Yet Congress has registered no reaction since 2002 when it was revealed that the Archdiocese of Boston was shuttling pedophile priests between parishes, archdioceses, cities and states. The last thing any lawmaker wants to do in this era is to cast any aspersions on religion, let alone one with as many voters as are in the Roman Catholic Church.

In Congress' defense, there was a time when such abuses by clergy looked like a local issue. For example, when Father Gilbert Gauthé was convicted in 1985 for molesting 11 boys in Louisiana, no one thought to look beyond the city's borders. And when The Boston Globe exposed the Boston Archdiocese as a haven for dangerous child predators in priest clothing, including the notorious Paul Shanley and John Geoghan, the story was covered nationally, but the initial thinking among Catholics and others was that Boston was alone.

But then we learned about the New Hampshire Diocese, the Los Angeles Archdiocese, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and even the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and many more religious entities, each of which has been embroiled in prosecution and/or litigation over childhood sexual abuse by clergy. What was once thought to be an unusual occurrence in fringe cults has turned out to be far more pervasive. State legislatures started to pay attention, and some state reforms have followed.

When we finally come to understand that abuse can be perpetrated by clergy of even mainstream religions, we must come to terms with the fact that such abuse is a part of the underbelly of the human condition, like murder and robbery. It is not only a local or a state issue, but a national one. (Indeed, it is international, with recent horror stories in Ireland, Austria, Australia, Argentina and Chile, among other places.)

There have been initiatives since the 1960s regarding child abuse, but abuse at the hands of clergy is the last guilty secret to be unearthed in the universe of children's suffering.

Hearings on abuse by clergy must address how every element of society — the media, prosecutors, parents, legislatures and religious institutions — let these victims down. More important, Congress needs to set in motion a federal agenda to deter the abuse.

The most shocking element of such abuse is the pattern among religious institutions to internalize it. Time after time, secrecy, public reputation and money have been priorities, not the victims.

Congress could deter such destructive institutional defenses by mandating the revocation of tax-exempt status for any charitable non-profit institution, or one of its legal subdivisions, that fosters or covers up child abuse or fails to report it to authorities.

When religious institutions cover up abuse by clergy, the cost to us is staggering — addictions, broken marriages, emotional disabilities and even suicide. These institutions can perpetuate the suffering of children and pay the price themselves, or they can be what we wish they would be: leaders of the fight against such suffering.

Marci A. Hamilton, a church/state scholar, is author of *God vs. the Gavel: Religion and the Rule of Law*.