

**WELCOME TO A CALL TO THE BISHOPS:
PRESERVE THE NATIONAL REVIEW BOARD
BUILD TRUST IN THE CHURCH**

May 22, 2004

**Church of St. Paul the Apostle
New York, New York**

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Our Forum

Last October, recognizing that many people ask, "why be Catholic in these scandalous times," Voice of the Faithful of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut organized an all-day conference at Fordham University on the theme, "Being Catholic in the 21st Century." Those of us who attended went home inspired to continue the work of renewing and reforming our Church. In the future Voice of the Faithful in the tri-state area will sponsor other forums like this one today so that the voice of the laity may be heard loud and clear. We hope that our forum will also serve as model for others throughout the country.

The Rationale for our Forum

As you know, on February 27, the National Review Board, a body of twelve distinguished American Catholic laymen and women, appointed by the bishops, published its assessment of the current crisis. Simultaneously the audit carried out by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice presented factual data concerning the extent of priestly sexual abuse during the past fifty years.

As we now know, earlier in February before the publication of these reports, several bishops, including Cardinal Edward Egan of New York, Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, Archbishop John Myers of Newark, and Archbishop Henry Mansell of Hartford, together with the bishops of their respective provinces, were seeking to undermine the National Review Board. Writing to Bishop Wilton Gregory, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, they proposed the postponement until November of a decision on whether to continue previously promised annual audits. They also expressed their fear that the National Review Board was asserting its independence and displaying uppity ways.

Because we are fearful that the bishops intend to abandon annual audits and eviscerate the work of the National Review Board, the most significant lay body in the Catholic Church at the present time, we have come together this afternoon.

When the reports were released on February 27, Bishop Gregory proclaimed, with an air of apparent finality, "the terrible history recorded here today is history." Indeed it is an indelible chapter in the history of the American Catholic Church. While one can understand the desire of the bishops to put it behind them, history teaches us that scandals of this magnitude have serious consequences for years, indeed for centuries to come. The current scandal, the gravest in American Church history, has not yet run its course.

The Intangible Consequences of the Scandal of Sexual Abuse

Lest we forget, the numbers reported by the John Jay Audit are staggering. More than 10,000 of our children were sexually assaulted by more than 4,000 priests over fifty years. At least \$540 million, the contributions of the faithful in the pews, have been expended in settlement costs until now. Numbers alone, however, cannot convey the intangible consequences of this scandal. Let me suggest some of them.

1. The Survivors. Thousands of our boys and girls had their innocence taken away by predatory priests. Now grown to adulthood, many have suffered grievous psychological and spiritual damage; many have turned away from the Church that allowed them to be raped and sodomized and refused to hear their complaints. We need to reach out in loving embrace to these, our wounded brothers and sisters. All Catholics in every parish need to acknowledge this sin and to offer public atonement.

2. Priests of Integrity. The majority of our priests have been faithful to their vow of celibacy and faithful in their service to the people, but because of the betrayal of some, a cloud of suspicion hangs over all. Parents worry about allowing their children to be alone with priests and are reluctant to encourage their sons to contemplate priesthood as a worthy vocation, burdened as it is by charges of pedophilia and homosexuality.

3. The Bishops. Catholics are even more horrified by the realization that our bishops, the reputed shepherds of the flock, knowingly allowed the wolves to run free among the innocent. The tragic failure of the bishops to act as good shepherds and to safeguard our children, our most precious resource, raises many questions as to their understanding of what it means to be a bishop.

4. Failure to Acknowledge their Own Sin. In their desire to maintain the walls of the clerical culture and to protect predatory priests, the bishops have destroyed the trust they enjoyed as leaders of the Catholic community. Though they have made much of their new-found intention to be transparent and accountable, they have yet to acknowledge the enormity of their own sin of complicity in the crime of sexual abuse. Their opposition to the publication of court documents concerning sexual abuse gives the lie to their claim to openness.

5. Loss of Trust and Credibility. Their credibility is also affected when they speak on issues of social and economic justice, sexual morality, war and peace, and more recently, the participation of Catholics in the political life of our country.

6. The End of Secrecy and Intimidation. If the bishops are ever to recapture the trust and credibility so foolishly thrown away, they must abandon the old ways of secrecy and intimidation and adopt a new management style that is honest and open and allows all the faithful, laymen and women alike, to bring their gifts to the table.

7. The Shame of us All. As members of Christ's Body, all of us can take pride in the Church's many good works during the past fifty years. Nevertheless, we also suffer from the shame hidden for so long and, by our silence, we bear responsibility for this tragedy. Now we must assume our baptismal duty to set things right. St. Paul tells us that the life of the Church depends upon the harmonious interaction of all its members and that no one can say to another "I do not need you." So now, let us pledge to work together to restore the pristine beauty of our Church.