

5-1608 - What's needed now to heal the church?

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Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea proposes the following steps as a path toward reconciliation in the sex abuse crisis:

Steps for the bishops

Since these things start at the top, Catholic bishops could take a number of concrete steps:

- * Lead legislative efforts in every state to do away with criminal statutes of limitation for sexual abuse of a minor.
- * Lead legislative efforts in every state to clarify mandated reporting laws, expanding them to include clergy if they do not already. Urge legislators to put teeth into these laws by assessing substantive penalties on mandated reporters who fail to report abuse to civil authorities.
- * Charge Catholic Charities with developing outreach programs for parents fleeing sexually abusive spouses and partners. Help these parents access the resources they need to protect their children and help them report abuse to civil authorities.
- * Work with Catholic colleges to ensure that their law schools and social work, psychology, criminal justice and counseling programs offer coursework and concentrations in child abuse. Work with Catholic college health centers to ensure that anyone coming for medical or psychological help is screened for a history of child abuse.
- * Publish a national directory of priests living and dead who have been credibly accused of sexual abuse, along with a list of all their assignments, including those connected to seminary training.
- * Develop truth and reconciliation programs, perhaps in consultation with the Paulist Center in Boston (NCR, Jan. 25, "Dialogues aim to foster healing within the church") in every diocese.
- * Invite survivors and experts in sexual abuse to speak at every meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for the next decade. The bishops cannot hear too many stories or receive too many expert reports or advisory papers on sexual abuse. Truth and reconciliation processes can be included in the meetings.
- * Tell the truth, do penance, hold each other accountable.

Steps for SNAP

SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) asserts that it is the largest survivor group (8,000 members) and has been around the longest of any advocacy group (17 years). It may be helpful and appropriate for SNAP to:

- * Divide itself into a reform division, devoted to needed changes in the church, and a recovery division, focused on the well-being of those who have suffered sexual abuse, with different boards of directors, leadership, and staff in order to effect what are, in fact, different and sometimes contradictory goals.
- * Make public, professionally certified annual reports detailing the sources of their financial support and the ways in which their money is spent. This is the kind of transparency they rightly demand from the church and should therefore model in their own operations.

* Publicly clarify their policies regarding the referral of victims to torts attorneys. This would set to rest questions, like those recently posed by sociologist Fr. Andrew Greeley, about SNAP's relationship with plaintiffs' lawyers.