

July 5, 2007 - McCormack's victims got lifelong sentences
Commentary, Chicago sun-Times (IL)

You the impartial judge and jury are asked to consider the following facts:

The defendant, who had served as a priest on the West Side, pleaded guilty to five counts of aggravated criminal sexual abuse for molesting five boys between 2001 and 2006. Their ages ranged from 8 to 12. He pulled down their pants and fondled their genitals, abusing one of his victims "on nearly a daily basis" between September 2005 and January 2006, according to an assistant state's attorney.

When given the chance to speak before sentencing by a Cook County judge, the defendant stood silently, neither apologizing for his offenses nor showing contrition. He received a sentence of five years, of which he may serve only half. While making no apologies for McCormack, a spokeswoman for the Archdiocese of Chicago, supported the sentence on the basis that he was not accused of rape. "It wasn't assault, which is a more egregious crime," she said.

Was justice served? Is 2½ years in prison just punishment for the Rev. Daniel McCormack, who committed these crimes while serving at St. Agatha Parish and Our Lady of the Westside School? Will that sentence send out the proper message to potential offenders, at a time when the Catholic Church is attempting to set things straight following this latest case in a long history of sexual abuse scandals?

The archdiocese may find relief in the fact that there was no penetration. It may say the perception of the 38-year-old McCormack's crimes is worse than the reality. And the law seems to tilt in its favor: Without penetration, the priest could not be charged with assault or rape and he could not be sentenced to more than seven years.

But, as one expert noted, the distinction is lost for the victims. Years and even decades after being abused by their priest, a powerful authority figure in their lives, victims continue to feel an overwhelming mix of torment and shame and regret. They suffer from having had their innocence stolen from them and their lives permanently altered. "Their sentence is life," said an attorney for the families of two victims.

In accepting a plea deal of five years, the state saved the boys from the ordeal of having to testify, certainly a good reason for agreeing to a plea bargain. The maximum term, with time off for good behavior factored in, would have added only eight months to McCormack's sentence. By the time he gets out, if Cardinal Francis George is successful in appealing to the Vatican, McCormack will have been permanently removed as a priest. It's safe to say the boys he molested -- who are believed to number many more than these five -- will need far more time to remove themselves emotionally and psychologically from his despicable treatment of them. That's not a matter of perception. That's a matter of truth.